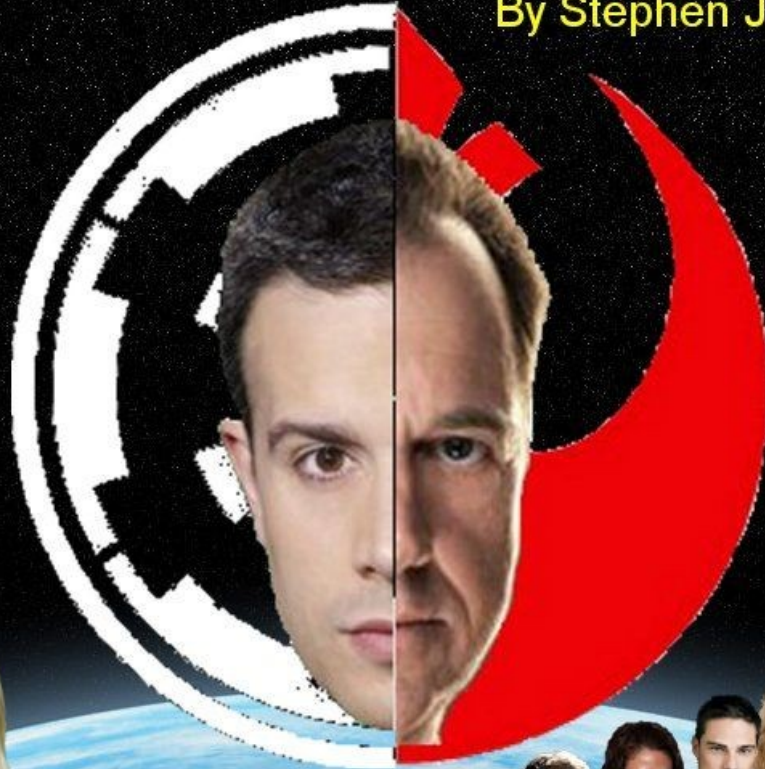


STAR WARS

5-01: Rescue Mission

By Stephen J Dutton



Handwritten signature



Civil war turns father against son

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

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

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

RESCUE MISSION

THE STAR FORGE IS NOW ONLINE AND THE ALLIANCE MUST FIND A WAY TO DESTROY IT. FOR THE OCCUPANTS OF THE *SILVER HAWK* THIS MEANS FINDING A WAY BACK ON BOARD TO SAVE THE FRIEND BEING HELD CAPTIVE AT ITS HEART...

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.

The hologram being projected into the centre of the room was of an alien structure far larger than the starships that surrounded it. Given that some of these ships were three thousand metres in diameter, that meant that the alien space station was truly immense.

"The latest scans colonel?" Major Vorn Larcus asked as accompanied by his golden coloured protocol droid he calmly walked towards the centre of the briefing room. Set up to allow the command staff of the local sector's Alliance forces to address a meeting of hundreds of their personnel at once it seemed empty with just Vorn and Colonel Harris Ergard present, even with the massive hologram taking up so much room.

"It is." Colonel Harris replied, "Mister Grammel and I have been taking it in turns to make flybys but its getting harder each time. There are increasing droid fighter patrols and added to that the conditions-

"Yes sir, I'm familiar with the conditions inside the nebula." Vorn interrupted as he stared up at the hologram, noticing that there were more capital ships around it than he remembered being there, "They're producing them quickly." He said, pointing at a cluster of battleships.

"Yes, too quickly." The colonel responded, "Even the Confederacy at the height of its power couldn't build warships as fast as these damned rakata. If things continue at this rate they could present a bigger threat to us than the Empire."

"I take it that plans are being put together to take down that starforge." Vorn said, looking directly at the image of the space station.

"That's why I asked you here." The colonel replied, "I've been running through several ideas with Admiral Aphanar and Colonel Collis, but every time we run into the problem of the sheer number of ships the rakata have already been able to produce."

"You think that sneaking someone aboard the starforge before the main assault will work?" Vorn asked and both he and the colonel smiled at one another.

"Major, you read my mind." Colonel Ergard said.

"Actually colonel I believe that Master Larcus-" the droid began.

"Be quiet Jeeves." Vorn interrupted.

"Your team is the only one to have already been aboard." The colonel continued, "Our plan is for you disable the station's production facilities and open their defences so we can launch an all out attack."

"Like Tarlen?" Vorn asked, "We were forced to withdraw at Tarlen. And the Empire wasn't fielding as many ships as the rakata have here."

"No, but those ships had organic crews whereas we believe that the rakata ships were designed by the Trade Federation to be operated mainly by droid crews."

"Ah, I see." Vorn said, "You're hoping that we can find some sort of master shut down."

"Exactly." Colonel Harris replied with a smile, "If you can pull the plug on those ships then that only leaves the station itself and our fleet should be able to handle its defences."

"Colonel may I remind you that although the schematics that Harvey downloaded revealed the number and position of the starforge's weapon systems they did not reveal their power." Jeeves pointed out.

"Something else for the boarding party to do?" Vorn asked.

"Exactly." Colonel Ergard replied.

"That's asking a bit much for a single team."

"That's what Colonel Sallir thought as well. He's going over all the field teams to see who's best suited to doubling up with you."

"A droid specialist would be handy as well." Vorn said.

"I'm sure the head of field ops will-" Colonel Ergard began, but Vorn interrupted him.

"No sir, I'm not talking about anyone from field operations. I was thinking of asking if Lieutenant Lerner from droid maintenance could accompany us."

"You'll have to run that by support services." The colonel said and Vorn nodded, "I suppose she'll be replacing your new wife?" he then asked.

"What Kara?"

"I do believe that Lieutenant Larcus is the only individual who-" Jeeves began.

"Shut up Jeeves!" Vorn snapped.

"Well really." The droid commented before Vorn went on.

"That depends on Kara. She's only a few months along and quite frankly I think there could be hell to pay by suggesting she's too infirm to go along." Then after a moment's pause he added, "Of course I'd rather she took things easy."

"Ah major, you're here." A deep voice called out from behind the two officers and both looked around to see the familiar form of Colonel Shintel Sallir, the mon calamari officer in overall command of all the rebel field operation teams in the sector.

"Yes sir." Vorn replied to the approaching mon calamari, "Colonel Ergard was just going over what's expected of my team."

"Well you won't be going in alone major." Colonel Sallir replied, "As Colonel Ergard may have told you we consider this a mission that requires more than one team to accomplish."

"Yes he did." Vorn responded.

"I have selected Major Shrell's unit to accompany you." Colonel Sallir said and Vorn frowned briefly, "Is there a problem with that major?" the mon calamari colonel asked him upon seeing this reaction.

"It's just that Major Shrell and I haven't seen eye to eye for some months now." Vorn answered, "I think he holds me responsible for the death of one of his men."

"Be that as it may," Colonel Sallir replied, "his team contains the personnel I believe would be most useful in this mission. The pair of you will just have to learn to get along. If it makes you feel better I regard this as your mission and you will have tactical authority superseding Major Shrell's equal rank."

Vorn took a deep breath, suspecting that being in the position of taking orders from him would only make matters with Major Shrell worse.

"I'd also like to request a specialist from support services sir." He said.

"Who?" Colonel Sallir asked.

"Lieutenant Asha Lerner from droid maintenance. I think her skills could be invaluable."

"That sounds reasonable to me." Colonel Sallir said, "Though I cannot authorise her transfer without the approval of the head of support services you understand."

"Of course sir." Vorn said, "I was going to go and speak to Shyla Nerin myself about it."

"Very well." Colonel Sallir said, "Good luck major and may the Force be with you."

Vorn smiled.

"Thanks." He said, "I think we'll need it on this mission."

"Package for Larcus." A voice that was accompanied by a knocking sound called out from outside the transport ship *Silver Hawk*.

Sergeant Tharun Verser, former mercenary turned freedom fighter set down the blaster he was cleaning at the table and wandered to the top of the nearby access ramp.

"Which one?" he asked the rebel standing at the bottom of the ramp. In one hand he held a datapad while there was a plain package under the other arm, "We've got two."

"Err," the other rebel said.

"Oh just come on up." Tharun said and as the man walked up the ramp Tharun turned around and yelled out, "Lieutenant!" loud enough that the approaching rebel flinched. In response a woman poked her head out of one of the cabins and looked at him.

