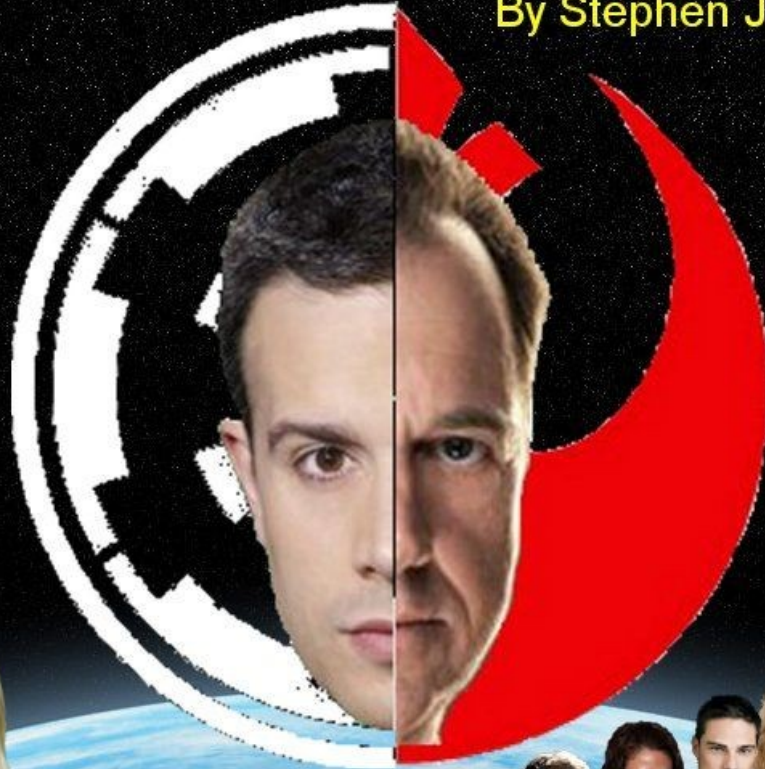


STAR WARS

4-08: Prize of War

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...

PRIZE OF WAR

A REBEL PRIVATEER COMES CLOSE TO CAPTURING A RAKATA. HOWEVER, THE ALIEN ESCAPES AND GOES TO GROUND ON ESTRAN, SETTING IN MOTION A MANHUNT. BUT THE REBEL TEAM LED BY MAJOR LARCUS IS NOT THE ONLY GROUP HUNTING THE ALIEN...

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

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1.

Lorn Kruger, captain of the *Just Cause* studied the sensor data closely. The nearby vessel had dropped out of hyperspace several minutes earlier and looked in no hurry to depart, a clear indication that it was not aware that Captain Kruger's vessel was watching it. His own ship, a stolen customs frigate was doing its best to act like a hole in space, using only passive sensors and with high powered systems like drives and weapons powered down. This was essential given that it was currently located just beyond the edge of the Estran system, the sector's capital and headquarters for the bulk of the Imperial navy's sector group. One mistake and Lorn's tiny ship could find itself facing dozens of capital ships and their fighter groups. The door to the bridge slid open and woman about Lorn's age entered. This was Lieutenant Carli Sentis, an observer from the Alliance to Restore the Republic, placed on Lorn's ship to make sure he followed the rules laid down by his Letter of Marque.

"What have you found captain?" she asked, leaning on the back of his chair.

"I love when you're so formal." He replied and he pointed to the monitor in front of him, "Transport ship. Dropped out of hyperspace and hasn't done a thing since."

"That's odd. There shouldn't be any shipping this far out of the system. We're only here for your people to get a peek at what's being loaded around Estran." Carli said, a puzzled expression on her face.

"Could be a smuggler." Lorn suggested, "Waiting to meet up with another ship to transfer black market goods."

Carli looked towards the comscan operator.

"Are there any signs of modifications to that ship?" she asked.

"No lieutenant. It reads as a standard Ghtroc super freighter."

"Not the sort of ship I'd associate with smugglers. Its too big and conspicuous." Carli commented.

"Maybe not, but I'd like to know if it's a legitimate target." Lorn said, "That ship can carry fifty thousand tonnes of cargo and its completely unarmed. Even if the thing turns out to be empty the ship itself is a prize worth having."

"Yes the Alliance could do a lot with a ship like that." Carli said.

"So can I attack it?"

"Second contact!" the comscan operator sudden called out, "Single ship with an entry vector that looks like it came from in system."

"So they were waiting for someone." Carli said.

"It's Imperial." The comscan operator added, "Transponder says navy. It's a skipray blastboat."

"Prepare for jump." Lorn ordered, "If they've figured out we're here then-"

"No wait!" Carli interrupted, "The navy wouldn't send a single blastboat anywhere on a combat mission."

Then she looked back at the comscan operator, "What's the freighter doing?" she asked.

"Freighter had opened cargo doors. It looks like the blastboat is going to dock."

"There's your answer Lorn." Carli said, "That freighter's probably an intelligence vessel. Hit it when the blastboat is inside and the Alliance will reward you handsomely for capturing it intact."

Lorn smiled and activated the intercom.

"All hands, action stations."

The moment the freighter's cargo bay doors swung shut once more the *Just Cause's* ion drives came to life, along with its electronic countermeasures, jamming the communications of the freighter.

"They're powering engines captain." The comscan operator warned.

Lorn activated the intercom again.

"Gun crews, target ion drives only. Fire to disable." And from the bridge there was the muffled pounding of the frigate's turrets opening fire.

The freighter's shields flared briefly under the sudden barrage before they collapsed and a blast from one of the *Just Cause's* weapon struck an engine. Already a slow and ponderous ship, the freighter's speed was reduced even further and the *Just Cause* swooped down upon it.

"Let's go!" Lorn snapped as the freighter grew in the bridge's viewport, "I want to go aboard with my men."

"Wait for me." Carli added, "I ought to check this out."

Half a dozen of Lorn's crew waited for the captain by the airlock. They were armed with an assortment of close quarters weapons, mainly pistols but with a pair of Clone Wars vintage carbines for heavier support. When Carli and Lorn arrived they found the boarding party already cutting through the hatchway of the freighter.

"We're in!" one of the boarders snapped as the hatch fell back and landed with a heavy 'clang'! Immediately the man leapt back as a blaster bolt flew through the gaping hole and carved a deep rut in the ceiling above their heads.

Without pausing Lorn plucked a grenade from his belt, removed the pin and hurled it through the hole.

"Fire in the hole!" he yelled and a few seconds later there was a loud 'boom' and a flash as the stun grenade went off. Drawing his pistol Lorn then dived through the hole before the freighter's crew could recover. He found the ship's defenders all lying behind a makeshift barricade that had collapsed when the grenade went off. There were five of them and all were human and wore the functional civilian dress common to spacers.

"Come on the bridge is this way." Carli snapped, slapping Lorn on the shoulder and running off down a corridor with her blaster in her hand.

"Secure them." Lorn ordered one of his crew and indicating the incapacitated freighter crewmen, "Then half of you head for engineering and the rest of you with me." And he ran after Carli.

A ship like a Ghtroc super freighter carried only about a dozen people, so even taking the four-man crew of the blastboat into account still left at most eleven left to be dealt with. This was more than the number of rebel privateers in the boarding party, but only by a small margin and Lorn was confident his men could handle them. Of course, that assumed that the Empire had not modified the ship in a way that increased the crew compliment. By adding a stormtrooper barracks for example. But as quickly as this thought occurred to him Lorn dismissed the idea. If there were stormtroopers aboard then they would have been waiting by the airlock. The crew of this ship were spacers and intelligence analysts, not marines.

As they approached the bridge there was a flash of blaster fire down the corridor.

"Get down!" Lorn yelled and he pushed Carli to the deck.

"Hey what are you doing?" she demanded.

"Saving your life." he replied, "Who knows who the Alliance would replace you with. They may not fit in my bunk so easily."

"You're so romantic." Carli said sarcastically.

"Anyone got any grenades?" Lorn asked the other privateers.

"No." Carli said, "No grenades. We need that bridge intact."

"Well that means we need to take it quickly." Lorn said, "If I was the captain I'd be smashing all the Empire's fancy toys before we could get hold of them."

"Then I suggest blasters on stun." Carli said, adjusting the setting on her blaster, "And we'll just put as much firepower down there as we can."

"You heard the lady. Blasters on stun and let's move." Lorn said as he too adjusted his blaster. Then he fired towards the bridge, not aiming his shots any more than was needed to send them through the open doorway. Without saying a word he got to his feet and ran towards the door, still firing on the move. Another of the freighter's crew tumbled through the doorway, blocking his comrades from closing it. One tried to pull him clear but another shot sent him sprawling backwards across the floor.

Carli and Lorn reached the doorway at almost the same time and they pressed themselves up against the bulkhead either side of it.

"Surrender!" Carli called out, "We're Alliance. You'll be well treated." But the response came in the form of another blaster bolt that struck one of the privateers in the chest, burning a large hole through his armoured vest. Lorn winced.

"That does it." He said and he held his blaster around the door and began firing.

The bridge crew scattered when they saw Lorn storm in. Only one was visibly armed and Lorn shot him repeatedly, not stopping until he had collapsed and the weapon had left his hand. Behind him Carli and the remaining privateers joined him, though unlike their captain they saw no need to open fire on the cowering crew, instead they just rushed at them and ordered them to the floor.

"Okay bridge secure." Lorn said, looking around, "Hang on," he added, "there's no damage."

"That's excellent. It means-" Carli began before Lorn interrupted.

"If this lot are Imperial agents then how come there's not extra gear in here? I mean look at this place, this is no intelligence ship."

"Then how come they were meeting with that navy blastboat down in the hold?" Carli asked.

"Good question." Lorn said and he walked over the nearest crewman and dragged him back to his feet,

"Answer the lady. Tell her what you're doing out here."

"Kriif off." The man replied and Lorn struck him with the butt of his gun.

"Wrong answer." And then he flicked the blaster back to a lethal setting and pressed its muzzle to his head, "Try again."

"We stole it okay? Blastboats are worth a fortune."

"I know." Lorn said, "The one in your hold will make me-"

"Captain over here!" one of the privateers suddenly shouted and he pulled a figure from behind a console and shoved into the open.

"What the hell?" Lorn exclaimed. Whereas all of the other crew that the privateers had encountered on the freighter were human this one was most definitely not. It had green-scaled skin and a tall head with an eye set to each side, a similar configuration to a mon calamari but clearly not the same species. It was a rakata. Tens of thousands of years earlier, before the founding of the Old Republic the rakata had ruled an empire with an iron fist, enslaving other species and forcing them to construct their great works. When this empire collapsed the rakata had all but vanished from the galaxy, but in recent months it had been discovered that a number of them still existed somewhere in the nebula that bordered the sector. Both the Alliance and the Empire were now watching for any signs of activity from them.

"Well this is interesting." Lorn said, approaching the alien, "Hey Carli, what will the alliance offer me for our new friend here?"

"Oh I think they'll class him as a command rank prisoner." She replied.

"You hear that?" Lorn said to the rakata, "You're worth a five hundred credit bounty." But the alien just stared at him, "Does he even understand me?" Lorn asked, looking around at the crewman he had struck and at that moment the rakata struck.

The alien took hold of the muzzle of Lorn's blaster and at the same time he sent an elbow into the face of the privateer stood behind it. Then as Lorn was looking back towards him the rakata struck him in his throat and pulled his weapon from his grip.

"Grab him!" Carli shouted as Lorn staggered backwards, clutching at his throat and gasping for air. But before either of the other two privateers could stop him the rakata dived through a nearby hatchway and sealed it behind him, "Lorn are you okay?" Carli asked as she took hold of him. Lorn nodded and coughed. "Get after him." he croaked and Carli headed for the closed hatch. However, when she tried to open it the hatch remained firmly closed.

