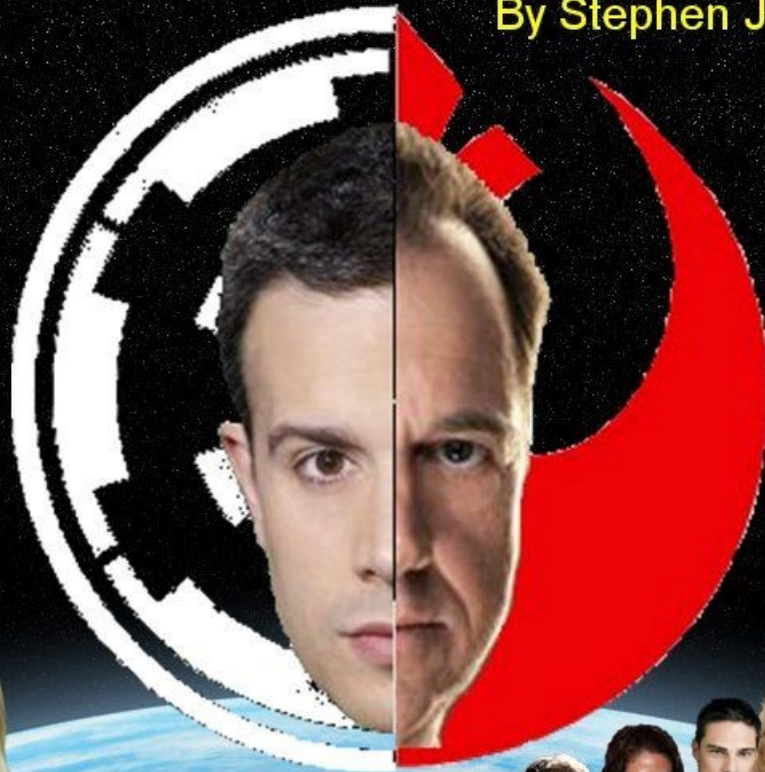


STAR WARS

5-02: Return to the Forge

By Stephen J Dutton



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Civil war turns father against son

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

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

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

RETURN TO THE FORGE

FINDING A WAY TO GET ABOARD THE STAR FORGE, THE REBELS ATTEMPT TO SABOTAGE IT IN PREPARATION FOR THEIR FLEET TO ASSAULT IT. BUT UNKNOWN TO THEM THE GALACTIC EMPIRE HAS DISCOVERED THE FLEET'S PREPARATIONS AND IS PLANNING AN ATTACK OF ITS OWN...

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

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1.

The grating in the floor of the docking bay burst open and clattered as it slid away.

"Get it off! Get it off! Get it off!" the first rebel to emerge yelled.

"Jaysica keep your kriffing voice down!" the next one hissed. This was Major Vorn Larcus, the rebel in charge of the mission. After him came a man in overalls who rushed up to Jaysica with a towel and began to wipe the vomit from the back of her head and neck.

"Oh thank you Tobis." Jaysica said and Vorn was relieved that this time she chose to keep her voice down.

"Sorry about that boss." Another woman whispered as she climbed out of the tunnel below the docking bay, "But I did try and warn her."

"Yes I heard your warning Kara." Vorn replied as he watched the final two members of his team, Captain Mace Grayle and Sergeant Tharun Verser climb out of the tunnel. Tharun was supposed to have been the first one out of the tunnel, but when Kara had thrown up over Jaysica the small woman had pushed past him to get clear.

For this mission Vorn's team was not alone though, a second unit consisting of five more rebel field agents as well as an officer from the Alliance's droid maintenance department and it was she that was the first to climb out of the tunnel.

"Do you do this a lot in the field? Crawl through sewers I mean."

"More than I'd like Asha." Mace replied as he helped her up then he reached back down into the tunnel to help up the next rebel.

"I'm fine captain." The man said. Major Jym Shrell commanded the second rebel unit and as Vorn's team kept watch over the dimly lit docking bay the rest of his unit followed him. First was Captain Anzar Deller, the owner of the ship that transported Jym's unit and behind him came his first mate, Lannaye Curve. Next out was a young woman about the same age as Jaysica, Tayal Lineer had been a professional thief and as soon as she was out of the tunnel she darted into the shadows. The last man out of the tunnel was Travis Jesler, an ex-bounty hunter who wore armour similar to Tharun's.

"Excuse me." A voice then called out from in the tunnel, "But is someone going to help us up?"

"Tharun, Tobis, go help Travis with the droids." Vorn ordered and the pair returned to the entrance to the tunnel. As the three rebels helped a pair of 3PO protocol droids and an R5 astromech out of the tunnel Jym dashed over to Vorn's side.

"Okay so now what?" he asked as he looked up at the bulk freighter that the docking bay held.

"Over there." Vorn replied, pointing across the bay and past the freighter to where there numerous shipping containers, "I think it may be nice to know exactly what it is that the rakata are taking to the star forge if we're going to infiltrate it."

Jym nodded and looked around to where he knew Tayal was concealed and nodded, waving towards the containers. Then he turned to Anzar and Lannaye.

"Go with her." He said softly and the two rebels dashed after Tayal.

They came to a halt amongst the containers, pressing themselves up against one of them while Tayal inspected the seals.

"Nothing special here." The thief said and then she produced a compact multi-purpose tool from her harness and jabbed a small knife blade into the narrow gap where the container closed. Immediately there was a hissing sound and the container opened just enough for Tayal to lean inside and examine the contents.

"Well?" Anzar asked.

"Fusion generators." Tayal replied.

"Go tell the major." Anzar told Lannaye and the woman scurried back to where Jym and Vorn waited on the far side of the docking bay.

"Looks like they're moving fusion generators." She said, focusing on Jym.

"That fits with what we know about the rakata." Vorn said, "They're shipping in the materials they need to maintain an advanced civilisation. When we were aboard the star forge last time a lot of it looked like Republic and Imperial technology adapted for their own use. This time my plan is for them to be carrying us there."

"In the crates with the reactors?" Jym asked.

"Exactly. Hiding inside the crates allows us to get aboard the ship without breaking in." Vorn said. Then he looked around the docking bay one last time, noting the positions of all of the rebels, "It looks like we're the only ones in here." He said and he stood up, "So let's go find ourselves some boxes to hide in."

The size of the containers left enough room in each for four rebels plus a single droid. Therefore it was easy to divide the rebels up between them by placing each of Jym and Vorn's field teams along with their commanders' protocol droids into two, while the crews of their ships and Tobis' astromech, Harvey hid in a

third. So hidden, the rebels waited in silence using glow rods to illuminate the interiors until Vorn's team felt their container shift suddenly.

"What's happening?" Jaysica whispered.

"Loading droids." Tharun replied just as quietly, "They're putting us aboard the ship."

"So will we be taking off soon?" Jaysica then asked.

"I'll ask." Vorn said and he activated his comlink, "Mace, do you read me?" he asked.

"Right here major." Mace's voice responded, "I think we're already aboard the ship."

"That's what I'm calling about." Vorn said, "You know the protocols of this starport better than anyone else.

How soon can we expect to depart?"

"Loading droids work on a just in time basis major. We'll likely take off less than an hour after loading in finished."