"What's wrong now Tharun? Yelling like that it had better be good."

"Delivery Ma'am. Could be for you."

"It just says 'Larcus'." The rebel delivering the package added and he held it up. Instantly the woman smiled.

"At last!" she exclaimed rushing from her cabin and snatching the package.

"I need a signature." The deliveryman said and he held out his datapad so that she could sign for the delivery, "Thanks." He then added before turning to leave.

"So what is it ma'am." Tharun asked as he returned to where he had been sat earlier, "Or is it classified officer stuff?"

"It's my new dress uniform. And don't call me ma'am. It's annoying. I'm still Kara." Kara said as she ripped open the package and then held the tunic portion of the uniform up against her chest, "How does it look?" she added, "I need to make sure it fits right before I start to get bigger and have to put it in storage until after the baby's born."

"A little large lieutenant." Tharun commented and Kara sighed.

"Stop being so kriffing formal. That's an order sergeant."

"Okay mom." Tharun replied, this time without looking up from his task.

"What?"

"I said sure mom."

"Mom?"

"Well that's right isn't it?" Tharun asked, "You married the major and I-"

"Got falling down drunk and married his spoiled little princess." Kara interrupted.

"Exactly. So I figure that makes you my mother in law. Mom."

"But I'm more than ten years younger than you!" Kara snapped and Tharun shrugged.

"Ah, but should age really be a barrier to happiness?" Tharun then asked, staring ahead into space.

Kara just scowled, scooped up her new uniform and stormed back into her cabin.

"What's going on?" another young woman asked as she emerged from another of the cabins with a man wearing overalls.

"The new lieutenant's just having trouble adjusting to protocol regarding enlisted personnel addressing officers little lady." Tharun replied.

"Well perhaps if she was nicer to us all then we could be nicer to her." The young woman said, sitting down at the table opposite Tharun while the man with her went to the kitchen unit and began preparing drinks.

"Still upset about not getting invited to the wedding Jaysica?" Tharun asked her.

"I'd have made a wonderful bridesmaid." Jaysica said. Then she looked at the third rebel in the room and added, "Tobis, tell him what she said to me when I suggested it."

"What?" Tobis responded, "Oh, err, I don't think-

"Tell him." Jaysica repeated and then to Tharun she added, "It was really rude."

"Come on lad. Spit it out." Tharun said.

"Oh, well, err. The lieutenant had certain concerns about the potential for-" Tobis began nervously at the same time as he approached the table with two cups of hot caffeine in his hands and set one down in front of Jaysica.

"She said I would ruin her dress." Jaysica interrupted, "Can you believe that?"

Tharun and Tobis exchanged glances without speaking before Jaysica continued.

"Her exact words were 'I've not kept that dress hung up for a year on the off chance the boss would marry me just for you to end up tearing it.' Can you believe that?" she said and then she set her drink down on the table, accidentally placing it on top of one of the components to Tharun's blaster. Unbalanced the mug toppled over as soon as Jaysica released her grip on it and caf was promptly spilled all over the table,

"Oops." Jaysica said to the frowning Tharun, "It was an accident."

"Sure it was." Tharun replied sternly.

It was then that Vorn appeared at the top of the access ramp.

"Morning major." Tharun said when he noticed him there.

"Morning sergeant. Where are Kara and Mace?" Vorn replied.

"Lieutenant Larcus is in her cabin. I don't know where the captain is." Tharun said, "Why? We got an assignment?"

"We have. We're going after the starforge." Vorn told him.

"About damned time." Tharun replied.

"Err," Tobis said nervously, "just us?"

"It does seem dangerous for just six people major." Jaysica agreed.

"Don't worry we won't be alone." Vorn said.

"Planning on cramming all of Colonel Collis' special forces into the ship major?" Tharun asked, "I don't think that Captain Grayle would approve."

Vorn smiled.

"No." he said and he looked around, "I'd rather wait until Mace was actually here to explain this so I don't have to do it a second time."

"Explain what?" another voice asked as Mace Grayle, the owner of the *Silver Hawk* came walking up the access ramp, "I was with Malia aboard the *Renegade* when word came through for the entire fleet to prepare for action."

"The entire fleet?" Kara's voice said as she returned to the lounge area, now wearing the newly delivered and somewhat ill fitting uniform, "Hi boss." She then added as she embraced Vorn and kissed him. Then she added, "Tharun was being mean to me and the baby."

Vorn sighed and hung his head.

"Everyone just sit down and listen." He said and he waited for the other rebels to take seats before continuing, "High command wants the rakata dealt with before they're in a position to launch an all out invasion."

"Sounds reasonable." Tharun commented.

"To do that we'll be infiltrating the starforge in order to disable as much as we can before the fleet hits it with everything we've got."

"Big job for six of us." Mace commented.

"Someone else is going with us." Jaysica said.

"Who?" Mace asked, then he put his head in his hands, "No wait, I can see it coming. It's Commander Kord's team isn't it? We'll have Inra going on about how the *Beauty Queen* is so much better than the *Silver Hawk* again."

"No. It's not the *Beauty Queen's* team." Vorn said.

"So who is it boss?" Kara asked, "Come on, do tell."

"It's the *Scarlet Knife*." Vorn said and all the other rebels frowned.

"I think I'd prefer putting up with Inra." Mace commented.

"Major, Major Shrell's unit don't exactly like us." Tharun said.

“Yes I’m aware of that.” Vorn replied.

“Oh come on,” Kara exclaimed, “they absolutely can’t stand the sight of us.” Then she looked at Jaysica and added, “All because of the klutz and her sister.”

“Hey!” Jaysica protested, “It wasn’t my fault.”

“What part of covert operations don’t you understand?” Kara asked.

“Never mind that now.” Vorn said, “The fact is that we’ve got to infiltrate the starforge ahead of an attack by the fleet. As well as Major Shrell’s team we’ll be taking Lieutenant Lerner from droid maintenance with us. The idea is that we’ll shut down the starforge’s production facilities while Major Shrell takes her to shut down the battle droids. Now I want all of you to get ready for launch.”

2.

"Jym." Vorn said to the man standing in front of him in the docking bay. The nearby ship was older than the *Silver Hawk*, an example of the barloz-class of vessel that predated YT-1300's like Mace's ship and near its prow was an image of a bright red knife with blood dripping from the tip of its blade.

"I suppose you're here about the mission." Jym Shrell replied as he turned away from the tall dark skinned man who accompanied him, the expression on his face making it clear that he was not happy about the situation.

"You've spoken with Colonel Sallir then?" Vorn asked.

"Of course and I'm telling you what I told him, my team will work with yours so long as it doesn't look like you're endangering us un-necessarily while you hog the glory. If I suspect that's what's happening then we're out."

Vorn frowned.

"You understand that this mission is under my command?" he asked.

"Oh yeah, the colonel made that clear." Jym replied, "Didn't he Anzar?" he then added, glancing over his shoulder.

"Perfectly." The dark skinned man answered.

"Just give us the route you want us to follow through the nebula and we can get this over with." Jym then said, folding his arms.

"Actually we're heading for Estran first." Vorn replied.

"Estran?" Jym repeated, "What's the sector capital got to do with all this?"

"That's where the young lady who was abducted to become the core of the starforge came from and my team have encountered rakata agents there before. I intend to get aboard one of their own ships and use it to sneak through their defence perimeter. Plus there are a few people we can check in with who may be able to offer more help."

"Very well then." Jym replied, "We'll be ready to go within the hour. Anything else?"

"Yes, one thing. My plan is for your team to escort a specialist to shut down the rakata's droid forces. I think she should fly with you."

"A specialist? You better not be talking about that Jaysica Horbid. She was in droid maintenance for a time wasn't she?"

"Yes she was, but I'm not talking about her. I'm talking about Asha Lerner. She was Jaysica's superior. Shyla Nerin's okayed her temporary reassignment."

"And for a moment there I thought you'd come up with a way to replace Devid." Anzar commented, referring to the rebel from Jym Shrell's unit that had been killed as part of a mission to free Kara and Vorn from Imperial captivity.

Vorn ignored the comment.

"Within the hour then." He said directly to Jym, "And we'll meet on Estran."

