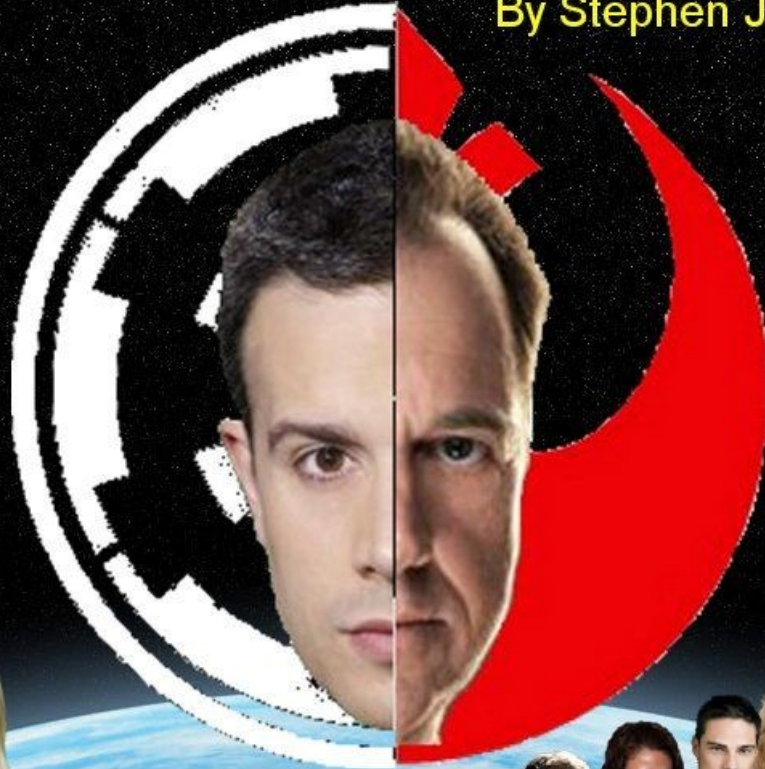


STAR WARS

2-05: Pirate Bait

By Stephen J Dutton



Handwritten signature or initials in black ink.



Civil war turns father against son

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

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

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

PIRATE BAIT

ONE OF THE SHIP'S USED BY THE REBEL ALLIANCE TO CONDUCT MINING OPERATIONS IS HAVING TECHNICAL TROUBLE AND THE OCCUPANTS OF THE SILVER HAWK MUST LEND ASSISTANCE. BUT ARE THEY THE ONLY ONES IN THE SYSTEM OR IS SOMEONE PREYING ON THE HELPLESS MINING VESSELS?

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

Star Wars is the intellectual property of Lucasfilm Ltd. This story is unofficial and Lucasfilm has not approved any of it.

1.

"Tell me!" the shorter of the two women who came into the lounge area of the transport ship the *Silver Hawk* said to the taller one preceding her.

"No Jaysica." the taller one replied, "Now leave me alone."

"But Kara, I need to know."

"No you don't."

"What's going on?" a voice asked from the far side of the lounge. This was Vorn Larcus III, the two women's superior officer.

"Major, Kara's got a new boyfriend and she won't tell me who it is. She's going out with him tonight."

"Is she?" Vorn said, shifting his gaze towards Kara.

"Well it is Benduday night boss." Kara said, "Everyone knows Benduday night's date night."

"That's true." Another voice interrupted as Mace Grayle, the owner and captain of the *Silver Hawk* walked past the two women, "You look nice." He added to Kara, "Whoever he is he's a lucky guy."

"Aren't you going to ask who he is?" Jaysica asked Mace.

"No." Mace replied, "I've got a date of my own. The *Renegade's* in port so I'm meeting up with Captain Mayan."

"Still seeing Mallia then?" Kara asked.

"See!" Jaysica snapped and she waved a finger at Kara, "She can ask about other people's relationships."

"That's because people like me more than you." Kara replied sarcastically. Then she added, "How does my makeup look?"

"Like you're a-" Jaysica began.

"It looks fine." Vorn interrupted.

"Where are Tharun and Tobis?" Kara asked, noticing that the final two of the *Silver Hawk's* usual occupants were missing.

"Tharun's already gone." Vorn said, "Off to meet Corporal Heed I think."

"And Tobis is in the hold looking at the engines." Mace said, "I thought they sounded a bit odd when we landed last."

"I didn't notice anything." Jaysica said.

"Well I did," Mace replied, "so Tobis is trying to figure out what's wrong with them."

"I want you to help him." Vorn said to Jaysica, "With that mouse droid of yours as well. We can't afford to have the ship laid up for repairs too long. Adding you and Penny to the repair crew will halve the time it takes."

"Triple it more like." Kara commented, "When she starts breaking things."

"Tobis!" Mace shouted before Jaysica could reply and a young man in greasy overalls appeared at the door leading to the cargo bay.

"Yes captain?" he asked.

"I'm off now." Mace told him, "Jaysica's staying behind. She's going to help you with the repairs. How long do you think they'll take?"

Tobis didn't answer and Mace noticed that his engineer was staring in Jaysica's direction, smiling nervously.

"Tobis? I asked how long you think the repairs will take."

"Oh. Err. Yes. Sorry."

"Well?"

"Well it depends. If its what I think it is from your description then it could be four or five hours."

"Four or five hours?" Jaysica repeated, "That's the entire evening. Major, will you help us too please?"

"I can't." Vorn answered.

"But why?" Jaysica pleaded.

Vorn stood up and picked up the jacket he had left on the seat beside him.

"It's Benduday night." He said, "Its date night." Then he held out a hand to Kara, "Miss Bilstran," he said, "may I escort you to the turbolift?"

"Sure boss, just don't make my date jealous okay?" she replied to the officer who was more than thirty years her senior.

"I'll try." Vorn replied, smiling.

At the bottom of the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp the three rebels paused.

"So how long will it relay take Tobis to fix the engines?" Vorn asked Mace.

"Well the cable I pulled loose should be easy for the droids to locate, so he should have it fixed in about fifteen minutes." Mace replied.

"So then that leaves him alone with Jaysica for pretty much the entire evening." Kara said.
"Well it's a plan." Vorn said, "But I don't see the lad taking advantage of it."
"It's the best we can do without telling him we're trying to help him." Mace said.
"Why he wants her anyway is beyond me." Kara said.
"Each to his own." Vorn said. Then he looked at Mace, "Enjoy yourself tonight and give Mallia my best."
"Thanks major." Mace replied, giving Vorn a casual salute before heading off across the hangar bay in the direction of the docking ports for larger ships such as the *Renegade*. Vorn and Kara then walked arm in arm towards the main turbolift cluster.
"Vorn!" a woman called out and Vorn quickly pulled his arm away from Kara's.
"Shyla." Vorn replied, "I wasn't expecting to meet you here."
Shyla Nerin was in charge of the Support Services Division for the sector, with responsibility for all of the Alliance's non-military operations.
"Obviously," she replied as she got closer, "but I thought it better to come and break the news in person instead of by com."
"I've got a bad feeling about this boss." Kara said.
"So do I." Vorn added.
"Don't worry." Shyla said, "I'm afraid all plans for tonight will have to be cancelled, but the job I have for you is easy."

Tobis leant through the open inspection hatch at the back of the *Silver Hawk's* cargo hold. His astromech droid Harvey had narrowed down the location of the fault to somewhere in this section. Though he enjoyed his position as starship engineer on the *Silver Hawk*, right now this was not what he wanted to be doing. He wanted to be spending time with Jaysica. At that moment Jaysica was sat on an empty crate watching him, a large box of tools beside her.

"Everyone has a date but me." She complained.
"Err. I don't." Tobis commented. Then he spotted a cable that had become unplugged from its proper place and he smiled as he realised that the repair job would be over in moments.
"Oh you don't count." Jaysica replied as she looked at her reflection in an inspection mirror she took from the toolbox. Then she went on. "Kara must be really worried her boyfriend will like me better if she's hiding him from me. Maybe she wants to marry him." Then she paused again before continuing with, "Tobis, do you think we'll ever be married."
There was a 'thunk' as Tobis stood up too rapidly, forgetting he was still leaning through the inspection hatch and hitting his head on the machinery above him. He staggered back, clutching his head.
"I mean I think I will." Jaysica said, ignoring Tobis's distress, "I mean some handsome man's bound to come along and fall in love with me. But it must be hard for someone like you to relate to women."
Tobis looked at Jaysica and frowned.
"I- Err-" he stammered. But before he could get any further a voice called out.
"Jaysica! Tobis!" Mace yelled, "I hope you've fixed this ship because we're shipping out."

