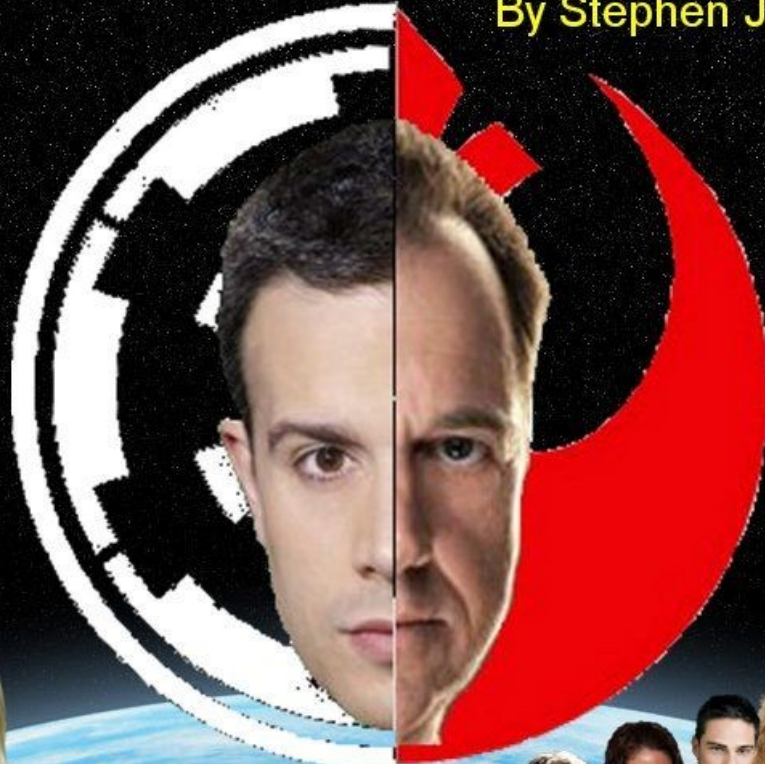


STAR WARS

9-08: Death in the Shadows

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...

DEATH IN THE SHADOWS

ALLIANCE PRIVATEERS RAID IMPERIAL SHIPPING FOR DESPERATELY NEEDED SUPPLIES BUT WHEN ONE SUCH VESSEL FAILS TO RETURN THE *SILVER HAWK* SETS OUT TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM. IT BECOMES APPARENT THAT THIS IS NO MERE BREAKDOWN HOWEVER, RATHER THAT THE PRIVATEERS BOARDED A SHIP THAT HELD MORE THAN THEY BARGAINED FOR...

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

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1.

The gozanti-class cruiser was travelling alone when it was spotted by the privateer vessel *Flashback*, an old PB-950 patrol boat that had been repaired so often that there were very few of the originally specified components left.

"Not often you see a ship like that out alone now." the privateer captain said to his Alliance liaison officer, "She doesn't even have any TIEs under her hull."

"I know actual navy ships aren't your normal choice of target but you're free to engage her if you want." the liaison officer replied, "Though it would be nice to know why she's all the way out here rather than having jumped to hyperspace."

"The Alliance can sort that out later." the captain replied, "After they've paid me for her. I figure a ship like that must be worth a hundred thousand easily." then he activated the intercom built into the console in front of him, "All hands this is the captain. Action stations. Ion cannon prepare to fire, we've hit it big today boys."

"Colonel Larcus! Captain Grayle!" a woman's voice called out as Lieutenant Colonel Vorn Larcus and Captain Mace Grayle walked towards a turbolift. Turning around the pair saw a female officer wearing a lieutenant's rank markings waving at them.

"Lieutenant Sentis." Vorn responded.

"How's life as a pirate?" Mace added. Carli Sentis was one of the Alliance's liaison officers who were assigned to the small force of privateer vessels operating in the sector, raiding Imperial shipping under letters of marque and reprisal.

"Oh fine." she replied, "Though there's a chance I won't be doing this much longer. The Alliance has offered Lorn a fleet commission. He'd still command the *Just Cause* but it would be acting as an escort to one of those big ships you two captured for the fleet. Have you considered the bounty your team would have earned if you were privateers instead of field agents?"

"Every time I think about sending Cass to college when the war's over." Mace answered and Carli smiled.

"Look, I know this isn't really your thing but there's a privateer vessel overdue. Do you know the *Flashback*?" she said.

"I know of it." Vorn replied, "I don't think I've ever met the captain or its liaison officer though."

"Well it's missing. All the privateers were supposed to have a get together last night and they failed to show up. Command have tried sending messages but there's been no response. I was wondering whether you'd be up for heading out to take a look. Lorn and I would go but the *Just Cause* needs an overhaul to her hyperdrive."

Vorn looked at Mace.

"What do you think?" he asked, "Up for a little side job?"

"Could just be a faulty hyperdrive." Mace said, "I'm sure Tobis could get them up and running in no time. Even if he can't we can at least offer them a lift back here."

The YT-1300 class freighter dropped out of hyperspace on the outer edge of the system where the *Flashback* had last been reported. Not knowing the exact situation in the system Mace immediately shut down all non-essential systems aboard his ship and switched to passive scanning, doing his best to avoid detection.

"We've arrived." he said into the intercom and moments later his nineteen year old daughter appeared in the doorway behind him.

"Dad why didn't you warn me?" she asked as she sat down, "I wanted to be here when we dropped out of hyperspace."

"You seemed busy tidying your part of your cabin." Mace replied and Cass smiled.

"Sure. Tidying my cabin." she said and Mace winced.

"Cass, what did you do?" he asked.

"I just made some more room. That's all." Cass said, "So have you found the pirate ship yet?"

"It's a privateer, not a pirate." Mace pointed out.

"What's the difference?"

"A pirate is a criminal who steals from people. A privateer is a criminal that works for us." Mace said and Cass frowned.

"Doesn't seem like much of a difference to me." Cass muttered.

Just then there was a beeping from the console and Mace looked towards the source.

"There they are." he said, "Less than a million kilometres from their last reported position. Go let the others know."

Cass nodded and got to her feet when all of a sudden a woman's voice called out from elsewhere in the ship. "Where the kriff are all my clothes?"

"Actually dad, could I stay in here?" Cass said.

"Cass what did you do? And why?"

"Well Kara and Jaysica were arguing again about Jaysica spilling stuff on Kara's clothes and it kept me awake most of the night. So when Kara was in the shower and Jaysica was in your cabin with Tobis I kind of hid all their clothes. Now no-one can spill anything." Cass said and Mace sighed.

"Laser brain." he said, "Kara will never let that drop. Now go out there and tell them we've found the ship. Oh and give them both back their clothes."

"Okay. But I've got a bad feeling about this." Cass said and she walked out of the cockpit and into the *Silver Hawk's* lounge. Here she found Vorn and the former mercenary Tharun Verser, who also happened to be Vorn's son-in-law. Tharun was sat at the table eating while Vorn stood by the door to the short corridor connecting to the crew cabins.

"Kara," he said, "come in here and I'm sure we can sort all of this out."

"Sort this out?" Kara, who was not only the team's medic but also Vorn's wife despite the massive age gap appeared in the doorway wearing just a towel, "Boss, the klutz has obviously destroyed all my clothes. Yesterday it was caf on my best jacket and now I'm supposed to fight evil naked."