"Yes we will." Jym replied and then he waited as Vorn walked away.

Anzar turned to the *Scarlet Knife's* access ramp where a short woman had been stood while the conversation had been going on.

"Did you get that Lannaye?" he asked.

"Every word." She replied, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Being the capital world of the sector, the space around Estran had thousands of ships passing through it each hour. So the two small transport ships that dropped out of hyperspace and then headed for a quiet starport away from the primary one went almost completely unnoticed and since neither vessel was on any Imperial watch lists the few navy and customs personnel that did see them did not think it worth diverting any of the planet's picket vessels to intercept them.

The starport they headed for was a collection of individual docking bays, so after landing Vorn led his team to the *Scarlet Knife's* docking bay to discuss the next phase of the mission.

"Jym our contact is in the capital itself." Vorn exclaimed, "Mace will take us there in the *Silver Hawk*. I suggest the rest of our teams remain here until we get back."

"There are some parts we ought to try and pick up." Lannaye commented.

"Same here." Lieutenant Lerner added as she emerged from the *Scarlet Knife* as well, "I could always do with a few extra droids."

"That should be fine." Vorn replied, "But only items that can be obtained openly. We can't risk alerting the authorities to our presence."

"And if it's alright I'd like to drop in on Cass while we're in the capital." Mace then said.

"Cass?" Jaysica said, "Can Tobis and I come as well?"

"Who's this Cass?" Jym asked.

"An orphan who's been feeding us information." Vorn replied and then he looked at Jaysica, "And no you can't go as well. I'm fine with people taking the opportunity to gather needed supplies but I'd rather not have everyone running about at random. Mace can check on her just fine by himself."

"Just don't tell Captain Mayan about the visit." Kara commented, "Malia may start thinking she's got a rival."

"Eww Kara." Jaysica exclaimed, "That's disgusting. Mace is more than twenty years older than Cass." Then when she noticed both Kara and Vorn glaring back at her she looked at Tobis and added, "What did I say?"

"Oh, err. Well you see its just that-" he began before Tharun interrupted him.

"The major is more than thirty years older than the lieutenant." He said with a grin and Jaysica blushed and looked away.

"If everyone's finished making value judgements about people's private lives I think we ought to be going." Vorn said.

"The University of Estran?" Jym said as he and Vorn stood just beyond the university campus and he read the sign, "There's an expert on the rakata here?"

"Well where else would you expect to find an expert in a civilisation who's empire collapsed more than thirty thousand years ago?"

"I suppose so." Jym said and then he and Vorn headed for the entrance to the main building.

They paused until a large group of students also approached to enter the building and then simply proceeded inside with them, avoiding any notice from the bored looking security guard just within. Vorn led the way through the corridors to the xenoarchaeology department and to an office door labelled 'Dr Jenessa Drame'.

"Here we are." Vorn said and he knocked gently on the door. There was no reply and when Vorn looked around he saw someone coming towards them, a young male human that he took to be a student, "Excuse me." Vorn said to the student, "But do you know where Doctor Drame is?"

"What? Darth Drame?" the student replied, then his face fell, "Wait, no don't tell her I said that."

"Don't worry." Vorn reassured him, "We've no idea who you are. Though you've obviously met the good doctor."

"Just tell us where she is." Jym added in a sterner tone of voice.

"Lecturing probably." The student answered and he glanced at his chronometer, "The current set of lectures end in a few minutes."

"Thank you. You've been most helpful." Vorn said with a smile and then he and Jym waited while the student walked away and disappeared round a corner.

"So do we just stand here and wait?" Jym asked.

"No need." Vorn replied as he slid his hand into his pocket, "I've got a spare key." And he presented the blank looking card he took from his pocket to the lock and the door promptly slid open, "We'll wait inside." Vorn said as he entered the office, "Want some caf? Jenessa's got a machine in here."

"Sure, why not." Jym said as he sat down and looked round the office. All around were sketches, photographs and computer generated images of ancient artefacts and the places they had been found. Then he noticed a small crystalline cube on Jenessa's desk and while Vorn's back was turned he reached out and picked it up.

"Do you mind not doing that?" a voice said and a holographic image of a tall man suddenly materialised in front of him.

"Stang!" Jym exclaimed, dropping the cube and almost overbalancing, "Vorn, what the kriff is this?"

"Ah you've met Criston then." Vorn said as he turned around and handed Jym a cup of caffine.

"Criston?" Jym asked.

"Criston Harsis. Jedi knight." Vorn said, "Well not quite."

"Criston Harsis was the creator of the holocron you just picked up without asking." The image said, "He created me as its gatekeeper."

"And when the Empire has gone to great lengths to scour the galaxy of all evidence that you exist you just happened to be on the desk of a university lecturer?" Jym asked.

"Jenessa dug up the holocron on some dig." Vorn explained, "Criston here didn't make himself known until he found someone deserving of his attention."

"Let me guess. You." Jym said with a scowl.

"No." Criston replied, "A young lady named Kay Laren." Then the hologram turned its head towards Vorn, "By my reckoning it has been three months." He said.

"It has." Vorn said and looking at Jym he added, "Kay is the unfortunate individual that the rakata are using to control their starforge."

"They're using a person? How?" Jym asked.

"Rakata technology is based on manipulation of the Force." The Criston hologram explained, "But the species was rendered blind to it by a plague that swept through them. Now they need another Force sensitive individual to help them operate their own technology."

"Which, aside from what we believe are their limited numbers is why they're replicating Separatist technology." Vorn added, "They need ships that function using technology alone rather than the Force." It was then that the office door slid open again to reveal a human woman standing there with a stern expression on her face.

"Vorn, how the hell did you get here?" she asked as she closed the door behind her.

"You should be more careful where you leave your pass key Jenessa." Vorn replied and he held up the key he had used to open the door, "When you visited our headquarters I had Jaysica make a copy. Just in case I ever needed to get in here in a hurry."

"That fool?" Jenessa asked and Jym smiled, "And is there a sign on my door that says 'Rebel Alliance drop in centre' now?" she then added.

"I thought it better than standing around in a corridor waiting for someone who may recognise me to walk by."

"Yeah, being wanted for treason must be such a drag." Jenessa said as she sat down behind her desk, "Just tell me what you want Vorn." Then she looked at Jym, "And who this guy is who now suddenly knows that I know you."

"Of course, where are my manners?" Vorn replied, "Doctor Jenessa Drame, meet Major Jym Shrell."

"Another major huh? I've got a bad feeling about this."

"We're going back to the starforge." Vorn said.

"And there it is." Jenessa said, "You know if it weren't for the fact that Kay's still being held in that place I'd have moved to Coruscant already. No rampaging aliens there."

"What can you tell us?" Vorn asked and Jenessa picked up a datapad.

"This is everything I've found in the university archives." She said, "Notes on their language and iconography. Not much though, a lot remains a mystery to us even today."

"Keeps you in work at least." Jym commented.

"Indeed." Jenessa replied before going on, "I've also been looking into the background of the thugs they've been using."

"The one's wearing the infinity symbol?" Vorn said, "Those two prisoners we interrogated linked them to the Church of Infinity."

"The rakata referred to their empire as the Infinite Empire didn't they?" Jym then added.

"That's right." Jenessa answered, "And it just so happens that there's a religious group called the Church of Infinity in the sector, headquartered right here on Estran. That COMPNOR guy your lot decapitated a couple of years back was a member."

Jym and Vorn looked at one another.

"Who?" Vorn asked.

"First I'm hearing about a decapitation." Jym then said.

"Really? Because it was all over the news."

"We don't get much news where we are." Jym commented.

"Well anyway," Jenessa continued, "I looked into the Church of Infinity and what I found was pretty interesting from a professional standpoint."

"How so?" Vorn asked.

"Well over time religions can splinter and change their practices as they gain new recruits or lose members. Or sometimes a new religion can just spring up when someone finds some old artefact from some civilisation and they decide to emulate them." Jenessa explained.

"So you think that we're dealing with a load of wannabe rakata?" Jym asked.

Jenessa smiled and nodded.

"The Church sprang up about the time that the sector was first settled about four thousand years ago." She replied, "I think that some of the early settlers found some evidence that the rakata had been here first and emulated them. Or maybe the locals were descended from rakata slaves and some of the settlers took on their belief system. Either way the Church of Infinity is following some heavily distorted rakata patterns. Now if the rakata suddenly came back who do you think they'd go to for help?"