"You know," Tharun said as he took a seat behind Mace and Vorn in the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk*, "this is the second time I've had to leave Mara early because of a sudden deployment."
"What was the first?" Mace asked, powering up the ship's engines.
"It was on the exercise last week." Vorn reminded him, "It doesn't count because he shouldn't have been sneaking off with her in the first place."
"Well next time I'd still appreciate a bit more notice major." Tharun said, "What's so urgent this time anyway?"
"Some Alliance mining ship's got technical trouble." Vorn told him, "We're running some spare parts out there for them and we're to assist them in getting their ship working properly again."
"A repair run?" Tharun asked, "How come we're not getting any genuine missions? That last one didn't count. We were only expecting a bunch of university geeks, not mercenaries."
"That's my fault I'm afraid. Officially I'm still on light duties." Vorn replied.
The *Silver Hawk* lifted from the deck and Mace piloted it clear of the hangar bay.
"Just enjoy it while it lasts." He said, "I for one don't actually enjoy being shot at."
Then with a sudden lurch the *Silver Hawk* entered hyperspace.

Nen Tok was the only living being on the bridge of his ship. Every other station was 'manned' by battle droids. The neimoidian found it useful to have a crew of machines; it meant that he had no need to share the spoils of his raids with anyone. Of course that had changed slightly in recent weeks. He had entered into a partnership with a human who had provided him with some rather useful intelligence.

"Sir we're picking up a ship leaving hyperspace." One of the droids said.
"Identify it." Nen Tok ordered.
"It's a freighter sir." The droid informed him, "Just like you expected."

"Excellent. I've had enough of attacking these small ships. This one will lead us to the mother ship. Track it."
"Roger, roger."

Only Mace and Vorn were in the cockpit when the mining ship came into view as it rose over the horizon of the tiny moon it orbited.

"It's a piece of junk!" Mace exclaimed.

Looking out of the viewport Vorn had to agree. The ship was ancient, a century or more in age by his reckoning. It was designed not to undertake mining itself, but to act as a mobile refinery for the squadron of smaller vessels that could dock in the cradles that ran beneath it. Large storage tanks for the collected resources could be seen dotted all across the hull.

"I'm sure it's perfectly safe." Vorn said, not so sure.

"Right, that's why they put out an urgent call for technical help." Then Mace activated the *Silver Hawk's* communication system and signalled to the vessel, "*Iron Ore*, this is *Silver Hawk*. We are on approach and requesting docking instructions."

There was no response and Mace repeated his call a few moments later. Still there was nothing.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Mace told Vorn.

"They've still got power." Vorn replied as he noticed the lights that were active on the ship before them.

"We've seen that before." Mace said, remembering encounters with more than one ship adrift in space. None of which had gone smoothly.

"Wait. What's that?" Vorn asked and he pointed at one of the mining ship's running lights. Designed to be visible from a great distance, the high-powered light source was flashing irregularly.

"Is that some sort of pulse code?" Mace asked.

"It could be." Vorn answered, "I'm a bit rusty with the one I learnt, but I don't think it's that one."

"There are hundreds of those things." Mace said, waving a hand towards the flashing light, "How are we supposed to know which one?"

Vorn grinned and activated the *Silver Hawk's* internal communications.

"Jeeves, we need you in the cockpit now." He said, and then he leant back in his chair and watched the flashing light.

"Yes master Larcus? How may I help you?" the golden coloured protocol droid said as it arrived in response to Vorn's summons.

"Take a look at that." Vorn said, nodding towards the light, "Is that a pulse code?"

"Oh yes master Larcus, I do believe it is."

"Can you tell what it's saying?"

"Of course sir. I am fluent in over six million forms of communication, including almost five—"

"Just tell us." Mace said.

"It says 'Communications failed. Dock in aft hangar.' Then it repeats itself." Jeeves answered.

"Aft hangar it is then." Mace said, "I'll take us in."

"You do that." Vorn said, standing up, "I'm going to get everyone ready for trouble. Just in case."

2.

A trio of men were waiting when the access ramp was lowered and the occupants of the *Silver Hawk* emerged.

"Expecting trouble?" one of them asked when he saw how heavily armed they were.

"We've had a few experiences that were, err, well, unfortunate." Vorn replied. Then he added, "Are you Krayne?"

"I am. Captain Krayne of the *Iron Ore*." Krayne answered and he held out his hand.

"Major Larcus," Vorn replied, taking the offered hand, "and this is Captain Mace Grayle of the *Silver Hawk*." Mace nodded and Krayne nodded back.

"So what's the problem?" Vorn asked, "Aside from your comms array of course."

"Pretty much everything." Krayne replied, "We've got systems failures across the ship. The communications array is just the latest. I'm just glad we got a call out before it went down."

"What does your chief engineer have to say about all this?" Mace asked.

"Don't have one." Krayne told him, "I've got a bunch of mechanics, but my chief engineer got poached by one of your lot. He's fixing some fancy freighter now. Neither he nor the stuck up bitch that took him cared about leaving me in the lurch."

"It wasn't Sen Verid by any chance?" Mace asked.

"That's him. Went to work on the—"

"The *Beauty Queen*." Mace said, scowling, "Inra Vayne strikes again." Mace and Inra had never got on. The hapan female was forever comparing her YT-2400 freighter to the other, older vessels used to move rebel teams around in the field and was constantly boasting of her own vessel's superiority over the others. Needless to say, Mace was not alone in his dislike for her.

"Yes well she flashed a load of money in Sen's direction and he moved all his stuff out. Now I have to try and direct this ship's operations and oversee a maintenance schedule as well. I swear if I ever get hold of either of—"

"Look," Vorn interrupted, "can you just give us a list of what's gone wrong? We've brought plenty of replacement parts with us and I'm sure that Mace's engineer is quite capable of directing your repairs." Vorn and Mace both looked at Tobis.

"Err." He said as he looked from one to the other and back.

"He'll do it all right." Mace said.

"There's something else as well." Krayne said to Vorn.

"What?"

"Well with our communications down we've been out of contact with all of our mining shuttles. There's three of them collecting tibanna gas from the gas giants in the system and two more pumping hyperbarides from one of the moons. I would have headed out to meet up with them myself, but that would mean being out of position for your arrival or if any of them had an emergency and headed back here. So I'm sure you can see my problem."

"You need to make sure they're all still okay." Vorn said and he looked at Mace.

"I don't see a problem." Mace said, "We can leave Tobis here with Harvey and the spare parts and go check on the shuttles."

"Jaysica, I want you to stay here as well with Penny. Help Tobis and Captain Krayne out." Vorn added, looking at Jaysica, whose face fell at the thought of having to remain on the dilapidated vessel.

"So what does this place do then?" Jaysica asked.

Tobis was working in a deep hole in the floor of the chamber, located on one of the *Iron Ore*'s lower decks. While he worked down the hole Harvey was plugged into the control panel, emitting assorted noises as Tobis adjusted the control circuitry. A lead ran from the droid into the hole and to Tobis's datapad so he could understand the sounds. Once again Jaysica was just sat back doing nothing more than watch Tobis working, her legs dangling into the hole while she sat on the edge.

"Oh. Its a carbon freezing chamber." Tobis replied, "The tibanna gas and hyperbarides are highly volatile. Freezing them in carbonite makes them safe for transport. Plus you don't need any specialised containers. You can just stack the blocks however you like."

"Oh." Jaysica said, not at all interested in the response. "So how long do you think all of this will take?" she added and she yawned.

"Well this room's just about done. But Penny's probably located more faults by now. We could be here for a week or more."

"A week?" Jaysica exclaimed, "I can't keep this up for a week!"

Tobis stood up in the hole and looked at Jaysica and frowned.

At that moment there were more high pitched squeals from the doorway and a tiny boxlike mouse droid came rolling into the room.

"Penny!" Jaysica called out with a smile, "Please tell me you didn't find anything else that needs fixing."

The mouse droid let out a series of chirps and bleeps and Jaysica looked at Harvey.

"Tell me what she said."

