

“Maybe we should switch algorithms,” Charles said.

“We’ve tried that four times already,” Sean said.

The two sat side by side on the bridge of the Henry Morgan, flagship of the Gray Buccaneers. After the intense series of events on Kleet they had all agreed to get some much needed rest. Sleep never came for Charles, and when Sean wandered onto the bridge after only a few hours of slumber he found the Professor already hard at work trying to hack the Four Horsemen computers.

Hours went by and slowly the rest of their companions made their way to the bridge. A few of the more intelligent pirates lent a hand in the hacking efforts but so far no progress had been made.

Penelope was the last of the group to arrive on the bridge. She was in a quiet mood, still shaken by all she had seen on Kleet. She moved behind Sean and Charles, observing their attempts to break the passwords on the computers.

“That doesn’t look right,” she said.

They stopped and looked at her.

“What do you mean?” Sean asked.

“You’re trying in English.”

“Yeah?” Sean replied.

“Isaac never worked in English.”

Charles stood up.

“What language did he work in?” he asked.

Penelope suddenly felt on the spot as many of those on the bridge were looking at her now.

“I’m not sure,” she admitted sheepishly.

She could see the disappointment on their faces, so she quickly spoke again.

“But maybe I could recreate it.”

Sean smiled and nodded.

“Good idea,” he said.

Taking a stylus in her hand, Penelope stepped up to a flat screen on the wall. She stood for a moment, trying to remember what the language had looked like. Isaac had been very private with his business and she had only seen glimpses of the strange language. Finally she started writing, doing her best to recreate the letters and words. Once done she took a step back.

Sean and Charles studied it for several moments.

“I have no idea what that is,” Sean said.

A moment later Charles also spoke.

“Neither do I,” he said. “I thought it would be something biblical, maybe Hebrew or Greek, the language that Revelations was written in, but it’s not.”

“It’s Aramaic.”

They all turned to see Gordon Fay, who hadn’t said a word all morning up until that point. Fay’s mood was dark and he was spending his time seated far removed from the rest of them, but now he slowly approached, observing the language on the screen.

“It was used during New Testament times, but primarily for things like empire administration and worship,” Fay continued.

Charles and Sean shared a look.

“Sounds like the kind of language the Four Horsemen could appreciate,” Sean said.

Charles nodded, then looked back to the terminals that he and Sean had been hacking from. He pressed a few commands, switching the input language to Aramaic, but then hesitated.

“Now we just need someone who knows the language to finish the hack,” Charles said.

Everyone turned to face Fay. Once he realized what they were getting at Fay threw up his hands and backed away.

“I don’t think so,” he said. “You all may have no problem illegally breaking into other people’s computers but I’m not going to take part in any of your lawbreaking.”

Charles moved towards him.

“These computers belong to an organization called the Four Horsemen,” Charles said. “We’re not certain what their goals are but what we do know is that they are ruthless, dangerous and most likely a threat to our entire galaxy.”

He was right in Fay’s face now.

“So you can either stand here and hold onto your holier than thou beliefs or you can give us a hand and help stop bad people from visiting more death and evil upon innocents.”

Fay stared at him for a long moment before finally letting out a long sigh. He pushed past Charles and walked towards the terminal.

“Fine,” Fay said. “But when I make my official report to the authorities about what went on out here I’m going to tell them that I only helped you hack the computers because I feared that my life was in danger if I refused.”

“Who says it isn’t?” Harbinger asked.

Fay stopped and turned to look at the manbeast. Harbinger was crouched at the back of the bridge, sharpening his knife. He smiled at Fay as he ran the sharpening stone along the edge of the blade. Charles put his hand on Fay’s shoulder and gently guided him forward. Fay swallowed hard and then stopped looking at the harbinger. He sat down at the terminal and began typing in commands.

“Can someone bring me some water?” Fay asked.

“You’ve gotta be kidding me,” Sean said.

Fay shot him an angry look.

“Show some respect for your Professors young man,” Fay said. “I get thirsty when I work on computers.”

Charles nodded towards Sean, who rolled his eyes but left to fetch a glass of water for Fay. The bridge was quiet and the only sound was Sam speaking to some of the Gray Buccaneers about ship maintenance while Fay worked quickly. He gulped down the glass of water that Sean returned with and after finishing the last drop pressed a key on the terminal.

“Done,” he announced.

The computers displayed that the password had been accepted.

“Nice work, Gordon,” Charles said.