"The people that believe the same thing they do." Vorn said, "Are you saying that the rakata control the Church of Infinity?"

"No. But I do think they're keeping a close eye on it and picking out those people they can make use of." Jenessa said and she showed the two rebels a page on her datapad, "The church runs a prison visiting scheme."

"A lot of them do." Jym commented.

"Yes but most are trying to rehabilitate offenders." Jenessa said, "Saving their souls. I think that the Church of Infinity is instead trying to pick out those who aren't reformed. I bet if you check out the history of the thugs who've attacked us you'll find out they've served time in prison."

"This gives us a lead." Vorn said, "If we can link transport ships to members of the church we may have found our rakata supply ships." Then he looked at Jym, "What do you think?"

Jym sighed.

"Its not much." He replied, "But in the absence of a better idea it's something for us to check out. Tayal should be able to get into a church office and get us some membership lists. Then we can run them against starship registrations."

3.

Tayal was a young woman about the same age as Jaysica, a professional thief who had been facing a lifetime of solitary confinement for her crimes when Jym's unit had rescued her. Since then she had provided her skills to his field team, breaking into supposedly secure facilities with apparent ease.

"Do you really think you'll need all that stuff?" Tharun asked her as he and Jaysica watched her placing one item of equipment after another into the harness she wore over her skin-tight suit.

"If she didn't think she'd need it she wouldn't be taking it." The man sat behind them in the *Scarlet Knife's* lounge area. This was Travis Jesler, a former bounty hunter who would be rounding out the four man team put together by Jym and Vorn to gain entry to the Church of Infinity's records. Jaysica and Tayal would be the ones to actually penetrate the church's security while Tharun and Travis would provide backup should they run into opposition.

"What exactly are you bringing to this party?" Tayal then asked, looking Jaysica up and down.

"I have this." Jaysica replied, producing a compact multitool from her pocket, "Oh and Penny of course." And she tapped her backpack.

"So a can opener and a mouse droid." Tayal commented, walking up to Jaysica and looking down at her, "Look, I know all about you and I swear that if you screw this up it'll be the last mistake you ever make. Your unit has cost us enough already." And then she barged past Jaysica and headed out of the ship.

"Well that was rude." Jaysica commented as she and Tharun then watched Travis following his teammate.

"Let's just get this over with." Tharun said and he followed the others from the ship. Outside they found the other members of both rebel teams along with Asha waiting to see them off.

"Hey Tharun." Kara called out and she approach him, "I thought you might appreciate this." And she handed him a small flask and then whispered in his ear.

"Thank you lieutenant." He said, "That's very thoughtful of you."

"I hope you're going to share that." Travis commented.

"Get your own." Tharun replied as he tucked the flask in his jacket.

Using a landspeeder hired for cash and with a fake identity card the four rebels drove directly to the closest building registered to the Church of Infinity and parked in a nearby side street. The streets in this part of the city were fairly well lit and so after disembarking from the speeder they approached the building cautiously, Tharun and Travis with their arms around Jaysica and Tayal's shoulders so that they would appear to be a pair of couples out for the evening. This also enabled some of Tayal's bulkier equipment to remain hidden by placing it between her body and Travis'.

"Looks like any other temple to me." Tharun commented as he glanced across the street, "Perhaps the major would have a few more insights, I think he was pretty devout before his defection. Not this church mind you, but they all seem the same to me. Boring speeches and boring rules."

"Don't worry." Tayal responded as she too looked across the street, "I've been in plenty of temples."

"You don't seem that religious to me." Jaysica commented.

"I was there for salvation." Tayal replied with a smile.

"She was there for the charity collections." Travis added.

Tharun looked up at the sky.

"What's wrong?" Jaysica asked him.

"Oh just looking out for any signs of lightning bolts." He replied, "I'd hate to get hit by a deity with poor aim."

"Skylight." Tayal then said.

"What?" Jaysica asked.

"There's a skylight on the temple roof." Tayal said.

"Skylights are good right?" Travis asked and Tayal nodded.

"They tend not to be alarmed." She said.

"But how do we get up there?" Jaysica asked, "It's three storeys."

"I've got a line thrower." Tayal said.

"But the alleyway beside the building is too narrow for you to be able to see the skylight from." Jaysica then pointed out.

"Office building next door." Tharun commented and Travis nodded.

"I agree." He said.

"That's exactly what I was thinking." Tayal then said, "There'll be an external fire escape on the offices that should get us up to the roof. I'll fire a line across to the temple roof and we can slide over. Everyone fine with that?"

"I am, but-" Tharun began and he looked down at Jaysica.

"What?" she demanded, pulling herself away from him, "Are you suggesting I can't slide across that gap?"

"Well let's face it little lady, you're not the most graceful – Ow!" Tharun said and he grasped his arm as Jaysica punched him.

"Oh this is really getting us places." Travis commented.

"Never mind." Tharun said, frowning and still rubbing his arm, "Let's go. Tayal, led the way."

"Why does she get to lead the way?" Jaysica asked.

"Because she's got most of the kit and knows the best way to use it." Tharun replied.

Tayal darted across the street and into the alleyway between the temple and the office building beside it and circled around the rear. There, just as expected was a set of metal stairs mounted on the wall that led up to the roof. The only problem was that the stair ended about three metres above the ground with a set of steps designed to cover the final distance folded up out of reach from below.

"Lift me." Tayal said, looking at both Tharun and Travis and the two large men leant down and picked her up between them, lifting her up above their heads so she could reach the lowest level of the fire escape. Pulling herself up she then released the folded steps and held onto them to limit the speed at which they dropped, preventing the sound of an uncontrolled drop alerting anyone to the presence of the rebels in the alleyway. With the fire escape now accessible it was simply a matter of climbing up them to the roof. There was a sealed door here that gave access to the building, but the only attention the rebels paid to this was to keep an eye on it just in case someone emerged and discovered them.

"Can you hit the skylight from here?" Jaysica asked Tayal as she looked across the gap between the two buildings and took off the long coat she was wearing to cover her equipment harness.

"Sure I can." Tayal replied with a frown, "Unlike you I actually know what I'm doing."

"Hey! That's not fair!" Jaysica exclaimed loudly.

"Shush!" Tharun hissed, "Keep your voice down."

"Well she started it. She insulted me."

"Look calm down and have a drink." Tharun told her, sliding the flask Kara had given him from his jacket and he handed it to Jaysica, "It's Corellian whisky."

Now it was Travis who frowned.

"Corellian whisky? And you're not going to share it."

"I would if I thought you could handle it." Tharun said as Jaysica took a deep gulp from the flask, "It's got a bit of a kick." And then Jaysica simply collapsed, "See?" Tharun added.

"What the hell was in that?" Travis asked, astounded.

"Oh just some homebrewed whisky." Tharun said, "Oh and a powerful sedative that Kara says shouldn't be mixed with alcohol under any circumstances. Now can we get on with our assignment?"

"Ready when you are sergeant." Tayal said with a smile and then she fired the line thrower across the gap. The line was tipped with a sharp spike that embedded itself in the roof of the temple just beside the skylight, leaving a syntherope line dangling between the two buildings. Then there was a soft whirring sound as Tayal retracted the excess line and hooked the line thrower onto the low wall running around the edge of the roof.

"There we go." She said as she tested the line. Then without waiting for further instructions she pulled herself over the side of the roof and, with her legs wrapped over the line as she went she pulled herself across to the temple roof.

"I'll go next." Tharun said and he turned to the sleeping Jaysica and removed her backpack and slung it over his shoulder.

"What about her?" Travis asked.

"What about her? We'll leave her here until we're done. Trust me its safer this way." Tharun told him and then he too pulled himself over the gap to the temple. As soon as he was perched on the roof beside Tayal, Travis followed them across.

Tayal then turned her attention to the skylight itself, running her hands around the frame.