Harvey too let out a series of electronic sounds, but his were translated on Tobis's datapad display.

"There's a coolant leak in the food storage chamber." Tobis said.

"Food storage?" Jaysica repeated, "Good I'm starving. We should fix that now."

Then Jaysica went to stand up. But as she placed a foot on the edge of the hole to lift herself up on she slipped and cried out as she fell into the hole, landing right on top of Tobis and the pair collapsed in a heap.

"You should fix that edge." She said as she lifted her chest away from his face, "Its slippery. Now help me out of here."

The *Silver Hawk* approached the moon where, according to the crew of the *Iron Ore* a mining shuttle was mining hyperbarides. The rare and highly toxic heavy metals were essential for high-energy applications such as the manufacture of turbolaser weapons. So the procurement of them was of vital importance to both the Empire and the Alliance.

With only four of the normal six living occupants aboard the *Silver Hawk*, all of them were able to sit in the vessel's cockpit.

"There's nothing out here." Kara said from the co-pilot's seat. Normally Vorn himself would take this position, but Kara's knowledge of starship sensor systems meant that for this flight it made more sense for her to be sat there, "Are we in the right place?" she added, looking at Mace.

"Right where Krayne told us to be." He replied.

"What are you scanning for?" Vorn asked, leaning between Kara and Mace.

"EM emissions boss." She replied, "The shuttles likely to be on the ground so our active stuff probably won't spot it until we're right on top of it. But we should be able to read energy output from out here."

"Wouldn't it be hidden if the shuttle were on the far side of the moon?" Tharun asked.

"No." Kara told him, "Its only a few hundred kilometres across. The power output of hyperbaride mining would create enough waste heat that we'd see the emissions as they crossed the horizon even from directly opposite their location."

"They can't have finished mining." Vorn said, "One shuttle would take years to deplete the deposits on this moon and Krayne didn't say anything about them running low."

"And if they'd headed back to rendezvous with the *Iron Ore* we'd have flown past them." Mace added.

"Then they're here somewhere." Vorn said, "Kara, switch over to active scanning. We'll just have to search more thoroughly."

Mace brought the *Silver Hawk* in low, flying over the cratered surface of the airless moon at an altitude of less than a kilometre. He even activated the ship's forward floodlights just in case they illuminated anything that the sensors failed to find.

"Something ahead." Kara said after almost half an hour of searching.

"The shuttle?" Vorn asked.

"I don't think so. It's not a very strong return and its irregular. I think its just some junk on the surface."

"Or maybe not." Mace said and he brought the *Silver Hawk* even lower. There, in the beams of the floodlights dim shapes slowly became recognisable and the four rebels saw the field of debris that their scanners were detecting. At the centre of the field was the distinct shape of the mining shuttle, its hull torn open and wrecked equipment all around it.

"Look at that." Tharun said, "The marks around where the cockpit used to be. That's blaster damage."

"So not an accident then." Vorn said.

"No, he's right boss." Kara said, "That ship's been shot up."

"Take us in." Vorn said, "We need to find out if there are any survivors."

After suiting up, Kara and Mace left the *Silver Hawk* and walked the short distance to the destroyed mining shuttle where it quickly became obvious that no one had survived.

"Nothing but ghosts here boss." Kara signalled back, "Some blast and burn fatalities, but I think most of them died from decompression."

"Any signs of who did this?" Vorn asked.

"Somebody with big guns." Mace replied, "Bigger than ours anyway."

"The Empire?" Tharun suggested.

"It's a possibility." Vorn agreed.

"I don't think so boss." Kara said, having heard the exchange over the communication system, "The cargo storage areas are all empty. From what Captain Krayne told us the shuttle had been here at least a week."

They'd have filled at least a third of them by now. Whoever wrecked the ship stole the hyperbarides. Doesn't sound like Imperial troops, they'd have left it for a salvage crew who would have taken the wreckage as well. Whoever did this wanted to be in and out fast. That's more like-"

"Pirates." Vorn interrupted, "Get back here now. We have to get back to the *Iron Ore* and warn them that they've got pirates prowling the system."

"What is it?" Captain Krayne asked.

"Incoming contact captain. It's changed course and heading since we first spotted it, so it's definitely a ship."

"Heading this way I take it?" Krayne said as he looked at the sensor display.

"Yes sir."

"It's not the *Silver Hawk* or one of our shuttles coming back is it?"

"No. The return is too large. I'd say it's a frigate type ship."

"So not a transport?"

"Possibly. But I don't see what a transport ship that big would be doing so far off the regular shipping routes."

"Are our communications back up yet?" Krayne asked another of his bridge crew.

"Not yet. The work crews are concentrating on our engines." The crewman answered.

"So we can't move out of the way either then?"

"No. We're in a steady orbit."

"Contact is coming into visual range captain." The sensor operator said and Krayne looked at a display screen showing the feed from the *Iron Ore's* external visual detectors. The ship shown on the display possessed a forward section similar to that of a Corellian Corvette, but similarities with that type of vessel ended there. For starters it was about twice the length and its hull did not narrow behind the forward section. Instead it went straight back until extending outwards in a wing assembly at the rear of the ship.

"Looks like a Pelta-class ship." Krayne said. Pelta-class frigates had been in use since before the Clone Wars and during that conflict they had been used as fleet support vessels, "I wonder what they want?"

"Are they attempting to evade?" Nen Tok asked.

"No captain." A droid replied, "They're just sitting there."

"Good. Then this will be over soon. Open fire."

"Roger roger."

Captain Krayne did not have to wait long to discover what the approaching vessel wanted as the turbolaser strike slammed into the *Iron Ore's* hull.

"We need to get out of here!" he bellowed as the entire ship rocked under the barrage, "When can we have engine power?"

"I can't raise the engineering section sir." A crewman replied.

Then a turbolaser shot hit the bridge and everyone there was dead before their remains could be blown through the hull breach into space.

Alarms began to sound automatically as soon as the first shot hit the *Iron Ore* and crewmen began to panic. Some headed for duty stations, others for the supposed safety of compartments away from the outer hull. But as shot after shot struck the ancient and poorly maintained vessel it became obvious that it was doomed and would break up. Even without an order from the bridge, that had been strangely silent during the attack, the crew began to head for escape pods. In the mess hall Jaysica began to follow them.

"Tobis what are you doing?" she demanded when he took hold of her arm and stopped her, "We have to get to the escape pods!"

"No." he replied, "We're under attack. We'll be helpless in an escape pod."

"Then what should we do?"

"This way! Quickly!" Tobis said and he began to move towards a different door.

"Where are we going?" she asked as he pulled her through the corridors of the mining vessel as it shuddered once more with Harvey and Penny rolling after them.

"The freezing chamber." He replied as they ran into the chamber.

"The freezing chamber? But why?"

"Because it will let us survive in a vacuum." He said and he began to set the controls of the carbon freezer.

"You mean you're going to put us in that?" she asked.

"It's the only way."

"Is it even safe?"

"Probably. I just fixed it."

"Probably?"

Tobis didn't reply straight away. Instead he picked up a reel of wire from beside the control column and tied the loose end around the control lever. Then he took hold of Jaysica's hand and pulled her towards the narrow pit where the freezing took place.

"Get in." he said as he threw the reel of wire into the pit.

Jaysica began to climb down into the pit, but another shudder caused her to lose her balance and she fell.

"Are you alright?" Tobis asked as he jumped in after her and helped her back to her feet. Jaysica nodded.

With the reel of wire in one hand Tobis wrapped his free arm around Jaysica's waist and pulled her up against him.

"Tobis." Jaysica said, "I'm scared. I don't want to die."

Tobis looked down at Jaysica and she looked back up at him, her fear plain to see on her face. Impulsively Tobis leant down and kissed her at the same time as he pulled the wire and activated the carbon freezer.

Nen Tok leant back in his chair and smiled as he watched the *Iron Ore* breaking up. Some of the ship's crew had evidently made it to escape pods that shot away from the stricken vessel. However, the tiny craft were especially vulnerable just after launch and his ship's secondary laser cannons were making short work of them.

"The enemy vessel is destroyed captain." One of his battle droid crew informed him.

"What about the cargo?" he asked.

"Here captain." The droid replied as it displayed an image on the main bridge screen that showed a cloud of tiny rectangular blocks tumbling away from the wreckage of the *Iron Ore*.