"I didn't do anything to your clothes." Jaysica said as she emerged from the cabin that Mace and his engineer Tobis shared, with Tobis right behind her. With Mace busy in the cockpit the pair had taken the opportunity to spend some private time together in Tobis' bunk and Jaysica had a blanket wrapped around her while Tobis was fastening his overalls.

"Where are my clothes? What did you do to them?" Kara demanded.

"They're right where they should be." Jaysica replied, walking into the cabin the pair of them shared with Cass and opening one of the drawers before frowning and adding, "Hey, my clothes are gone as well."

"Dad says we've found the ship." Cass said quickly before turning back towards the cockpit in an attempt to escape as quickly as she could.

"Just a moment young lady." Vorn said sternly, "Do you know happened to Kara and Jaysica's clothes?"

"I may have seen them in one of the escape pods." Cass said as both Kara and Jaysica glared at her.

"Go and get them." Vorn said, "I'm going to go and see exactly what Mace has found." and leaving the other rebels in the lounge he headed for the cockpit, "So what do we have?" he asked as he sat down beside Mace.

"I've found the *Flashback*." Mace replied, "She looks like she's adrift and without power."

"A breakdown?" Vorn suggested.

"Possibly. But there's a second vessel out there as well and she's adrift as well. Colonel I've got a very bad feeling about this." Mace told him.

"I don't blame you. One ship adrift is an accident but two? That's just too much of a coincidence. What can you tell me about the other ship?"

"It's a gozanti-class transport so it could be Imperial or it could be a commercial vessel. Problem is that she's dead in space as well and there's no transponder to identify her. I'm not getting life readings from either ship but given that both are military designs their hulls are pretty well shielded against our life form detectors." Mace said.

"How far away are they?"

"About four light minutes. Gives us plenty of time to figure out how you want to go about going aboard them."

"This isn't an official operation Mace, there's no need to wait for me to give an order." Vorn replied.

"In that case I'd like to point out that I'm not happy docking the *Silver Hawk* to either ship until we know what happened. We've got plenty of vacc suits and rocket packs now."

Vorn nodded.

"Okay, I'll take my team aboard the *Flashback* via an EVA." he said, "You can stay here with Tobis, Cass and the droids while we do a basic check on the ship. Jaysica should be able to get us inside and I'll need Kara if there's anyone over there that needs medical attention. With Tharun and I to watch their backs we should be able to handle any trouble we come across. Plus of course it gets Kara and Jaysica away from Cass."

"They're pretty mad huh?"

"This is my wife we're talking about here." Vorn said, "I'd rather run afoul of a Sith lord. I'll see what I can do about calming her down though."

"Thanks. Cass has been pestering me and Malia to have a baby pretty much since we got married and it would be a shame if she got disintegrated before it was born."

2.

The clunky appearing *Flashback* was spinning slowly as it drifted through space and when Vorn and his rebel field team climbed out onto the *Silver Hawk's* upper hull they looked at the nearby privateer vessel.

"It's spinning." Jaysica commented, "How do we get aboard?"

"Aim for the middle little lady." Tharun told her.

"Perhaps you and I should go first sergeant." Vorn suggested and Tharun nodded in agreement.

"As you wish colonel." he replied.

The two rebels then triggered their rocket packs, propelling themselves across the gap between the *Silver Hawk* and the *Flashback*. Decelerating as they closed in on the other ship they turned themselves around so that they landed feet first on its hull close to the point about which it was spinning and the magnetic boots they were latched on.

"See?" Vorn signalled to the other two rebels, "It's easy."

"Easy for you me maybe boss." Kara said, "But I sense the klutz smacking face first into something very soon." and then she activated her own rocket pack to send her flying between the two ships. However, whereas Vorn and Tharun had taken things slowly Kara moved more quickly and the flame from rocket pack shone brightly in the otherwise dark vacuum of space. Then just as rapidly she decelerated and turned around to land on the hull of the *Flashback*, smiling.

"That's how to do it with style." she said.

"Well if you can do it like that then so can I." Jaysica said as she jumped off the *Silver Hawk's* hull before activating her rocket pack. However, she had jumped at an angle that was taking her away from the *Flashback* and she had to veer around sharply to get herself back on course. Thus as she neared the privateer ship she did so at an angle that brought her hurtling towards the other rebels.

"Down!" Tharun yelled, ducking just as Jaysica rushed over him before crashing into Kara and knocking her away from the hull.

"You nerf herder!" Kara exclaimed, "You could have killed me."

"It was an accident." Jaysica protested.

"Well that's what you get for trying to use your rocket pack like an expert when you've got less than ten hours experience in-" Kara said before she trailed off.

"Kara, what's wrong?" Vorn asked.

"Boss get to the cockpit." Kara replied, "I'm on my way back and I'm bringing the klutz with me."

"Understood." Vorn said and as Kara grabbed hold of Jaysica to guide her back to the *Flashback's* hull he and Tharun made their way to the upper surface of the patrol boat and to the transparent cockpit canopy. Looking inside they saw why Kara had wanted them to investigate it immediately.

Despite the lights inside the cockpit being out it was still possible to make out a single figure sat in the pilot's seat and it was not only clear that he was dead but also that he had died violently, a large stab wound evident in his stomach.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this colonel." Tharun said.

"Kara hurry up and get back here. Meet us by the port side air lock." Vorn broadcast as he and Tharun began to head for the airlock closest to them.

"What's going on over there?" Mace asked from the *Silver Hawk*, having been listening in to the communications between the rebel field team.

"There's a dead guy in the cockpit." Tharun responded, "We're going to go inside and check it out."

Kara and Jaysica set down beside the airlock just as Vorn and Tharun reached it and Jaysica immediately set to work on the lock.

"How long will this take little lady?" Tharun asked, aiming his rifle at the airlock hatch just in case there was someone or something inside waiting for them.

"Got it." Jaysica responded as the hatch promptly slid open, "The security lockouts on this ship are about three hundred years out of date."

"Well now that Jaysica has got us inside I suggest we take advantage of it." Vorn said and the rebels made their way into the airlock, removing their rocket packs as air was being pumped into the compartment. Inside the ship there was still power for artificial gravity as well as operating doors and maintaining breathable air but the lights were not active and the only sources of illumination were the glow rods the rebels had attached to the helmets that they kept on as they made their way forwards to the cockpit where they had seen the body.

As soon as they entered the cockpit, Kara stepped forwards and double checked that the man in the pilot's seat was indeed dead by checking for a heartbeat.

"He's dead alright boss." she said, "At first glance I'd say he bled out." and she looked downwards at the

large pool of blood on the floor by her seat and then turned to look at the trail of blood that led out of the cockpit.

"Obviously he wasn't stabbed here." Vorn added as he looked at the trail as well.

"Lots of red lights here colonel." Tharun commented as he studied the flight control console. Vorn then moved closer so that he could see for himself. Being more familiar with starship operations than Tharun was he immediately knew what these represented.

"Looks like he tried to jump the ship into hyperspace without configuring the hyperdrive properly. It created an energy feedback pulse that blew out the main power core. We're running on emergency reserves right now." Vorn said.

"Why would he do that though?" Jaysica asked.

"My guess is that he didn't know what he was doing." Vorn replied, now looking at the body. The uniform was of an Alliance officer and he wore a major's rank badge, "He was obviously the liaison officer rather than one of the privateer crew. My guess is that he may have watched the crew execute hyperspace jumps but he wasn't a pilot or navigator himself."