“Yes, hooray, I’m a common criminal like the rest of you,” Fay said half heartedly as he stood up and motioned for Charles to sit at the terminal.

Charles and Sean went through the computer systems, looking for anything that would tell them where Isaac was going next. They ran into a lot of empty directories, a lot of deleted files and a lot of small pieces of information, but after an hour were still without any big breakthrough.

“What type of information were they looking through on those systems?” Charles asked.

“Nothing really,” Sean replied. “Some major corporations...”

“How many major corporations?” Charles interrupted.

Sean punched a few buttons.

“Eighteen on this system and twenty four on the other system I looked through,” he answered.

“On the three systems I looked at they covered fifty eight of the galaxy’s top one hundred corporations,” Charles said. “So now we need to figure out what they were looking for.”

Another hour went by as they searched for information on each of the hundred corporations. Finally they had their answer.

“The CEO’s of the top one hundred corporations that utilize galactic shipping lanes in our galaxy are all meeting on Corporate 1,” Charles announced. “If the Four Horsemen are that interested in the meeting it means we should be too.”

“Corporate 1 is tightly secured,” Sam said. “Unless we can find some way to get you disguised as a high ranking employee of one of the corporations that is headquartered there we might as well not even bother making the trip.”

Charles stood up and stretched, then turned to face Sam.

“I’ll think of something,” Charles said. “I’ll only take a few people. A smaller group will draw less attention.”

“I’ve heard stories of Corporate 1, Charles,” Sam said. “It doesn’t matter if you take fewer people, you’re not going to get past their security.”

Charles gave it some thought before responding.

“We’ll find a way,” he said. “I’ll take Sean and Penelope with me, Harbinger and Fay will remain with you and the rest of the Buccaneers.”

“Excuse me?!” Fay shouted. “You are not leaving me on a ship full of pirates!”

Fay stepped forward, a look of outrage on his face.

“You want me to stay behind with a killing machine like the harbinger? Are you crazy?”

The harbinger moved forward quickly. Before Fay could run Harbinger had grabbed him in a half hug, a big smile on his face.

“Come on friend, we can stay behind and live the pirate life,” Harbinger said.

Fay noticed that the harbinger still had his knife in his hand and pulled away. He eyed the giant man fearfully for a moment, then looked to Charles.

“Professor Bryant, could I speak with you a moment?” Fay asked.

Charles walked over to him and the two moved away from the others.

“Listen,” Fay began. “You know how I feel about you.”

“You hate me.”

“Correct. But as much as I hate you, I’d rather be on your ship, flying to do who knows what, than to be left with the harbinger.”

The two turned around slowly, eyeing the harbinger.

“He scares me,” Fay whispered.

Charles shook his head.

“Fine, you’ll come with us.”

The two of them returned to the center of the bridge.

“Sam, move the Gray Buccaneers into the Glendale sector,” Charles said.

“That’s close enough to Corporate 1 that you can reach us in an emergency but far enough out that you shouldn’t draw any unwanted attention.”

Sam nodded his agreement, but then approached Charles.

“I’m not one to question a friend, but I’m not sure about you leaving the harbinger here unsupervised,” Sam said quietly.

“I truly believe he’s not a threat to you or the Buccaneers,” Charles said.

Sam shifted his weight before responding.

“I’m glad that you feel secure, but you’re not the one who’s going to be left with no way to control him.”

Charles looked at the Harbinger. The man was staring at them and appeared to be aware of exactly what they were discussing. Charles knew what Sam was getting at, he wanted one of the control bracelets. It made sense, but for some reason Charles was reluctant to do it. Finally he pulled one of the three off but he couldn’t shake the feeling that he was committing some sort of betrayal against Harbinger’s trust by handing it over to Sam.

Sam slipped it onto his wrist and looked to relax once it was in place.

“He’s given me no reason to use these bracelets against him,” Charles said.

“Please don’t activate it unless it’s absolutely necessary.”

Sam nodded and Charles stepped away. He looked at Harbinger but could see no hint of emotion on the man’s face.

“Let’s get our things and head to the Justicebringer,” Charles said.

He, Sean, Fay and Penelope left the bridge together. Once they were gone the harbinger approached Sam.

“So what do I have to do to become a Gray Buccaneer?” he asked with a smile.

Sam locked eyes with one of the other pirates on the bridge and then quickly moved away without responding, busying himself with a mundane task on the nearest terminal.



CREATED BY PHILLIP HALL

WRITTEN BY A.C. HALL & PHILLIP HALL

EPISODE NINE – “STRAIGHT TO THE DARKEST ROUTE”

“Is the course set?” Charles asked.