"Stang! He's jammed it." She exclaimed and she took out her comlink, "Everyone look out, there's a rakata on the run from the bridge and he's armed. I want him taken alive."

The rakata had other ideas however, avoiding any sound that suggested the presence of another being and heading as quickly as possible for the cargo hold where the blastboat was docked facing the outer cargo door. The main hatch to the ship had been left open and the rakata climbed inside. Just as he turned to close the hatch behind him a pair of the privateers burst into the hold after him.

"There he is!" one yelled and he fired a burst from his carbine towards the ship. One of the shots clipped the rakata's arm and he screamed in pain as he fell back into the blastboat.

"Stop it you nerf herder!" the other yelled, knocking the weapon to one side, "We're supposed to take him alive." And both privateers rushed towards the blastboat.

But just as they neared the compact vessel the rakata was able to reach out and close the hatch. Then he pulled himself back to his feet and staggered towards the pilots seat, sitting down heavily before bringing the ship's engines on line.

"Oh kriff!" the carbine armed privateer snapped as both men heard the engines start, "We've got get the hell out of-" but before he could finish the rakata fired the blastboat's lasers. A wave of heat struck the privateers despite their being nowhere near the actual laser blasts themselves. However, the energy of the blasts was so great that in this confined space it was enough to heat the air all around them before blowing apart the cargo doors and exposing the entire hold to the vacuum of space.

From the bridge Carli and Lorn watched as the blastboat flew away from the freighter and looped around to head into the Estran system.

"What the hell is he doing?" Lorn asked.

"His transponder may get him through the security net." Carli said, "He must have friends somewhere on Estran itself. I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Yeah well so do I and we're not going after him, not my ship lady. If the Alliance wants him they can send a different ship."

"You know Lorn, I think that's an excellent idea."

2.

The YT-1300 class freighter *Silver Hawk* came out of hyperspace in close proximity to the *Just Cause*. The privateer frigate was no longer docked with the Ghtroc super freighter, instead the two ships drifted close by one another while the privateers awaited the arrival of Alliance forces.

Through the canopy of the *Silver Hawk*'s cockpit its owner Captain Mace Grayle and Major Vorn Larcus III the commander of the rebel unit stationed aboard observed the two ships.

"Well there they are major." Mace said, "Just as promised. I just wish you could tell me why we're bringing the ship back to Estran so soon."

"I wish I could as well." Vorn replied, "But all I was told was that an observer aboard a privateer ship had found something they needed help with. You know what these observers can be like, they play their cards pretty close to their chests at times."

"Yeah, well just so long as we've not got another renegade on our hands. I'd rather not test the exact limits of our shields." Mace said.

"I've more faith in the shields than I have in our one laser cannon." Vorn commented and then a woman's voice came from the intercom.

"What? Even with me at the controls boss? I'm hurt."

Vorn looked at Mace.

"You had the intercom on?" he asked.

"I thought it might come in handy if we could order Kara to start shooting straight away."

"Hello *Silver Hawk* this is the *Just Cause*." Lorn's voice then said as he signalled from his own ship, "I've got the ventral hatch ready and you're clear to dock."

"Thanks for that *Just Cause*." Mace replied, "We're heading in now." And he directed the ship towards the frigate.

"I'll go let the others know." Vorn said, getting up and heading out of the cockpit.

There were three rebels in the *Silver Hawk*'s lounge. One of them was Mace's engineer Tobis while the other two were like Kara, members of Vorn's field team. Tharun Verser was a former mercenary and the tall man wore his body armour, ready for trouble. The final rebel was Jaysica Horbid, the team's demolitions and security specialist. She sat arm in arm with Tobis, resting her head against him.

"We felt the ship drop back to realspace major." Tharun said, "What's the story?"

"The privateer ship is waiting here as expected." Vorn replied.

"So its not a trap?" Jaysica asked, smiling.

"No. At least it doesn't look that way." Vorn said, "Mace is moving us in to dock so we'll be going aboard."

Then he looked back at Tharun who was cradling a heavy blaster rifle, "So no need for that just yet." He said and Tharun sighed.

"I hope your right major." He said.

"So am I invited as well?" Kara asked as she descended the ladder from the turret, having overheard everything said in the lounge.

"Of course you are." Vorn said.

"Just try not to punch anyone okay?" Tharun added and Kara pulled a face at him.

Vorn was first to climb the ladder to the *Silver Hawk*'s top hatch and as it slid open Carli extended a hand down to help him up.

"Hello major." She said. Then as Mace emerged from the hatch she added, "Captain."

"Lieutenant." He replied, "So can you tell me why you've had us come all the way out here?"

"I think I should leave it to Captain Kruger to explain." Carli said, "If you'll follow me I'll take you to him."

Though the frigate was slightly larger than the *Silver Hawk*, its interior was far more cramped to accommodate the heavier armament, shield generators and larger crew compliment. As such the rebels frequently found themselves having to squeeze their way past crewmen coming the other way.

Carli led the team to the compact bridge where Lorn was waiting. Like the rest of the ship this was cramped and both Jaysica and Tobis who were bringing up the rear of the group found themselves having to wait in the corridor outside.

"Welcome aboard the *Just Cause*." Lorn said from his chair, "I think you'll enjoy this." And he tapped at his control panel before pointing to the main display. The screen showed a recorded image of the skipray blastboat accelerating into the Estran system.

"The freighter had an escort?" Vorn asked.

"Oh, err, shouldn't we be leaving then? Before more Imperial ships show up?" Tobis asked, peering over Tharun's shoulder.

"Is he always this jittery?" Lorn asked.

"He does his job." Mace answered as the video image reached its end and returned to the start, "Now what are we looking at?"

"That ship was stolen by someone working with the crew of the freighter we've seized." Lorn told him.

"We had hoped to deliver it to the Alliance as well." Carli added.

"Hey then we'd have a pair." Kara commented, "It'd go just nice with that one we stole."

"Too bad someone else obviously stole it first." Tharun said.

"I'm guessing that's why we're here." Vorn said, looking at Lorn.

"It was a rakata." Lorn replied and there were gasps and nervous glances from the newly arrived rebels.

"A rakata? On Estran?" Jaysica said, "But why?"

"Well we've known they have agents working for them there. It must be hoping they can help it get back to wherever they're based." Vorn replied.

"But Estran boss?" Kara said, "Why not just fly that blastboat back to the nebula? Its got hyperdrive."

"My guess is that the nav computer wasn't given the data before we attacked." Lorn said.

"How far did you track it?" Mace asked.

"All the way to Estran." Lorn said, "It easily slipped through the security perimeter and into the atmosphere. It landed somewhere in the northern hemisphere. About three hundred kilometres outside Estran City itself as best we can tell. I wanted to ask the freighter crew what was there but she wouldn't let me." And he looked at Carli.

"He was going to beat answers out of them." She replied.

"Thanks for stopping him." Vorn said to her, "That rarely works."

"Depends how hard you hit them." Tharun commented and a slight hint of a smile appeared on Mace's face.

"You've got the tracking data?" Vorn asked.

"Right here." Lorn replied and he held up a mem-stik. Vorn reached out to take it but Lorn pulled it away, "No." he said.

"What?" Carli exclaimed, "Lorn, give it to him. That's why we brought him here."

"No." Lorn repeated, "If you want this you agree to my terms. I'm not part of your revolution; I'm an independent contractor. I expect to be well paid."

"Oh don't be ridiculous Lorn." Carli told him.

"If you want that rakata then I'm going with you and I'll be the one to bring him in. I lost four people seizing that freighter out there and I want to make sure the job is finished properly. So do we have a deal major?" and Lorn waved the mem-stik about.

Vorn looked at Mace, who nodded.

"Deal." Vorn said.

"Well in that case I'm with you too." Carli said and as Lorn drew in breath to reply she added, "I'm assigned to keep an eye on you captain and that's exactly what I'm going to do."

Lorn handed over the mem-stik only when he was aboard the *Silver Hawk* and the ship had separated from the *Just Cause*. Vorn took it straight to the cockpit and while Mace plotted a course as far as the orbit of Estran Vorn connected it to the ship's computer and checked the co-ordinates.

"Uh-oh." He said.

"What's wrong?" Mace asked.

"Take a look at these co-ordinates." Vorn said, "We've been there before."

"What?" Mace said and he looked at the display Vorn had been studying, "Ah." He added, "I see what you mean. That's near where your son was abducted."

Darall Harber made a point of shaking every member of his congregation by the hand as they filed out at the end of the service. He knew most by name and those he did not he could still make it appear as if he knew them. When the last of the worshippers was gone he closed the temple doors and walked back towards his pulpit, passing beneath the large hologram floating above the rows of seats and rotating slowly. A tall hooded figure emerged from a back room and called out to him.

"We are alone?"

"We are. The service has finished. I think I was successful in getting across-"

"That matters not now." The hooded figure said and it lowered its hood to reveal that it was a rakata. Darall bowed his head in respect.

"What is wrong?" he asked.

"Our freighter outside the system was attacked with one of my brethren aboard."

"He is dead?" Darall.

"No. Fortunately he was able to make his escape in the gunboat you helped us acquire. But he was unable to return to our nearest outpost; instead he was forced to come here to this world. You must inform your acolytes. He must be found before our enemies can get to him."

"I hate this place." Kara said from the bottom of the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp and looked around. The ship was landed in what literally was a landing field, with only a simple beacon to identify it as an approved public landing zone at all.

"What's wrong with it?" Carli asked, "I don't see any customs agents to cause trouble. Seems like a decent landing spot. I mean I'd be happier if we weren't so exposed but."

"The locals are total nerf herders." Tharun said as he walked down the ramp behind them, cradling his rifle, "And I don't mean they're farmers do I?" He then added, looking back up the ramp to where Jaysica and Tobis had appeared.

"I thought they were." Jaysica said and Tharun sighed.

"Oh, err, I think Tharun was referring to the insult." Tobis said.

"What? Oh right." Jaysica said, "Well they certainly weren't very friendly the last time we were here."

"Well it looks like Thracken's around." Mace said as he and Vorn descended the ramp with Lorn and he pointed towards one of the handful of other ships present, an obsolete and battered looking pathfinder-class scoutship.

"Who's Thracken?" Lorn asked.

"He's just some crazy old man." Kara replied.

"That 'crazy old man' as you put it is the reason we know about the rakata to begin with." Vorn reminded her.

"Perhaps we should go and see if he's inside." Mace commented and the rebels made their way across the landing field to Thracken's vessel.

"Thracken!" Vorn shouted as he banged on the hatch and then waited for a response. When none came he looked around and added, "I don't think there's anyone at home."

"So what now then boss?" Kara asked.

"We need to find Thracken." Vorn replied, "That means checking all the places he could be."

"I don't think there are that many places to hide around here." Tharun said.

"Kara and I will wait here in case he comes back." Vorn said, "Mace I want you and Tharun to check out that cantina we found him in last time."

"What about me and Tobis major?" Jaysica asked with a smile, linking her arm with Tobis'.

"Go into town as well." Vorn replied, "He could be stocking up on supplies or spare parts. Tobis knows what to look for. Now remember all of you, the locals aren't exactly welcoming to outsiders so watch yourselves."

"We'll be careful." Jaysica replied, "Won't we Tobis?"

"What? Oh, yes of course. We'll be careful." Tobis responded.

"You'll be dead if you don't watch your step lad." Tharun commented.

"You never mentioned us major." Carli said, indicating herself and Lorn.

"No I didn't. Frankly its up to you. You can head into town with any of the others or remain here with me and Kara."

"I think someone mentioned a cantina." Lorn said, "I think a drink would be nice right about now. I don't get much chance about the *Just Cause*."

"You're with us then." Mace said, "Just don't expect friendly service."