"So what happened to the rest of the crew?" Jaysica said.

"I don't know. But given the state of the major here, I've got a very bad feeling about them." Vorn replied, "We need to search the rest of the ship."

A PB-950 patrol boat like the *Flashback* was a relatively small vessel with two decks laid out in a manner that made it easy for the four strong rebel team to search. After finding the body of the liaison officer in the cockpit they found no signs of anyone else aboard the ship, living or dead. However, they were able to follow the trail of blood from the cockpit back to one of the cargo holds where it led right up to a loading door that doubled as a docking port.

"The Imperial transport." Vorn said, "Our dead liaison officer must have been stabbed while aboard it and managed to get back here before he bled out."

"But what would scare him so much that he'd try to make a hyperspace jump when he didn't know how?"

Tharun asked, "From what I've heard, trying that can result in a lot worse than just a blown power core."

"Yeah, remember what Tobis managed with that scout ship aboard the carrier a couple of years back?" Kara said, "Hyperdrives channel a lot of power and if they blow at just the right point then they're basically a really big bomb."

"Yes, fortunately they won't reach that point on a planet's surface. Otherwise you'd have terrorist groups using them to blow up cities all over the galaxy." Vorn added.

"So what next boss?" Kara asked and Tharun winced.

"Do you really need to ask?" he said.

"Whatever happened, it happened on the Imperial transport." Vorn said, "We need to go over there and find out what that is."

"See. I knew it." Tharun commented.

"Mace can you hear me?" Vorn said, suing his vacuum suit's comlink to communicate with the *Silver Hawk*.

"Right here colonel." Mace responded.

"Mace the liaison officer is dead and the crew are missing. I think something happened aboard the Imperial transport. Would you and Tobis mind suiting up and joining us over here? I'd like the strongest possible force before we go aboard."

"Sure, we'll be over in a few minutes." Mace replied, "What about Cass?"

"Oh yes, do bring the little angel over." Kara commented, smiling and Vorn frowned.

"Leave her aboard the *Silver Hawk* with the droids." he said, "If anything happens to us then she needs to send word back to Alliance headquarters."

"Understood. See you soon colonel." Mace said and then the channel went dead. At which point Vorn turned to Kara.

"Kara can you just let this thing with Cass drop? It was just a prank." he said.

"Yes and one good prank deserves another boss." Kara replied.

"What if she apologised?" Vorn asked.

"Kara should be apologising." Jaysica said.

"What?" Kara responded, "I don't need to apologise to Cass."

"No. To me. You blamed me when I didn't have anything to do with it." Jaysica pointed out and Kara sighed.

"Fine. I'm sorry that on the basis of your past behaviour I leapt to the conclusion that you'd stolen all my clothes. Happy now?" she said.

"Not really. But I suppose it's the best I'm going to get from you." Jaysica said.

"Good. Now let's start planning our revenge." Kara replied.

"Kara," Vorn said, "anything you do to Cass, I reserve the right to do to you." and Kara smiled as she took out a datapad.

"Come on Jaysica." she said as she walked over to a cargo container and sat down on it, "We need to list all the things I'm willing to let the boss do to me."

3.

Joined by Mace and Tobis, the rebels crossed from the *Flashback* to the gozanti-class cruiser that was drifting nearby. Just like the smaller patrol boat the Imperial vessel appeared dark and lifeless and as the rebels moved closer, again propelled through space by the rocket packs, they saw signs of damage on its hull.

"Err, that looks like the hyperdrive." Tobis said.

"Another ship with a blown hyperdrive. Think someone else tried to do a jump they didn't now how to execute?" Tharun asked.

"Oh, err, no. I, err, I don't think so." Tobis said, "I think, err, I think that we looking at the result of a freak ion cannon blast."

"The *Flashback* does carry ion cannons." Vorn commented.

"Probably just meant to stop the ship escaping but something overloaded." Mace said.

"An overloading hyperdrive didn't slice up that major." Kara pointed out, "That was a deliberate stab wound."

"There's the hatch. We'll go in through there." Vorn said as they got closer, "Jaysica, get us inside."

The rebels attached themselves to the hull beside the hatch and Jaysica crouched down to access its control systems only to find that someone had already disabled the locking mechanism.

"It's not sealed." she said, pressing the control to open the door, "Someone else already took out the lock."

"This is probably the same hatch that the crew of the *Flashback* used." Vorn said, "Everyone get ready, we know how this ended up for their liaison officer."

There was a slight delay to the hatch opening, caused by the inner hatch having to close first to prevent a loss of atmosphere from inside the Imperial transport but when it did open the interior of the air lock was revealed to be empty of anything except a trail of blood leading from the inner door to the outer one. Once again the interior of the ship was darkened but there was gravity and when the airlock pressurisation cycle had completed there was also a breathable atmosphere inside that allowed the rebels to open up the helmets of their vacuum suits.

Stepping out of the air lock with their weapons at the ready the rebels arrived in a storeroom that was a scene of carnage. There were four bodies in the room, all of them bearing stab and slash wounds that had resulted in blood being splashed around the entire room. Worryingly all four appeared to have been attacked from behind, suggesting that someone had cut them down as they were heading back to the air lock.

"Messy." Tharun commented and he crouched down to pick up one of the dead men's blasters, "The power pack on this isn't fully charged." he said, "They may have been able to get off a few shots before they were taken out."

"I don't see any Imperial bodies around." Kara pointed out.

"We should get to the bridge." Vorn said, "Maybe we'll find some answers there."

"Oh, err, what about the engine room?" Tobis suggested.

"Right now I want us to stick together." Vorn replied, "Whoever did this took out four armed men. At least together there are six of us."

"I'll take point." Mace said as he raised a bulky looking carbine. This was a deck sweeper and rather than firing a concentrated energy blast it produced an expanding stun pulse that could incapacitate anyone within a wide area. The weapon had been designed specifically for boarding actions and although its range was short this was not a drawback in the confines of a starship.

"Very well." Vorn said, "Tharun, you bring up the rear."

"Yes colonel." Tharun responded as the rebels began to move towards the front of the Imperial transport ship. Ahead of the storeroom the rebels entered the ship's lounge area and there were two more bodies of privateers in here. These men looked to have been sat at the table eating when they had died and both had had their throats cut before either could pick up the weapons still lying on the table in front of their corpses.

"Colonel." Tharun said softly as he pointed his rifle towards a nearby door, "There's blood on the control panel to the freezer."

"We're going to open it and look inside aren't we?" Jaysica asked.

"Yes we are." Vorn replied, "Cover me. I'll do it." and he moved towards the freezer door, watched over by the other rebels.

Taking hold of the handle, Vorn paused before he pulled the door open rapidly and then slammed it shut again when he saw what was inside.

"What's wrong?" Mace asked.

"Yeah boss, what's in there?" Kara added as she strode forwards and opened the door herself to reveal the bodies of the original Imperial crew all suspended upside down from the ceiling of the freezer. As was normal for a ship of this type there were only two officers, both of junior rank, while the rest were enlisted technicians

and gunners.

"Privateers didn't do this." Mace said as he looked at the various stab wounds the dead crewmen had suffered.

"No, not if they wanted to stay working for the Alliance." Vorn replied. Then he closed the door again, "We'll cut them down when we deal with the rest of the bodies. For now though, I want to take a look at the bridge." There was a short staircase at the far end of the lounge area that led up to the door to bridge and this was already open as the rebels approached it. From inside there were flickering lights from the control consoles but other than that the bridge was as dark and unwelcoming as the rest of the ship so far.