"Okay there is an alarm, but I think it's just a simple switch that'll trip if the window's opened." She said, "That's not unusual for a skylight though and I can get past it. The problem is seeing what's further inside though." She then added, leaning close to the glass. With the interior of the temple in darkness it was impossible to make out any details and using a glowrod would not only risk giving them away, but also just reflect off the glass, "Okay, this is going to take a few minutes." She then said and from her harness she took a reel of adhesive tape that she began to coat the skylight with. When she was finished the glass was completely covered and from her harness she took a short metal rod and flicked her wrist. There was a snapping sound and the telescopic rod expanded to about a metre in length. Lifting the rod above her head Tayal then began to strike the skylight repeatedly, each blow producing a snapping sound and visible cracks on the glass. To finish off Tayal banged the tip of the baton directly against the roof to collapse it and then after putting it away she began to peel back the shattered glass of the skylight.

"The way is open gentlemen." She said, "Now we just need our spy."

4.

Tharun grinned and passed Jaysica's backpack to Tayal at the same time as Travis took out a datapad and plugged his comlink into it.

"Ready." He said.

"Great. Lower me down." Tayal said as she hooked a second syntherope line to the back of her harness. Clutching Jaysica's backpack to her chest, Tayal was slowly lowered through the skylight into the temple. She found herself in the main part of the temple where worshippers would gather for sermons. This occupied all three storeys of the building, with rows of benches filling the ground floor and two levels of balconies running around the walls to increase the amount of seating available. The syntherope went slack as Tayal reached the floor and Tharun and Travis stopped reeling it out.

Tayal then opened up Jaysica's backpack and took out the tiny wheeled droid that was inside and set it down on the floor.

"Okay then, err, Penny is it? Go and see what you can find." She whispered and without a sound the droid rolled away.

"Signal's clear." Travis said to Tharun as he looked at his datapad, the screen showing the image being transmitted by the camera built into Penny's chassis.

"See that?" Tharun asked as he too studied the image, "Infra red motion sensors."

"Good job we just sent Tayal down." Travis said, "Her dead suit will block her body heat."

"Yeah, I don't think that Jaysica would fare too well perched up here on this roof until Tayal gets the job done by herself." Tharun then added looking down over the edge of the roof.

"Guys what do you see?" Tayal's voice then sounded from Tharun's comlink.

"Pretty much what we expected." Tharun replied, "Basic security. Make sure that kinky suit of yours is fastened up tight."

"Don't get any ideas about being the one to peel it off." Tayal told him and Tharun smiled.

"No worries. I'm married." He said.

"Found it." Travis said suddenly and he held the datapad up to Tharun.

"Yeah, that looks good." Tharun said and then to Tayal he added, "Tayal, there's a door beneath the pulpit, looks like it could lead to the admin section."

"Understood. On my way." Tayal replied and unhooking herself from the line that still led back up to the roof she towards the front of the temple where a raised pulpit overlooked the rows of seating. Beneath this, where it would be hidden from the view of the congregation by several decorative panels was a plain looking door with Penny waiting beside.

"Okay, let's see what you're hiding." Tayal muttered to herself and she began to inspect both the door and the wall surrounding it. As it turned out the door appeared to be fairly typical, lightweight and mass-produced. But it was sealed and Tayal lacked either a key or an override code to open it. However, what she did have was a dedicated electronic lock breaker that she held up to the lock sensor. In a matter of seconds the hand held device reconfigured the way it reflected energy from the lock thousands of times until it found the correct pattern to disable the lock and the door slid open with a hiss.

"Never fails." Tayal then muttered as Penny rolled forwards into the corridor on the other side.

There were several doors leading off the corridor, one of which seemed to be an external one that Tayal ignored. Instead she examined each of the others carefully for any signs that they were alarmed and when she found nothing she tried each one in turn. Most simply slid open right away, but one remained closed and Tayal grinned.

"Something in here that needs securing is there?" she said to herself, "In that case I think that this is where I'll start." And she took out the electronic lock breaker again. The device was just as effective at opening thus door as the previous one and when it too slid open Tayal saw an office on the other side, complete with a computer terminal sat on the desk.

"So do you think that's it?" Travis' voice asked over her comlink and it took a moment for Tayal to remember that he and Tharun were watching the visual feed from Penny.

"Why else would the door be locked?" Tayal replied as she crept into the office and looked around. Seeing several bags on a nearby table she approached them and peered inside.

"Just get the data from the computer." Tharun told her, "Don't waste time on anything else."

"A bit of extra cash always comes in handy." Tayal replied.

"What?" Tharun asked.

"These bags hold collection money." Tayal explained as she reached inside one and then held out a handful of coins where Penny's camera would pick them up. Then she returned the coins to the bag and began

stuffing them all into her backpack, "This way it'll look like the damage was all caused by someone after money, not computer records." Tayal went on.

"Good point. Carry on." Tharun replied and still sat on the roof with Travis he looked skywards.

"What's wrong?" Travis asked.

"Oh just keeping an eye out for lightning bolts." Tharun told him.

With the collection money stashed in her backpack, Tayal headed for the desk and sat down before activating the computer.

"Okay I'm in." she transmitted, "I'm calling up the membership lists. Wait, hang on." And there was a pause.

"Tayal what's happening?" Travis asked.

"It's this terminal." Tayal replied, "There's something odd about the way it's running. Wait, yes that's it. I think that there are effectively two computers here."

"What do you mean by that?" Tharun asked her.

"Well there's the computer I've just started up and there's another one that exists only in the memory of this one."

Travis and Tharun looked at one another.

"Do you know what she's talking about?" Travis asked.

"I'm not the computer expert." Tharun replied, looking back to the roof of the office building well aware that Jaysica was far more familiar with computers than he was.

"Just tell us what you mean in plain Basic." Travis told Tayal.

"Well basically I have the choice of two different computers on one terminal." Tayal began to explain, "Each of which can have its own set of files and programs. This sort of set up isn't that uncommon for people who want to run different types of software that isn't all compatible with the same operating system. But the way it's been implemented here is strange."

"How so?" Tharun then asked.

"Well it looks like the other system is concealed in the background and is monitoring everything I'm doing."

"So could it be an automated backup?" Tharun suggested.

"No. That would be so trivial as to be unnoticeable. I think that this is running programs simultaneously so that whatever data is entered into one goes into the other at the same time."

"But why would anyone want to do that?" Travis asked.

"What? Have you never heard of keeping two sets of books?" Tayal replied, "I think that someone's massaging the accounts and needs different sets for themselves and anyone auditing them."

"Copy everything." Tharun ordered, "The entire drive."

"Are you kidding? All I've got are a couple of memstiks. That's nowhere near enough storage."

Tharun scowled.

"Take the computer." He said eventually, "Bring us the entire thing."

"Err, they'll notice it's gone." Tayal pointed out.

"Yes but hopefully they'll still think it was stolen in a regular burglary." Tharun replied and Tayal sighed.

"This is so amateurish." She said to herself as she shut down the computer and began to disconnect the various cables from the base unit.

There was no further communication from Tayal until she appeared back at the bottom of the line dangling from the skylight where she tied the computer base unit to the line and then called out.

"Okay, take it up." She called out and then she stood back and watched as the computer was lifted up through the skylight to the rebels waiting on the roof. A moment later the line came back down and Tayal connected it to her harness. Then she scooped up Penny and stuffed the droid into Jaysica's backpack before tugging on the line again.

With Tayal now out of the temple the three rebels crossed the alleyway once more to return to the roof of the office building where Jaysica still lay sleeping soundly.

"Okay we divide the load evenly." Tharun said as Tayal disconnected the line from the line thrower and let it drop into the alleyway, "Tayal can take the money and Penny, Travis you take the computer and I'll carry our sleeping friend here."

At Vorn's insistence all of the rebels not involved in the mission to obtain the temple records waited together in the *Silver Hawk*, something that produced a rather uncomfortable atmosphere given the dislike of Vorn's team that Jym's possessed and most of Vorn's team as possible found excuses not to be in the lounge area with the others. Mace sat in the cockpit; supposedly monitoring local communications while Tobis withdrew to the workshop with his astromech droid Harvey. Kara simply claimed to be tired and headed for her cabin, leaving just Vorn himself with Asha and Jym's team.

In the cockpit Mace sat back in his chair and yawned, then he sat up with a start as the door behind him suddenly opened with a hiss.

"Don't sneak up on me like that." He said as he turned to see Asha and then relaxed again.

"Sorry." Asha replied, "How am I supposed to open the door?"