As the other rebels headed towards the nearby settlement Kara and Vorn headed back towards the *Silver Hawk* and went inside. As soon as the access ramp was raised once more Kara looked at Vorn.

"So boss," she said, "you've me all to yourself. What do you want to do to pass the time?"

At this time of day there were few people in the cantina and it was obvious that Thracken was not among them. Aware that some of them were armed Tharun moved his hand to the blaster holstered prominently on his leg. However, the group led by Mace had been instructed to watch for Thracken in the cantina despite the attitude of the locals so they approached the bar itself and Lorn knocked on it.

"Service." He called out, ignoring the stares from the other customers.

"What?" the barman asked abruptly.

"What kind of beer do you have?" Lorn asked.

"Its just beer." The barman replied, "You want four?"

"Yes." Mace said before either Carli or Lorn could speak, "And could you tell us if Thracken's around? Thracken Grammel."

"He comes and he goes." The barman said as he walked to the taps and prepared four drinks, "I don't ask."

"I guess there's at least a five drink minimum for useful information." Lorn said.

"Well the other two will have more luck." Carli said.

3.

There were only a handful of stores in the settlement and most sold only essential goods. Even the few luxuries available looked to be built for durability as if the place were on some isolated world far away from the nearest hyperspace trade route rather than just a few hundred kilometres from the capital city of the entire sector. But the nature of these goods on offer meant that they were ideally suited to individuals planning extended trips beyond civilised space without support such as rebels or independent scouts like Grammel Thracken.

"We should head back." Jaysica said to Tobis after they had checked all of the stores, "He's obviously not here. I mean Kara gets to sit in the Silver Hawk with her feet up and Mace and Tharun are probably half drunk by now. Why should we do all the hard work? Its not fair."

Before Tobis could respond there was a sudden 'Crash!' from an alleyway between two of the stores, followed by a yell.

"Don't let him get away!"

Looking at one another briefly both Jaysica and Tobis rushed to the alleyway and looked down it. There they saw three large men holding onto a white haired man who had blood running down the side of his face. It was Thracken.

"Hey!" Tobis shouted, "Let him go."

"Just keep on walking." One of Thracken's attackers replied without bothering to turn around. But then he noticed that the looks on his comrades' faces were of concern and he glanced over his shoulder to find himself staring down the barrel of Tobis' blaster pistol.

"You heard him." Jaysica said, "Let our friend go."

"I don't think so." The man replied and he swung Thracken around so that he formed a shield in front of him that obscured Tobis' line of sight, "You wouldn't want to hurt your friend now would you?" he then asked, an evil grin on his face.

Behind him one of the other two men slowly reached out his arm for a metal bar that was lay on the ground amongst Thracken's scattered belongings. But before he could reach the object he wanted to use as a weapon there was a sudden flash and the sound of blaster fire as Tobis shot him.

"Holy kriff!" the third man exclaimed as his comrade fell dead, "Let's get out of here." And he turned and ran back down the alley

Slowly both Jaysica and Tobis advanced towards the man hiding behind Thracken and Jaysica reached into a pocket and produced a compact hold out blaster.

"You think that because there's two of you I'll give up? Well I've still got your friend here and I'll snap his neck if you come any closer." The man warned them and they stopped. Then Jaysica smiled.

"Actually," she said, "I think you'll find there are three of us."

"What?" the man said just before Thracken plunged the knife he had slid from under his coat into his side.

Screaming, the man let go of Thracken and staggered back, his hands now clutching at the wound that still had Thracken's knife sticking out of it. Tobis fired again and his shot sent the man sprawling backwards.

"Quick!" Jaysica said to Thracken, rushing towards the body, "Let's get your knife and get out of here."

"Yes of course." Thracken replied, "Wait no. I need my other things." And he scurried to the other belongings that had been knocked from his grasp.

"Err, we really need to be going." Tobis said, "If someone heard-

"I'll be quick." Thracken said as he knelt down and began to gather up his belongings.

"Oh we don't have time for this." Jaysica said, "Tobis keep watch while I help him." and she went over to assist Thracken.

Retreating back to the entrance to the alleyway Tobis looked out into the street and saw a pair of armed men in uniform rushing towards him.

"Err, Jaysica." He said.

"What is it?"

"Trouble." Tobis said, running back down the alleyway. Reaching Thracken he grabbed hold of the older man and pulled him back to his feet, "We're leaving." He said.

"But my-" Thracken began but Tobis ignored him, instead dragging him further along the alleyway.

Lorn shuddered as he drained the last of his drink.

"That's strong stuff." He said.

"Then be careful how many you have." Carli told him before they were interrupted by Mace's comlink chiming.

"Looks like no-one may be getting any more." He said as he took out the device and activated it, "Mace." He said simply.

"Captain its me." Tobis' voice said, "We've found Thracken."

"Great, where?" Mace asked.

"Err, hang on." Tobis said and then he was heard to say, "Where are we?" and a moment later he said, "To the north of town, heading for the water pumping station."

"The water pumping station?" Tharun commented, "What's the lad doing there?"

"Tobis, what's going on?" Mace asked.

"Ahh. Well, err, it's just that we're, well-"

"We're being chased by the cops." Jaysica's voice interrupted.

"We're on our way." Mace replied.

"What?" Kara asked when she activated her comlink.

"Kara? Is that you?" Mace asked.

"Well who would it be?"

"Well I just called the major's comlink."

"Oh right, we must have got them mixed up."

"How? Wait never mind. Jaysica and Tobis have found Thracken, but they're being chased by the police.

We're heading to meet them now, but we'll need a pickup. Tobis said they're heading for a pumping station."

Kara smiled.

"Just send me a beacon." She said.

"Copy that." Mace said and his transmission suddenly switched to a simple repeating 'ping'.

With the comlink still in her hand Kara rushed from the lounge to the cockpit where an R5 astromech droid and a gold coloured protocol droid were monitoring the few ship's systems currently active.

"Out of the way Harvey." Kara said to the astromech droid, "we've got to go." And as she pushed past it to the pilot's seat the astromech let out a rude sounding tone.

"Really Harvey," the protocol droid, "she may be impatient but there's no need for that sort of language."

Then it looked at Kara in the seat beside it, "Excuse me Mistress Bilstran, but should you be doing that? You're flight status was revoked when-"

"Jeeves, I've punched officers." Kara said, "What makes you think I won't find something to hit you with as well?"

"Well really." Jeeves responded, "How rude."

The *Silver Hawk's* engines came to life and the ship lifted off the ground. Kara held it in place for a short time while she set the communications to monitor the homing signal being sent by Mace before accelerating.

"Kara what are you doing?" Vorn called out from the corridor and a moment later he was standing in the doorway.

"Mace called for help." She replied, "Tobis and the klutz are about to be arrested and he wants us to go rescue them all."

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Vorn said and then he looked at Jeeves, "Get out of my seat Jeeves." He said.

"Why certainly Major Larcus sir." And the droid swapped places with Vorn.

"So where are we heading?" he asked.

"Just following a beacon for now." Kara told him, "North for now."

The pumping station was a small building set amongst a complex cluster of pipes and storage tanks. It was built beside a river and surrounded on the other sides by a simple wire fence that Jaysica cut through using a compact multi-purpose tool.

"Here." She said, lifting a flap of wire mesh to create a gap just about big enough to crawl through.

Thracken crawled through first, followed by Tobis while Jaysica continued to hold back the flap of wire.

Jaysica then got down on the ground to crawl through the gap herself, but without anyone to hold up the flap it was able to drop back down on top of her.

"Uh-oh." She said, her eyes widening.

"What's wrong?" Tobis asked.

"Tobis I'm snagged." She said.

"Can you get free?" Tobis then asked, looking around for any signs of the police he knew to be hunting them. Jaysica wriggled.

"No, I'm stuck."

"Here let me help you." Thracken said and he reached down and took hold of one of Jaysica's arms before pulling her towards him.

"Wait," she protested as Thracken continued to pull, "I don't think that's a very good-" and then there was a tearing sound as she was suddenly pulled free of the fence.

"Oh. Oh dear." Thracken exclaimed as he found himself looking at the tattered remains of Jaysica's trousers still caught in the fence while Jaysica herself was now lay inside it.

"Police!" Tobis snapped as he saw the first signs of an approaching speeder and he and Thracken ducked down, "We need to get inside." He added.

The flashing red lights from the two speeders gave away the position of the police before the approaching rebels saw the vehicles or the officers themselves.

"Did anyone bring macrobinoculars?" Carli asked as they looked at the distant police and pumping station, "I left mine on the *Just Cause*."

"Mine are still on the *Silver Hawk*." Mace said.

"Well at least I planned ahead." Tharun said as he produced a set of macrobinoculars and handed them to Mace, "I'll use my rifle scope." He added and after Mace took the macrobinoculars from him Tharun lifted his rifle and aimed it towards the pumping station.

"Looks like there's four of them." Mace said.

"That's my count too." Tharun agreed, "I see them holding two rifles, two pistols and – and, what the hell is that?"

Mace adjusted the macrobinoculars and zoomed in closer.

"It can't be." He said.

"What?" Lorn asked, "What's going on?"

"Well they look like someone's pants." Mace said.

"Jaysica's pants." Tharun added.

"Oh don't be so-" Carli began and Mace handed her the macrobinoculars, "Oh yes." She said, "Pants. Does your corporal often remove her clothing during missions?"

"More often than is appropriate." Mace said.

"Though to be fair she's only been completely naked a few times." Tharun added, "But don't bring it up with her or Tobis."

"Well what do you think sergeant?" Mace said.

"I think the major doesn't like us killing civilian cops." Tharun replied.

"An A-two-eighty has a stun setting doesn't it?" Lorn said and Tharun snorted.

"One of the most powerful rifles in the galaxy." He muttered, "And all I seem to do recently is stun people."

And there was a 'click' as he set his rifle to stun. Lying down to support his rifle better Tharun lined up on the nearest police officer and fired. There was a flash of blue light and the rebels saw one of the police officers collapse. Immediately the other three took cover.

"That's blown it." Carli said, "They'll be sending for backup."

"Fortunately we have some of our own." Mace said and he took out his comlink, "*Silver Hawk* come in." he transmitted.

"*Silver Hawk* here, what's your status?" Vorn replied.

"Looks like there are cops between my group and Tobis'. Tharun's stunned one, but the other three have taken cover." Mace said and at that moment there was a flash from beside one of the police speeders as one of the rifle armed police armed returned fire and the rebels ducked, "And it looks like they know where we are." He added.

4.

From the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk* Kara and Vorn saw the blaster fire below; blue stun bolts from Tharun and lethal red ones from the police. Vorn acted quickly, using the ship's communications to isolate the police frequency and flooding it with interference.

"Mace, their comms are jammed." He signalled, "Just try and keep them pinned down while we go pick up Tobis and the others."

"Major it's a bit difficult to pin down three cops with just one rifle." Mace said, "And they're too far away for our pistols to hit them on stun."

Vorn took a deep breath.

"Set to kill." He said, "Just try not to hit any of them okay?"

"Got it." Mace replied and the channel went dead.

"Okay Kara, let's head for that pumping station." Vorn said and then he looked around at the two droids behind him, "Jeeves, Harvey, get to the hold and stand by with the cargo hatch. We'll need to winch them up."

"Why of course Major Larcus sir." Jeeves replied and the droid immediately turned to leave the cockpit, Harvey rolling behind.

Waiting silently inside the pumping station Tobis was certain he heard a noise other than the machinery surrounding them.

"Err, does anyone else hear that?" he asked.

"It sounds like a repulsorlift." Thracken said, "I think the police have found us."

The noise grew louder.

"Do the local police have airspeeders?" Tobis asked.

"No, no they don't." Thracken replied.