"And then it's probably only about five or six until we reach the star forge." Vorn said.

"That's my guess major." Mace answered.

"That's a long time to spend cooped up in shipping containers. Have Harvey conduct whatever scans he can manage from inside. As soon as the freighter jumps to hyperspace we'll get out and find somewhere more comfortable to hide."

The sound of the freighter's repulsorlift engines starting up signified its launch just as Mace had predicted.

The sound continued until the ship exited the atmosphere and switched to its ion drives. Finally, when the freighter was beyond the gravity well of Estran there was a lurch that was felt within the containers.

"Okay that's it." Mace said, "We're in hyperspace."

Anzar stepped up to the join where the container opened and pressed hard either side.

"Give me a hand." He said, looking around at Mace. Then the two men braced themselves and there was a grinding sound as the container opened. Stepping out into the hold Mace and Anzar spotted Tayal sitting on top of another nearby container, grinning.

"What's got you so happy?" Mace asked and Tayal pointed to another container. The opening of this was ajar, but the position of the adjacent container was preventing from opening any further as Vorn's team attempted to get out.

"Looks like your leader overlooked something in his plan." Jym then said to Mace as he stepped out from his own hiding place.

"Tobis, get Harvey out here." Mace said, looking back into the container that had been his hiding place, "The major could do with his help."

"Oh, err, right." Tobis responded and he looked over his shoulder at where his R5 unit was rolling from the container, "Err Harvey can you detach the door from that container please?" he asked and the little droid let out a chirp as a panel in the front of its cylindrical body opened and a tiny circular saw extended out from within.

"Without actually damaging it." Jym added, "The last thing we need is for anyone to come along and notice that there was someone hiding in there.

Harvey let out another sound; this one sounding much ruder than the first and the saw was withdrawn to be replaced by a fine manipulating claw that was then used to undo the bolts holding the container's door on.

"Is there any way I can step out of this thing and still retain some dignity?" Vorn said as he emerged first, looking down at where the door now lay.

"I don't think so sir." Mace replied, "Your orders?"

"I want to patch into the ship's systems." Vorn replied, "I want to know exactly how people are aboard apart from us. Also we need to know about security. The shuttles we checked out last time carried security droids. If there are any aboard this ship we need to avoid them."

"Thinking of seizing control boss?" Kara asked from behind him.

"No." Vorn answered, shaking his head, "Not yet at least. We don't know if there's some specific approach pattern or recognition code they have to use. If there is and it's not in the computer then stowing away will have been a waste of time. On the other hand this is a valuable ship and we do have enough people here to operate it. So I'm suggesting that we use it as our escape ship."

"I like it." Jym said, "But we've not even got aboard the star forge yet."

"No, but I like to plan ah-" Vorn began before the freighter lurched again.

"We just dropped out of hyperspace." Lannaye said.

"Too soon." Kara said, "We only just left the Estran system."

"No." Mace added, "Think about it. These guys have probably made this run hundreds of times and who knows how many times it was made before they started? All that time they've probably got an optimum route plotted." And then there was another lurch, "See? We could be at the base of the Spire Worlds."

"So that means it's just a quick jump up and then some hops through the nebula." Vorn replied with a smile.

"Exactly." Mace agreed, "We could be at the star forge in under two hours at this rate."

"In that case we should split up." Vorn said, "We need to evaluate this ship before we arrive. I'd hate to find out we're surrounded by enemy troops who were aboard."

"Teams of three?" Jym suggested and Vorn nodded.

"I think Anzar, Lannaye and Mace should head for the bridge. Tobis, Tayal and Jaysica can head for engineering. Asha can take Tharun and Travis to search for any extra security or passengers while Kara waits here with you and me."

For a moment Jym frowned at the thought of waiting with Kara with and Vorn, but he realised that Vorn's plan assigned the best personnel to each target.

"Agreed." He said.

Vorn turned towards the container where Mace's group had hidden just in time to see Harvey wheeling out.

"Okay Harvey," he said, "let's see a deck plan of this type of ship and figure out the best ways to get around."

"Admiral on the bridge!" one of the mon calamari officers present yelled as Rear Admiral Aphanar stepped onto the bridge of her ship, the MC80 cruiser *Wave Rider*.

"As you were." She said before the bridge crew even had the opportunity to stand at attention. She walked to her station and sat down, running her eyes over the displays built into her chair before she turned to one of her crew, "Get me the general." She ordered.

"On the line now admiral."

"Good." Aphanar replied, turning around again and she activated her communication system, "General Kain." She said as a hologram of a human appeared in front of her.

"Admiral." The image responded, "I take that your ships are ready?"

"They are general."

"Then you have permission to launch. Good luck and may the Force be with you. Kain out." And then the image faded as the transmission ended.

Adjusting the communication system Admiral Aphanar then addressed the entire fleet.

"This is Admiral Aphanar to all ships. Initiate the jump to hyperspace and I will see you all at the first rendezvous point." She announced.

Outside, through the bridge viewport Aphanar saw flashes of light as her ships engaged their hyperdrives and then she saw the stars themselves stretch out and the *Wave Rider* itself lurched as it too entered hyperspace.

At more than a hundred metres long but crewed by only ten individuals the freighter had a great many places for the rebels to conceal themselves as they crept around it. Heading for the bridge, Mace led Anzar and Lannaye. It was slow going for the trio, with more than one attempt to get to the bridge suddenly blocked by the unexpected appearance of a crewmember that forced the rebels to retreat and either try again after waiting for them to move on or look for another route around. The smuggler carried a bulky weapon with a flared muzzle. Known as a decksweeper, the weapon was designed to discharge an expanding energy pulse identical to a blaster on a stun setting. Intended specifically for use in the confines of a starship, Mace planned on using it to clear the corridor should contact with the crew be unavoidable.

"How many is that?" Anzar whispered as the ship dropped out of hyperspace again.

"Eight." Lannaye replied and Mace suddenly halted ahead of them, "What's wrong?" Lannaye asked, pressing herself up against the nearest bulkhead and looking around for any sign that they had been discovered.

"Eight." Mace replied softly, "We've made eight jumps already."

"So?" Anzar asked.

"So if we made one jump to the base of the Spire Worlds, one up to where we entered the nebula last time and then six more that only leaves two more jumps before we're at the star forge."

"This is taking too long." Lannaye commented.

"Perhaps we should fall back to the hold." Anzar suggested, but Mace shook his head.

"Major Larcus wants the bridge checking out. So that's what we're going to do." He said.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Lannaye muttered, but Mace ignored her and carried on.

Anzar looked down at Lannaye and frowned.

"Looks like we're carrying on then." He said.

2.

The bridge of the freighter was a cramped compartment that had just enough room for four manned stations, a pilot, navigator, comscan operator and a systems monitoring station. The hatchway that led to it was open and as Mace and the other rebels approached they could hear the crew talking.

"Numbers are locked in." the navigator announced, "We can jump whenever you're ready."

"Then standby, I'm powering the hyperdrive now." The pilot replied, but before he did as he said he glanced to the comscan station, "Have you got the squeal ready?" he asked.

"Just loading it in now."