"Activate our tractor beams." Nen Tok ordered, "I want every last one of those carbonite blocks in our hold."

"Roger roger."

Cutting the engines of the *Silver Hawk*, Mace let the ship drift as it approached the steadily expanding cloud of debris that had been the *Iron Ore*.

"Jaysica and Tobis were aboard that thing." Vorn said, "I ordered them to stay."

"So you think the pirates got here before us?" Tharun asked, "I mean that ship did look ready to fall apart before we left."

"Kara, what have you got?" Mace asked.

"I'd say there was weapons fire." She answered, "I can make out the bridge section and it seems to have taken a direct hit. If the ship broke up in an accident that area wouldn't have taken that sort of damage."

"So it was the pirates then." Vorn said, "What about escape pods?"

"I'm not reading any transponders." Kara said, "If any were launched they were destroyed before we got here." Then she paused before she added, "Hang on. I've got something."

"An escape pod?" Mace said.

"No. But a power source. Not much but definitely there. About twenty degrees starboard, three hundred metres."

Everyone looked out of the cockpit canopy, searching for whatever Kara had seen on the sensors.

"There!" Mace said, pointing, "What's that?"

"An astromech droid!" Kara exclaimed.

"Why Mistress Bilstran," Jeeves exclaimed from behind the four rebels, "I do believe you are correct. It's Harvey."

"Not just Harvey." Tharun added, "Look below him."

Holding onto one of Harvey's feet was a grasping arm that led down to the boxlike structure of a mouse droid.

"Take us in closer Mace," Vorn said, "bring them aboard."

As soon as Harvey and Penny were brought aboard both droids began to emit rapid streams of chirps and bleeps.

"Slow down Harvey." Jeeves said, "There's no need to be so impatient. What? Taken by pirates?"

"Who was taken by pirates?" Vorn asked, "Are they talking about Jaysica and Tobis?"

"Why yes Master Larcus. It appears that Master Dorfus suggested to Mistress Horbid that it was a bad idea to try and leave the ship in an escape pod, believing that they would be destroyed by whoever was attacking their ship."

"Good lad." Tharun said, "So how'd he get them off the ship?"

"Oh it seems he didn't Sergeant Verser. He froze them both in carbonite so that they would survive the destruction of the ship."

"Now that's using initiative." Mace said.

"Yeah but risky." Kara said, "I doubt the equipment on that ship was rated for organic freezing."

"Perhaps not Mistress Bilstran," Jeeves said, "but according to Penny she saw the readout on the block and it indicated that they both survived the freezing process."

"Then they survived. So where are they?" Tharun asked.

"It would appear that after the Iron ore broke up the pirates recovered all of the carbonite blocks using tractor beams before they left. Including the block that contained Master Dorfus and Miss Horbid."

"So they're gone." Kara said, "How are we supposed to find them?"

"We go where people go to get rid of stolen goods." Mace said, "A shadow port. There's only one decent shadow port in this sector and I know where it is. In fact there's an undercover rebel agent there who we can ask for help."

3.

The shadow port was located in the region known as the Shadow Worlds, the collection of systems regarded as being 'below' the gigantic star-birthing nebula that neighbored the local sector. Massive storms and dust clouds that swept over it buffeted the surface of the world. For protection, the assortment of docking bays and trading posts of the black marketers and fences were located in the network of channels that criss-crossed the surface.

"Be careful around here." Mace warned as the rebels descended the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp, "Not everyone's friendly."

"This lot for example." Kara said as she nodded towards a group of armed men approaching them.

Kara and Tharun's hands both reached towards their blasters.

"Don't." Mace said, "They're here on official business."

"Official business?" Vorn asked.

"Yeah official." Mace replied.

"My name is Lae Chen. Onell the Hutt sends his greetings." The human at the head of the group of armed beings said when he reached the rebels.

"Greetings." Mace replied, "I am the master of this vessel. We have come here to look for—"

"I don't care why you're here." Lae Chen interrupted, "I am only here to collect your docking fee. Five hundred credits."

Mace reached into his pocket and counted out some banknotes.

"Err major, I'm a little short here." He whispered.

"Don't worry about it." Vorn said and he produced more banknotes.

"Imperial Credits only." Lae Chen said when he noticed that some of the notes that Vorn had were Alliance credits.

"That's okay." Vorn said and he began to separate the different currencies, "Here, five hundred credits. Imperial."

Lae Chen took the money and handed it to one of his men. The man held the bank notes and passed a scanner over them.

"Genuine." He said to Lae Chen.

"Good." Lae Chen said then he looked back at Mace, "You have three days. After that you owe an extra hundred credits per day." And he walked away with his men behind him.

"Did he say Onell the Hutt?" Kara asked, "You brought us to a world run by a hutt?"

"Yeah I know." Mace answered, "From what I've heard some prospector used the entire planet as collateral on a loan from Onell he couldn't keep up the payments on. Now Onell runs the place as his own private marketplace."

"And for such a reasonable price too." Kara said, "Given how much of our cash is in Alliance Credits we could run out pretty quick."

"Don't worry," Mace reassured her, "we can use our own money with some of the traders here. Plus there are some helpful beings who will gladly exchange it for us."

"For a reasonable fee?" Vorn asked.

"Maybe not so reasonable." Mace answered, "So we better make sure we don't waste what hard currency we've got."

"Get in and close the damn door!" the trader called out as Mace led the others into his place of business.

"Jacen? Is that you?" Mace called out, shutting the door behind the last rebel to come through.

"Mace? Mace Grayle?" Jacen exclaimed as he approached, "I thought you got out of running errands and moved into field work."

"I did." Mace replied, "Jacen Karn, meet Major Vorn Larcus the third. He commands the unit I transport."

Vorn held out his hand and Jacen shook it.

"I hope we're not bothering you." Vorn said, letting go of Jacen's hand.

"Oh its no bother when you bring a woman like this." Jacen said, turning to face Kara.

"Kara." Kara said and she held out her hand for Jacen. The rebel agent took it, but rather than shake it he lifted it up and kissed it.

"If I'd known you were coming I'd have cleaned up a bit." He said.

"You certainly have a lot of stuff here." Vorn said, "Is all of this destined for the Alliance?"

"Pretty much." Jacen said, "Some of it I sell on here though. I get the stuff our privateers seize that we don't want and take a cut to sell it for them."

Tharun, who had been wandering around Jacen's 'store' suddenly stopped. The former mercenary smiled and picked up a blaster.

"What about this?" he asked, "Is this for sale?"

"The BlasTech A280? It doesn't work."

"Why did you buy it then?" Tharun asked him.

"I thought I could fix it, but I've just never got around to it."

"How much?" Tharun asked.

"Like I said it doesn't work."

"I heard. Now how much?"

"Tell you what, you can have it for nine hundred."

"Major?" Tharun said, "I'm sure Tobis and I can get it working."

"Alright then." Vorn said, "But this counts as your birthday and Republic Day presents. Okay?"

"Sure and I promise to be good." Tharun said as Vorn counted out the money in Alliance currency.

"I take it these are acceptable?" he said to Jacen.

"Sure, I take them at face value." He replied, "So is it just the rifle? Or is there anything else I can get you?"

"We need information." Vorn said.

"I can do that. I keep an eye on as many of the comings and goings here as I can for the Alliance. You never know who or what you'll see."

"We're looking for a cargo of carbonite blocks." Vorn said, "They'd have come in recently. Within the last day."

"Yeah I saw them. A bunch of old Trade Federation battle droids went past with a whole lot of the things about six hours ago. What's so important about them?"

"They contain two of our friends. Did you see where they took them?" Mace asked.

"There's only one man here who could take a cargo that big. Jek Deray."

"So where can we find him?" Vorn asked.

Jacen looked at a wall-mounted chronometer.

"Follow me." He said, "I'll take you to him."

They found Jek Deray in a cantina, or at least what passed for a cantina in the shadow port. It seemed that regular shipments of liquor could not be counted on and behind the bar an extensive brewing facility could be seen. Jek closed his eyes and took a sharp breath as he took the first sip of his drink.

"How many times have I told you Val?" he said to the barwoman as he put the glass down on the bar and pushed it away from him, "I like drinks that let me keep my eyesight."