"Then it's not the police. Those engines are overhead." Tobis said and he dashed for the door.

"Tobis wait!" Jaysica called out after him, "They could have sent for help. It could be stormtroopers."

"It's the *Silver Hawk*!" Tobis exclaimed, "Come on, quick!"

Bursting out of the pumping station they saw the *Silver Hawk* now hovering almost directly overhead and near the rear of the ship a hatch slid open before a line was lowered.

A blaster bolt suddenly passed close by and Tobis turned to see that the police had noticed them and one was now focusing on them.

"Get him aboard the ship." He said to Jaysica, "I'll cover you." And he raised his blaster and fired back.

Jaysica and Thracken ran to the winch line lowered from the *Silver Hawk* and found that three safety harnesses had been hooked to the end. Removing them Jaysica handed one to Thracken and began to put another on herself. As soon as they were ready Jaysica hooked the line to Thracken's harness and then looked up at the hovering *Silver Hawk*. Seeing Jeeves peering out of the ship she waved. Immediately the line began to be drawn back in, lifting Thracken off the ground.

Jaysica watched as he was taken up inside the *Silver Hawk* and then as the line was lowered once more.

"Tobis!" she yelled and still firing he ran towards her.

"Take this." Jaysica said, handing him the final harness. When Tobis had fastened it around him he pulled Jaysica towards him and fastened both harnesses to the line before signalling to be pulled up.

"That's an interesting view." Tharun commented as through his scope he caught sight of Jaysica's bare legs as she and Tobis were hauled up to the *Silver Hawk*.

"Tharun not now." Mace responded, "We need to keep those cops distracted while they're dangling there."

"We're aboard!" Jaysica's voice called out over the intercom and Vorn nodded at Kara.

"Now let's go pick up the others." He said and Kara twisted the control column to turn the ship around sharply. Then he spoke into the intercom, "Tobis get to the ramp. We can't winch them all up with no one left to cover them."

"Here they come." Mace said as the *Silver Hawk* swooped low over the police and headed directly for the other rebels.

"Looks like they're holding the door open for us as well." Carli added when she saw the access ramp opening.

The *Silver Hawk* spun around in mid flight, taking up a position between the rebels on the ground and the police by the fence with the access ramp fully open and pointing towards the rebels.

"Move!" Mace snapped and all three rebels and their privateer ally ran for the ramp. Unlike the others Mace did not halt when he reached the top of the ramp, instead running through the lounge and to the cockpit.

"Out of my seat." He said to Kara.

Taking over the controls of the *Silver Hawk*, Mace brought up the shields. The small arms with which the police were armed were no threat to the hull of even a relatively small civilian starship like the *Silver Hawk* but they would still leave tell tale marks on the hull that Mace would rather not have to explain to a customs official.

"I think Thracken's back in the hold still." Mace commented.

"Excellent." Vorn replied, "I need to go see him right away." And he got up out of the co-pilot's seat and darted from the cockpit.

"Hey boss! Wait for me." Kara said and she ran after him.

Thracken was actually in the lounge, having been escorted there by Jaysica and Jeeves.

"What the hell happened to you?" Kara asked when she saw Jaysica tugging at her jacket to pull it further down her exposed legs.

"It was-" Jaysica began before both Kara and Tharun interrupted her.

"An accident." They said simultaneously and then they smiled at one another.

"Corporal where are your trousers?" Vorn asked.

"Err, the police have them." Tobis replied.

"Ahh, if it helps it was sort of my fault I'm afraid. Yes, all my fault." Thracken said suddenly.

"I doubt that." Kara commented, then she noticed a flash of red as Jaysica's jacket lifted up slightly, "Hang on," she said as she reached out towards Jaysica and pulled up the jacket to expose her underwear, "those are mine!" then she looked at Vorn and pointing she added, "Aren't these mine boss?"

"How would he know what your underwear looks like?" Carli asked.

"That's a very good question." Tharun agreed.

"Look can we just concentrate on what's important?" Vorn said.

"She stole my underwear boss." Kara said, then she turned to stare straight at Jaysica, "Come on, give them back."

"Kara no." Vorn said and he took hold of Kara and pulled her back towards him, wrapping an arm around her waist to keep hold of her, "Jaysica, go find something to put on. Kara stay right here."

Then as Jaysica dashed into her cabin Kara shouted after her.

"I don't want them back now you've worn them anyway." And Vorn sighed.

"Captain Grammel," he said, "I'm sorry to bring you here like this but-"

"Oh, oh its quite alright." Thracken replied, "You saved me. Its about the lights isn't it?"

"Lights? What lights?" Lorn asked.

"The old fart sees lights in the sky." Tharun whispered to him.

"Ahh, I see." Lorn replied.

"They wanted to know about the lights as well." Thracken said.

"They who?" Vorn asked.

"Err, he was being attacked when we found him." Tobis explained, "Three men."

"They knew about the lights." Thracken said, "I saw them again two nights ago and they wanted me to tell them where they went."

"So we've got competition." Lorn commented, "Did you tell them anything?"

"Oh no." Thracken replied, shaking his head, "No, I don't trust them."

"But you do know where they went don't you?" Vorn asked.

"Oh yes, as soon as saw them I watched them closely. I saw precisely where they went." Thracken replied.

"Good." Vorn said, "In that case I'd like you come with me to the cockpit." He was just about release his grip on Kara when he turned to Tharun and Tobis and added, "Sergeants Dorfus and Verser, I order you to keep Specialist Bilstran and Corporal Horbid apart. Understood?"

"Can we shoot them?" Tharun asked.

"Only on stun." Vorn replied.

The only one of Thracken's attackers to have escaped with his life did not live much longer. He slumped to his knees, his mouth and eyes opened wide as he stared at his killer before toppling over.

"Good," Darall said turning to one of the other acolytes gathered around him, a large man whose bare arms were covered in tattoos and other deliberate decorative scars, "Now next time find men who can overpower an eighty year old man without getting themselves shot."

"Yes holiness." The man replied, his gaze fixed on the ancient dagger that Darall held and the blood still dripping from the blade.

"Driver, door." Darall then said, wiping his knife clean and his chauffeur opened the door of his luxury landspeeder with blacked out windows for him. Darall got into the car and the chauffeur began to close it

when Darall placed a hand on it, "Oh and gentlemen," he said calmly, "remember the penalties for failure." And he glanced down at the body on the ground before removing his hand from the door.

"It's a lake." Mace commented as the *Silver Hawk* circled the area that Thracken had led them to. Sure enough a large body of water was right below them, its dark waters calm and obviously deep. All around the landscape consisted of hills, scattered rocky outcrops the only break in the blanket of dark green vegetation. "Makes sense." Lorn said from the cockpit pit door, having let Carli and Thracken take the seats behind Mace and Vorn.

"What do you mean?" Vorn asked him, looking back over his shoulder.

"Well at the bottom of a lake is a good place to hide something." Lorn said, "The Empire must have figured out that skipray was stolen by now and if it was parked up in the open country they'd see it on satellite scans."

"But starships tend to float." Carli pointed out.

"Only when they're full of air." Lorn replied.

"Yes, yes that's it." Thracken said excitedly, "Land a ship in a lake and then open all of the hatches and it'll flood and sink to the bottom. Very clever."

"So how do we find it?" Carli asked, "Do you have underwater gear on board?"

"No we don't." Vorn replied, "None of us are qualified to use it anyway. But we don't need to find the ship."

"We don't?" Thracken said in surprise.

"We're looking for the pilot." Lorn told him, "Though the bounty on that ship—"

"Would be nothing given that it's filled with water. Which is exactly why the pilot won't still be onboard. He'll have made for shore before the ship sunk and the displacement of water sucked him down with it." Mace interrupted, then he looked down through the canopy at a point on the lakeshore and added, "There, that looks good." And he angled the *Silver Hawk* towards it.

The *Silver Hawk* set down beside the lake in an area of relatively flat sand and the moment the access ramp was lowered Tharun came rushing down, fully armoured and with his rifle held at the ready.

"Clear!" he yelled, still holding his rifle to his shoulder as he swept his aim along the tree line.

"A little over the top don't you think?" Carli asked Vorn, "We're only after one—"

"We're after a rakata lieutenant." Vorn interrupted, "From what we've seen of them they're merciless and I'm taking no risks. Now I believe you've tracking experience yes?"

"Yes, from my days doing what you do." Carli replied.

"Good, then I suggest you and I take Captain Kruger and Kara while Mace takes the others and we move around the lake."

"What about the ship boss?" Kara asked, "Shouldn't two of us stay and guard it? You and I maybe?"

"I'll seal it up." Mace said, "The droids can look after it just fine. In fact if we leave Harvey plugged into the sensors he could sweep the shoreline as well. You never know, he may spot something."

"Good idea." Vorn said and he looked back up the ramp to where Harvey, Jeeves and the mouse droid that belonged to Jaysica waited, "Got that?" he said and Harvey let out a series of bleeps before turning on the spot and rolling out of sight, heading towards the cockpit.

"Excuse me, I don't mean to be a problem, but what about me?" Thracken asked, "Which way do I go?"

"Go with Mace and his group." Vorn said, then he looked around at the other rebels and added, "Right then, let's get moving. Look for any signs of where the rakata came ashore."

Without a word the two groups of rebels then split up and began to walk in opposite directions along the shore.

5.

Most of the lakeshore consisted of sand with only small, scattered rocky outcrops extending into the water. Had the rakata come ashore at one of these places it would be difficult to tell, but fortunately they tended to sit high up from the surface of the lake so it was reasonable to assume that the alien would have instead made for the gentle slope of a sandbank.

"What are we supposed to look for anyway Tobis?" Jaysica asked. In Mace's group Tharun, Tobis and Thracken all moved in a side-by-side line ahead of Jaysica and Mace, carefully searching the ground ahead of them. They had walked a considerable distance now. The Silver Hawk was still in sight, but the other group had disappeared from view because of the shape of the lake.

"What? Oh, err, well anything out of the ordinary I suppose." Tobis replied.

"Footprints would be a good start." Tharun added, "You can tell a lot from footprints."

"Like what?" Jaysica asked.

"Like how many feet your target has." Tharun muttered.

"I heard that." Jaysica said.

"Look just keep quiet and let them search." Mace said.

"But I'm bored and I'm tired. Can't we take a break. Don't you want to rest Tobis?"

"Don't answer that sergeant." Mace said, coming to a halt and looking at Jaysica, "Look, this is important. Just let them get on with their work. If you want to take a break then take a break, but you'll have to catch up with us when you're done. Understood corporal?"

"There's no need to be nasty about it." Jaysica mumbled as she wandered back to a rock that they had just passed and sat down on it, "Ouch!" she suddenly exclaimed, "I sat on something." And she stood up rapidly. As she did so she dragged up the bright yellow life jacket that had been concealed behind the rock, one of its fastenings now caught in her belt.

"Don't move!" Tharun snapped and he rushed towards her.

"What?" Jaysica replied, looking down.

"Err, Jaysica that looks like an Imperial issue life jacket." Tobis said.

"Of course!" Thracken exclaimed, "The rakata swam ashore so he'd be bound to take one of the life jackets from the emergency supplies."

"Give it here." Mace told her and he held out his hand.

"Hang on, it's twisted around my belt." Jaysica replied.

"Oh here, let me help." Thracken said, walking up to her had taking hold of the dangling life jacket.

"Hang on," Jaysica said, "I think it's snagged on-" and then she was interrupted by the sound of tearing cloth.

"Oh no, not again." Tharun said, wincing.

"The rakata must have come ashore here." Mace said, drawing his blaster and looking around. Then he took out his comlink and activated it, "Major, we've found something."

"What is it?" Vorn replied.

"A life jacket, looks like Imperial issue. We reckon the rakata used it get ashore."