"Three more bodies." Mace said as he entered the bridge ahead of the others, turning so that his decksweeper covered the entire bridge, "I think one of them is the privateers' captain."

"Let me see." Vorn replied, slinging his rifle over his shoulder as he took out his datapad and called up the personnel profiles of the privateer crew, "Yes, he's the captain." he said as he compared the body in the pilot's seat to the image of the privateer captain.

"This guy was stabbed in the back." Tharun said as he crouched down by the body just inside the doorway.

"And these two had their throats cut." Mace added, looking at the necks of the two seated bodies.

"So someone took out the guard and then killed these two." Vorn commented. Then he looked around at Tobis, "Tobis, see if you can pull up the ship's flight recorder."

"Oh, err, yes colonel." Tobis replied and Mace dragged the body of the privateer captain out of the pilot's seat.

"Tharun I want you to stand watch on those stairs." Vorn added, pointing to where the stairs outside the cockpit continued up to the crew quarters, "The rest of us will deal with the bodies in the lounge and storeroom."

"Yes colonel." Tharun replied, nodding before he moved to the bottom of the stairs leading upwards and aimed his blaster rifle up them.

Leaving Tobis to work in the cockpit the other rebels headed back down the stairs to the lounge where Mace positioned himself at the door leading back to the storeroom where they had first come aboard and the rest began to gather up the bodies.

"We'll keep them in the freezer still." Vorn said, "It'll stop them from rotting before they can be disposed of properly."

While Vorn's group worked to move the bodies and Tobis attempted to access the ship's flight recorder Tharun and Mace remained on watch. Both men stared into darkness that was illuminated only by the beams from their glow rods and they saw nothing.

All of a sudden Tharun heard the sound of something metal falling to the deck and a fire extinguisher suddenly came rolling down the stairs towards him.

"Movement!" he called out.

Tharun braced himself for either one of the privateers or an Imperial crewman to make an appearance but there was nothing but blackness. For a moment he thought he saw movement in the shadows cast by his glow rod but as he turned there was nothing there at all.

"False alarm." he added, "Lousy fire extinguisher must have come loose from its bracket somehow."

"Oh, err," Tobis began when he heard this and he turned around to point out that the brackets used to retain fire extinguishers were designed to be strong enough that they would not spontaneously fail when something passed in front of his face and he was unexpectedly struck hard enough to know him backwards. As he fell he knocked the tools he had been using to try and repair the flight controls enough to give him access to the ship's flight recorder and they too fell to the floor with a clatter.

"Are you okay in there lad?" Tharun called out, turning back towards the cockpit and stepping towards the doorway. However, he too thought he saw something pass in front of him before a weight slammed into him and he was pushed back from the doorway. The impact caused Tharun's finger to tighten on the trigger of his rifle and he let off a single shot that put an energy bolt into the bulkhead beside the door.

"The cockpit." Vorn exclaimed and the rebels in the lounge all turned towards the stairs.

"Tobis!" Jaysica cried out and she ran forwards just as Mace was pointing his blaster towards what he thought was something moving in the shadows.

"Jaysica get down." he ordered but instead Jaysica carried on running towards the stairs until something in the darkness lashed out at her and she cried out as she was thrown backwards. Even after it attacked Jaysica the other rebels could not see exactly what it was that they were facing and as they searched for a target to show itself Mace felt something grab him around his neck and was suddenly thrust up against a bulkhead before collapsing to the floor.

"Boss what just happened?" Kara asked as she and Vorn stood in the now silent lounge area.

"I don't know but I've got a very bad feeling about this." Vorn replied and then he hurried across the room to check on Mace, "He's alive. Unconscious but alive." he said.

"Same with the klutz." Kara added as she checked on Jaysica, "What sort of nerf herder runs into someone's line of fire."

"Someone concerned about a loved one." Vorn said, "We better check on Tharun and Tobis."
Hurrying up the stairs the two rebels found a dazed Tharun slumped opposite the entrance to the cockpit.
"Hey Tharun, what happened?" Kara said as she crouched down so that she could study him more closely.
"Did anyone get the serial number of that AT-AT that just stood on me?" Tharun said, groaning.
"Looks like Tobis is out cold as well." Vorn said as he lifted the engineer off the flight console.
"What the kriff was that thing boss?" Kara said.
"I think it was a defel." Vorn answered.
"A what?" Kara responded.
"A defel." Tharun repeated as he rubbed the back of his head, "Some people call them 'wraiths.' They come from some isolated planet on the Outer Rim. They can bend light around them."
"So what's it dong aboard this ship?" Kara said.
"My guess is that our privateers weren't the first ones to try stealing it." Vorn replied, "I think the defel killed the original crew but before he could escape the privateers arrived and boarded it."
"And he killed them too." Tharun added, "That guy on the *Flashback* must have been able to make back to his own ship and separated before the defel could get aboard with him."
"And now we're aboard it's going to try picking us off." Kara said, "That's just kriffing great. Boss, I don't want to be worrying about watching out for that phantom-"
"Wraith." Tharun commented."
"Whatever. Boss, I don't want to be worrying about that thing coming back and trying to finish off the job of killing us all while I'm trying to treat everyone. I want to get them back aboard the *Silver Hawk*."
"Wait a minute there." Tharun said, "If we dock the *Silver Hawk* the wraith could slip aboard." and Vorn nodded.
"Kara, you'll have to do an EVA to take them back with you." he said.
"An EVA? You're kidding." Kara exclaimed.
"It's the only way Kara. A defel can't survive in a vacuum any more than you or I can and wearing a suit will make it visible. By doing an EVA you'll guarantee that it doesn't go with you."
"We can attach them together using syntherope and you can take them back all at once." Tharun suggested.
"Okay then." Kara said in agreement at last, "Help me get them into the air lock. But what about you two?"
"We need to stay here." Vorn said.
"Yeah, it hasn't killed us yet." Tharun added and Kara frowned.
"Don't say things like that." she said.
"Sorry mom." Tharun said and Kara's frown deepened.
"Oh just help me get these three into the air lock." she said.

4.

Cass was sat in the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit sipping a drink and watching the Imperial transport when she saw one of its air locks open and a figure in a vacuum suit climbed out onto the hull. This figure then pulled three more out of the air lock, all four connected together by a synthrope line and Cass saw that only the first of them was moving.

"Jeeves!" she called out and a golden coloured protocol droid came walking into the cockpit.

"Miss Cass, whatever is the matter?" the droid asked before it noticed the figures now moving across the space between the Imperial transport and the *Silver Hawk*, "Oh my, what has happened?"

"I don't know." Cass said, "Just go get in the air lock and help whoever that is while I try to find out what's going on."

"Very well Miss Cass. I shall go there now." Jeeves replied and as the droid was leaving the cockpit Cass reached for the communication controls.

"This is Cass." she transmitted, "What's going on?"

"Cass I'm bringing back casualties. Get the air lock open." Kara responded.

"Casualties? What happened over there? Is my dad okay?"

"He'll be fine. But I need to get him, Tobis and Jaysica aboard."

"I've just sent Jeeves to the air lock. He'll help you bring them aboard." Cass said before shutting off the communication system and rushing to the inner door of the storage room that doubled as an air lock herself and waiting impatiently for it to open.