"Good." The pilot said, "I want it set up to send as soon as we arrive. The last thing we need is for those damned vultures to shoot us down."

"Vultures." Mace whispered to Anzar, "They must be talking about droid fighters."

"Makes sense." Anzar replied, "A patrolling force to watch for intruders."

"And this ship has an identification code that will allow it to pass right through." Mace commented and he looked at the others, "I think we ought to call it in." he said.

"What was that?" Vorn asked, "All this gear around us is interfering with your signal." And he looked around at the containers of fusion reactor parts all around him.

"I said that the crew has pre-programmed a code that will take the ship through the star forge's defences." Lannaye repeated, the transmission still somewhat distorted.

"So if we seize the ship now we could still get through." Kara commented.

"Assuming that there aren't any other procedures we don't know about." Jym responded and Vorn nodded in agreement.

"Yes, its too risky for now." He said and then he raised his comlink to his mouth, "Hold your position," he signalled, "but don't do anything to give yourselves away just yet. Asha's team hasn't found anything yet, but they're still searching. We still haven't heard from Tobis' group yet."

"Understood." Lannaye replied and then the connection was cut off.

"We should have brought Penny with us." Jaysica commented as the group she was at the rear of made its way along a maintenance crawl way intended to allow easy inspection of the sublight ion drives. If the engines were run for any prolonged period of time the crawl way would become far too hot to use, but since the freighter was only using its sublight engines for brief periods between jumps through hyperspace the temperature was manageable.

"And what would that achieve?" Tayal asked from in front, "We've not seen any signs of droids aboard. So even a mouse droid would give us away. Now quit complaining and keep up. The engine room can't be far ahead and the sooner we get there the sooner your boyfriend can check it out. Assuming he can stop checking out my ass." And at that point Tayal looked back at Jaysica and Tobis.

"What?" Tobis exclaimed, "I, err, I wasn't." and he looked back towards Jaysica who stared back at him, frowning, "Honestly." He added.

Tayal crawled on until she reached the end of the crawl way, a mesh covering that blocked the way entirely. She could not make out anyone on the far side through the mesh, but she had learnt not to rely on sight alone and her hand reached for the motion sensor array clipped to her shoulder.

"Stay still." She whispered to the two rebels behind her and she activated the sensor.

There was a brief vibration that ran through her shoulder to indicate that the device had activated properly and then she waited motionless while it conducted its scan. Had it detected any further movement close by it would have vibrated again to warn her, but there was nothing and after about a minute of waiting she gave up, "Okay then here goes." She said and grasping the mesh in one hand she formed a fist and struck it with the other. There was a brief 'bang' and the cover came away from the wall, prevented from falling to the floor thanks only to Tayal's grip on it. Once again she waited, watching and listening and waiting to see if the sensor would pick up any movement other than the punch she had just thrown. With nothing to suggest that they had been discovered Tayal led the others out of the crawl way into the engine room and as soon as her feet touched the deck she drew her hold out blaster.

Tobis took the grate from Tayal as soon as he followed her out, waiting for Jaysica to get clear as well.

Jaysica pulled herself from the crawl way using her arms before suddenly collapsing onto the deck in a heap.

"It's alright, I'm okay." She said as Tobis bent down to help her.

"Just get that cover back on." Tayal hissed.

"Hey, shouldn't Tobis be giving the orders?" Jaysica asked her, "He's a sergeant. In fact I'm a corporal and you're not even that."

"Oh yeah?" Tayal replied, "Well we all know what Kara did to get her promotion. What did you have to do for yours? Weren't you willing to do what your major wanted in exchange for a commission?" Jaysica gasped at the suggestion that Kara's commission had been a result of her relationship with Vorn. "That's not true!" she snapped. "Oh, err, shouldn't we be keeping quiet?" Tobis commented softly as he finished putting the grate back in place. "Yes we should sergeant." Tayal said with a grin, "Perhaps you should put the corporal on report." "Why you-" Jaysica hissed, leaping forwards to strike Tayal. However, the thief was agile enough to easily sidestep the crude attack and Jaysica found herself falling through where Tayal had been stood. Right into an emergency alarm trigger.

When the klaxon started to sound the bridge crew began checking their instruments frantically. "Fire on the engineering deck!" the systems operator exclaimed and from the rebels' hiding place Mace scowled. "Jaysica." He hissed.

"What the kriff is that?" Jym snapped as the klaxon was heard in the hold. "I've got a very bad feeling about this." Vorn responded as he activated his comlink, "All units report in." he broadcast. "Tharun here major. What's going on?" "Err, it's Tobis." Tobis' voice then cut in, "We err – well we had a slight accident." "Major it's Lannaye, the bridge crew is starting to panic. They're ordering all available crew to the engineering deck to fight a fire." Vorn frowned. "Everyone just go! We need to seize the ship now." He ordered.

"About damn time." Mace muttered and raising the deck sweeper to his shoulder he pointed it towards the still open hatchway ahead of him and fired. There was a sudden pulse of bright blue light as the weapon discharged and the energy blast expanded to fill the corridor leading to the bridge and then envelope the entire bridge crew at once. Without any being able to alert any of the other crew on the ship all four instead slumped forwards in their seats. "Okay let's go!" Mace yelled and he rushed forwards onto the bridge, "Anzar, give me a hand with these guys." He then added as he pulled the first of them from his control station. "Sure." Anzar replied, grabbing hold of a second unconscious crewmember. "What about me?" Lannaye asked. "Here take this." Anzar told her, passing his blaster rifle to her, "Cover the door. You see anyone that's not one of us then shoot them." "Got it." Lannaye replied and she unfolded the rifle's stock and crouched by the side of the hatchway. Anzar and Mace dragged the four unconscious crewmen out into the corridor and dumped them on the floor before darting back to the bridge. Anzar sat in the pilot's seat while Mace sat beside him at the astrogation console. Behind them Lannaye got to her feet and closed the hatch, a heavy door dropping down to seal them in. Then she sat at the comscan position. "All jump co-ordinates are locked in." Mace said. "Engines all reading in the green." Anzar then said. "Looks like the access code is set as well." Lannaye then added. "Great." Mace said, "Now how about we shut that damned alarm up?"

Although the engine room itself had been unmanned when the rebels had first entered it there were two crewmen in the next compartment and at the sound of the alarm they burst in through the door, one of them clutching a fire extinguisher. Tayal reacted quickly, firing at them just as they came through the hatch. But her tiny blaster was too inaccurate from all the way across the room and the shot instead struck a nearby pipe, producing a sudden blast of vapour that made both crewmen duck. "Okay, shooting in the engine room – bad idea." Tayal commented as she too ducked for cover. Beside Tayal, Jaysica also crouched out of sight with her compact blaster in her hand. On the other hand Tobis held his military grade sidearm with both hands as he moved towards the crew and he flicked the setting to 'stun'. Rounding a large power capacitor as tall as he was Tobis suddenly found himself face-to-face with one of the men who swung at him with a metal bar he had picked up. Tobis ducked and there was a sudden loud 'clang!' as it struck the capacitor. Startled by the noise the crewman hesitated before striking again and this gave Tobis just long enough to raise his blaster, press it to the man's abdomen and fire. The light and sound

from the shot were muffled by the crewman's own body and he crumpled and fell, coming close to landing on top of Tobis.