"Knock first." Mace suggested and as Asha sat down in the co-pilot's seat he added, "So what's it like back there?"

"Awkward." She replied, "Even your protocol droid isn't talking to theirs. You know its bad when 3PO units are quiet. What the hell's going on between you?"

"Oh they kind of blame us for getting one of their unit killed."

"And did you?"

"No. He just got unlucky. I've seen it happen far too many times." Mace said. Then, after a pause he added, "Plus there's the whole thing about the time we backed them up on a mission and ended up saving everyone. From what I hear they were none too pleased about that."

Asha was about to go when she spotted movement from outside the ship.

"Someone's out there!" she exclaimed and Mace stared out to where she pointed.

"It's alright." He said, getting to his feet, "They're back." And he rushed from the cockpit to the lounge. There he found Vorn sat reading from a datapad while Anzar, Jym and Lannaye sat on the opposite side of the table in a huddle. Both Jeeves and Jym's red coloured protocol droids stood back, standing close to their respective owners while keeping their distance from one another, "The team's back." Mace said as he headed for the access ramp, "And it looks like one of them's hurt."

"Kara!" Vorn yelled as he leapt to his feet.

"What's all the racket boss?" Kara asked, leaning out of her cabin.

"They're back and someone may be hurt." Vorn replied. Behind him Mace opened the access ramp and stood back as the four rebels sent to break into the temple ran aboard.

"What happened?" Mace asked as Tharun set the still unconscious Jaysica down on the sofa.

"How long has she been like this?" Kara then asked, leaning over her.

"Oh about an hour." Tharun replied as he looked at his chronometer.

"Then there's nothing to worry about yet." Kara responded, standing up straight.

"What are you talking about?" Vorn asked.

"A good question." Jym added.

"The sedative in the drink." Travis told him and there was a sudden snoring from Jaysica.

"I have to put up with that every night." Kara then said to Vorn and he sighed.

"Just tell me what you found." He said to Tharun.

"I'll let her do it. She was the one who went into the temple." Tharun replied, looking at Tayal and the rest of the gathered rebels did the same.

"When I logged onto the computer I found evidence of a hidden system." She told them.

"That's why we brought this." Travis added, tapping the computer base unit.

"I figured you'd want Tobis to take a look at it." Tharun added.

"And what will the church staff think when they arrive tomorrow?" Jym asked, frowning.

"That they've been robbed." Tayal answered and she tipped the contents of one of the cash bags over the table.

Vorn sighed.

"Just go and get Tobis." He said, "Tell him we need Harvey."

"Right you are major." Tharun replied before he headed for the workshop and moments later he reappeared with Tobis and his astromech droid following behind him.

"Jaysica!" the engineer exclaimed and he rushed to her side, "What happened?"

"Oh she's just sleeping." Kara reassured him, "She'll be fine and so will we until she wakes up."

"Tobis we need Harvey to take a look at this computer." Vorn then told him.

"What? Oh, err, right." Tobis said and he began to examine the base station, "It'll need power." He said and he rushed back into the workshop before returning with a power cable that he used to plug the computer into a power port set into the wall, "Okay Harvey, see what you can get from this." He added and the astromech droid chirped as it rolled up to the computer, extended an access probe and plugged itself in. As it did so Tobis returned to Jaysica's side and sat beside her, cradling her head in his hands. There was another sudden snore.

The probe rotated back and forth several times as Harvey attempted to determine the best settings to interface with the computer before the droid let out another set of chirps.

"The droid wishes to know which of the segmented systems he is to examine." Jym's protocol droid translated.

"I was going to say that." Jeeves responded.

"But you didn't." the other droid replied.

"Red cut it out." Jym said, "Leave this to Major Larcus' droid if it means so much to him."

"As you wish sir." His droid replied.

"Major," Jeeves then said to Vorn, "Harvey reports that the computer drive has two distinct operating segments and wishes to know which he is to examine."

"Both." Vorn replied.

"We need to know why there are two systems." Mace added and Harvey chirped again before continuing to search through the computer's hard drive.

For several minutes the rebels could do nothing more than just stand back and wait while Harvey carried out the assigned task, but eventually the droid stopped probing the computer and began to let out a string of electronic chirps and whistles.

"Harvey says that data regarding temple finances is being automatically copied from one drive to the other." Jeeves translated, "The records of all transactions are then being adjusted in one of them while the original maintains an accurate record of income versus expenditure."

"So there's a priest on the take then." Jym commented.

"Oh no Major Shrell." Jeeves replied, "Harvey also indicates that the computer is set up to automatically transfer both sets of data to a remote location."

"Where?" Anzar asked and there were more chirps from Harvey.

"From the data in the program set up to carry out the transfer it would seem that the financial records are copied to the headquarters of the Church of Infinity in the capital." Jeeves explained.

"That means we're dealing with more than just a few individuals using the church as a recruiting ground doesn't it?" Vorn said, looking at Mace.

"Sounds like the church authorities themselves are in on the rakata plot." Mace replied, "They'll need one set of records to show the Empire and their members, while keeping another for themselves."

"So what's the difference between the two sets?" Kara asked.

"There are functions to automatically reduce income by an amount equal to certain entries listed under expenditure." Jeeves translated as Harvey answered.

"What entries?" Vorn asked.

"Harvey indicates that there are only vague descriptions Major Larcus sir." Jeeves said, "But there do appear to be a great many receipts regarding starport services."

"That sounds like what we're after." Lannaye commented.

"The services are for berthing, fuel and overhaul services." Jeeves went on, "However, the particular starships and their owners are not listed."

"I take that this starport is where the receipts are from though." Mace said, "After all it's the closest one to the temple."

"Harvey indicates that they are captain." Jeeves replied.

"What about a membership list?" Vorn then asked, "We need to know who's a part of the church so we can look for starship registrations. Those shuttles the church itself owns can't be the extent of their fleet and I don't fancy trying to squeeze all of us into one of them without being spotted."

"Of course Major Larcus sir. Harvey says that there is indeed a list of individuals affiliated with the local temple. That is also backed up remotely and there is a manipulated version on the alternate drive with several identities removed."

"Sounds like we need to concentrate on the redacted names." Jym said.

"Excuse Major Shrell," Red interrupted, "but that will require direct access to the starport computer system."

"Mace and Tharun can take Harvey to deal with that." Vorn said.

"And what about the rest of us?" Jym asked.

"We'll split up into pairs. With each pair accessing the flight logs of any ship that Harvey indicates may be operating for the rakata. Kara will go with Tobis and when Jaysica wakes up I'll go with her. Jym, I suggest that you go with Tayal and Travis can act as an escort for Asha."

"That still leaves me and Lannaye." Anzar commented.

"Yes it does." Vorn replied, "I think it sensible for you two to stay with the ships. If anything goes wrong you can get them both back to headquarters." Mace frowned at the suggestion of someone from Jym's team being left in charge of his ship, but before he could say anything that may offend them Vorn spoke again, "It'll only be until Mace and Tharun get back of course. Then they'll take over watch on the *Silver Hawk*."

Anzar looked down at Lannaye.

"There's a lot could go wrong." She said, "We don't now how many ships will be involved or what security measures they could have put in place."

"Nothing special if it's anything like the security at the temple." Tayal commented.

"Do I get a say in this?" Asha asked suddenly, "I mean about being sent to break into a starship. I didn't sign on for that."

"Of course you didn't lieutenant." Vorn replied, "You signed on to help shut down the defences of the starforge and until that task is completed you are under my authority. To put it bluntly, I'm ordering you to assist us."

"Don't worry lieutenant," Travis said, "I'll have your back." And Asha frowned.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." She muttered.

5.

The starport control centre was kept manned at all times of day and night, though in the early morning when Mace and Tharun arrived there were fewer staff around than there would be later on.

"So who are we looking for captain?" Tharun asked softly.

"A guy called Doyer. He's one of the customs agents that Odras Balve paid off to look the other way when his stuff comes through. Or rather Balve is overlooking some of the interest in what Doyer owes him."

"So we're trusting someone who's heavily in debt and could make some extra cash by turning us in for the reward?"

"Kind of. But let's face it, people who get involved with Balve soon find out what happens if you cross him and I happen to know that Balve regards me as something of an investment seeing how much I owe him. If anyone turned me in I bet he'd be asking them to make up his lost income."