"Hold your position." Vorn ordered, "Search the immediate area, but do not head inland yet, we're on our way to hook up with you."

"Stop laughing at me!" Jaysica yelled at Kara.

"Oh come on," Kara replied, "you've got to admit that's its pretty funny how you keep ending up with no pants on."

"No it isn't. And I'm really cold, there's a really cold wind coming from the lake."

Kara drew in breath to respond but Vorn held up his hand for quiet.

"Don't." he said simply.

"Aw boss."

"Don't 'aw boss' me. Just quit your bickering for five minutes while we figure out what's going on here."

"Fine." Kara said, rolling up her sleeve and looking at the chronometer on her wrist, "You've got five minutes."

"So what do you think happened?" Vorn asked Mace.

"Well the rakata obviously came ashore somewhere near here." He replied.

"But we haven't found any tracks. No, none at all." Thracken added.

"I'm guessing the rakata covered them over and ditched the bright yellow jacket before heading inland." Tharun said.

"That's a lot of ground to cover." Lorn said, looking away from the lake.

"Even with the Silver Hawk flying backing us up from the air." Tharun agreed.

"Oh, err I think the ship's sensors will be of limited value." Tobis said, "It's that, err, well, without knowing anything about rakata biology we can't program them to scan specifically for one."

"So we'd wind up picking up every animal for kilometres." Mace said.

"We can't exactly bring in reinforcements." Carli said, "The amount of troops we'd need would be enormous."

"Yeah, even if your superiors let you have them they'd never get past the orbital security net." Lorn added.

"We don't need an army." Vorn said, "We just need someone who knows how a rakata thinks. Someone who can predict how one will act in a given situation."

"Oh is that all?" Lorn said, "Do you happen to know anyone who knows about a species that has barely been seen for more than twenty-five thousand years?"

"As a matter of fact I do." Vorn said.

Darall looked up from his desk as one of his temple acolytes brought a rough looking man into his office. For a moment he had trouble remembering the man's name, but then it came to him. Serrin. He was a former gangland thug that the Church of Infinity had recruited under the cover of one of its prison visiting programs. The man had enough talent with violence to be useful but was still nicely expendable.

"Leave us." He said to the acolyte and the man bowed to both him and the hooded rakata sat silently in the corner and left the room, "Well?" Darall asked, "Have you found him?"

"Not yet your reverence." Serrin replied as he knelt before Darall, "But we've made progress."

"Do go on."

"I split my men into two groups. The larger one is still looking for your fugitive." Serrin said

"Why not all of them? Why should I provide you with men if they're not going to be used to find the being I want?"

"Because the others have been keeping tabs on our rivals."

"You mean the infidels that attacked the men sent to apprehend that fool whose prattling exposed our slave smuggling operation?"

"Exactly. The cops reported that they fled in a YT thirteen hundred. We've been tracking one since then."

"And what did it do Serrin?"

"It headed for one of the nearby lakes where the occupants conducted a search of the shore. I've got my people sweeping the area as best they can right now, but whoever these others are they've gone for now. They didn't find the being you want though. They just took off and headed for the capital of all places."

"They're here? Whereabouts?"

"Don't worry your reverence, they haven't checked in with the authorities. Whoever they are they don't work for the Empire. I've got men following them now and one of them has told me that a group has headed for the university."

"Thank you, that will be all." Darall said, leaning back in his chair.

"Of course your reverence." Serrin said and after getting back to his feet he bowed to both Darall and the disguised rakata like the acolyte before leaving.

"The university." The rakata hissed, "This could be troublesome."

"I know." Darall responded, "Our friend there has confirmed that they have a number of texts about your people. I've got a very bad feeling about this."

Doctor Jenessa Drame, head of xenoarchaeology field research addressed the class just as they were getting up to leave.

"Assignments should be with me by the end of the week." She called out, unsure as to whether anyone was able to hear her or paying attention even if they could, "Late papers will not be graded. Requests for extensions should be made to myself or my assistant Grenick." And she looked towards a horned devaronian standing in the corner. Then after the students were all gone she spoke to the devaronian, "So how many do you think I'll get?" she asked him.

"Papers, requests for extensions or excuses?" Grenick replied.

"Any." Jenessa said.

"I think Darth Drame will be making a comeback." Grenick said, then he noticed two men walking down from the entrance at the back of the lecture hall towards them both, "Uh-oh." He said as he recognised one of them.

"Mace?" Jenessa said when she turned to face the newcomers, "Who's this?"

"Doctor Jenessa Drame, meet Lorn Kruger." Mace replied.

"If you don't mind I'll leave you alone." Grenick said, "I don't want any part of whatever you're here for." And he left by the door set into the wall beside the massive display used to convey information in lectures.

"So I'm guessing you're part of the Alliance as well Mister Kruger." Jenessa said, keeping her voice low. The lecture hall's acoustics were designed so that anyone speaking in the vicinity of where she stood would carry easily.

"It's Captain." Lorn replied, "And I'm an independent businessman."

"He's a privateer." Mace said.

"So then Captains, what do you both want? Somehow I doubt you're here to sign up for classes." Jenessa said.

"We're hunting a rakata." Mace said, "We figured that if anyone knew anything about them it would be you."

"Not here." Jenessa said, "Come with me to my office." And she led them towards the door Grenick had departed through.

On the other side of the door Grenick stood with his head pressed up against it, listening to the conversation and when he heard them approaching he ran off before they even knew he was there.

"There's a rakata loose on Estran." Mace said bluntly as soon as the office door was closed and Jenessa's jaw dropped.

"A rakata? Here? But how?"

Mace looked at Lorn.

"We seized its ship." The privateer explained, "But the damn thing was able to escape before we could transfer it back to the Alliance."

"So what do you want my help for?" Jenessa asked.

"The major was hoping that you might be able to offer us some insight into how rakata think." Mace told her, "After all you have spent years researching them."

"I've dug up a few artefacts from their empire." Jenessa corrected him, "Its hardly the same as carrying out a psychological study. No I'm afraid I can't help you." Then she paused and said, "But perhaps – No, it would never work."

"What?" Mace asked, "Look doctor, we're out of options. A dangerous alien is on the loose and you're our only hope."

"I've heard that before." Jenessa muttered.

"She can't help us. We're wasting our time here." Lorn said, frowning.

"Wait." Jenessa snapped, "Look, there may be a way of finding this rakata, but I'm not the one who'll be finding it for you."

"Then who is?" Mace asked.

"Kay Laren." Jenessa said and Mace frowned.

"Lady Sharva's handmaiden? Are you insane? How is she supposed to find us a rakata?" he asked and Jenessa just smiled and held up a crystalline cube that was sat on her desk as an ornament.

"I met Vorn's son." She said, "He came in here just like you demanding I help fight some phantom menace. The thing was he didn't come alone; he was with—"

"A blonde in a bodyglove called Vay Udra?" Mace asked.

"You've met her then?" Jenessa said.

"Oh yeah. I'm a big fan of the little witch."

"And do you know she's Force sensitive?"

"Yes I do, but how do you?"

"Force sensitive?" Lorn interrupted, "Hey, I'd rather not be messing about with that sort of stuff. Sheltering jedi is bad for your health."

"Don't worry Lorn," Mace said, "we won't be sheltering any jedi."

"Well not a real jedi." Jenessa added, "The blonde in the bodyglove picked up this holocron." She went on, gently shaking the crystalline device, "She said it tingled. Now I always assumed that this was just a data holocron, but since then I've started to think that maybe there's more to it than that. More importantly she wasn't the only one to have told me about getting that sensation when they handled it."

"Kay?" Mace said.

"Exactly. I think she's Force sensitive as well. Not trained, but she has power. Maybe if we enlist her we can find your rakata. I seem to remember that jedi could sense the presence of sentient beings."

"Can you bring her to the *Silver Hawk*?" Mace asked.

"I suppose so." Jenessa answered, "Though why don't you go ask? Has the good Parliamentarian figured out you're not the hero she told everyone you were?"

"No not yet. But by keeping out of her way I limit her ability to find out. That could come in handy one day." Jenessa smiled.

"Just tell me where you're docked. I'll get her there."

"Vorn! Mace! Are you in there?" Jenessa called out as she stood in the docking bay with the *Silver Hawk* in front of her. The access ramp was open, but the door at the top was closed and there were no signs of movement.

"Could they have gone after this alien?" the young woman standing just behind her asked.

"I doubt it Kay. They're expecting us."

Sure enough the door at the top of the access ramp slid upwards and revealed Mace standing in the doorway.

"Hi come on in." he said, "We've been waiting for you."

Mace led them into the lounge where the rebels were gathered. The first person that caught Jenessa's eye was Thracken.

"What's he doing here?" she asked, "He's crazy."

"He led us to where the rakata ditched his ship." Vorn said, then he turned his attention to Kay, "Thank you for coming Kay. Mace told me that-

"Look, whatever you've been told I'm no jedi." Kay interrupted, "I don't even know why I'm trying this."

"Because its the right thing to do." Vorn replied.

"Yeah, because no one ever got killed doing the right thing did they boss?" Kara commented and Vorn threw her a stern look.

"What is it you want?" Kay asked, "Doctor Drame only told me you needed someone Force sensitive."

"We need you to help us find an alien." Mace told her.

"We're hoping that you can just 'feel' where it is." Tharun added, waving his fingers while speaking the word 'feel'.

"It is only one alien and we'll all be there to protect you." Vorn said.

6.

Standing by the lake where the rakata was believed to have come ashore Kay looked inland.

"You're all staring at me." She said.

"And she knew without even looking." Kara commented.

"You just need to concentrate." Jenessa said.

"That doesn't help much." Kay replied.

"Well perhaps this will." Jenessa said and she produced the holocron from her bag, "Now just relax and concentrate."

"Concentrate on what though?" Kay asked and Jenessa's face fell as she looked at Vorn, who just shrugged.

"What did that guy Kieran do?" Jaysica asked referring to a fugitive jedi knight the rebels had encountered.

"He got chopped up by stinky." Kara replied referring to how he was killed by Vay Udra.

"I think you should try focusing your thoughts on the rakata." Vorn suggested.

"But I don't really know much about them." Kay said as she grasped the holocron and tried to remember anything about the rakata that she may have heard.

"The rakata are best avoided. Their empire is long gone, but there are those amongst the survivors who would restore its tyranny if they could."

The voice came from nowhere and the rebels reacted by drawing weapons and searching for its source.

"What the hell is going on?" Lorn said as he searched for a target.

"Err, I think it came from that." Tobis said and he pointed to the holocron.

"But I thought it was broken." Vorn said, looking at Jenessa.

"So did I." She replied and she turned to Kay, "Ask it something." She told her.

"Like what?" Kay asked in return.

"Oh, err, I know." Thracken said excitedly and in a clear voice he called out, "Guardian reveal yourself." And an image of a tall human suddenly appeared in front of Kay, projected from the holocron.

"Greetings padawan. I am Criston Harsis." The hologram spoke.

From a ridge some distance away two men watched the rebels through macrobinoculars.

"Now that is interesting." "one of them said.

"I could take them all out from here." The other replied and his hand slid towards a long barrelled blaster rifle.

"No." the first said suddenly, "I have a feeling that Mister Serrin will want to know about this. We better call it in."

"Who the hell is he?" Kara exclaimed, her blaster pointing towards the image of the jedi knight.

"I am Criston Harsis." The guardian repeated, "Or rather I am a virtual recreation of him. He created this holocron and filled it with his knowledge."

"So that was before he died along with all the other jedi then?" Jaysica asked.

The guardian's image turned its head towards Jaysica.

"Can you please expand upon your claim that all the jedi are dead?"

"How old is this holocron?" Vorn asked, looking at Jenessa.

"Almost four thousand years." She answered, "I found it amongst ruins that dated back to about the time this sector was first being settled by the Old Republic."