After what seemed to Cass like an age the door finally did slide upwards to reveal Kara and Jeeves standing over the three unconscious rebels.

"Dad!" Cass exclaimed as she rushed into the room.

"Cass get back. Jeeves and I need to move them out into the lounge." Kara said.

"Can't you at least tell me what happened?" Cass asked as she stepped back into the lounge.

"We were attacked." Kara answered as she and Jeeves carried Mace from the air lock and set him down on the floor of the lounge, "There's some sort of alien aboard that transport that's invisible. It attacked us soon after we went aboard."

"What about Tharun and the colonel?" Cass said as she realised which rebels were missing, "Are they-"

"The boss and Tharun are fine. Tharun will probably have a headache in the morning but his skull was thick enough to protect him. They both know something about these defel so hopefully they'll be able to deal with it."

"So do you have an actual experience in dealing with defel?" Vorn asked, looking at Tharun.

"None. You?"

"No, I've only ever heard stories about them. Until today I was never entirely convinced that they were real."

Vorn replied. Then he looked up at the ceiling of the storeroom and paused, "I wonder." he muttered.

"Got an idea?" Tharun said.

"Maybe. Just maybe. All the lights are out, yes?"

"All the ones we've seen so far, yes."

"And why do you suppose that is?" Vorn said.

"To make it easier to hide." Tharun answered.

"But that would be no use if the defel couldn't see either, so its eyes must be adapted to lower levels of light than ours. Much lower." Vorn suggested and Tharun smiled.

"Make the light brighter and blind it?" he said.

"I'm hoping so. But without Tobis I doubt we'll be able to get the internal lighting back on line any time soon." Vorn pointed out.

"Pity I didn't bring any flares with me." Tharun said, "But I didn't think we'd need them aboard a starship."

"Maybe not, but I know where we can find some." Vorn said.

"The escape pods." Tharun replied and Vorn nodded then pointed to a nearby ladder that led both up to the crew quarters and down to the escape pods.

"Lead the way please sergeant." he said.

"Yes colonel." Tharun responded and he made his way over to the ladder.

Cautiously he climbed down the ladder into the lower deck where four escape pods were located. The former mercenary shone his glow rod around, hoping that if the defel was down there with him it would stay away from the light while Vorn followed him down the ladder.

"This one." Vorn said, pointing to the nearest escape pod and the two rebels darted towards it. Tharun stood watch outside the pod while Vorn climbed inside and quickly located the emergency supply kit. This

contained a variety of survival equipment meant to keep the pod's occupants alive on the surface of a hostile planet and as well as basic rations and water purification equipment included a lightweight blaster rifle for small game hunting, knives, syntherope and most importantly a supply of flares. Some of these were designed to be launched into the sky to attract attention but the majority were simple handheld pyrotechnics that would burn brightly for several hours when ignited.

"Here." he said as he took the flares from the supply kit and handed two of them to Tharun before tucking another two into his belt.

"Thanks colonel." Tharun said as he took the flares he was offered, "So where do we start?"

"Well since the defel doesn't seem to be down here with us. So my guess is that it went right to the back of the ship to try and fix the hyperdrive." Vorn said.

"Thinking it's still trying to escape with the ship?" Tharun commented and Vorn nodded.

"It make sense to me. We'll head back up to the storage room and then make our way through the hold to the rear gun battery and engine room. Ready?"

Whenever you are colonel."

Back aboard the *Silver Hawk* Cass had brought pillows and blankets from the crew cabins while Kara performed a more thorough examination of the injured rebels than she had been able to do aboard the darkened Imperial transport while Jeeves and Tobis' R5 astromech droid Harvey watched from the side of the room.

"How are they?" Cass asked.

"No change." Kara answered, "Which is good really. It means that at least they aren't getting any worse."

"Can't you just wake them up?" Cass said.

"Not until I'm sure its safe. If there's internal bleeding then having them awake and walking about could do more harm than good." Kara said before Harvey let out a string of chirping sounds.

"No Harvey, Lieutenant Larcus cannot simply perform a full reboot. Such a thing is not possible with human beings." Jeeves responded and when the astromech chirped again the protocol droid added, "No, they aren't very efficient at all. Droids are far superior."

Kara looked up from Tobis at that point and scowled. Then she turned to Cass.

"Toss me a pillow." she said and then caught a thrown pillow and slipped it under Tobis' head before getting to her feet, "Well I don't think that there's any serious damage to any of them. Of course with the klutz it's hard to tell the difference between brain damage and normal behaviour. I'll check on them all in another ten minutes but until then I think we should keep an eye on that Imperial transport. You go into the cockpit and stand by on the flight controls while I get into the turret."

"Do you really think we'll have to fire on that ship?" Cass asked.

"I hope not." Kara said as she began to walk towards their cabin while removing her vacuum suit, "Our one laser cannon isn't going to be much of a match for its weapons if we do." Then she paused and looked around, "Oh and while we wait I can go through my list of all the things I'm planning on doing to you to get my own back on you for taking my clothes while I was in the shower." and Cass's face fell.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." she muttered to herself before turning around and heading for the cockpit again.

Vorn struck the exposed end of his flare against the wall beside the hold door and it burst into life, producing a bright white light that was too bright for either of the human rebels to look at directly.

"Go." he said to Tharun, holding the flare up over his head at the same time as he opened the door and let the light shine into the hold.

Unfortunately the transport's hold had been fully loaded when it set out and rather than illuminating the entire compartment the flare instead just lit up a narrow path that ran towards the doorway at the far end of the hold that allowed access to the engine room while casting shadows into the gaps between the stacks of cargo containers.

"This could be better." Vorn commented.

"If the defel really doesn't like the light then maybe it'll be enough to keep it away from us." Tharun replied as he advanced into the hold with his rifle held against his shoulder, ready to fire as soon as he saw even a hint of movement.

In the centre of the hold there was a gap where the cargo lift was located and Tharun paused as he reached this.

"Wire." he said softly.

"What?" Vorn asked.

"Trip wire." Tharun said.

"Where?"

"Hooked on my ankle." Tharun replied and slowly Vorn lowered himself down to look at the length of wire that was strung across the gap between the stacks of cargo containers either side of the rebels.

"I don't see anything connected to it." Vorn said.

"I felt it shift even through my boot. There must be something heavy on the end." Tharun said.

"I don't see where it attaches at either end. It just disappears between the crates. Mind you at my age my eyes aren't what they used to be. Especially in this light." Vorn replied and carefully he set the burning flare down on the deck and switched to his glow rod as he tried to see what the trip wire was connected to, "No, I still can't see anything." he added.

"Try the other end." Tharun suggested and Vorn followed the wire to where it disappeared between containers on the other side of Tharun. However, yet again there was no sign of it being connected to anything.

"Still nothing." Vorn said, shaking his head.

"Okay, I'm going to try backing up." Tharun said, "Get ready to run."

"I'm ready." Vorn replied as he picked up the still burning flare and backed away before Tharun took a single slow step backwards.

There was no explosion when Tharun's foot came free of the tripwire, instead there was a clatter as something behind one of the stacks of containers fell to the floor.

"Back!" Tharun snapped and he and Vorn both ran back towards the door they had entered the cargo hold through.

"What was it?" Vorn asked.