“Yeah, we’re good to go,” Sean answered. “This ship is amazing, it does most of the work for you.”

“Come with me then.”

Sean stood up and followed Charles off the bridge of the Justicebringer. Penelope looked at the two of them with raised eyebrows, wondering what was going on. Charles led Sean further down the hall until he was certain that Fay and Penelope couldn’t hear them back on the bridge. Once they were out of earshot Charles turned around and faced his student.

“I’m sorry that things have gone the way they have out here, and the events on Kleet were far from ideal,” Charles said, “but sometimes in order to survive you have to be willing to kill.”

“I don’t believe that, Professor.”

Charles sighed. He gestured towards a nearby ridge in the wall.

“Sit down, Sean.”

Sean did as he was told and as Charles stood before him he suddenly felt like he was back in class at Covan Unified University.

“This is the one lesson I’ve always dreaded having to teach you,” Charles said. “If you’re going to make a life as a Bounty Hunter in this galaxy, if you’re going to live longer than a year or two on the job, you have to be willing to do what it takes to survive. You have to deal with things in a way that end with you being alive, even if that means that your enemies aren’t.”

“There are more civilized ways to handle bad situations,” Sean said.

“Sometimes, yes,” Charles agreed. “Do you think that I wanted to unleash the harbinger on the men in that building back on Kleet? I didn’t Sean, but if I hadn’t then we would’ve all been killed trying to get in there.”

“You didn’t even give them a chance to surrender themselves.”

“There’s a time and a place for by the book procedures and that was not it. I dealt with the situation the only way I could.”

Sean looked at the floor.

“But the way you dealt with it ended up in Jerry getting killed,” he said.

Charles stood silent for many long moments. Finally he sat down beside Sean and spoke quietly.

“Jerry and Sam saved my life. After my wife died I was obsessed with revenge, I was twisted by hate. I went down a dark path and even after I had accomplished what I set out to do, I found it impossible to get off of that path.”

He fell silent for some time before continuing.

“Jerry and Sam, they’re the ones that brought me back. As I began taking jobs with them, they reawakened a sense of goodness in me. Jerry’s the one that convinced me to start teaching again. Deep down I always knew that the only reason he opened a bond business on Academia 7 was so he could keep an eye on me. He was always around, just in case I needed him.”

The two sat in silence. When it became apparent that Charles was done speaking, Sean stood up and faced his Professor.

“I’m not blind to the bigger situation going on here, Professor Bryant,” Sean said. “I know we’re not in the classroom, that the textbook answers don’t always apply now. I just think a greater effort can be made to at least try to do things a

better way before going straight to the darkest route. We're up against animals out here and I just don't want to become one in the process. I don't want any of us to."

Charles stood up and placed his hand on Sean's shoulder.

"You've grown into a capable Bounty Hunter and more importantly, a good man," Charles said. "Your noble convictions make you a valuable asset to this mission."

Sean smiled, soaking up the rare direct praise from Charles.

"Now let's get back to work," Charles said, turning back towards the bridge.

Sean followed him back down the hallway.

"Of course," Sean answered, the smile still on his face.



There was almost no open land on Corporate 1, the entire world filled with skyscrapers and buildings. The spaceport was top of the line and immaculately kept. The Justicebringer fit right in with the state of the art ships docked there, but Charles, Sean, Penelope and Fay stuck out immediately as they emerged down the ramp. Their bounty hunting gear and clothing clashed terribly with the business people in the area.

The checkpoint at the exit of the spaceport was staffed by four men in dark black suits. They all took notice of Charles and company approaching. Charles observed them closely, watching how they moved, noting that these looked to be highly trained individuals. Movement caught his eye and he glanced upwards to see four turrets, one aimed at Charles, one at Sean, one at Penelope and one at Fay. The turrets tracked their movement, ready to fire at the push of a button.

"I'm going to have to ask you all to stop where you're at please," one of the men in suits said.

They did as they were asked and waited as the four men in suits conversed. One stepped forward, a digital pad in hand.

"Our logs have no record of your ship having business on Corporate 1."

Charles pointed to the Bounty Hunter badge on his chest as he responded.

"We've received a tip that a dangerous criminal is here and intends to commit more crimes."

“We’ve received no such tip,” the man in the suit responded quickly.

“Well you’re not a professional Bounty Hunter, now are you?” Charles asked. “If you let us do our job and apprehend this man it’ll help keep your world safe.”