"So its information is going to be a bit out of date then." Carli said.

"Guardian-" Vorn said to the hologram.

"You may address me as Criston." It replied, "That was the intention of the original Criston Harsis."

"Sorry. Criston I'm sorry to inform you that the Jedi Order has fallen. If there are any survivors they are scattered and in hiding. Right now the galaxy is controlled by disciples of the sith."

"The sith?" Criston repeated, "Yet I sense no darkness in her." And the hologram looked directly at Kay.

"How about someone tells me what I'm supposed to do right now?" Kay said nervously, staring back at the holographic guardian.

"I am here because I sensed your attempt to contact me." Criston answered, "Simply explain what you require."

"What, so this hologram from that little cube will tell her anything she wants to know?" Lorn asked, "Seems too easy to me."

"And you are correct." Criston answered, "I will only provide the information that I deem the recipient deserves."

"A holocron is more than just a recording device." Jenessa explained, "They can be created to have a personality matrix more complex than even the most advanced droids. We may as well be talking to the real Criston Harsis."

"We are hunting a rakata." Vorn said to the virtual Criston, "We have discovered a number of them exist in the nearby nebula—"

The hologram held up a hand.

"I know about the rakata in the nebula. I discovered them when I came here."

"Can you tell us where they're based?" Mace asked.

"No. The original Criston never included that information within me. I suspect he was killed before he discovered it himself."

"But can you help us find the one we're hunting?" Vorn asked.

"That depends on why you are hunting it." Criston replied and he looked at Kay, "I want you to explain it to me."

Kay looked around before turning back to face the guardian again.

"They want to take it back to the Alliance so they can try and find out where the rest of them are."

"And what is this Alliance?" Criston asked.

"The Alliance to Restore the Republic." Vorn answered, "We are fighting a civil war against the sith-controlled Galactic Empire."

"And how do the rakata relate to this civil war?" Criston asked.

"They don't." Mace replied, "As far as we can tell they're a threat to everyone."

Criston looked at Kay again.

"You were trying to use your abilities to detect the rakata?" he asked and Kay nodded.

"But I don't know how." She said.

The hologram walked around to stand behind Kay and leant over her shoulder.

"Just look ahead." He said, pointing.

"Okay."

"Now you're not trying to single out the rakata just yet. First just relax, let the Force flow through you without trying to do anything with it for now." Criston told her and Kay did as she was told, taking deep and slow breaths.

"How is this helping? I mean—" Kara said, but she stopped talking when Carli, Mace and Vorn all glared at her.

"Now where do you think the rakata is?" Criston asked Kay.

"I don't know. How can I tell?" Kay asked.

"You will know, just trust your feelings."

"Oh this is all a bunch of—" Kara exclaimed, but Kay suddenly pointed.

"There!" she exclaimed.

"How can you tell?" Tharun asked.

"Go on, tell them." Criston said.

"I don't know." Kay said, "I just get the feeling that there's someone that way who doesn't want to be found."

"Have faith in your feelings." Criston said and then he was gone.

"Okay so that was weird." Carli said.

"Yeah," Kara added, "it's the oddest thing to have happened to us this week."

"So what are we going to do?" Lorn asked, "I don't like the idea of just heading off that way because she picked the direction at random."

"Well for now it's the only lead we've got." Vorn replied, "We'll head that way and see if we can pick up a trail. Lieutenant Sentis and Sergeants Dorfus and Verser will take the lead."

"Shouldn't I go near the front as well?" Thracken asked.

"No." Vorn replied, "I only want combat personnel on point. Just in case."

"You know your son told me pretty much the same thing." Jenessa commented.

"Really? How did that work out?"

"Not so good."

"Oh. Well hopefully we'll have more luck."

The rebels moved inland still unaware that they were being watched by the two men on the ridge.

"They're moving." the first one said, "We better get after them. Contact the others and get them to move in that direction, I doubt they're heading that way for fun."

"Over here!" Tharun called out and he crouched down beside a large rock.

"What is it sergeant?" Vorn asked as he scurried over to find Tharun scraping at the ground with his knife.

"The ground's disturbed." Tharun said, "Someone buried something here."

"You know that some of the wildlife buries its own droppings don't you?" Thracken said.

"They crap survival ration wrappers?" Tharun asked as his digging revealed the discarded wrapper from an energy bar that had been opened out flat and he held up the thin plastic sheet for everyone to see, "Imperial issue." He added.

"Well its not one hundred percent proof." Mace said, "Half the ration bars sold in stores are Imperial issue, but the fact that someone tried to hide this wrapper is significant."

"What's that smell though?" Jaysica asked.

"Did you fart?" Kara responded and Jaysica frowned.

"Stang!" Tharun snapped, dropping the wrapper when he noticed the other side.

"Problem sergeant?" Vorn asked as Tharun dragged his hand across the ground and then tipped water from his canteen over it before repeating the action.

"Oh no sir." Tharun replied, "I just love handling something an alien used to wipe himself clean with."

"When this is over remind me not to shake hands with you." Carli commented.

"At least we know we're on the right track." Lorn said and he looked at Kay, "Maybe there is something to all that mumbo jumbo after all."

The first sound Darall heard as he got out of the speeder was a distance rumble of thunder.

"It is unfortunate that we can't just signal him." Serrin said to him. Once again the man had got down on one knee and had bowed his head in respect.

"We can't risk the infidels becoming aware of our presence before your men are ready." Darall said, "Now what do you have to report?"

"My men are conducting a general sweep of the area, moving parallel to the other group and staying out of sight. I've got a smaller team following them that can call in the rest if we find the being you're after."

"Excellent." Darall said.

"There's one more thing your reverence." Serrin added.

"Go on."

"Well, it's just that a pair of the men I had observing the others reported seeing something strange. They say that woman from the university brought along a holocron and another of them triggered something unusual."

"Tell me more." Darall said, a smile spreading across his face.

"Oh great, that's just what we need." Carli said as she felt the first drops of rain on her head. A moment later there was a flash of light from overhead, followed by a low rumble and the rain became heavier.

"That could be a problem." Mace said, fastening his jacket.

"Why?" Jaysica asked, "Tharun and the others haven't found any footprints yet anyway."

"Explain things to your girlfriend would you Tobis?" Kara said.

"Oh, err, well its just that the bad weather makes low level flying harder." He said, "So letting the droids fly the *Silver Hawk* to pick us up isn't a very good idea."

"So either we walk out of here with our prisoner or after we capture him we wait while one of us goes back for the ship." Kara said.

"Look on the bright side." Tharun said, "If this guys mates turn up they won't have any air cover. Plus if anyone else is-" and then he stopped speaking in mid sentence.

"What's wrong?" Lorn asked.

"My comlink." Tharun replied, plucking the device from his webbing, it just picked something up.

"Are the droids trying to get hold of us?" Jaysica asked as she produced her own comlink and examined it.

"No." Tharun replied, "I think that it was an unintentional burst signal."

Tobis reached into his pocket and also brought out his comlink.

"Would one of you two tell me what you're doing?" Vorn said.

"Oh, err, its quite simple really." Tobis said, "It's just that, well, certain type of comlink are vulnerable to sudden high voltage discharges. Its most common when starships keep their ion drives running at low altitude, but there are other things that can cause it."

"Like lightning." Tharun commented.

There was another flash of lightning and Tharun's comlink produced a sudden loud burst of static.

"There it was again." He said, "Major, we're not alone out here."

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Jenessa said and her had reached down to the slug-throwing revolver holstered at her hip.

There was another flash of lightning and this time Tobis' comlink buzzed with static.

"It came from that way." He said, pointing and Tharun lifted his rifle to peer down its scope while Carli, Mace, Thracken and Vorn all took out their macrobinoculars and looked in the same direction.

"There!" Thracken snapped, "Something moved."

"Yeah, I saw it." Tharun said, "By those rocks about two hundred metres over."

"Is it the rakata?" Jaysica asked.

"No it looked human." Vorn said.

"Who'd be out here in this weather?" Kara asked.

"Hikers?" Mace suggested.

"Or someone else after the rakata." Vorn said, "I mean we know he has friends here." Then he looked at Tharun, "Sergeant, put a single round into that rock."

The Blastech A280 rifle had a well-deserved reputation as one of the most powerful in the galaxy at large and so when the energy blast struck dead centre of the rock the effect was impressive. The stabilised plasma bolt superheated the rock as it burrowed its way through, creating an expanding cloud of gas that exerted enough pressure to split it in two with a loud 'crack'. The split was not clean however and in addition to the superheated gas, fragments of molten rock were hurled in all directions.

There were startled screams form behind the rock and a trio of figures emerged, rushing to get clear of the blast. Through his scope Tharun saw that two of these carried blaster carbines while the third had a longer barrelled hunting weapon. For hikers they were exceptionally well armed.

"Drop the guns!" Tharun yelled and all three figures reacted by swinging their weapons towards the rebels.

"Take them." Vorn said as he ducked and exchanged his macrobinoculars for the rifle he had in the oversized holster on his leg.

Tharun knew that the carbines were more powerful than the hunting rifle and that they likely had the capability to fire bursts or fully automatically, whereas the hunting rifle was limited to semi-automatic fire only. However, at this range Tharun also knew that the carbines' accuracy was greatly reduced and so he lined up the man with the hunting rifle in his sights. For a brief moment he found himself looking right down the muzzle of the long barrelled weapon as its owner attempted to take aim at him, but Tharun was quicker and a single shot from him sent his opponent sprawling across the ground with a large smoking hole in his chest. Bursts of fire from the carbines sent the rebel group diving for cover, but as Tharun had calculated they were too far away for there to be any significant danger.

"Just keep low." He said, "They need to be a lot closer than they are to stand any real chance of hitting us."

"Just the two left you think sergeant?" Vorn asked, unfolding the stock of his rifle.

"I think so major. Are you thinking one each?"

"At this range more like I'll keep one pinned down long enough for you to deal with the other one."

"Mind if I try major?" Mace asked from behind Vorn.

"Be my guest." Vorn replied and he rolled to one side while Mace crawled forwards and took the rifle.

"Name your target captain." Tharun said as Mace braced the rifle against his shoulder.

"I'll take the fat guy on the left." He said, "Easier to hit."

Tharun smiled.

"Whenever you're ready then sir." He said.

Another burst of fire erupted from one of the carbines and this time came close to hitting the group. The blasts tore up a clump of dirt between Jaysica and Kay and both young women squealed as they scabbled clear.

"Stay down!" Vorn snapped, noticing that both had got up on all fours to move rather than staying flat.

Mace and Tharun opened fire. Unlike their opponents who seemed to be trying use fully automatic fire to compensate for both their weapons' and their own lack of accuracy the two rebels took their time to line up one their targets. Tharun's first shot tore the arm from one, while his second silenced the screaming man forever. On the other hand Mace narrowly missed his target with his first shot, nevertheless forcing him to cease fire just long enough for Mace to fire two more in quick succession that both struck the man in his chest and he slumped forwards across his weapon.

The rebels waited silently for a few moments to make sure that the threat was gone. But as it happened they were not out of danger yet.

A blaster bolt whizzed overhead, followed rapidly by a second and then a third.

"Behind us!" Lorn snapped, the privateer pointing his blaster pistol in the general direction of this new threat and firing off several rounds at random.

"Anyone see them?" Vorn asked.

"Not them, but I can see their positions." Carli replied as she saw more blaster bolts coming out of the gloom.

"We're too exposed here boss." Kara said and she too fired her weapon randomly in the vague hope she would hit something.

"I think you're right." Vorn agreed and he looked at Tharun, "Sergeant we need to get to those bodies." And he pointed to the men Mace and Tharun had just shot.

"Thinking of picking up some souvenirs major?" Tharun asked.