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with my brewing." She replied, "You just can't handle the real stuff." Then she looked further down the bar where a wookiee was drinking a glass of the same beverage, "Isn't that right Travakka?" and the massive furred being growled then took another gulp, draining its glass. Jek noticed the approaching rebels and spun around on his chair to face them.

"Hey Jacen!" he called out, "Come over here and settle an argument."

"I'll stay out of it if you don't mind." Jacen said, "I like being able to see."

"Lightweight." Val said, "How about your friends? Any of them grown up enough for a drink?"

Tharun reached over the bar and picked up the glass. He took a sniff then lifted it to his lips.

"That's good." He said and he looked at Mace, "You should buy a bottle. It ought to clear the *Silver Hawk's* plumbing no problem."

"Well I'm sorry we don't have all those fancy drinks like they do on Coruscant." Val said, noticing the comparatively smart appearance of the rebel team compared to the inhabitants of the shadow port, "Now what can I get you folks. I have soft drinks for the kids as well."

"We're just here to see Jek." Jacen said.

"Then get out." Val said, "I can't have you taking up room at the bar."

"Its alright. I was done here anyway." Jek said and he got up. It was then that the rebels noticed his blaster. The bulky weapon dangled straight down beneath his arm on a sling. The length of the sling meant that when Jek held his arm by his side it would rest on the grip of his weapon, allowing him to bring into action rapidly. Tharun placed his hand on his own sidearm just in case.

"So what do you need?" Jek asked as they got outside.

"Have you been offered any carbonite blocks today?" Vorn asked.

"I have some in stock." Jek said, "Tags read that they contain tibanna gas and hyperbarides."

"Did you get them today?" Vorn asked.

"I'm not in the habit of answering questions about either my suppliers or my customers. If you've lost some blocks then it's your problem. Take it up with Onell if you've got a problem, but I wouldn't count on him being too sympathetic with your plight."

"We're not looking for trouble Jek." Jacen said, holding up his hands, "The shipment that came in today had two of their people in them."

"Hey, I don't deal in anything living. Frozen or not. You know that Jacen so does everyone else. So they know not to offer me anything like that because I'll send them packing. I don't care what else they're offering."

"Yeah, I know that Jek." Jacen said defensively, "But you must understand that we need to find out where the block with our friends in is. Maybe we'll even make you an offer on the blocks you did buy."

"What?" Kara exclaimed, "We're paying to get the Alli- I mean our own carbonite blocks back?"

"If that's what it takes to get Jaysica and Tobis back – Yes." Vorn told her.

"Rebels you said!" Nen Tok said angrily to the human in the hologram, "Tell me Mister Shallak, do rebels often freeze people in carbonite? Hardly meets up to their high and mighty ideals about being 'humane'. Though you humans don't seem too big on being humane."

"What are you talking about?" the hologram replied, "Those were rebels. My source confirmed it."

"Source? What source?"

"Its confidential."

"Well tell your confidential source those so-called rebels weren't just using their carbon freezer to store what they were mining out there. We found two humans in one of the blocks."

"That's not possible."

"Look for yourself Mister Shallak." And Nen Tok beckoned for a pair of battle droids to bring the carbonite block containing Jaysica and Tobis, frozen at the moment of his kiss into the field of his holo-transmitter. "By the time I found this my droids had already taken out all of the mining ships. I don't fancy the idea of ending up in a block like this because I stole from the wrong person Mister Shallak. Rest assured, if they find me I'm telling them about you."

"They were rebels Nen Tok. I promise you that. Now about my money-"

"Your money? Money for what? Faulty information that puts me at risk?"

"You owe me ten percent."

"You're getting nothing from me Mister Shallak."

"If you don't pay then I'll-"

"You'll what? You'll come after me? How exactly? You lost your ship captain; the rebellion shot it out from under you. Try coming after me and my droids will do the same with your legs." And Nen Tok cut the link.

"That could have gone better." Shallak said to the man who had been listening in.

"That's going to cost us." He replied, "With what Nen Tok owed us we could have put a down payment on a ship."

"We've enough." Shallak replied.

"To buy a ship?"

"No. To steal one. I know the ins and outs of customs corvettes and I know how to recognise a crew that we can bribe. Now let's get out of here. Nen Tok knows about this place and I don't want to take the chance that he didn't send some of his tin soldiers to try and get hold of this." And he patted a bulky case on a table beside him. A case marked with the symbol of the Rebel Alliance.

4.

"These are all of them." Jek said, leading the rebels into one of his storerooms. The chamber was big enough to fit the entire *Silver Hawk* inside and it was filled about half way with row after row of carbonite blocks, "I watched the droids bring them in here one after another. Not one of them had any people frozen in them."

"Okay, we believe you." Vorn said, "They must have known about your rule regarding living things. So if Jaysica and Tobis aren't here, then where are they?"

"I bought these from a neimoidian called Nen Tok." Jek said and when Jacen looked towards him he added, "Hey I still like to keep my dealing confidential. But I won't have anything to do with him again if he's trading in people."

"Okay then." Jacen replied, "So how much are you asking for these?"

"Three hundred each for the tibanna blocks, five thousand for the hyperbarides. Is there anything else you want?"

"There is actually." Tharun said, "Do you have any spare parts for a Blastech A280?"

The squad of battle droids met Nen Tok as he was returning to his cabin.

"Did you find him?" the neimoidian asked.

"No sir." The lead droid answered, "The room you sent us to was empty."

"So we still don't know what his source was?"

"No sir. There was nothing left to indicate that."

"Very well. Now take the carbonite block with our prisoners to the speeder. I'm about to arrange a meeting with a buyer."

"Roger roger."

Jacen accompanied the other rebels back to where the *Silver Hawk* was berthed. Mace made a quick inspection of the ship before they opened up the access ramp, wanting to reassure himself that no one had tampered with the ship in his absence.

"The droids would have let us know if anyone came near her." Vorn said.

"Droids can be reprogrammed major. If someone knows what they're doing," Mace replied, "and there are plenty of beings around here that do."

"He's got that right." Jacen added. Then Mace opened up the ship and they went aboard.

"So what do we do now boss?" Kara asked as she slumped down in the *Silver Hawk's* lounge, "That neimoidian could have hundreds of battle droids aboard his ship."

"Yes I know that." Vorn replied, "but we've gotten in and out of places with thousands of troops in them before now."

"Yes major," Tharun said as he began to heat water for caf, "but we used trickery for that. We used fake transponders to fly through their perimeters and we disguised ourselves so we could move about inside. I don't know about you, but I'm not thin enough to pass for a battle droid."

"What's your plan?" Mace asked.

"So you think I've got a plan?" Vorn said to him.

"Of course you do."

"Of course I do."

"How about you share it with the rest of us then major." Tharun said.

"Yeah, its good to share." Kara added.

"Its what Mace said." Vorn told them.

"Me?" Mace asked, "What did I say?"

"Droids can be reprogrammed. We grab ourselves a battle droid and reprogram it."

"Reprogram?" Kara asked, "Tobis is our droid geek and as much as I hate to admit it, Jaysica is next. Neither of those two is with us right now boss."

"I know that." Vorn said, "But we still have Harvey and Penny. I'm sure that Jaysica has a droid programming chip for Penny stashed somewhere. Plus we have you." And he looked at Jacen.

Standing out of the way, Jacen folded his arms and let out a laugh.

"Me?" he said in amazement.

"Yes." Vorn said, "I know that you need to keep your connection to the Alliance secret, but can you provide us with a battle droid processor that has been altered according to our requirements?"

"I get it now." Tharun said, "We just swap one of this neimoidian's droids' processor and let it find Jaysica and Tobis for us."

"Exactly." Vorn said.

Jacen put the tiny electronic module down on the table.

"Here you are." He said, "This should do the job just right."

"What does it do exactly?" Tharun asked.

"It changes the command hierarchy for the droid." Jacen explained, "Instead of listening to the central system, it will take its orders from you. Major Larcus in particular, then Captain Grayle and so on."

"What if the central system sends it an order and it doesn't follow it?" Mace asked.

"Actually it will. Providing that it doesn't directly contradict something one of you has told it to do the droid will act so as to fit in."

"So when we get a droid under our control what will we ask it to do?" Kara asked.

"Well as I see it," Vorn began, "our first concern is locating Jaysica and Tobis. Then we need to retrieve them."

"So we will have to fight our way past all the droids this neimoidian has at his command then?" Tharun said.