“I assure you, we need no help.”

Charles was growing frustrated as he realized this wasn’t going to work. He stepped forward.

“Sir,” the man in the suit snapped, “I advise you do not take another step or we’ll have no choice but to respond with deadly force.”

“Deadly force? We’re just talking here.”

Another of the men in suits approached now.

“Board your ship and leave, now. You have no business here.”

Sean stepped forward and the men pulled guns and aimed them at him.

“One more move and my associate will kill you!” the nearest man in a suit said.

“Then I pity your associate, as my father will take apart his life piece by agonizing piece if he does such a thing,” Sean responded coolly.

The men hesitated for a moment.

“Who’s your father?”

“Neil Varis, CEO of Orion Industries.”

The men in suits were immediately nervous. The one with the digital pad started punching in commands.

“Please give me one moment, sir,” he said.

A profile of the company appeared on the man’s screen and he quickly moved through to the Varis family. His eyes went wide and he motioned to his associates to lower their weapons. Charles also noticed that the turrets above them deactivated.

“I’m terribly sorry for the inconvenience Mr. Varis, we had no idea. Please, enter and leave Corporate 1 whenever you like, we’ve seen to it that you won’t be bothered.”

“Thank you.”

They walked towards the exit. The man with the pad called out after them.

“I’m sure your father doesn’t need to know about this, Mr. Varis. Perhaps it would be best if you didn’t mention this small hang up?”

Sean turned back around.

“See to it that our ship isn’t tampered with and I’ll forget all about this unpleasant delay.”

The man smiled.

“You’ve got it sir!”

Once they were out of earshot of the men Penelope spoke.

“Your father is the CEO of Orion Industries?”

Sean nodded.

“You said he was wealthy, but wow, Orion Industries?”

He again nodded, making it clear that his father wasn’t his favorite subject.

“You should beg him for a job while we’re here,” Fay said. “You’d be lucky to land a position with Orion.”

Sean scoffed.

“That’s what he wanted,” Sean answered. “But I refuse to get ahead because of my father’s name. Besides, Bounty Hunting is the only job I ever truly wanted.”

Now it was Fay’s turn to scoff.

“Bounty Hunting is work for lowlifes and blood thirsty triggermen. You’re higher class than that Mr. Varis.”

Sean stopped walking and turned towards Fay.

“With all due respect Professor Fay, shut up.”

Fay’s eyes went wide and he gestured towards Charles.

“This is how you teach your students?”

“Gordon, this isn’t a classroom and out here Sean isn’t my student, he’s my partner.”

Penelope pointed to a nearby building.

“Isn’t that what we’re looking for?” she asked.

It was the building where the meeting was supposed to take place. Charles led them towards it quickly. They received shocked glances from the businesspeople that they passed on the streets but none of the black suited security people approached them, apparently having been told about Sean by their associates at the spaceport.

They circled around to the back of the building and came to a steel exit door. It was locked and a keypad was installed in the wall beside the door. Sean pulled some tools out and began dismantling the keypad.

“Great, now I can add breaking and entering to my growing list of offenses,” Fay said.

Charles ignored him but stepped closer to the door, keeping a close eye on what Sean was doing.

“I know, Professor,” Sean said. “It’s a generation five, which means it has feedback protection.”

Charles smiled and took a step back. A few moments later the door buzzed and then swung open. They went inside and emerged into a plush hallway. It was as upscale as an office building could get and Charles led them towards what appeared to be a reception area at the end of the hall. There was something about the atmosphere in the place that had him uneasy and he pulled his pistol. Sean gave him a questioning look.

“No people,” Charles whispered.

Sean looked around, realizing that the Professor was right. There was no one in any of the offices they passed and no one moving in the hallway. There was a large desk in the reception area and behind it two massive mahogany doors.

A blood curdling scream came from behind the doors and Charles and Sean rushed forward quickly. The doors weren’t only locked, but felt barricaded. The two of them retreated down the hallway, then rushed the doors again. They lowered their shoulders and hit the doors at full stride, sending them crashing open. They entered into a cavernous conference room. In the middle was a table that stretched across the length of the room. There were one hundred plush seats, one for each of the one hundred CEOs that were here for the meeting. All of them had showed up and all of them were dead.

Charles had witnessed some hellish scenes before in his life, but none of them compared to this. The CEOs had been brutally slaughtered. Their bodies were strewn about the room like toys thrown about a child’s play area. Blood dripped from the table, the walls, and the ceiling.