"There." Tharun then said as he spotted a man in a customs uniform, "Is that him?"

"Yes it is." Mace replied and he hurried his pace to catch up with the man, "Hey there Agent Doyer." He said and before the man could reply he added, "I think we have a mutual friend. Odras."

Doyer's face fell.

"Look, I'm up to date." He hissed, looking around to see if he was being watched.

"Relax." Mace told him, "I'm not actually here for him, I'm here because I need a favour and I believe that we can come to a mutually agreeable solution." And then he opened his jacket to reveal the heavy blaster pistol holstered under his shoulder as well as the bank notes taken from amongst the money taken from the temple taped to it, "It's your choice." Mace said with a smile.

Taking another quick look around, Doyer reached out and took the money.

"My office is this way." He said and he led the two rebels and their droid into a small room nearby, "So what do you want?" he asked.

"Nothing much." Mace replied, "Just for our droid to have a bit of a look around the registration database. We're looking for an old friend and we think his ship may be kept here."

"What's the ship called?" Doyer asked, "I can-"

"It's called the none of your business." Tharun interrupted.

"We're not sure." Mace said, glaring briefly at Tharun, "Our friend isn't the owner, but we have a list of possibilities. It's better for us to do this with our droid so no one gets suspicious about you running so many searches in one go."

Doyer looked at the two rebels suspiciously, he knew that whatever they were doing was illegal but was reluctant to get in the way of anyone associated with the crime lord Odras Balve.

"Can I assume that if you find your friend then you'll be on your way and won't need anything else?"

"Sure." Tharun said, grinning, "We'll keep your involvement our little secret."

"I'm off to check on the items held in the warehouse pending clearance." Doyer said, "It generally takes me about half an hour."

"We'll be gone by the time you get back." Mace assured him and the customs agent turned and left the rebels alone in his office, "Okay Harvey, it's up to you now." Mace said when the door closed behind Doyer and the droid produced an abrupt sound as it rolled up to the computer access port and plugged in.

"It'd be nice to know what he just said." Tharun commented.

"Actually it probably wouldn't." Mace replied, thinking of how easy it was for droids of the R5 series to get into a bad mood.

Mace and Tharun could do nothing but wait while Harvey searched through the starport database and compared the list of ships' owners to the names that had been redacted from the public membership list of the Church of Infinity. They waited until Harvey suddenly let out a shrill tone, followed by a rapid chirping.

"Does that mean he's found something?" Tharun asked Mace.

"I guess so." Mace replied when the monitor on Doyer's desk came to life and showed a list of names of individuals, followed by names of starships and docking bay numbers, "That's it!" Mace exclaimed and he took out his comlink and activated the device, "Major we've got it." He transmitted, "Four names, each with a ship docked here now."

"That's great." Vorn's voice responded, "Read them to me now and we'll go and check them out."

"Why couldn't I go with Tobis major?" Jaysica asked as they stood outside the docking bay of the first name on the list provided by Mace and Vorn frowned.

"Because this way each team has one person who can hack into the ship's computer." He replied.

"But I thought you were a navigator. Surely you could-"

"Jaysica!" Vorn snapped, "Just do as you're told and get us into this docking bay and then into the ship's computer. Got it?"

"There's no need to be nasty about it." Jaysica muttered as she examined the lock panel beside the door to docking bay.

"What was that? I didn't quite catch it corporal." Vorn said sternly, having heard exactly what she had said.

"Oh nothing." Jaysica said, prising the panel from the wall.

Jaysica then reached inside with her bare hand and there was a sharp 'crack!' accompanied by a flash and she gave out a yelp as she quickly withdrew her hand at the same time as the docking bay door slid open.

"That's better." Vorn said as he peered inside, then he waved for Jaysica to follow him as he rushed through the doorway. Flattening down her hair, Jaysica rushed after him.

Jym shivered as another gust of wind blew past him. He and Tayal had scaled the side of their target docking bay and were now located up on the roof. The bay was open to the elements and the ship inside clearly visible.

"So how will this work again?" he asked her.

"Easy major. I fire a line right across the bay and you hold it tight while I slide across until I'm over the ship. Then you let out some line so that I get lowered down right on top of it. Finally you secure this end and I'll hold it tight at mine for you to slid down and join me. We'll leave a second line running back that we can use to haul ourselves back up afterwards."

"Sounds simple enough." Jym commented.

"It is. So long as you don't drop me." Tayal replied and then she fired her line thrower across the docking bay, smiling as it embedded an anchor in the roof on the far side, "Here, take this." She then said, passing the thrower to Jym and hooking up her harness to the line. Jym pulled the syntherope tight and braced himself, feeling the excess pull as Tayal began to make her way across. Just as she had explained Tayal stopped when she was over the transport ship below and waved at Jym. He nodded and began to slowly let out more syntherope and Tayal began to get lower as the line sagged.

The moment her feet touched the upper hull of the ship she stood up straight and waved once more and Jym reacted by tying the line to a nearby pipe. He saw the line go tight as Tayal pulled on it from her end and with a second line tied around his waist Jym wrapped his legs around it, took hold with both hands and slid down towards her.

"Oof!" he exclaimed as he landed heavily on the roof of the ship. Then as he sat up he looked at Tayal and added, "So how long to open the top hatch?"

"I've no idea." Tayal replied, "I'm more interested in this maintenance cover over here." And she moved gracefully across the upper hull, easily avoiding all of the potential obstacles until she came to the main sensor array. Located just beside it was a small panel marked 'DATA FEED PRIMARY.' Crouching down she pulled a tool from her backpack, "I borrowed this from Anzar." She said as she began to undo the fasteners holding the cover closed.

"A hydrosponder?" Jym said, "Oh that's very subtle."

"It gets the job done." Tayal replied as the cover came loose to expose not only a set of optical data cables, but also an access port, "Now we just plug in and download the data." She added with a smile.

Asha and Travis had also made their way onto the roof of the docking bay that held the ship that was their target, but Travis intended for them to take a more straightforward route into the bay and was simply letting out a vertical line as Asha peered nervously over the edge.

"Not done this before?" Travis asked her.

"There's not much call for it in droid maintenance." She replied and Travis grinned.

"Just hold onto me then." He said as he wrapped the line around his waist and Asha stepped up to him and wrapped her arms around him, "Oh yeah, that's good." He commented and she frowned. Then, before she could say or do anything else he took a single step backwards off the edge of the roof and Asha screamed. She stopped screaming when they landed in a heap on the floor of the docking bay, with Travis on top of her.

"Would you mind getting off me?" she asked.

"Oh I'm good." He replied and she frowned again before pushing him off and scrabbling away.

"I was just waiting to see if all the noise you made had attracted any attention." Travis then said as he got to his feet and he turned to the transport behind him, "Okay, so I suppose now its up to you." He added.

The smell in the tunnel was overpowering as Kara and Tobis crept along it. Tobis suddenly became aware that Kara had stopped behind him and he turned to see if she was all right. There he found her standing with one hand on the tunnel wall for support while the other was clamped over her mouth.

"Oh, err, are you okay?" he asked, stepping closer.

"You know I don't know if it's the amazing new smell you've discovered or me being pregnant," Kara replied, taking her hand from over her mouth as she spoke, "but right now I feel really-" and all of a sudden she vomited, the stream spraying over Tobis' overalls.

"Oh, err." Tobis stammered as he looked down at his clothing, the dull grey now covered in a creamy colour as well. Then he looked back up at Kara.

"Better out than in huh?" she said and then she pointed ahead, "Onwards sergeant. I'm good now."

"Err, yes. Of course." Tobis said and he turned back around.

The tunnel led right under the docking bay where their target was located, a Corellian bulk freighter just over a hundred metres long. A simple grate in the floor of the docking bay allowed waste to be washed down into the tunnel for disposal.

"Score." Kara said as Tobis helped her up out of the tunnel, "So what do we do now?" she then asked before she removed her canteen from her belt and took a drink of water, sloshing it around her mouth to clear out the bitter taste she still had.