"Not necessarily." Vorn replied, "These droids operate using a central command system to provide processing power. Without a link to that they'll shut down. So once we know where our people are we'll just have our droid pull the plug on the central system. Then we'll only have to deal with whatever droids the neimoidian can control directly. I'm guessing that he has some sort of personal controller for use away from the ship."

Even in a place like Onell the Hutt's shadow port where there was as little record keeping as possible, it was not difficult to locate a three hundred metre long Pelta-class frigate. A vessel of that size had to be landed beyond the settlement, which made sneaking up on it more difficult with no crowds to hide among. Holding back, the rebels studied their target through macrobinoculars.

"Doesn't look like we'll be getting much closer than this." Tharun said, studying the deployment of the battle droids around the ship, "I'd say there's about fifty battle droids deployed in small groups all around the ship and at least three pairs patrolling."

"Then that's our way in." Vorn said, "We wait until one of the patrols gets near and lure it towards us. Then we overpower it and send one droid back with the altered control module."

"What about the other one?" Kara asked, "Won't they notice its missing?"

"We'll have the other one report it as destroyed." Mace suggested.

"Yeah, its not as if the other won't have noticed them moving away from their proper patrol route." Tharun added, "The fact that we've drawn them away explains why one's missing." Then he looked at Vorn, "So what's your idea for drawing them out?"

Vorn looked over his own shoulder at where Harvey waited. The rebels lacked the weaponry for merely disabling droids, so they had brought along the R5 unit instead.

"Give them a yell Harvey." He said and the little droid let out a shrill wail.

"What was that?" one of the battle droids on the perimeter asked. Another one lifted a set of macrobinoculars up to its visual receptors and searched in the direction of the sound.

There was the sound of metallic footfalls and two more droids approached.

"There's something over there." The droid with the macrobinoculars said, pointing, "Go check it out."

"Roger roger." The newly arrived droids said together and they began to walk away from the ship.

"Get ready." Vorn whispered, "They're coming."

The rebels crouched behind cover as the two battle droids approached. As the sound of their footfalls grew louder Vorn looked at Harvey and gave the droid a nod and the astromech droid slowly rolled forwards.

"Hey you! Stop right there!" the lead battle droid called out and both of them raised their blasters. At that moment Tharun and Mace bobbed up from behind their cover and both fired at the battle droid furthest from Harvey. The droid exploded in a shower of sparks and its partner turned towards the rebels. Before the droid could return fire, Harvey rolled forwards and extended a manipulator arm from within its casing. The arm extended up towards the battle droid's body, clamped onto an exposed cable and pulled it free. There was a brief flash of light and the battle droid collapsed.

"Quickly!" Vorn yelled, "Get it open."

Kara dashed to the helpless droid and removed part of the casing from its back. She reached into the exposed electronics inside and pulled out a module identical in appearance to the one Jacen had reprogrammed. Then she took the altered module from a protective case and inserted it into the empty socket. To finish she replaced the open casing.

"Done!" she exclaimed.

Harvey chirped and plugged the loose cable back into its proper place and almost immediately the battle droid sat up.

"Did anybody get the licence plate of that speeder?" it asked.

The rebels looked at on another, confused. Then Vorn looked at the droid.

"I want you to return to your ship." He said, "Find the carbonite block with our two friends inside and report in." and he handed the droid a comlink, "If you are asked about what happened here, say that your partner was destroyed by someone trying to sneak through the perimeter. Say you drove them off."

"Roger roger." The droid replied. Then it picked up its blaster, got to its feet and headed back towards the ship.

"Weren't there two of you?" the perimeter sentry asked when the lone battle droid returned.

"Yes. Some body shot at us. The corporal was destroyed. I'm going to maintenance to get my damage seen to."

"Roger roger." The sentry replied and the reprogrammed droid continued on its way.

"Well, that's the first stage over and done with." Vorn said as he observed the battle droid entering the ship.

The battle droid pushed the carbonite block forwards, using built in repulsorlift motors to support it.

"Here." Nen Tok said, "As you can see the block contains two beings, both of whom survived the process of being frozen."

Nen Tok's reptilian customer leaned in for a closer look.

"Humans." He hissed, "Where from?"

"Does that matter?" Nen Tok asked, "I am offering them to you very reasonably."

"Yes. Too cheap. Something wrong. Where from?"

"They were amongst a cargo I recovered-"

"Stole. Pirated. You pirate."

"Yes, alright then. I stole them."

"Who from?"

"I was told rebels."

The trandoshan slaver let out a hiss and stood up straight.

"Rebels? No. Rebels not do this. You lie."

"I am not lying! I was told they were rebels, but I asked the same questions as you are when I found this. My source has since disappeared. Now do you want to buy this or not?"

"Risky. I licensed slaver trader. Humans not to be traded. Imperial law."

"You don't care any more about Imperial law than I do. Why else would you be buying slaves out here instead of more openly? You have a customer who needs slaves and isn't asking questions."

The trandoshan hissed again.

"Yes. Bought many here. Ship full." And he placed a clawed hand over a stack of clothing that had been taken from the slaves now safely locked away.

"Aren't you thinking? You don't need slave pens for these two. They can't escape from this. You can just leave them anywhere out of the way."

"Risky." The trandoshan said, "Survived freezing. May not survive thawing. Worth less."

"You've already told me they are cheap." Nen Tok said, "Bah! I'm in no hurry to sell-"

"Yes you are. If not, you ask more. I offer less. You take money or take slaves. Either way, we finished."

The trandoshan held up a small bundle of cash, all in Imperial Credits.

Nen Tok snorted. He knew that the trandoshan realised that the two frozen humans were worth far more, but the neimoidian was desperate to be rid of them. If whoever had owned the mining ships caught up with him then Nen Tok could end up as a statue himself. He reached out and snatched the money.

"Ustrussk," he said addressing the trandoshan by name, "don't count on me forgetting this."

"Many slaves for sale." Ustrussk replied, "Not need more form you."

Nen Tok snorted again and turned around.

"Come on," he said to the battle droid that had accompanied him, "we're leaving."

Followed by his droid, Nen Tok stormed out of Ustrussk's starship and back to his speeder where another droid stood watch.

"Take me back to our ship." Nen Tok ordered and he climbed into the speeder.

5.

The reprogrammed battle droid walked through the corridors of the Pelta-class frigate towards the cargo hold.

"What are you doing down here?" another droid said, knowing that it was the only active droid assigned to this section of the ship. Though the hold held many spare battle droids, they were all kept inactive until Nen Tok wanted them.

"I'm looking for the prisoners." The reprogrammed droid replied, "Aren't they here?"

"No they're not. Didn't you see the captain leaving? He took them with him."

"Gone?" Vorn repeated when the reprogrammed droid contacted him via comlink, "Where?"

"I don't know sir." The droid replied, "Nen Tok has taken them away."

"Why?" Vorn asked.

"To sell them sir."

"He's sold them?" Mace exclaimed, overhearing the exchange.

"Listen," Vorn said, "this is very important. We need to know who he's sold them to and where we can find them. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir." The droid replied excitedly.

"Then go to it."

"Roger roger."

"This is bad major." Tharun said as Vorn put his comlink away, "If someone moves Jay-"

"I know." Vorn replied, "We find them on this planet, or we don't find them at all."

Nen Tok was not in a good mood when he returned to his ship. Though he had rid himself of the last thing connecting him to the raids on the mining ships, he had not made as much as he had hoped from the sale of the two humans. Even though he had made far more than he had expected from the sale of the rest of the stolen cargo, owing to the fact that he had not paid the agreed percentage to his informer he was still more focused on what had not gone the way he wanted.

"Did everything go well captain?" a droid asked him as he stepped down from the back of the speeder.

"No! Everything did not go well you idiot machine!" Nen Tok yelled back, "That greedy lizard gave me less than a quarter of what those two were worth as slaves. No get back to your station."

"Roger roger." The droid replied as Nen Tok stormed past. But as soon as the neimoidian was out of sight the droid headed for a secluded part of the shop and produced the comlink that Vorn had given it.

"Sir, are you there?" the droid signalled.

"Yes." Vorn replied, "We're here. We saw a speeder drive aboard. Was that the captain?"

"Yes sir. He was back from selling the prisoners."

"Who to?"