At the far end of the room the last of the CEOs had just been killed. His head was cut clean off by a lanky individual who held a knife that looked just like the

harbingers. Charles and the man saw one another at the same time. With blinding speed the man leapt onto the conference table and charged. Its arms and legs were unnaturally long and skinny and it ran like an animal, on all fours, its knife now held between its teeth.

The table was over a hundred feet long but this strange individual was covering ground quick. Charles took aim with his pistol.

“COME, MY HARBINGER!”

The voice boomed out from the far end of the room. The man on the table skidded to a stop and then turned around, a dog called back by its master. Charles and Sean paused as they saw the source of the voice emerge into the room. Stepping through a set of mahogany doors that provided access from that end of the room, the man proved to be imposing even from such a far distance.

He appeared to be over six feet tall and looked like pictures of Norse gods, his muscled body hard as steel. His flowing blonde hair fell past his giant arms and framed his battle scarred face. There was a jagged scar running from forehead to chin across one eye and another large scar on his neck where it appeared someone had once tried and failed to hang him.

“War,” Charles breathed as he quickly pulled his rifle from his back.

The lanky harbinger rushed past its master and through the doors. The blonde haired man pointed at Charles and Sean.

“You’re lucky I have somewhere else to be.”

Charles was lining up his shot with the rifle and fired just as the man exited the door. The high caliber bullet blew through the door, but he couldn’t be sure it hit the target or not. Sean moved into pursuit, doing his best not to step on any of the dead bodies. Charles threw his rifle onto the conference table and pulled his pistol, then followed Sean.

By the time they reached the far doors there was no sign of anyone. Sean started to run down the hallway.

“Stop,” Charles said. “They’re long gone by now.”

Penelope screamed behind them and they rushed back into the conference room. She and Fay had just entered and were getting their first look at what happened there. Fay was a green tinted shade of pale and retched all over the floor.

“Sean, get them out of here,” Charles said.

Sean nodded and moved back to that side of the room. He led Penelope and Fay back through the doors into the waiting area. Charles moved slowly through the room, looking for something he hoped not to find. On the floor near the end of the table he saw one of the CEO’s and turned him over with his foot. Charles stared down at the lifeless face for several moments before walking away.

Charles made his way to the reception area and stepped out. Penelope was sitting in a chair in the reception area, her face blank, and Fay was further vacating the contents of his stomach into a potted plant in the corner. He saw Sean nearby and motioned for him. The two went back into the conference room together.

“Your father is here Sean,” Charles said quietly. “He’s dead.”

Sean stared at him for some time, his face blank. After a moment Charles began to think that Sean hadn’t heard him.

“Okay,” Sean said at last.

“He’s at the other end of the room, I’ll show you.”

Charles reached out to grab Sean’s arm but the young man pulled away.

“No, it’s fine.”

Charles regarded him for a moment, trying to find the best way to get him to understand.

“We don’t have much time here, Sean. Come say goodbye to your father.”

Sean backed away.

“I said I’m fine, Professor,” he said, his voice defensive now. “Let’s just get what we need and get out of here.”

Sean turned around and went back into the reception area. Charles stood there for a moment, wondering if he should go after the young man, but decided not to press it. News of what happened here would be getting out before long and Charles also predicted that a Four Horsemen cleanup crew would be here soon to erase any trace of their involvement.

He began activating the terminals in front of the CEOs to see what they had all been looking at before they had been killed. On each of the screens was a proposal for a single galactic checkpoint for all shipping. It was a planet called Huran 4 and the proposal called for all shipments to stop there first to be inspected, checked and taxed.

There was no upside to the deal for the CEOs and their companies. All of the money would go to the Four Horsemen and it would give them control of all trade in the galaxy. Charles looked up from the screen and at the death all around him. The CEOs never had a chance, he realized. Either accept the checkpoint at Huran 4 or end up dead. Looking over the way the bodies were laid out, he got a sense of how it had happened. One CEO had spoken out against the plan, and then another. That was all it took. After the killing started it never slowed down, never hesitated, never gave any second chances.

The weight of what he was witnessing settled upon him. Practically the whole of the galactic economy was dead in this room.

Charles pushed the thoughts from his mind and looked back down at the screen, memorizing as much of the information as he could. He then left the conference room. Sean was sitting beside Penelope, both of them wearing eerily blank expressions, while Fay was collecting himself in the corner.

“I know where we need to head to next,” Charles said. “Let’s get off of this planet.”

END OF Episode 9

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