"Oh, err." Tobis replied as he looked around. That should do." He added, pointing to where the ship was being refuelled, "There'll be a computer access port located at the fuel intake valve. It's err – it's so that the ground crew can check for obstructions but, err, we can-"

"I get it." Kara interrupted, "Now go patch in while I keep watch from here." And she promptly sat down on the floor beside the open grate and took another drink, "I wish this was something stronger." She said to herself and looking down at her stomach she added, "It's your fault I've to go back down that hole sober kid."

6.

"What the hell happened to you lad?" Tharun asked when he saw Tobis standing at the top of the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp and Tobis turned to look at Kara as she came up the ramp behind him, "Ah." Tharun added, "You okay there mom?"

"Stop calling me that!" Kara snapped and she looked around the lounge. All of Jym's unit along with Asha, Mace and Tharun were present but there was no sign of Jaysica or Vorn, "Where's the boss and the klutz?" she asked.

"Not back yet." Jym replied.

"And no word from either." Mace added.

Kara turned to Tobis and pointed a finger at him accusingly.

"If that girlfriend of yours has killed my baby's father I'll be heading for you every time I need to puke. Got it?" she said and Tobis nodded.

"Somebody looking for us?" Vorn's voice suddenly called out as he and Jaysica walked up the access ramp.

"Boss!" Kara exclaimed as she rushed to embrace him. The she noticed Jaysica with her hair badly messed up, "What the kriff happened to you?" she asked.

"Nothing." Jaysica replied nervously.

"There was an incident with the power flow to the lock of the docking bay door on the way in." Vorn said, "Oh and the lock to the ship. And when she mistook a power socket for a computer access port."

"Tobis I don't feel well." Jaysica then said and she walked up to Tobis and embraced him, closing her eyes as she rested her head against his chest. Then she sniffed several times and opened her eyes, "Tobis, what's on your chest?" she asked as she pulled her head back.

"Oh, err, well, you see Kara-" Tobis began and Jaysica sudden leapt backwards.

"Eww! Eww-eww-eww!" she exclaimed as she furiously rubbed the side of her face that had been resting against Tobis and then she turned and ran towards the bathroom.

"Perhaps we should take a look at the data we've collected." Jym suggested.

"Good idea." Vorn replied, "Let's go."

The cockpit of the *Silver Hawk* was designed to seat only four people, so when eleven tried to cram themselves inside it rapidly became very crowded. Sat in the co-pilot's seat, Vorn's eyes widened briefly as Kara suddenly sat in his lap and kissed him.

"The baby needs somewhere to sit." She said and he sighed.

One by one the datapads used to store the information copied from the transport ships were hooked up to the *Silver Hawk's* computer and the flight logs copied to it. The information appeared on the console's main display as four separate lists of jump co-ordinates, providing a full history of where the ships had been.

"Three of these ships have been in the nebula major." Mace said as he recognised some of the numbers.

"Yes, so I see." Vorn replied as he struggled to see around Kara.

"So we can take any of them?" Anzar asked from the back of the cockpit.

"No." Mace answered, "Most of these are no where near the rakata starforge. They must be being used to run supplies to the various outposts they've got set up."

"Make sure to keep a copy of all of this." Vorn said, "The rakata probably have a primary world somewhere in the nebula and we've no idea where at the moment."

"Sure thing major." Mace said and then he smiled, "That's it!" he exclaimed, pressing his finger against the display as a particular string of numbers appeared, "Those are the co-ordinates we used to reach the starforge."

"Then we've found our supply ship." Jym said, "Which one is it?"

"Oh that's ours!" Kara said excitedly, "The one Tobis and I hacked into." And then her face fell, "I guess this means we'll be going back down that tunnel doesn't it?" she added, "I've got a bad feeling in my stomach about this."

The door to Gayal Tharr's office slid open and one of her subordinate rushed in, came to a sudden halt and saluted. Gayal ignored him for a few moments while she finished what she was working on.

"Yes?" she said eventually, sitting up straight in her chair and looking at the intelligence agent.

"This just came in." he answered, holding out a datapad.

"And you couldn't just forward it electronically?" Gayal asked as she took the datapad and looked at the screen, "Ah. I see." She added and she got to her feet and headed for the door.

"Where are you going?" the junior agent asked.

"We can't deal with this." Gayal replied, holding up the datapad, "So I'm taking it to someone who can."

Surrounded by an assortment of other officers, Fleet Admiral Praus Vretan stood in the command centre orbiting the sector's capital world of Estran. Most of them were administrative staff from the headquarters but there were three men in admirals' uniforms as well. These men, Admirals Hall, Rosten and Sayer commanded three of the most powerful ships in the sector fleet. Admiral Hall commanded the tector-class star destroyer *Horrific*, a variant of the standard Imperial-class star destroyer like the *Primarch* Rosten commanded. Hall's ship exchanged hangar space for enhanced armour protection while Admiral Sayer commanded the *Pride of the Empire*, an allegiance-class battlecruiser that was six hundred metres longer than even the other two vessels.

"Wait! You can't go in there!" a voice called out and the three naval fleet commanders turned away from the holographic representation of the sector and looked towards the entrance to the command centre. There they saw a junior officer and a pair of fleet security troopers blocking the path of a woman in the uniform of Imperial Intelligence.

"Fleet admiral! I need to speak with you immediately!" Gayal called out.

"Let her pass." Admiral Vretan said, waving her forwards and the security guards stepped aside "Now what's so important that you come barging in here without first making an appointment Ms Tharr?" he added.

"This is admiral." Gayal replied and she gave him the datapad. Admiral Vretan took the offered device and began to read the display, looking uninterested at first but his look hardened suddenly.

"How up to date is this?" he asked, frowning.

"The information is about two hours old." Gayal told him, "My source has to rely on some rather unorthodox methods of relaying information to us."

"Sir, if I might ask-" Hall began.

"Of course." Admiral Vretan interrupted, "If the information that Imperial Intelligence is presenting to us is accurate then it seems that the Rebel Alliance is about to deploy its entire fleet for a strike."

"Including their privateers?" Sayer asked.

"Unlikely." Hall responded, "That rabble don't even have the discipline to fight as part of a rebel battlegroup."

"There's no mention of the privateers." Gayal added in agreement.

"So an attack like Tarlen then." Hall said, "Which world is the target?"

"None." Admiral Vretan answered, "According to this report the rebels are sending their fleet into the nebula to engage something. We've got the jump co-ordinates for the location where they'll be heading into the nebula." And then he turned back to the holographic display. Reaching his arm up he placed his hand at the edge of the nebula and that part of the hologram was suddenly magnified.

"I can have my squadron there in under two hours sir." Hall said, "Now that Captain Naje's line is up and running again my ships are enough to deal with the rebel fleet."

"No." Admiral Vretan replied without looking at Hall.

"Of course, you'll be wanting to deal with them personally." Hall said, "Your squadron is of course-"

"Actually that's not what I had in mind either." Admiral Vretan said and he looked to one of the nearby headquarters staff, "I want a full deployment schedule." He ordered.

"Admiral I must protest." Gayal exclaimed, "If you start pulling in ships from different units the rebels will be gone by the time you get there."

"Yes I'm counting on that." Admiral Vretan replied.

"But admiral-" Gayal began.

"Ms Tharr," The fleet admiral interrupted, tucking the datapad under his arm, "if a squadron of our ships jumps out there right now then the rebel fleet may be warned and change their plans. On the other hand if I choose my forces carefully then I can have a much more powerful force waiting for them when they come back out again."

"What ships were you thinking about sir?" Sayer asked and Admiral Vretan took a deep breath.

"Every destroyer we have. Including the lighter ones. Plus as many cruisers as we can spare without leaving our shipping lane open to attack. I plan to set up a blockade of our ships outside the nebula. I'll have our interdictors establish a gravity well further out and with the nebula blocking the rebels from jumping to hyperspace as they emerge they'll have no choice but to engage our ships." Then Admiral Vretan looked at Gayal again, "Unless you'd rather have Moff Horatian overrule me Ms Tharr." He said.

"No. Of course not fleet admiral." She said.

"Then if you don't mind Ms Tharr I have a great deal of work to do." Admiral Vretan said and Gayal nodded before turning and walking away.

"Of course," Admiral Rosten said, breaking the silence he had so far maintained, "we don't know what it is that the rebels are up to."

"Do you really think that matters?" Hall asked him, "This time next week we'll have wiped them out. All of them."