"He didn't say sir. But he did call the buyer a greedy lizard for giving him less than they were worth."

"Lizard? He definitely said lizard?"

"Yes sir. That's what he said."

"Good. That will have to do. Now listen carefully to me. Your assignment is over so there's just one last thing I want you to do."

"Of course sir. What is it?"

"I want you to do as much damage as you can in there. If you can kill Nen Tok, do it."

"Roger roger."

"So there we have it." Vorn told Jacen back in his establishment, "They've been sold to someone from a reptilian species."

"Assuming that 'lizard' wasn't just some figure of speech." Jacen said.

"Its all we've got." Mace said.

"Okay then, let me take a look." Jacen said and he picked up his datapad, "I've tried to keep an accurate database of who comes and goes." He explained, "The Alliance likes to know what's going on with local criminals. So I've got plenty of images stored."

After ten minutes of searching through his database, Jacen had produced a list of all members of reptilian species known to operate in the shadow port.

"I've limited the search to beings that actually run businesses." He explained, "Otherwise there'd be hundreds of returns."

"How many are there now?" Mace asked.

"About forty." Jacen said as he plugged his datapad into a desktop station and projected images of all of the potential buyers onto the wall.

"Forty?" Vorn repeated in amazement as he looked at the faces, "Are there really that many slavers just from reptilian species here?"

"I didn't limit it to slavers." Jacen replied, "While I didn't want to produce a list too long to check out, at the same time I didn't want to take the risk on missing someone just because they haven't dealt in slaves before now."

"So where do we start boss?" Kara asked, "Do we just pick the ugliest one or something?"

"That's one way." Tharun agreed.

"Slavers are still our best bet." Vorn said.

"I thought that too." Jacen said, "Which is why although I didn't just concentrate on them I have picked them out." And he tapped a few keys on his computer, causing many of the images projected onto the wall to vanish and the remainder to increase in size.

"So just three of them left." Mace said, "That's much better odds."

"It gets even better." Jacen said and he walked up to the projection, "This one," he said tapping one of the images, "isn't on planet at the moment. He left about six days ago."

"So just two possibilities the." Vorn said.

"Indeed. This one," Jacen said pointing at an image of a rodian, "is a permanent resident here. He typically buys slaves in bulk from off world and sells them on to others here. While he," and he moved his finger to point at a trandoshan, "comes here, picks up enough slaves to fill his ship and then leaves. He arrived three days ago and bought another hold full."

"What sort of ship?" Mace asked.

"A ZH-25 Questor."

"That could be a problem major." Mace said to Vorn, "That class of ship is faster than the *Silver Hawk*. If he gets off planet then we've lost Jaysica and Tobis for sure."

"And if he's already got a hold full of slaves then he could be leaving at any moment." Tharun pointed out.

"I realise that." Vorn said, "The rodian's not going anywhere. We'll go check out the trandoshan."

Ustrusk's ship was in a docking bay not far from the *Silver Hawk's*. With no customs restrictions, gaining access to the bay was simply a matter of walking in when it seemed that no one was watching. Onell the Hutt did not provide security guards for docking bays and Ustrusk had not seen fit to hire any of his own. Keeping to the shadows, the rebels made their way as close to the ship as they dared.

"Do you think he's home?" Kara whispered, "The trandoshan I mean."

"I think he's in there alright," Mace said softly, "and I think we got here just in time."

Why do you say that?" Vorn asked.

"Look over there major." Mace replied and he nodded towards machinery on the far side of the bay.

"Generators." Vorn said.

"Yeah and they're not hooked up to the ship."

"So?" Tharun asked.

"Haven't you ever paid attention when we dock?" Kara asked.

"Not really." Tharun replied, "I've never been a spacer."

"They're getting ready to launch." Vorn said, "Those generators are so the ships secondary systems can be run in port without draining the fuel cells." Then he added, "I was in the Navy in the Clone Wars remember. I still remember dockside protocol."

"At least his engines aren't running yet." Mace said, "From a cold start it should take a minute or so to build up enough power to launch."

"He looks sealed up tight though." Kara added, "I wouldn't be surprised if he's running pre-flight checks in there right now."

"So how do we get in?" Tharun asked.

"The access ramp is under the mid section." Mace said, "Plus there's a pair of cargo hatches at the rear."

"We'll take the cargo hatches." Vorn said, "The slaver's more likely to be towards the front of the ship and I'll bet he keeps his captives in the holds. Kara, do you think you can get one of those hatches open?"

"I don't know boss." Kara said, "I'm better in the cockpit than under the hood."

"Well you'll have to try you best won't you?" Vorn said, then without another word he dashed from their hiding place towards the ship.

The other rebels followed him as quickly as they could, all of them doing their best to keep out of sight from the ship's cockpit. Mace and Tharun lifted Kara up onto their shoulders so that she could reach the hatchway

overhead. Or more specifically the control panel beside it. The first thing she did was hit the button labelled 'OPEN'.

Nothing happened.

"Did you really think that would work?" Mace asked.

"It was worth a try." Kara said as she removed the panel.

"Won't he notice us doing this?" Tharun asked.

"I hope not." Vorn replied. But before he could go on there was a sudden whistling sound that became a lower pitched rumble.

"He's getting ready to launch!" Mace yelled, "Kara. Hurry."

"Nearly there." She replied as she tugged at wires and shorted ends together. Then she let out a cry of, "Got it!" as the hatch slid upwards.

"Pull me up." Vorn said and Kara reached down to him and took his hand. Vorn grabbed the lower edge of the open hatch and with Kara's help he pulled himself up through the hole. Then he turned around to help Kara in after him. Just as the ship began to lift off the ground.

The blast from the repulsorlifts knocked the pyramid of Kara, Mace and Tharun backwards and Vorn could do nothing but stand in the open hatchway and watch as the ship got further and further away into the sky.

"Quick!" Mace said as he got back to his feet, "We need to get back to the *Silver Hawk*."

"But I thought you said that the slaver's ship was faster." Tharun said as he too got up again.

"All the more reason to move quickly." Mace said and he ran for the docking bay's exit. As he ran he pulled his comlink from his belt and activated it. "*Silver Hawk* come in."

"Oh yes Captain Grayle." Came Jeeves' reply, "What can I do for you."

"Get the ship started. We're leaving."

"Oh Captain Grayle, I'm just an interpreter. I'm not programmed for-"

"Get Harvey to do it!" Mace yelled, "We're on our way back and I want to leave as soon as we get there." And before Jeeves could reply Mace cut the link.

6.

Inside the slaver's ship Vorn hit the button that closed the cargo hatch and took a moment to look around. What he saw confused him. He had expected the hold to be an open area that perhaps had sections contained behind metal bars to hold slaves. But instead he was in a corridor little wider than the hatchway that was lined with closely spaced and numbered doors. Vorn reached into his jacket and drew the compact blaster he kept holstered there. Slowly, he crept deeper into the ship.

Ustrussk noticed the light indicating an open hatch only as it went out and he hissed in irritation. "Go check hatches." he said to the heavily scarred bith that was sat just behind him, "One open maybe." The bith nodded and left the cockpit. Ustrussk hissed again. A hatch should not have opened. His crew knew the penalties for failing to keep the ship in good working order and the possibility of a slave escaping was nil, kept chained and naked in individual cells they had no way of breaking out.

As far as Vorn could tell the entirety of this hold had been filled with rows of tiny compartments. Then it struck him. Each of these probably contained a single slave, kept isolated until they reached some other planet where they would be set to work. His first instinct was to start opening the doors, but he realised that to do this was reckless. He could not protect so many beings from an unknown number of slavers. For now at least he had no choice but to leave them where they were.

The engines of the *Silver Hawk* were already running when Mace charged into the docking bay, closely followed by Kara and Tharun. He paused briefly to open the access ramp and boarded the ship before it was even fully open.

"Get the ramp sealed!" he yelled without looking back over his shoulder as he headed towards the cockpit. There he found Harvey plugged into the ship's control systems. Ignoring the droid, he sat in the pilot's seat and grabbed hold of the control column. The sound of the engines grew in volume and the *Silver Hawk* lifted off.

"Kara get on the cannon!" Mace bellowed, not even bothering to use the ship's intercom system. He glanced at the sensor display and saw only a single return. From its size and heading it was obviously the departing slaver's ship. Fortunately the ship's pilot did not seem to be flying at the ship's maximum speed. Mace scowled and steered the *Silver Hawk* on an intercept course, pushing the engines as hard as he dared.