"Yes and I'd rather none of us were shot doing it." Vorn replied.

"Then I've got what you need right here." Tharun said and he plucked a grenade from his webbing, "Get ready to run." He said and he threw the grenade.

There was a 'pop' that barely stood out against the rain and blaster fire and the air around where the grenade had landed was suddenly filled with a cloud of thick white smoke.

"Move!" Vorn snapped.

The group scabbled to their feet and ran towards the three dead bodies, sliding through the mud as they reached them and went to ground again.

"A DC fifteen." Thracken said as he grabbed hold of one of the carbines and he smiled, "I have one just like it back on my ship."

"Fat lot of good it is there." Lorn said, "Why didn't you bring it?" and he began to pat down the bodies, rifling through their pockets.

"I was being mugged when you found me. I didn't have chance to go back and get it."

"Then try carrying it with you." Lorn suggested, "Who mugs a man with one of those?"

"Well since you're familiar with it you may as well keep hold of that one for now." Vorn said to Thracken and he grabbed the other carbine and tossed it to Kara, "You take this one." He said before looking at Mace,

"Mace, get that sporting rifle. If its still functional you take it and I'll have the E eleven back."

"Score." Lorn commented as he pulled a wallet from one of the bodies, removed the cash and tucked it into his jacket. Then as he was in the process of removing the chronometer from the dead man's wrist he noticed the look he was getting from Jenessa, "What?" he asked, "I steal stuff for a living."

"That chrono better not be my birthday present." Carli told him.

"Course not baby." Lorn replied, "I'm stealing something much better for that."

Tobis noticed a comlink lying beside one of the bodies and picked it up. Smiling he tucked it into a pocket.

Mace crawled to the sporting rifle and after inspecting it he threw the military issue rifle back to Vorn and then turned his attention back towards the cloud of smoke.

"They don't seem too keen to come rushing through that do they?" he said.

"They're obviously smart enough to be worried about what may be waiting for them on this side." Kara replied then she glanced at Kay, "I don't suppose you can tell us how many we're facing can you?" she asked her.

Frantically Kay shook her head.

"I- I can't tell anything." She said.

"You realise that the longer we wait here the more likely it is that even more of these guys could turn up?" Tharun said to Vorn.

"Yes I had figure that out sergeant." Vorn replied, "But the question is where should we go?"

"Err." Tobis began and Jaysica noticed that he was staring off into the distance.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Well, err, it's just that what's that?" Tobis replied and he pointed to where a tiny light could be seen in the distance.

Vorn lifted his macrobinoculars back to his eyes and looked towards the light. Increasing the magnification he saw that it was the glow given off by a small fire in the mouth of a cave. Exactly the sort of thing that someone who had survived the controlled ditching of a starship would make while they waited for rescue.

"Tobis I think you've just earned your sergeant's pay for the month." He said, "We head towards that cave."

"Did you just say cave?" Jenessa asked, "What is it with your family and aliens hiding in caves?"

7.

"Your reverence."

Darall waited until Serrin had knelt and bowed his head as was appropriate from one so low ranking in the Church of Infinity's forces.

"Give your report." He then said.

"The infidels were able to withdraw before we could surround them completely."

Darall scowled, furious.

"You outnumbered them ten to one!" he bellowed and his hand moved towards his ceremonial dagger.

"Reverence, they spotted one of our scout teams and attacked before we were in position."

"Then your men should take more care." Darall snapped, "Gather together those you have left and get after them. They must not."

"Excuse me your reverence, but there is more."

"Go on." Darall said, annoyed that a disposable thug like Serrin had the nerve to interrupt him.

"We have spotted what could be a campfire. We may have found him."

A hint of a smile appeared on Darall's face.

"Then forget the infidels. Go and retrieve him."

"Yes your reverence." Serrin said and he stood up and turned to leave. However, before he could take a single step Darall spoke again.

"One more thing." He said and Serrin turned back towards him with his head bowed.

"Yes your reverence?"

"Do not fail me again."

The rakata sat inside the cave, dismantling the small hunting blaster that had been a part of the survival kit aboard the blastboat while waiting for his latest kill to cook over the fire. The relatively low powered weapon had come in useful, allowing the rakata to hunt without depleting the power pack of the military style pistol that he had stolen from Lorn. That weapon he kept tucked through his belt in case it was needed urgently. A sound from outside the cave made the rakata reach for the pistol and point it towards the cave entrance, remaining motionless as he waited for a target to appear.

"Infinity is all." A voice called out.

"All else is temporary." The rakata responded in accented basic, still keeping the blaster trained on the cave entrance as a pair of humans appeared, their hands raised.

"We have been sent to help you." One said.

The rakata snarled. These humans his role demanded he associate with did not show him the respect his species was due angered him. Despite this he also knew that it was necessary. Few in the Church of Infinity had any idea that it's practices were based on a debased form of ancient rakata worship and that the rakata themselves controlled it, so for now he was just an anonymous alien church member.

"Good." He said, returning the blaster to his belt and walking to where his would be rescuers stood, "I assume that you have transport to take me from this place without being seen?"

"Yes, we-" the man replied but he was cut off suddenly by a blaster shot between his shoulders.

Startled, the other man spun around just in time to take a shot in the chest. The rakata reached for the blaster pistol again, but before he could draw it Lorn leapt out from behind a boulder and aimed a weapon at him. The rakata froze, his hand hovering close to the blaster but not touching it.

"So you speak basic then." Lorn said, "I guess that means you'll know what I mean when I tell you not to move." Then there was the sound of movement from all around as the rest of the group appeared.

"Amazing." Jenessa said softly.

"What?" Kay asked from beside her.

"It's an actual rakata." Jenessa replied, "All I've ever seen before now are ancient skeletons and images. But this is a living, breathing specimen."

"A specimen that's worth a lot of money to me." Lorn said as he approached the alien and plucked the pistol from its belt, "I'll be having this back I think." He said.

"Okay so now what?" Tharun asked. He was stood with his back to the rakata, searching the surrounding area through his rifle scope for any signs of more of the alien's allies turning up and ready to fire if any did appear.

"Well the original plan was for the droids to fly the Silver Hawk in and pick us up." Vorn said, looking up at the cloud-covered sky.

"Well that plan's no good any more." Mace said, "The weather's still too bad for them to spot us from high altitude."

"If we try walking all the way back he'll slow us down boss." Kara said, looking at their rakata prisoner, "His friends will find us for sure."
"What about this?" Carli asked and she produced a device the size of her fist from a pouch.
"Is that a grenade?" Kay asked.
"Oh no. Err, it's a strobe." Tobis told her, "It emits electromagnetic pulses at regular intervals."
"What type?" Vorn asked Carli.
"Visible light I'm afraid, but it might be strong enough to penetrate the cloud." She replied.
"And strong enough to bring every one of those other creeps running towards us." Kara added.
"Yes!" Thracken suddenly exclaimed and the rest of the group stared at him.
"Care to expand on that?" Vorn asked.
"We use the strobe to draw them in where we want them to be." Thracken said, smiling.
"We set an ambush." Tharun said, also smiling.

"I'm terribly sorry Captain Grayle sir," Jeeves replied when Mace gave him the order to lift off, "but given current weather conditions both Harvey and myself are of the opinion that-"
"Can it Jeeves." Mace said angrily, "We need a pickup and we need it now. We're about six kilometres west of your position so get that cranky astromech pal of yours to fly the ship out here and circle. We'll be using a strobe to mark our position, but you must not – I repeat not – descend below cloud level without a direct command from any of us. Understand?"
"Not really Captain Grayle sir."
"Never mind. Can you and Harvey at least follow the order?"
"Why of course sir. We are-"
"Good. Mace out." And the channel went dead.
"Well really Harvey." Jeeves said, looking down at the astromech droid beside him, "Sometimes humans are most odd."
From behind them there was a shrill chirp from Jaysica's mouse droid.
"Yes Penny." Jeeves said, "Her as well."

The low ground between the hills in the spot chosen for ambush was wide and relatively flat and firm, an excellent landing spot for a starship the size of the *Silver Hawk* under most circumstances. However, given the current situation it was a very poor place for the ship to land. The hills all around offered excellent positions from which an attacker could pour fire down on anyone trying to get onto or off a landed ship. The rebels positioned themselves on these hilltops in four pairs. Mace and Tobis to the north, Kara and Vorn to the east, Carli and Lorn to the south and Tharun and Thracken to the west. The remaining three group members had been tasked with watching their rakata prisoner. For now they were positioned to the west as well, but at the first sign of an enemy advance from that direction they were to fall back out of their path. From overhead there came the sound of powerful repulsorlift engines and Vorn looked upwards, trying to see through the clouds.
"It's bound to be the Silver Hawk boss." Kara said to him, "Who else would be up there?"
"I suppose you're right." Vorn replied, "I better make the call." And he activated the comlink he had been keeping ready, "Lieutenant, now."
The tiny strobe was too small to see in the poor light when Carli tossed it from the hilltop, but before it landed the device activated and released a bright flash of white light. Landing at the foot of the hill and continuing to bounce across the ground the strobe continued to emit flashes of light at regular intervals.
"Well if that doesn't attract their attention I don't know what will." Kara commented.

Serrin also looked skywards when he heard the sound of the *Silver Hawk's* engines. He was currently with a group of a dozen armed men, constituting about a fifth of his remaining force.
"What is it?" one of the men asked.
"Most likely a starship." Serrin replied, "It could be a gunship or airspeeder though, but I doubt our enemy would have come in a vehicle that couldn't carry them off planet."
"So you think it belongs to the infidels then?"
"Well it's not ours is it? I'd know if it was."
"Over there!" another man yelled and he pointed to the horizon.
Serrin looked to see what the man was pointing at and initially saw nothing. But then he saw a pulse of white light appear from beyond a hill and then there was a short pause before another flash of light was seen.
"Stang." Serrin cursed, "We're too late, they've got him."
"How can you tell?" a man asked and Serrin pointed upwards to where the sound of engines was coming from.
"Because they've called in a kriffing extraction!" he yelled. Then he pulled out his comlink and switched it on, "All units converge on flashing beacon. Our enemy has our target. Rescue him at all costs."

"We've got movement." Mace broadcast as he watched the approach of a band of armed men from the north. It was a group of eight and none looked to be armed with anything bigger than a pistol. "More from the south." Carli added, "Just over a dozen I'd say. Mainly carbines but a couple of hunting rifles as well."

"Another dozen or so the west." Tharun said, "Just pistols it looks like."

"Same to the north." Mace said.

"Well the main force looks to be coming from our way." Kara said, "The boss makes it twenty. A mix of weapons, mainly pistols but they've got about half a dozen hunting rifles as well."

"Err, that's a lot of men." Tobis said to Mace softly, "Think we can handle that many?"

"Not all spread out like they are." Mace replied and he activated his comlink again, "Orders major?"

"Keep out of sight." Vorn replied, "We need them in the kill zone between us. When Kara and I open fire I want Tharun and Thracken to do the same. Feel free to use bursts against any clumps of them, we need to thin out their numbers as quick as we can."

"What about grenades?" Tharun asked, "I've got one smoke and a frag left."

"I've a stun grenade as well." Lorn added.

"The stun grenade should be fine." Vorn answered, "But only use that frag if you can be certain not to damage the strobe. Mace, I want you to pick off any individuals that look important. Any questions?"

There was no reply and Vorn lifted his comlink to his mouth one more time.

"Very well. Let's just hope the Force is with us."

Serrin frowned as he watched the group approaching from the north just wander right into the area of open ground. His group had reached the edge of the area less than a minute earlier and Serrin was still trying to locate the enemy position. So far without success and he knew that the group to the north could be blundering into a trap. On the other hand that was the smallest group he had available and if the infidels chose to attack them they would expose their positions quite nicely.