Tobis got to his feet and was about to advance further when the second crewman appeared in front of him, still clutching the fire extinguisher. Before Tobis could even take aim to shoot him the man discharged the extinguisher towards Tobis, enveloping him in a cloud of freezing cold carbon dioxide and causing him to stagger backwards. The man roared and charged towards the disorientated Tobis with the extinguisher held high. But before he could use it like a club to batter Tobis, Tayal suddenly appeared. Not willing to risk another blaster shot in the engine room with a weapon that could not be set to stun she had exchanged her blaster for her expanding baton and she swung it towards the charging crewman. The tip of the baton smashed into his hand and he cried out in pain as he lost his grip on the fire extinguisher that clattered loudly to the deck. Then Tayal struck again, this time striking the side of the man's knee and he dropped to the deck. Finally, before he could attempt to get back to his feet Tayal brought the baton down on the back of his head and he collapsed, his lifeless body lying in a steadily growing pool of blood.

"Its safe." Tayal called out towards Jaysica as she collapsed her baton, "You can stop cowering back there now."

"I wasn't hiding." Jaysica protested, "I was just waiting for my chance to get involved."

"Yeah right." Tayal replied.

"Tobis tell her." Jaysica said, but Tobis was instead taking out his comlink.

"Err, we've secured engineering." He transmitted, "Everything's fine here." And then he looked at the pipe that was still spraying vapour into the room, "Sort of."

The first thing the remaining four crewmen knew of the rebel presence was when the butt of Tharun's heavy blaster rifle came round the corner to strike one in the face and he staggered backwards with blood pouring from his nose. As he stepped fully into view Tharun spun his rifle and fired a single shot that blasted a hole right through the chest of the next man. Behind him Travis leapt out into the open, his rifle set to fully automatic and opened fire. With nowhere to hide the last two crewmen were easy targets and both fell dead almost instantly.

As Tharun and Travis surveyed their work Asha stepped out from around the corner as well and looked at the bodies.

"You guys don't mess around do you?" she said.

"Doesn't pay to take chances lieutenant." Travis replied, "When I was a bounty hunter hunting rebels, I always fired first because I knew that they would give half a chance."

"I think that's enough talk about shooting our own side." Tharun said as he slung his rifle and took out his comlink, "Okay major, we've got four dead crewmen here."

"Good." Vorn's voice replied, "Mace's team has taken the bridge and four prisoners and Tobis has another prisoner and a body in the engine room. Jym's going up to the bridge with Jeeves and Red to take command of the ship while I head to engineering with Harvey and Penny. They'll update the admiral on our progress and complete the jump to the star forge. I want you to head up to the bridge as well to take the prisoners somewhere secure. Oh and if any of the crew are wearing those pendants I want you to grab hold of them. I've got an idea."

When the freighter completed its final jump and dropped out of hyperspace with the star forge ahead in the distance there was an electronic squealing sound from the communications speaker.

"Well? Either of you two got that?" Jym asked the two protocol droids standing behind Lannaye. One of the droids belonged to Jym himself, known as Red because of both its serial number RD-3PO and its bright red colouration while the second golden coloured droid was Vorn's and was referred to as Jeeves.

"Oh yes sir Major Shrell." Jeeves exclaimed, "It's a standard binary code used by some militaries during the Clone Wars."

"The Separatists to be exact sir." Red added.

"Probably the squadron of vulture droids bearing down on us." Lannaye said.

"They are requesting identification sir." Jeeves said.

"Then now we find out what that code is worth." Jym said, "Send it Lannaye."

Outside the ship a dozen droid fighters streaked towards the lumbering vessel, their weapons trained on it. But just as they were coming into firing range and they began to lock on there was a transmission, a string of binary encoded digits that matched the approved response code and they veered off, flying over the top of the freighter.

"Well they bought it." Anzar said as he watched the fighters through the forward viewport.

"Okay set a course for the star forge." Jym replied, "But take it slow, we don't know what other checks there could be and I'd rather not be in a position where we can't jump away if we have to. Try not to make it so

slow that they get suspicious though.”

”You know, fly casual.” Mace added.

”Right. Flying casual.” Anzar replied.

”Did I miss anything?” Vorn asked as he appeared in the open hatchway with Harvey behind him.

”Just a squadron of sentry fighters.” Jym replied, ”But the code was good and we’re closing on the star forge.”

”Take a look at that.” Lannaye exclaimed as she looked up from the comscan console and out of the viewport. There, just coming into view were the unmistakable ring shapes of Lucrehulk-class battleships. With a diameter of more than three thousand metres and capable of carrying an army of battle droids each one was a potent war machine even by modern standards.

And the rakata had dozens of them. Additionally the space around the massive battleships was dotted with smaller vessels, each one a potent warship in its own right. To the rebels these were easily recognisable, without exception they had been types used by the Separatists during the Clone Wars and were designed to be operated by large numbers of droids. Droids that the star forge could produce at least as rapidly as it seemed to be producing warships.

”Looks like they’ve managed to build some more since the last flyby.” Vorn commented as he gazed at them as well.

”How is the fleet supposed to fight all those?” Anzar said.

”The idea is that it won’t have to.” Vorn replied, ”Not if Asha can shut them all down.”

Then the communications system chimed again.

”Freighter *Ligson* respond.” An alien voice said in Basic and Lannaye reached for the transmit switch.

”No wait!” Vorn called out before she could.

”What’s wrong?” Jym asked.

”The crew of the freighter were all men. If a woman replies the rakata may figure out something’s up.”

”Put me through.” Jym said and he reached for the communications controls set into his console, ”This is *Ligson*. Go ahead.” He said in response to the rakata signal.

”*Ligson* you are to proceed to bay four. Your cargo will be offloaded there.”

”Understood.” Jym said, ”We’re coming in.” and then he shut off the communication system and looked around, ”So anyone know which one bay four is?” he asked.

”That’s why I brought Harvey.” Vorn said, looking down at the astromech, ”Okay Harvey, give us the plan.”

And from within the little droid a hologram was projected into the air in the middle of the bridge that illustrated the star forge. It was somewhat different to the actual star forge as it was now, the rakata had had three months to continue construction since it had been downloaded from their system, ”Jeeves,” Vorn then said to his protocol droid, ”can you tell which one is bay four.”

”Why certainly Major Larcus sir. Although the rakata language is not fully understood, by making use of information provide by Doctor Drame I am able to-“

”Just point.” Jym interrupted.

”Well really.” Jeeves responded and then he pointed to a position near the top of the spherical station core, ”Here. This is bay four.” He said.

”Heading in now.” Anzar said as he adjusted the freighter’s heading.

Meanwhile Jym leaned towards Vorn.

”So when were you planning on telling me about that map?” he asked.

”As soon as you needed to know.” Vorn replied, ”Don’t worry, you’ll get a copy that Red can translate for you. Or at least translate as much as Jeeves can.”

”Excuse me,” Mace then said, turning his seat to face them, ”but even when we dock, what exactly is the plan for getting off this ship?”