"Just an empty can or something colonel. Probably rigged up to fall if the wire was pulled too much and alert the defel to our presence. Maybe he doesn't want to risk having his stolen cargo blown up or blasted out into space by using a bomb." Tharun explained.

"Then it's a fair bet the defel knows we're here." Vorn said, "We could always try accessing the engine room from the upper level."

"Frankly colonel I don't think it matters. Let's go. Keep that flare up." Tharun responded and he started to advance into the hold once more.

Tharun paused momentarily when he reached the spot where the tripwire had been located and looked down.

"What's wrong?" Vorn whispered.

"Just checking colonel." Tharun replied and then he continued to advance.

The two rebels reached the door at the far end of the cargo hold without encountering any further traps or having the defel spring out at them from a hiding place and they stood either side of the door.

"Open the door and toss in the flare." Tharun whispered and Vorn nodded before slamming the palm of his hand down on the door controls. Then the moment that the door began to slide upwards he threw the burning flare underneath it, half expecting to hear a sudden cry of alarm from the defel as it was blinded by the bright light. However, there was no reaction at all and the two rebels then rushed through the doorway after the flare and looked around the transport's compact engine room.

The body of another privateer had been pushed to the side of the room and there was a toolkit beside an open access panel on the far wall that suggested someone had indeed been in here trying to repair the hyperdrive but there was no sign at all of the defel.

"I doubt he went down." Tharun said as he looked towards the ladder mounted on the wall beside him, "That just leads to the ventral gun turret."

"Which just leaves up to the crew quarters." Vorn added, nodding, "Then problem is that if we go up after him then he'll just head towards the front of the ship and come back down the stairs."

"Yeah, we could spend eternity going round in circles." Tharun agreed, "But if we split up then the defel could pick us off one at a time like he did to that poor nerf herder." and he looked down at the body of the privateer,

"What we need is a way to spot him easily."

5.

"Time to wake up captain." Kara said as she gently slapped Mace's cheek.

"Kara?" Mace responded as he opened his eyes and looked around, "How did I get back to the *Silver Hawk*? How long have I been out?"

"Firstly I brought you back here on a piece of syntherope and secondly not long. Less than an hour in fact. Tobis and Jaysica took heavier blows than you so I've left them out while I monitor their condition." Kara said and as Mace began to try and stand she helped him to his feet.

"What's going on?" Mace asked.

"The boss thinks that we were attacked by something called a defel." Kara explained to him, "Frankly it sounds like something out of an interstellar ghost story to me. I mean something that's invisible? Doesn't seem credible."

"Oh they're real alright." Mace said while he reached around to the back of his head, feeling where it had struck the deck hardest on impact and wincing suddenly.

"Careful there." Kara said, "You're lucky not to have a fractured skull. So you know about these defel things then?"

"I've heard spacers talk about them. Not many ships go to their homeworld but it is a source of certain rare metals that are hard to come by. Now where are the others? Tharun, the colonel and Cass?"

"The boss and Tharun stayed behind on the transport and Cass is in the cockpit." Kara told him and then she smiled as she added, "Where I stripped her naked and bound and gagged her with industrial tape in revenge for her oh-so funny little prank."

Mace groaned and hurried to the cockpit but when the door opened and he saw her in the pilot's seat she was still fully dressed and not restrained in any way.

"Dad!" she exclaimed when she looked around and saw him, "You're awake."

"I thought you were naked in here." Mace said, confused and Cass frowned.

"Okay, that's kind of a creepy thing for my dad to say to me." she said, "Would you just rush in on me naked anywhere else?"

"I told him I got my own back by stripping you and tying you up in tape." Kara said, smiling as she appeared behind Mace. Then she looked at Mace and added, "For your information Cass and I have come to a mutually agreeable position regarding her making things up to me."

"I don't want know." Mace said as Cass vacated the pilot's seat for him, "Now do we have contact with the colonel?"

"The transport's just a few kilometres ahead. The boss may be able to pick up a signal from here." Kara replied.

"Colonel Larcus do you read me? This is Mace aboard the *Silver Hawk*." Mace said into the ship's communication system. At first there was no response and Mace was about to make another attempt when Vorn's voice was heard.

"Mace I read you." he said, "Glad to hear you up and about."

"All thanks to the tender care of your wife colonel." Mace said.

"Hi boss." Kara added, leaning over Mace's shoulder.

"Kara filled me in on what you think is going on over there. Do you really think it's a defel?" Mace asked.

"I don't see what else it could be. We're obviously dealing with something that can evade observation and likes the dark. Do you know anything about them?" Vorn responded.

"Bits. Tall tales told in spacers' cantinas mainly."

"I don't suppose they said anything about how to make the creatures visible did they?" Vorn asked.

"I think something was said about ultraviolet light. Too much regular light blinds them but they see in UV and can be seen under UV light." Mace said.

"And is there a UV light aboard the *Silver Hawk*?" Vorn replied.

"Sorry colonel, I don't know that. Tobis would but he's out cold still." Mace told him.

"Okay. Tharun and I will check to see if we can find anything over here that will do. But let me know if you come up with anything." Vorn said.

"Do you want us to come over there and give you a hand boss?" Kara asked.

"No." Vorn replied, "Mace probably isn't fully healed, you need to take care of him and the others and I don't think sending Cass over is a very good idea."

"In that were are in complete agreement colonel. *Silver Hawk* out." Mace said.

"Hey! I can take care of myself." Cass protested.

"Not against invisible killer aliens you can't." Kara commented and then she turned to leave the cockpit, "I'm going to go and check on Tobis and the klutz. Hopefully she's still unconscious, she does less damage that

way.”

On the Imperial transport ship Vorn put his comlink away and looked around the engine room.

“Tharun, I don’t suppose you can see anything that looks like a UV light can you?” he said but the former mercenary just shrugged.

“Sorry colonel. I wouldn’t know a UV light if Tobis hurled it at me.” he said but then he frowned.

“What’s wrong?” Vorn said.

“Just a thought but what about a personal strobe beacon?” Tharun said and a smile spread across Vorn’s face.

“Sergeant when my daughter got drunk and married the first man she happened to see, she obviously picked well. Yes, a beacon will emit visible, infra red or ultraviolet light depending on how it’s set and there should be plenty of them in the escape pods. Come on, let’s go and grab some.”

Hurrying back through the cargo hold the two rebels made their way back down into the escape pod bay, Vorn tossing the burning flare to the bottom of the ladders ahead of them and then to the same pod that they had retrieved the flares from to begin with.

“Here!” Vorn called out from inside the pod, “There’s a full pack of beacons.” and he reappeared in the pod hatchway clutching a box that held a dozen fist sized strobe beacons. Each of these featured a clip so that it could be hung from someone’s clothing so that they could keep both hands free while they used it. The compact devices were of a basic but durable design that had endured for thousands of years. By default when activated they would produce bright pulses of visible light at intervals of one to two seconds, adjustable by the user. However, by adjusting the emitter it was possible to change the frequency of the pulse out of the part of the electromagnetic spectrum that was visible to humans and into the infra red or ultraviolet ranges. This would enable the wearer to remain hidden from anyone without the equipment needed to detect such frequencies. Vorn handed two of the beacons to Tharun who promptly clipped them both to his vacuum suit while Vorn took two more from the box for himself.