There was the hiss of hydraulics releasing and Vorn whirled around just in time to see a figure step through the door that clearly led out of the hold. With its large, bald head and solid black eyes it was unmistakably a bith. The bith was not looking at Vorn and he shut the door behind him before he moved in the direction of the external hatchway. Vorn crept after him, keeping his blaster trained on the back of his head.

The bith was nearing the hatchway when he looked down and noticed Vorn's shadow. He whirled around as fast as he could and reached for his own gun.

"Don't!" Vorn yelled and he grabbed the bith by the throat and pushed his blaster under his chin. Slowly, the bith raised his hands. Vorn let go of his throat, swapped the hand he was using to hold his blaster and then plucked the bith's weapon from its holster. He ejected the power pack and dropped the gun to the deck.

"Now I assume I've got your full attention yes?" Vorn said and the bith nodded, "Good. Now where are my friends? The two humans sold to you by the neimoidian."

The bith snarled.

"How about I add another scar?" Vorn said sternly, "One that runs from under your chin to the top of your skull in the shortest possible line?"

"They aren't in here." The bith said.

"We know you bought them!" Vorn snapped, leaning closer to the bith and he pushed the muzzle of his gun into the bith's flesh.

"They're still frozen!" the bith exclaimed, "They're in the other hold."

"That's better." Vorn said then he was interrupted by his comlink.

"Major Larcus? Can you hear me?" Jeeves asked.

Vorn pulled the device from his pocket.

"Right here Jeeves." He replied, "Where are you?"

"Oh Major Larcus, I regret to say that we're gaining on the ship you're in rather rapidly. Captain Grayle is piloting the *Silver Hawk* in a most reckless manner."

"I think I've found Jaysica and Tobis." Vorn said, "Apparently they're still in carbonite. Get Mace to bring the ship as close to this one as he can manage. We'll have to do a mid-air transfer. Vorn out." Vorn then cut the link and returned the comlink to his pocket. As he did so, he took his eyes off the bith for a moment. The bith swung an arm upwards and knocked Vorn's blaster from his hand. As the weapon slid across the floor Vorn aimed a punch between the bith's eyes but was too slow and the alien ducked out of the way before tackling Vorn.

The two combatants rolled across the deck until they disentangled themselves from each other. The bith got his feet first and lashed out at Vorn with his foot. But Vorn saw the attack coming and rolled to one side.

Then, as the bith's foot passed by him he reached out with both hands and grabbed hold of his ankle. Then he gave a sharp tug and dragged the bith back down to the deck.

His arms flailing as he fell, the bith felt the grip of his blaster beneath his hand and he grabbed hold of it.

Vorn scrambled for his own blaster and had just got it in his hand when he realised that the bith was aiming right at his head. The bith pulled his trigger.

Nothing happened and the bith stared at his gun in disbelief.

"I took the power pack. Remember?" Vorn said and as the bith reached for a replacement power pack Vorn shot him in the chest.

Vorn kept to the side of the door out of the hold when he opened and took a quick glance into the next chamber. When he saw it was empty he dashed towards the opposite door, guessing that it was the way into the other hold.

An alarm alerted Ustrussk to another vessel closing with his and a look at his sensors told him that it was approaching from behind him. Clearly, he thought, someone was in a hurry to leave the shadow port. Perhaps as a result of a deal gone sour. Then he noticed just how close they were getting. Already less than a thousand metres separated the two ships and the gap was narrowing.

Clearly this ship was not just on a similar course to him, they were trying to intercept him.

Ustrussk snarled and increased his speed.

Vorn noticed the change in the sound of the ship's engines as he entered the other hold. He shut the door behind him and looked around quickly. There, across the room from where he stood, was a block of carbonite. Clearly visible in the block were Jaysica and Tobis, locked in an embrace with their lips pressed together.

"Finally got her hey boy?" Vorn said with a smile.

Realising that he could not afford to be disturbed Vorn placed his blaster against the controls for the door he had just come through and fired. He ducked back as the panel exploded, shielding his eyes. The he holstered his blaster and ran for the external hatchway located at the rear of the hold.

Ustrussk's view shifted back and forth from the sensor display to the view outside his cockpit as he tried to put as much distance between his ship and his pursuers. His ship was armed of course, but the twin-linked cannons were in fixed forward mounts. Turning around to engage his pursuers would allow them to get closer, so Ustrussk kept on pushing his engines.

There was a flash. A stream of red energy bolts passed over Ustrussk's head from behind. He hissed. This confirmed to him that he was correct in concentrating on escape. The volley was clearly intended to force him to a lower altitude, if they meant to destroy him they would have fired directly at him.

The ship lurched suddenly and another alarm sounded.

Ustrussk looked at his instrument panel. What had happened? Had he been hit?

Then he saw the light indicating an open hatchway was lit again, that was what had caused the sudden lurch. The ship's automated safety systems had cut in, acting to limit his altitude to avoid the risk of decompression.

"Check hatches! Check hatches!" he shouted into the intercom.

With the hatchway wedged open, Vorn stood beside the cargo winch control panel and extended a length of cable that he then wrapped around the carbonite block containing Jaysica and Tobis and clamped it in place. Next Vorn tipped the block into a horizontal position and activated its built in repulsors. With the block now hovering about a metre off the deck, Vorn pushed it towards the open hatchway.

"Well they've stopped gaining altitude." Mace said as he and Tharun observed the slaver's ship ahead of them.

"Great." Tharun said, "now if Kara can just avoid blowing the major up long enough for him to figure out a way of getting off."

"Oh I think he's found a way. Look." Mace replied and he pointed out of the cockpit viewport.

Tharun looked out at the slaver's ship. He saw that one of the ship's cargo hatches was open and standing there he saw Vorn with a block of carbonite block.

"Get to the top hatch!" Mace snapped.

Tharun leapt out of his seat and ran from the cockpit.

Vorn could see the Silver Hawk below. Even though opening the hatch had limited the slaver's ability to gain altitude, Mace had not been able to catch up. Given the power of this vessel it was unlikely that he would be able to either. But right now that didn't matter.

Vorn gave the carbonite block a shove and pushed it out of the open hatch.

As Tharun clambered through the Silver Hawk's topside hatch he clamped a safety line onto the ship's hull and looked at the slaver's ship. There he saw a line dangling from beneath the vessel and a dark rectangle at the end of it. As he watched the rectangle grew larger as it came closer.

"Keep going!" Tharun shouted into his comlink, trying to overcome the noise of the air rushing past him.

Tharun stood up and reached out for the dangling carbonite block and grabbed hold of it as it came within reach. He pulled down and deactivated its repulsors so that it dropped onto the Silver Hawk's upper hull.

Kneeling on the block so that it did not slide away he looked up along the length of the trailing cable and waved to Vorn who was still stood in the hatchway of the slaver's vessel.

"Here goes." Vorn said to himself and he took off his jacket. He wrapped one of its sleeves around his hand and tossed the jacket over the winch cable before wrapping the other sleeve around his other hand. Then he ran towards the hatchway and leapt out.

Tharun watched as Vorn slid down the cable towards him and held his arms out wide.

"Oof!" Tharun exclaimed as Vorn slammed into him. He grabbed hold of Vorn and held him tightly.

Letting go of one sleeve of his jacket, Vorn drew his blaster again and pressed it against the cable. He pulled the trigger and the energy bolt sliced through it cleanly.

"We're clear!" Tharun yelled into his comlink, "Take us down."

Ustrussk watched his sensor display as the other ship broke off its pursuit. His crew were in the process of breaking into the cargo hold that had been sealed from within and soon he would be able to reach the safety of hyperspace.

Ustrussk hissed.

The cargo hold of the *Silver Hawk* was filled with blocks of carbonite. But there was one block not being kept in the hold. The block into which Jaysica and Tobis had been frozen was propped up in the lounge of the ship.

"Shouldn't we thaw them out?" Vorn asked.

"I don't want to risk it boss." Kara said, "They're perfectly preserved in there, so reversing the process outside of a proper medical facility is just taking a pointless risk. Besides, Tobis looks happy enough where he is."

"What about Jaysica?" Mace asked.

"Oh I'm definitely happier with her where she is." Kara replied.