”I’m glad you asked that Mace.” Vorn said and he held up his hand. Dangling from it were a pair of the infinity symbol pendants that followers of the rakata wore. Separating the pendants he handed one to Jym and then the other to Anzar, ”Travis already has one.” He said, ”I figure that between the three of you, you ought to be able to talk your way through whatever security they’ve got on hand and then open a gap for the rest of us.”

”Why just my team?” Jym asked as he placed the pendant around his neck.

”Because mine has already been aboard and it’s quite possible that some droid could recognise us.” Vorn replied.

”Yeah.” Mace added, ”Damn that electronic recall.”

3.

Bay four was large enough to hold several ships the size of the *Ligson*. Right now there was a second transport ship present, an oval shaped gallofree medium transport only slightly smaller than the *Ligson* while the rest of the space had been given over to short range shuttlecraft. Unsurprisingly these were mainly of types used by the Trade Federation before and during the Clone Wars. Clearly it was not only warships and droids that the star forge was being used to produce.

Anzar, Jym and Travis waited until the main access ramp was fully extended before all three strode down it calmly to where a single protocol droid backed by a squad of skeletal battle droids all standing in a row with their carbines held cross their chests. Further back, standing either side of the large hatchway leading away from the docking bay stood a pair of bulkier super battle droids, apparently acting as sentries. While a group of binary load lifter droids was lined up near another bulkhead. Each of the rebels had blaster pistols of various types concealed under jackets taken from the *Ligson's* genuine crewmen, these being the only weapons that they could carry without giving away the fact that they were armed.

"Please present your manifest." The protocol droid said.

"Here." Jym replied, handing over a datapad and as the protocol droid took it he looked towards the medium transport, "Where are the crew of that ship?" he asked.

"They desired refreshment." The protocol droid replied without looking up from the datapad.

"You know I'm feeling a bit peckish as well." Travis commented.

"I could do with something to eat that wasn't processed by our nutritional dispensers as well." Anzar then added.

"Then that's all of us." Jym said and then to the protocol droid he added, "So where do we go?"

The protocol droid turned towards the battle droids behind it, in particular to one with yellow stripes on its torso and head.

"Corporal, take two droids and escort these individuals to the mess hall on level four seven three."

"Rodger rodger." The battle droid replied and it stepped out of line, followed by the droids either side of it,

"Come with us please." It then said to Jym and it headed for the hatchway. Jym nodded to Anzar and Travis and they began to follow it, the other two droid escorts then following them. Meanwhile the rest of the squad instead followed the protocol droid as it too began to walk away. The droids escorted the rebels out of the hangar without either of the sentries making any moves and then turned down a corridor leading towards a turbolift cluster. Once there the battle droid corporal summoned a turbolift car and waited for it to arrive. As they waited Jym glanced at Anzar and Travis in turned and nodded.

The turbolift arrived just seconds later and the door slid open to reveal its empty interior. The rebels made their way to the very back of the turbolift and waited as the battle droids followed them in. Once inside all three of the droids turned to face the door, leaving their backs to the rebels and at that moment they acted.

All three men drew their blasters, pressed them to the base of the droids' necks and fired.

Anzar was armed with a relatively lightweight sporting weapon, but from point blank range it was easily enough to punch through the thin plating of a battle droid's skull and destroy it's main processing system. On the other hand both Jym and Travis carried heavy blaster pistols and the single shots from them were enough to blast the droids' heads apart.

"Okay quick grab their blasters," Jym said as he tucked his pistol under his jacket again and instead scooped up the nearest carbine, "and let's get back to the hangar. We've got some sentries to deal with."

Rushing back to the hangar the three rebels halted just short of the hatchway and Jym took out his comlink.

"Okay we're in position. How's it looking?" he signalled.

"Good." Vorn's voice replied, "The protocol droid set the load lifters running and then left with his squad.

There are just the two guards by the door left to deal with. Can you do it?"

"Sure." Jym answered, "Just watch and wait." Then he shut off his comlink and put it away, "Okay here we go." He then said to Anzar and Travis, "Anzar take the one to the left and Travis and I will take the one to the right. Remember, aimed shots only. I don't want us hitting anything that will trigger an alarm."

"Understood major." Anzar replied while Travis just nodded. The three rebels then rushed forwards with their weapons held high. The lack of a stock made precise aiming difficult, but given the short range they were operating and their years of experience in using similar weapons this was not a problem for any of them.

They reached the hatchway still out of sight of the two super battle droids standing just within and Anzar fired two shots in rapid succession that both slammed into the droid to the left and sent it toppling forwards with two smoking holes through it's armour plating. In response the second droid turned and raised its weapon arm. But before it could fire both Jym and Travis fired a single shot each, both of which struck it just beneath where it's head was set into its armoured torso and it too collapsed.

As soon as the second droid collapsed the rebels who had remained aboard the freight came rushing out. The three by the hatchway ran to meet them and began exchanging weapons; all three had their own military rifles returned while they passed their captured carbines to Asha, Lannaye and Tayal. In Vorn's unit both he and Tharun had military type rifles, Vorn's being a standard type rather than Tharun's heavier one while Mace had a longer barrelled hunting rifle and Kara and Tobis both carried lightweight carbines. Suddenly noticing that all she had was her hold out blaster Jaysica spoke up.

"Hey, how come I don't get a bigger gun?" she asked.

"Because our guns are bigger than you are little lady." Tharun replied.

"And none of us trust you not to shoot us with one." Kara said and when Jaysica's eyes widened and her jaw dropped open she added, "Oh quit complaining. If you get into trouble just scream and I'm sure Tobis will come and rescue you."

"Never mind that now." Vorn said sternly, "We've all got work to do." And he turned to Jym, "Jym, Asha's got the readouts of this station on her datapad and Red's identified the central droid management centre. Go there now while we head for the command centre. We'll meet back here as soon as we can." Then he glanced at his chronometer, "If all goes to schedule the fleet will be here in just over an hour so we've not got long."

The command centre of the star forge was filled with rakata rather than droid operated. The only droids here were battle droids by the entrances for security. Like the docking bay these were the more heavily armoured super battle droids rather than the lighter type.

"Commander!" one of the alien's called out and the station's commanding officer approached him.

"What is it?" he asked.

"I'm not certain sir. But there was a brief signal from docking bay four. One of the guard droids was in the process of sending a report when the signal was cut off. I've tried raising it but there's no response."

"Bay four? Isn't that where the supply ship just docked?"

"Yes sir. But the droid that processed its arrival reported nothing odd. Offloading has begun and three of its crew are being taken to the mess hall."

"Taken to? They've not arrived yet?" the commander asked.

"One moment sir, I'll just check." The other rakata said as he contacted the droids in the mess hall for a report, "No sir. They don't seem to have arrived yet." He added and the commander scowled.

"Send droids to locate them." He ordered, "And get some down to that docking bay. Send destroyers, we can't take any chances."

"Get back!" Tharun snapped when he heard the sound from ahead and the rebels in his group all darted down a side passageway.

"What is it?" Vorn asked softly.

"Sounded like a vehicle. Something on wheel." Tharun replied.

"Why would they be using a vehicle aboard the station?" Mace asked.

"Because it's really big?" Jaysica suggested and Kara sighed.

"Send Penny." Vorn said.