“If I recall how to work these things properly from my navy training I should just have to slide this switch upwards.” Vorn said, “Then it’s just a case of activating it like so.” then he pressed the activation button and gasped as a stocky humanoid form just over a metre tall with what looked to be bright yellow fur under the ultraviolet light was revealed to be standing barely two metres behind Tharun, “Down!” Vorn snapped as he reached for his rifle but the defel, realising that it had been exposed dived forwards and pushed Tharun into Vorn and the two rebels both fell to the floor, the distress beacon rolling out of Vorn’s grasp. The beacon continued to project its pulse of UV light though and so when the defel lunged at Vorn he was able to bring up his arms to push back against the alien as it landed on top of him, its bat-like features snarling at him. Having landed beside Vorn, Tharun looked around to see the defel attacking him. The alien appeared only briefly every second as the beacon emitted another pulse of UV light but it was enough for Tharun to be able to use as an aiming mark and he swung his rifle around.

The defel saw this and leapt away from Vorn before Tharun could fire. For a moment it disappeared only to reappear again when the beacon produced yet another pulse and Tharun adjusted his aim. However, the defel continued to dive and roll, vanishing and reappearing time and again until it finally reached one of the sets of ladders leading upwards and quickly climbed out of the escape pod bay.

“Well sergeant,” Vorn said as he sat up, breathing heavily after wrestling with the defel, “I think we can say that the beacons work.”

“We only see it for a fraction of a second though. It’s still invisible enough of the time to be able to get the drop on us and claw our throats out.” Tharun pointed out and Vorn nodded in agreement.

“Perhaps. But that was with just one beacon.” he said as he reached out and switched one of the beacons clipped to Tharun’s vacuum suit to its UV emitting mode and activated it, “But what if we’re running as many of them as we can at the same time?”

Tharun smiled.

“If the pulses are out of synch then the defel will be illuminated at different times by each one.” he said.

“Precisely. Now let’s see how many of these we can get fixed to ourselves.” Vorn replied as he picked up the box of beacons.

6.

Vorn and Tharun each connected half a dozen distress beacons to their vacuum suits, all of them set to emit pulses of ultraviolet light at what the rebels hoped would be different intervals. Tharun then took another of the beacons and threw it through the opening of the ladder shaft the storeroom above before climbing up after it.

"All clear colonel." he called out as Vorn then followed him up the ladder.

"There are too many ways around this ship for us to stop the defel getting around us if we search together."

Vorn said when he reached the top of the ladder and unslung his own rifle.

"Splitting up is risking one of us being ambushed colonel." Tharun said.

"I know. The only other option I can think of is if we seal these two doors here." Vorn said and he pointed to the doors at the front and rear of the storeroom, "Your rifle should be powerful enough to destroy the motors that operate them without us needing to worry about removing any inspection covers."

Tharun nodded.

"That leaves just the upper deck as the only route from the prow to the stern." he said.

"Precisely. Once we've done that I suggest we make our way forwards past the cockpit and down into the lounge. Then we'll search the entire ship from prow to stern, one room at a time."

"And what are your orders if we see the defel colonel?" Tharun asked.

"That thing killed an entire privateer crew and it attacked us without warning. If we see it we shoot it. No warnings." Vorn answered.

"No warnings." Tharun repeated.

Tharun's Blastech A-280 rifle was one of the most powerful blaster rifles manufactured and it took just a single shot to punch a hole through the reinforced bulkheads of the Imperial transport ship and destroy each of the motors in turn. Vorn then tested the doors by attempting to activate the controls that opened them and nodding when each attempt failed, indicating that the opening mechanisms had been fully disabled. Then he and Tharun returned to the ladder shafts and used them to climb up to the vessel's upper deck. This deck consisted of a single corridor that ran for almost the entire length of the vessel. At the front was a compartment that housed all of the ship's life support equipment while at the rear was the dorsal gun turret that also contained another ladder shaft that led down through the engine room to the ventral turret. In between these, lining each side of the corridor were the crew cabins to the front and bathroom facilities towards the rear.

"Corridor's clear." Tharun said as he stepped out into the corridor and checked in both directions, pausing long enough looking each way for him to know for certain that the beacons he wore would have emitted at least one pulse of UV light each. The two rebels then made their way forwards, passing through the life support compartment until they reached the stairs at the front of the ship that led down past the cockpit.

Tharun came to a halt outside the cockpit while Vorn checked inside. The same tools that Tobis had been using to try and gain access to the ship's computer were still strewn across the floor and as far as Vorn could tell none of them had been moved since the unconscious engineer had been taken back to the *Silver Hawk*.

"I don't think the defel's been back in here." he said, "Let's continue to the lounge."

Just as the cockpit had been in the same condition as the rebels had left it, the lounge also appeared to be untouched only in this case there was a great deal more damage from the initial fight against the defel.

"Colonel. Over here." Tharun said as he advanced towards the kitchen area.

"What have you found?" Vorn asked.

"None of us ate anything aboard this ship did we?" Tharun replied and Vorn shook his head.

"No, I think finding all these bodies put us all off our appetites somehow." he said.

"Well someone's been eating here recently. Look." Tharun said and Vorn approached the kitchen as well where he saw an open food packet left on the counter, "Our defel must have been hungry." Tharun added.

"Yes, well perhaps it will regret eating that." Vorn commented, "Imperial Navy rations don't make for much of a last meal after all. Now I think we can agree this room is secure and since the door to the storeroom is sealed we should be heading back towards the cockpit."

"Yes colonel." Tharun said and he began to head back towards the stairs.

Despite checking the cockpit on their way down the stairs to make sure that the defel would not ambush them from there, the two rebels still checked it again just in case the alien had been following them as they came down the stairs. It took just a few seconds for them to be convinced that the cockpit was still empty and then they continued towards the top of the stairs where Tharun opened the door to the life support compartment.

The moment he did this there was a flash of red from somewhere further down the corridor on the upper floor and he dived aside as the blaster bolt flew past him and struck the bulkhead behind him.

"Down!" he snapped and Vorn ducked as another two blaster bolts fired in rapid succession flew over him.

"Great. Now the defel's got a blaster as well." Vorn hissed.

"Probably picked it up off the body of that privateer in the engine room." Tharun replied as he switched his rifle to fully automatic and then fired a short burst through the doorway along the corridor. There was no scream to indicate that he had hit the defel but the suppressive fire did cause a break in the incoming fire and Tharun dived through the open doorway before another shot could be fired. Then he ran forwards and pressed himself up against the wall where the life support compartment narrowed and connected to the start of the corridor. Meanwhile behind Tharun Vorn crawled to the top of the stairs and used the uppermost step as cover while he fired a short burst into the darkness down the corridor as well.

The difficulty for the rebels was that taking cover meant that the distress beacons they were making use of to try and detect the defel were all obscured by the structure of the Imperial transport ship and so they were firing blind, relying on automatic fire to at least dissuade the defel from advancing towards them.

"Tharun, toss one of your beacons into the corridor." Vorn said and Tharun nodded as he removed one of the beacons from his vacuum suit and threw it through the doorway as if the device was a grenade. The strobe came to a halt about a third of the way along the corridor and as it released another pulse of UV light Vorn spotted the telltale yellow appearing fur of the defel located at one of the spurs in the corridor that led to the ladders shafts heading down through the storeroom and to the escape pod bay and he fired another rapid burst towards it.