"Get the others to stay back." He said to his own men, "Let's wait and see what happens."

"All units hold."

Mace looked at Tobis, startled by the sound.

"What was that?" he asked, keeping his voice low.

"Oh, err, an enemy comlink." Tobis replied, producing the comlink he had recovered from his pocket, "I took it from near one of the bodies. It must have switched on in my pocket."

"Well turn it off again." Mace instructed him, "The last thing we need is it giving our position away."

Tobis was just about to deactivate the device by removing its power cell when it picked up another transmission.

"Grell, I want your men to advance further. Keep an eye out for the target and we'll cover you."

"That sounded like a command transmission." Mace said, "Can you tell where it's coming from?"

Tobis glanced down at the comlink.

"Err."

"Okay forget it." Mace said and then he activated his own comlink, "We just picked up a transmission." He broadcast, "Anyone got eyes on someone using a comlink? It could be their leader."

"This is Carli, I think one of our guys has been sending."

"Mace this is Vorn, I want you and Tobis to swap positions with Carli and Lorn."

"Got it." Mace replied.

"Tharun and Thracken," Vorn continued, "Move your position further south as well to back Mace up if he needs it. Everyone else wait for Mace's signal. Taking out their leader may cause enough panic to convince them to withdraw when we hit the rest."

8.

Serrin waited impatiently, watching as the group led by Grell made its way cautiously towards the flashing strobe. He snarled, his instructions had clearly made Grell suspect a trap and the man was no longer haphazardly walking forwards like Serrin wanted. Reaching for his comlink again, Serrin prepared to order Grell to pick up his pace.

"Got him." Mace muttered as he watched Serrin through his scope, "Tobis let the others know."
"Err, right." Tobis said, activating his comlink, "The captain's got the leader in sight now."
"Good." Vorn responded, "Everyone wait for Mace to fire and then engage targets as you see fit."

"About time we got some excitement boss." Kara said, aiming her carbine towards the large armed group that was still unaware of the rebels' presence. She lifted her head away from the weapon and glanced back at Vorn, "Not that anything else we do doesn't thrill either though." She added.
"Likewise specialist." Vorn said and he took up a position beside Kara and took aim with his rifle.

Mace squeezed the trigger of the rifle gently and cursed as instead of placing a shot dead centre of Serrin's chest he instead barely clipped the man's shoulder.
"Should've checked the kriffing sights." He said before firing again.

The first shot, though not fatal caused Serrin to spin around on the spot and the second blast hit him between his shoulders.
"Serrin!" one of his men called out in alarm as he slumped to his knees and then toppled forwards. The rest of the group was just beginning to search the direction the shot had come from when both Tharun and Thracken opened fire as well, two sustained bursts of automatic fire ripping through them.

"That was gunfire!" Kay exclaimed.

"I know." Jenessa replied, pacing up and down, "I've heard it before."

"Don't worry." Jaysica said, "I'm sure the major knows what he's doing."

"He better had." Jenessa commented.

"What about Criston?" Kay said suddenly, "Could the holocron help us?" and she reached out to where Jenessa had set down her bag.

At the mention of the holocron the previously unresponsive rakata looked towards Kay and then at the bag she was reaching for.

"Hey stay still." Jaysica told the alien, holding her compact blaster near to its face.

The rakata suddenly reached out and punched Jaysica in the stomach, then shoved her backwards into Jenessa before either woman could react. Then he dived at the bag just as Kay was removing the holocron and snatched the artefact away from her before setting off into a run, heading towards the sound of battle.

"My holocron!" Jenessa snapped, pulling her revolver from her belt, "Come on we need to get it back."

"Never mind your holocron." Jaysica said, "The major will kill me if the prisoner escapes."

The three women set off after the rakata, trying to follow it through the gloom of the hillside. However, given the poor light and rough terrain they soon found themselves with no idea of where he was.

"Oh this is just great." Jaysica said, looking all around, "What are we supposed to do now?"

Kay smiled.

"I've got an idea." She said and after taking a deep breath she yelled at the top of her voice, "Criston!"

The first member of the Church of Infinity's force that found the rakata was dead. The woman had been almost cut in half by a succession of high-powered blaster bolts. Tracks in the sodden ground indicated the direction that the survivors of her unit had gone, but they seemed to be fleeing from battle and the rakata did not want to have to chase them. However, in their haste to withdraw they had left the woman's weapon behind. It was only a lightweight sporting blaster pistol but it was better than nothing and so the rakata picked this up before trying to determine where best to head next.

"Criston!"

The rakata whirled around when he heard Kay's voice, but the woman was not in sight and he relaxed.

However, he then noticed a glow from behind him and he glanced down at the holocron to see that it too was giving off light.

"Interesting." The virtual Criston Harsis said as the hologram looked at the rakata, "I don't think I ever met one of your species while I was alive."

"Over there!" Jenessa snapped, pointing towards the glow being given off by the holocron, "Kay that was brilliant." And she began to run towards the light.

"Stang." Mace said when he realised that the rifle's power pack was exhausted and he began fumbling through his pockets for another. Normally a rifle such as this would hold enough energy for a hundred shots, but it seemed that the man he had taken it from had not seen fit to put in a fresh pack before coming here.

"Err captain." Tobis said, pausing in his firing as well, "What's that light?" and he pointed to a pale glow beyond a hill.

"Maybe that group that ran off has recovered its nerve." Mace replied, "We better go head them off."

The rakata knew that the person standing in front of him was not real. His species had invented holocron technology and though the ability to recreate them had been lost to his tribe knowledge of their abilities had not.

Growling he hurled the fist sized cube as hard as he could and the hologram of Criston vanished abruptly as the projection unit went out of range.

"There he is!" Jaysica called out as she appeared over the hilltop, followed by Jenessa and Kay.

The rakata fired a single shot without aiming that caused the three women to flinch briefly and gave him enough time to turn and run. There was a loud 'bang!' as Jenessa opened fire and the bullet whizzed close past the rakata's head. Unnerved the alien took a look back while still running and saw that the three women were now making their way down the hill towards him. The rakata looked forwards again, hoping to be able to increase the gap between him and his pursuers, but instead he just had time to notice the rifle butt heading towards him before it slammed into his face and he collapsed.

"Give you the slip did he?" Mace asked, looking at Jaysica.

"It wasn't my fault. I-" Jaysica began, but she stopped when she saw Mace looking past her, "What's wrong?" she asked and she looked around, "Oh no." she said, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

Facing the largest enemy group, both Kara and Vorn had used automatic fire to inflict as many casualties to them as they could in their opening salvo. But after that they had limited themselves to either single shots or limited bursts to conserve ammunition. By the time that Mace's signal came through they had reduced their opponents by about half and were now trading shots with the survivors in cover.

"Major we've got incoming from the south." Mace's voice said over the comlink.

Vorn ceased fire and looked to the south where he spotted several lights bobbing up and down in the distance. Taking out his macrobinoculars he zoomed in on the area and his jaw dropped.

"We're kriffed." He said and he looked at Kara, "We need to leave."

"What is it?" Kara asked and Mace passed her the macrobinoculars. Taking them she looked to the south, "Oh we are so kriffed." She said as she too saw the group of repulsorlift vehicles heading towards them. A mix of landspeeders and larger speeder trucks they had the capacity to carry several hundred troops between them.

"This is Vorn, everyone fall back to the strobe. We're getting out of here. Jeeves can you hear me?"

"Yes Major Larcus sir, your signal is weak but-"

"Never mind. Bring the ship in, we're pulling out under fire. Keep the ray shields up but shut down the particle shielding. The enemy only seems to have blasters so there shouldn't be any danger to the ship."

"Certainly sir." Jeeves replied, "I'll open the door for you-"

"No." Vorn interrupted, "There could still be active enemy troops in the landing zone. Open the ramp itself but keep the inner door sealed until you're told otherwise. Do you understand?"

"Not really, but I will do my best sir."

The *Silver Hawk* wobbled slightly as it descended through the clouds and Mace winced when he saw it touch down so hard that for a moment he believed the landing gear would give way.

"Come on." He said to Tobis, "Give me a hand with this guy." And he tossed his rifle to Jenessa before bending down to pick up the unconscious rakata.

Tharun was the first to reach the base of the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp and he skidded to a halt, crouching down and waiting for Thracken to catch up. The older man arrived soon after, gasping for breath.

"Get aboard." Tharun said, "I'll stay here and cover the ramp."

"Of course." Thracken replied, heading up the ramp. But when he tried to open the hatch at the top he found it sealed, "Oh, what've I done?" he asked.

"The major must have ordered it sealed to stop anyone getting aboard we don't want aboard." Tharun replied.

"So what do we do?" Thracken asked.

"Stay put." Tharun told him.

Movement to the north attracted Tharun's attention and he turned to see Carli and Lorn running towards him and then he spotted one of the enemy's troops behind them. Tharun lifted his rifle and took aim before remembering that the *Silver Hawk's* ray shields were still up and he was inside them. Without being synchronised to the shield generators his rifle blasts would simply bounce back off the interior of the shield with potentially disastrous results.

"Look out behind you!" he yelled instead, waving at the man chasing the two officers.

Carli and Lorn turned to see the man but before they could do anything about him a blaster shot from the side took him off his feet and Tharun looked around to see Kara and Vorn closing in, Vorn lowering his rifle.

"How many are we short?" Vorn called out as he and Kara ran through the shield just after Carli and Lorn.

"Just Captain Grayle and Jaysica's groups." Tharun said.

"They've got my prisoner." Lorn said.

"Yes I know." Vorn replied, irritated by the captain's priorities. Then he smiled as she saw the rest of the rebels closing from the south, Mace and Tobis dragging the unconscious rakata between them, "Jeeves open up." Vorn said into his comlink and immediately the hatch at the top of the ramp slid upwards to reveal the protocol droid, "Okay everyone on board." Vorn said, "Its time to leave this party."

From the back of his speeder Darall watched as the rebels carried the rakata into their ship and his face fell. A moment later he heard the roar of the *Silver Hawk's* engines over the combined engine sound of all of his force and he slammed his fist against the ornately decorated armrest of his seat as he was forced to watch the ship lifting off.

"Well the prisoner is secure in the hold." Mace said as he and Lorn returned to the lounge. Mace remained standing while Lorn took a seat and began to empty his pockets onto the table.

"We'll get you back to the starport at Estran City." Vorn said to Jenessa and Kay, then he looked at Thracken, "You too." He added, "we can't really take you all the way back where we found you now."

"Yes of course." Thracken replied, "But what about me? The police will be looking for me won't they?"

"Just tell them we kidnapped you." Kara said, then she glanced to where Jaysica and Tobis sat close beside each other, "Or at least those two did." It was then that Kara noticed the items that Lorn was sorting through, "What's all that stuff?" she asked.

"Its what he took from the bodies." Carli said.

"Hey, this stuff could be worth money." Lorn protested then he simply added, "Hey!" as Kara reached out and snatched up a silver pendant from amongst the pile.

"Look familiar boss?" she said, holding it up to Vorn.

"Yes it does." He replied, "Doesn't it Jenessa?"

The pendant was in the shape of a number eight, turned on its side to form the symbol for infinity.

"The mercenaries who attacked my dig in the Spire Worlds had those." Jenessa said.

"It was an old rakata world." Tharun pointed out.

"Yes." Vorn said, "And it would appear that they didn't want anyone poking about on it. I think that this symbol could lead us to their agents in the Empire."

As soon as she got back to her house Jenessa closed the blinds and sat down, placing the holocron on the table in front of her.

"Come on." She said, "I know you're in there."

Nothing happened.

"Look, if it weren't for me you'd still be buried in the ground. So how about you show some gratitude and-"

There was a glow.

"Well?" Criston asked, appearing in front of Jenessa, "What do you want to know?"