"Penny?" Jaysica repeated, "But what if she-"

"Just do it." Vorn said sternly.

Jaysica looked down to where her mouse droid was positioned by her feet.

"Okay off you go." She said, "But be careful."

The tiny droid then rolled forwards and Vorn connected his comlink to his datapad so that he could watch the images being transmitted by it.

Penny continued along the route that they had been taking until the way was blocked by a hoard of ring-shaped droids rolling along it.

"Destroyer droids." Vorn hissed as he saw the image.

"A lot of destroyer droids." Mace added.

"Oh I've got a really bad feeling about this." Kara commented.

"Err, they don't seem to be heading this way." Tobis then said.

"The lad's right major." Tharun said, "I'd say they're heading further down the station."

"To the docking bay?" Mace suggested.

"And to Jym's team." Vorn added and he looked around, "Someone warn him. Quick."

Unlike the early versions of battle droid fielded by the Trade Federation before the Clone Wars, the types reproduced by the rakata required no continuous 'keep alive' signal from a central source. Instead they required only an initial start up command and the operated autonomously until a shut down command was given. All these commands were of course encrypted to prevent an enemy doing precisely what the rebels planned on and disabling the entire force before a single shot could be fired in anger.

This required a large computer system that could contain all of the necessary codes, communication information as well as a database on the status and capabilities of every droid connected to it, which for the star forge was already a force well into the millions. Therefore it was unsurprising to the rebels that the droid control centre was a large chamber dominated by computers. Most of the occupants in the room were themselves droids, but rather than battle droids they were an assortment of technical types that did not rely on the central control system at all.

"Looks like just a couple of guards." Tayal said as she returned to where the others were hiding close by, "Standard battle droids this time though, nothing special. Plus a handful of weird looking aliens. Kind of like mon calamari with taller heads."

"Those will be the rakata." Jym said, nodding, "We'll have to deal with them quickly as well." And he looked at Travis, "Got those stun grenades handy?" he asked.

"Right here major." Travis replied and he released a grenade from his webbing.

"Good. Now's here the plan." Jym began before the sound of his comlink interrupted him, "Hang on, I'll just see what Larcus wants now." He said.

"What's that sound?" Asha asked as Jym took out his comlink and the others began to listen.

"Major Shrell," Mace's voice called out over the comlink, "you need to watch out there are destroyer-" but before the sentence was complete the first of the destroyer droids rolled into view and unfurled itself.

"Down!" Jym yelled just before the droids opened fire, a hail of blasterfire scattering the rebels.

The destroyers advanced, still firing continuously as the rebels fell back. Red was struck and there was a brilliant flash as the protocol droid's arm was blown off.

"Oh Major Shrell! Help me!" the droid exclaimed.

Both Anzar and Jym opened fire on the closest droid, concentrating their fire. But the translucent bubble of energy that surrounded the machine deflected every last shot.

"Fire in the hole!" Travis yelled and he rolled the grenade he held across the deck towards the advancing droids. Moving slowly, the compact explosive passed through the shield and struck the droids leg before it was noticed. Ceasing fire, the droid looked down just as the grenade went off.

Stun grenades were designed to incapacitate organic targets, but exploding so closely to the destroyer droid the sudden burst of light and sound overloaded its sensor inputs and the droid staggered as it attempted to restore its senses.

"Now! Run!" Jym yelled as the disorientated destroyer droid not only prevented the others from advancing any further but also blocked their line of sight, volleys of fire from other droids bouncing off its shield before getting anywhere near the rebels.

"But major, what about my arm?" Red asked as it shuffled after the others.

"Forget it." Jym replied, "I'll get you a new one when we get back to headquarters."

"If we get back." Lannaye commented.

"Commander! The droidekas report engaging a force of intruders just outside the droid control centre."

The rakata commander rushed back to see the feed from the destroyers for himself.

"Excellent." He said, "What is their status?"

"Falling back. The droidekas are in pursuit."

The commander smiled.

"Have all patrols converge on their location." He ordered, "I don't want them to escape. Oh and patch me through to the fleet's tactical droids."

"Of course sir. But why?"

"Because the only reason for them to go near droid control is to shut down our battle droids. That means they could be the advanced party for a full-scale assault. When that arrives I want us to be ready for it."

4.

The sound of marching feet alerted Vorn's team to the approach of another group of battle droids. "Keep back!" Tharun hissed from the front of the group, but just as quickly as the droids came near they went on past without searching for the rebels.

"Looks like they're in a hurry to get somewhere." Mace commented.

"Jym." Vorn said, "They must have found his team and are hunting them."

"And drawing them away from us." Kara added.

"Well that's good isn't it?" Jaysica asked.

"Not for Major Shrell." Tharun replied.

"I'll bet that lot find a way of blaming us for it as well." Kara commented.

"Well we're almost at the command centre now." Vorn said, "And if we're correct then that's where they're holding Kay. I get the feeling that once we launch our attack those droids attacking Jym's team will turn around pretty quickly to try and deal with us."

"So we better make sure we're already gone by the time they get back here." Mace said.

"Exactly." Vorn agreed and he looked at Tharun, "Carry on leading the way sergeant." He told him.

Rather than occupying a single chamber on one level the command and control facilities of the star forge were split over several locations clustered together with the main command centre existing on two levels, with the upper one being a balcony that ran around the side of the room and provided access to the other associated control rooms.

As Vorn's team approached the command centre it was one of these rooms that they came to first. Like all of the other hatchways they had encountered, the one allowing access to this room was open to allow the interior to be seen from the corridor outside. A single rakata was on duty here and there were no guards. The rakata stood and went from one display to another, checking the readings shown against figures on a datapad and Tharun quickly ducked away from the hatchway.

"Just one." He whispered, "Rakata, not droid."

"Deal with him sergeant." Vorn replied, also in a whisper, "Quick and quiet."

Tharun nodded and handed Vorn his rifle. Then he drew his knife and peered back into the room. The rakata continued to walk along the row of displays, coming ever closer to the hatchway. All of a sudden Tharun leapt out of hiding and with his free hand grabbed hold of the rakata, pulling closer and he thrust the knife into the alien's throat and twisted it. For a few brief moments the alien thrashed about, unable to cry out for help as its blood flowed from the wound. But just seconds later Tharun felt him go limp and he let the alien's body drop to the deck.

"All clear." He said softly and the rest of the team crept inside.

"Perhaps we should shut the door." Mace commented.

"But given that it seems the rakata have a habit of leaving such doors open, wouldn't a closed doorway attract attention Captain Grayle?" Jeeves asked.

"Not as much as seeing all of us in here." Vorn said and he looked round and nodded at Jaysica who was stood closest to the hatchway and she shut the hatch behind her, "Okay," Vorn went on, keeping his voice low, "I think that we ought to send Penny on ahead again."

"You heard him, go on girl." Jaysica said to her droid and with a single chirp Penny rolled through the exit at the far end of the room and out onto the walkway around the main command centre, sending back images of everything in the room.

"I don't see any sign of Kay." Kara commented as she watched the feed, "Shouldn't she be hooked into the controls here?"

"Err, we don't actually know how she directs the station's operations." Tobis said, "She could be-" and then he stopped speaking suddenly.

"What's up lad?" Tharun asked.