The alien knew that it had been spotted however, the burst of UV light being highly visible to it while invisible to the two human rebels and it ducked back into the spur out of the way. Then more blaster fire came from the defel as it fired its weapon around the corner. However, this was not aimed towards either of the rebels. Instead the defel fired several shots in rapid succession aimed at the floor in the corridor until one of them hit the strobe and the regular pulses of UV light that made the alien briefly visible ceased.

Expecting the defel to make a break from cover under the cover of darkness Vorn fired another burst from this rifle, this one much longer than the others.

"Tharun, another beacon. Quick!" he called out and Tharun nodded as he pulled a second beacon from his vacuum suit and rolled it into the corridor beneath the blaster fire from Vorn. This exposed the yellow of the defel once more just as the alien disappeared through the doorway that led to the dorsal turret at the very end of the corridor and the door dropped shut behind it.

"The gun turret. Go!" Vorn exclaimed as he got to his feet and Tharun ran into the corridor ahead of him, pausing for a moment to scoop up the beacon that was still pulsing invisibly. The rebels then both ran the entire length of the corridor before grinding to a halt just outside the door to the turret and Vorn stood with his hand hovering over the control to open it.

"Ready?" he asked, "The defel could be right on the other side of this door."

Tharun stepped back, dropped to one knee and pointed his blaster towards the door.

"Ready." he replied, nodding and Vorn pressed down on the control panel.

Instantly the door slid upwards and Vorn made sure that he was out of Tharun's line of fire, but there was no sudden burst of blaster bolts from Tharun's A-280 rifle.

"Clear." he said as he got back to his feet and advanced through the doorway into the turret control room.

The gunner's seat was directly ahead of Tharun but he was more interested in the ladder shaft to his left and he leant over the edge and pointed his rifle downwards. With the lights aboard the transport out, the shaft was too dark for Tharun to see down even as far as the engine room on the level below, "Cover me, I'm going down." he said, slinging his rifle over his shoulder and drawing his sidearm instead before he began to climb down the ladder.

Tharun went as far as the engine room before stopping and waiting for Vorn to follow him down.

"Watch the door, I'll check the ventral turret." Vorn said and he dropped a beacon down to the bottom of the shaft before peering down after it. Seeing no flashes of bright yellow he then straightened up again and looked towards the only other exit from the engine room, "Looks like we've got him cornered now. There's no way out of the hold since we disabled the door at the forward end."

"This isn't going to be easy colonel." Tharun said, "Even with our beacons there are still plenty of places for that thing to hide in there, we could be walking into a trap. Are you sure you don't want to wait until the others can get over here and give us a hand?"

"No, we need to finish this quickly." Vorn replied, "We still don't know exactly what's in that hold and it could be something the defel could use against us."

"Okay colonel. If you'd like to open the door, I'll take point."

Vorn nodded and positioned himself by the door as Tharun switched back to his rifle. Then as soon as the door opened Tharun led the way into the cargo hold. There was a hissing sound from behind the rebels and for a moment Tharun thought that the defel had somehow escaped detection in the engine room before realising that the sound was Vorn closing the door behind them.

"This way we'll know if it tries to leave." Vorn said softly and Tharun nodded before moving forwards again.

The two rebels advanced cautiously, giving the beacons they carried plenty of opportunity to exposed the

defel but neither of them saw any sign of it. However, what Vorn did notice as they neared the open space in the centre of the hold was a stack of small containers, each no more than half a metre across starting to wobble and he realised that this could only happen if there was something behind them applying pressure. "Tharun look out!" he shouted and Tharun began to turn towards the moving containers. However, before he could get out of the way the stack came toppling down on top of him and the former mercenary was buried beneath them.

This was followed by a roar as the bright yellow form of the defel, clearly illuminated by Vorn's pulsing beacons leapt over the pile of containers towards the rebel. The staggered pulsing of the beacons made the alien seem to rapidly appear and disappear as it flew through the air towards him and Vorn tried to take aim with his rifle before it could reach him. The alien was too quick, however and Vorn was pushed backwards and his rifle knocked from his hand as the defel landed on top of him.

Well into his sixties Vorn was somewhat past his physical prime but he did have the advantage of size over the defel and the alien was clearly unused to fighting an opponent who was able to see it clearly if only for brief intervals and the pair wrestled with one another, each trying to land a single disabling blow on the other. To Vorn the defel appeared almost as if it was able to teleport itself very short distances as it moved during the brief periods of time between UV pulses from Vorn's beacons and each time it became visible again it was in a slightly different place that Vorn had to try and reach before it disappeared into the darkness once more.

The defel hissed at Vorn, speaking something in its own language as it managed to get a hand free and it raked its claws across his face just deep enough to draw blood. Vorn winced at this before kneeing the defel in its stomach hard enough to push it back off him and Vorn scrambled away as the alien recovered its senses. Looking around Vorn saw where his rifle had landed and it was clear to him that he would not be able to reach it before the defel, that had thankfully abandoned its own blaster in favour of engaging the rebels in hand to hand combat, was able to reach him again. Fortunately Vorn had a second blaster that the defel was not aware of. Rather than a full sized military issue blaster pistol, Vorn had always favoured a more compact hold out blaster that could easily be concealed in a pouch or pocket and he had this in a pocket of his vacuum suit.

Recovering from Vorn's blow, the defel charged back towards the rebel and once again it seemed to vanish intermittently in the pulsing UV light. As the defel charged Vorn was already reaching for the pouch that contained his holdout blaster and just as the defel launched itself into the air Vorn pulled his weapon from his pouch and fired.

The shot struck the defel in its shoulder and the alien screeched as it began to tumble through the air, still heading towards Vorn. Vorn pushed himself backwards across the floor and fired his tiny weapon again and again. The small size of the hold out blaster's power cell limited its ammunition capacity and after the sixth shot was fired it was exhausted. Most of the blasts had hit the defel though and as it crashed to the floor right in front of Vorn it lay still. Unwilling to risk the defel getting back up, Vorn ejected the spent power cell from his blaster and inserted a spare that he pulled from another pouch in his vacuum suit. The defel remained still though and Vorn started to relax when all of a sudden he heard a groaning sound coming from beneath the stack of containers that the defel had pushed over. Vorn smiled as he realised this meant Tharun was still alive under the containers and he took out his comlink.

"This is Vorn." he transmitted, hoping that the signal would reach the waiting *Silver Hawk*, "the defel is dealt with. Kara I need you over here, Tharun's hurt."

"Our position is marked colonel." Mace said as Vorn sat down in the *Silver Hawk's* co-pilot seat as Cass moved to one of the two seats behind the.

"Good." Vorn replied, "The Alliance can send ships to recover the *Flashback* and the transport later."

"Well Tharun's all tucked up in his bunk." Kara announced as she entered the cockpit and leant over Vorn to kiss him on the cheek, "He'll be fine by the way."

"Well we'll be back at headquarters within the hour and we can get all of the others into a proper medical facility." Vorn replied.

"And then Cass can make up for her prank." Kara added and Vorn sighed.

"Kara what did I tell you about that?" he said.

"She's going to babysit Vorn for us boss. Free of charge." Kara said and both Vorn and Mace frowned, "You told me that if I did anything to her then you'd do the same to me and that got me thinking about what I want you to do to me." Kara went on as she sat down in Vorn's lap, "Only that's a bit difficult while our son is around so I figured that Cass ought to do us a favour by looking after him for us. So how about it boss?"

Vorn took a deep breath and smiled.

"I love you." he told Kara and she smiled back at him.

"I know." she replied.