"What? Oh, err, could we just track back a bit?" he asked, pointing towards Vorn's datapad and waving.

"How far?" Vorn replied as he reversed the video feed.

"There, that's it." Tobis said after a few seconds, "Right there."

"What are we looking at?" Mace asked.

"Oh, err, I think its some sort of cryogenic storage tube." Tobis replied, "The sort of thing used on old sleeper ships. Perhaps Kay is-" and then he was interrupted by an alien voice calling out.

Looking around the rebels saw a single rakata on the walkway on the opposite side of the command centre, having apparently just exited the room directly across from the one occupied by the rebel. The alien was looking directly at the rebels as he shouted and waving his arm towards them.

"Stang!" Tharun exclaimed, "They've seen us!"

"Do it!" Vorn snapped and Tharun raised his rifle and fired a single shot from his rifle that sent the rakata toppling over the safety rail around the walkway, "Move!" Vorn then yelled and the rebels all rushed forwards. As they burst out onto the walkway they found battle droids coming at them from both sides and Tharun and Vorn opened fire on fully automatic, one aiming in each direction to hold back the droids. Mace rushed to the safety rail and crouched down behind it. He brought his long barrelled rifle up to his shoulder and took aim over the rail, using it to steady the weapon and began picking off anything that looked like a target in the area below. In return the rakata took whatever cover they could. Some possessed sidearms that they used to return fire while others called out in their own language, summoning the battle droids positioned outside the command centre.

"Come on!" Kara snapped and she grabbed hold of Tobis and dragged him towards a nearby stairwell.

"Hey! Wait for me!" Jaysica called out as she ran after them.

Kara rushed down the stairs, firing short bursts from her carbine as she went. Both she and Tobis halted at the base of the stairs as they waited for the chance to get to the cryogenic tube located in the centre of the room and fired at the rakata. There was a sudden squeal from above them and Kara looked around just in time to see Jaysica come tumbling down the stairs towards them.

"Look out!" she yelled to Tobis, but before either of them could react Jaysica landed on top of them both, sending all three sprawling across the deck.

"Harvey! Stay here." Jeeves called out as Harvey also rolled out onto the walkway, "Its just not safe out there."

The droid rolled right up to the safety rail beside Mace and tilted its body downwards. Then it gave out a shrill warning tone as it saw a rakata security droid hovering out of the shadows below towards Jaysica, Kara and Tobis. A hatch opened in the security droid and a nozzle emerged. There was a hiss as a jet of liquid carbonite was projected from the nozzle, but before this could strike the three helpless rebels and freeze them Harvey intervened. From a nozzle emerging from the astromech's own body came a billowing cloud of carbon dioxide intended for extinguishing electrical and chemical fires. However the cloud of gas also served to block the path of the carbonite. The two chemicals reacted rapidly on contact, turning the carbon dioxide cloud into crystals of solid dry ice that dropped to the deck and shattered before they once again began to vaporise.

The brief delay was all that was needed as Mace stood up, aiming his rifle almost straight down and firing a blast through the top of the security droid's head.

"We need destroyers up here!" the rakata commander yelled in his own language and the rakata technician stationed at the internal security console got up and attempted to reach the controls to summon the droids. But before he could reach it Kara was able to retrieve her carbine and fired a burst in his direction. One of the blasts struck the rakata in the back and he slumped forwards. Meanwhile the rest of the burst instead struck the console itself and it exploded in a shower of sparks and flames.

"Fall back!" the rakata commander ordered, "Everyone out while we get reinforcements up here."

With the few remaining battle droids remaining in place to cover them, the rakata began to retreat.

"They're falling back major." Mace called out as he put a shot into the back of one of them.

"Let them go." Vorn responded, "Just get this place secured. The fleet could be here at any moment."

Picking herself up off the floor Kara sprinted for a nearby doorway, slamming her hand down on the control to seal it. On the walkway, having now dealt with the battle droids Tharun and Vorn made their way around the upper level sealing off each access point in turn while Mace rushed down the stairs to assist Kara in sealing off the lower level. Meanwhile Tobis headed for the middle of the control centre and began examining the tube.

"Do you know how it works Tobis?" Jaysica asked as she joined him.

"Oh, err I think so." He replied, "But I don't think it is a cryo tube."

"Then what is it?" Mace asked as he approached as well.

"Well, err, I think that it's a modified medical pod."

"Kara get over here." Mace called out, "We need your medical expertise."

The nebulon-B frigate *Nova's Light* was the first of the rebel fleet to drop out of hyperspace near the star forge and almost immediately was challenged by a squadron of vulture droid fighters. The frigate's response, though not quite what the droids were seeking was swift and to the point with a volley of fire from its laser cannons ripping them apart.

This did not go unnoticed by the rest of the rakata fleet and aboard one of the massive *lucrehulk-class* battleships a super tactical droid surveyed the sensor readouts as yet more rebel ships appeared out of nowhere.

"This is Fleet Commander Ordon to all vessels." the droid broadcast, "Communications with star forge disrupted. All ships move to engage approaching vessels. Fire at will. No prisoners."

Ominously, the force of capital ships then began to turn towards the oncoming rebels and from out of their hangar bays emerged swarms of vulture droids.

“Admiral I have enemy ships in sector fourteen!” one of Admiral Aphanar’s bridge officers warned her. “Those droids are still active!” the admiral then exclaimed as she saw the rakata fleet approaching, “All craft prepare to engage.”

Without further prompting from the admiral the bridge crew began issuing orders not only to different parts of the ship but also to the other ships in the rebel fleet. It was clear that the rebels were heavily outnumbered. They possessed only four major vessels, the admiral’s MC80 star cruiser, a second ship of the same type, one Lucrehulk-class battleship of their own and an Imperial-class star destroyer and supporting these were fewer than twenty frigates and corvettes of various types and a dozen squadrons of fighters. However, Aphanar knew that if the field teams could shut down the battle droids remotely then the battle would be over.

“We have to give them more time.” She said to herself.

5.

"Jym can you read me?" Vorn transmitted when the command centre was secured and he headed towards the medical pod where the rest of the team were now gathering.

"Just about." Jym's voice replied. In the background Vorn could hear the sound of blaster fire, "We've run into some trouble. We've not been able to shut down the droids and we've got hundreds of them after us it seems."

"Well we've got the command centre sealed off and we're hoping to take down the rakata's ability to carry on producing more of them." Vorn then told Jym, "So hopefully that should draw some of them off. Do you think you'll be able to get back around to the droid control centre?"

"I don't know." Jym replied, "Even if we lose half of what's after us now they've still got us badly outnumbered and they know the layout of this place better than us."

"Okay then, this is my call." Vorn said, "I'm ordering you to fall back to the docking bay. Get to the ship and make sure it's secure. We'll do as much damage as we can here and then meet you there. Understood?"

"Understood, we're falling back." Jym replied and then the link went dead.

"Okay then, what's our status?" Vorn then asked, looking at both Kara and Tobis.

"There's definitely someone alive in there." Kara said, studying the readouts of the pod, "But thanks to all these weird rakata displays I can't tell you what species they are."

"What if we just open it?" Jaysica asked and Kara and Tobis looked at one another.

"Err, I think it'll work." Tobis said.

"Well we're not getting this pod out of here as it is." Kara then said.

"Okay so how do we open it?" Mace then asked.

"Oh I was hoping you weren't going to ask that." Kara said before Harvey let out a sudden series of chirps.

"Yes of course I'll tell them Harvey, but I don't see the need to be so rude about it." Jeeves said before turning to the other rebels, "Harvey indicates that he may be able to open the pod by interfacing with the computer port set into the control column beside it."

"Sounds worth a shot." Tharun commented, "Unless you'd like to try a different type of shot major." He added and he lifted his rifle.

"No." Vorn replied, "Harvey, go ahead."

The astromech droid rolled up to the computer port and plugged itself in before emitting another series of chirps and bleeps as it interfaced with the star forge's computer network.

"Major Larcus sir." Jeeves said, "Harvey says that the station's sensors indicate that our fleet has arrived and the rakata are moving to engage them."

"We need to get a move on then." Vorn replied, "How long until-" but before he could finish the sentence there was a hiss of escaping gas and the cover of the medical pod began to raise up.

"Eew! That stinks!" Jaysica exclaimed, covering her nose and mouth with her sleeve.

The pod was filled with a murky fluid and all of a sudden there was a thrashing from within, splashing the fluid over the floor around the pod.

"Quick!" Kara exclaimed, "We need to get them out of there." And she leant forwards.

"No wait!" Vorn snapped, pulling her back, "Remember you're pregnant. We don't know what this stuff is.

Stay back until we've got a better idea and he nodded at Mace. The two men then both reached into the fluid together.

"I can feel them." Mace said.

"So can I. I think they're restrained." Vorn said and then he turned to Tharun, "We need to drain this thing." He told him.

"Okay stand back." Tharun said and he aimed his rifle at an angle into the fluid and fired. There was another hiss as the super heated energy bolt boiled off the fluid immediately around its path before punching through the side of the medical pod and producing a sudden jet of the fluid through the hole.

"It is Kay!" Kara exclaimed as the fluid level dropped to reveal the woman lying strapped into the medical pod, a facemask covering the lower part of her face but leaving enough exposed to allow the rebels to identify the young woman they knew as the handmaiden of the noblewoman who had succeeded Vorn in their home planet's parliament. Kay had been discovered to be Force sensitive and it was this fact that had caused the rakata to abduct her, their technology being dependant upon it while none of the rakata themselves retained the ability.

"Quick, get her out." Vorn said and he reached down to remove her facemask. The mask turned out to be connected to a thick tube that had been forced down Kay's throat and she jerked as Vorn it out before spluttering and gasping. Then she simply screamed.

"These restraints aren't coming loose major." Tharun said, raising his voice to make it audible over the sound of Kay's screams.

"Oh for kriff's sake just cut her loose!" Kara yelled and before anyone could stop her she drew her knife and leapt forwards to cut through the straps holding Kay down.

"Kara!" Vorn snapped and she whirled around to face him.

"Look boss," she told him, "Kay's been immersed in this stuff for months. I don't think that it's going to do any harm to the baby. Now let work." And then she began to rip out the assorted wires that were connected to the bodyglove Kay wore, "Okay lift her out." Kara said, stepping back and Mace and Tharun stepped forwards again to lift her out of the medical pod, a task made more difficult by her struggling against them.

"Kay it's us." Mace said, grabbing her head and holding it so that she was looking straight back at him, "Mace and Major Larcus. Remember."

"Oh God help me!" Kay suddenly yelled, "Please help me!"

"That's what we're here for. We're here to rescue you." Jaysica said.

Now that she had stopped struggling Mace and Tharun stood Kay up and then let her go, then grabbed hold of her as she collapsed.

"She won't be able to walk boss." Kara said, "She's been in that tank too long."

"Then you and Tobis carry her." Vorn said, "Tharun you're on point, Mace and I will follow you and Jaysica will bring up the rear."

"Ooh, wait a moment." Jaysica said and she dashed to the nearest wrecked battle droid and scooped up its carbine, "There," she said with a grin, "now I've got one as well."

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Kara said as she and Tobis took over supporting Kay.

It was then that there was a pounding sound from one of the doors sealing the command centre. As the rebels looked round the sound ceased and instead there was a jet of sparks as something on the other side of the door began to cut through.

"I think we need to be heading away from that." Vorn then said.

The rebels then headed back up to the walkway and to one of the smaller control rooms on the opposite side of the command centre from where the rakata seemed to be breaking in again.

"Wait a moment." Vorn said and he returned to the walkway, standing next to the safety rail. Then he switched his rifle to fully automatic and pressed it into his shoulder. Squeezing the trigger he held it back as he swung the weapon around and sprayed energy blasts all around the control centre, smashing displays and processing units wherever the bolts struck. He released the trigger only when the weapon stopped firing from a lack of ammunition.

"Hopefully that'll slow them down a bit as well." He said as he ejected the spent power cell and replaced it with a fresh one, "Now let's get out of here."

The wreckage of dozens of battle droids littered the corridors outside the docking bay. Six rebels defending a single access point with fully automatic weapons were difficult to overwhelm when it seemed that all of the destroyer droids had been called away, but even facing unshielded droids the rebels still had their limits and now ammunition was starting to run short.

"Major I could seal this hatch." Tayal said as she loaded her last power cell into her carbine.

"But will it open again?" Travis asked.

"Not exactly." Tayal replied.

"Then we can't do it." Asha said, "This door needs to be open for Vorn's team."

"After what they've cost us why are bothering about them?" Tayal then asked.

"You're kidding. You'd just leave them?" Asha asked, amazed at the possibility.

"In a heartbeat." Tayal said.

"No." Jym said, "We're not leaving." And then he ducked behind the bulkhead beside the door and took out his comlink, "Vorn where the hell are you?"

"On our way." Vorn's voice replied, "Should be with you ten or fifteen minutes. Can you hold out that long?"

"Should be—" Jym began before there was the sound of rapid fire blaster cannons.

"Destroyer!" Anzar snapped.

"Negative on that Vorn." Jym then said, "Position is untenable."

"Then get out while you still can." Vorn replied, "We'll find something else. Vorn out."

"Okay you heard the man." Jym said, "Everyone on the ship. We're leaving."

"So what do we do now?" Jaysica asked, "How are we supposed to get away without the freighter?"

"There are other docking bays little lady." Tharun pointed out, "We can—"

"No." Vorn interrupted, "We'll never make it to any of them. The rakata know we're aboard and we'll never make it to any of them."

"Last time we at least had Cass to come pick us up." Mace commented.

"Oh, err, that's it." Tobis said suddenly.

"Cass isn't around to save us this time lad." Tharun said.

"No, but the fleet is." Tobis replied.

Aboard her flagship *Wave Rider*, admiral Aphanar watched the progress of the battle, though to call it a battle had been something of an exaggeration so far. Realising how badly outnumbered and outgunned her ships were Aphanar had ordered her ships to avoid engaging the rakata as far as possible and for the most part this had been successful. Their capital ships were slow, with only the rebels' own *lucrehulk*-class ship and *nebulon-B* frigates at risk of being caught if they chose to simply turn and flee and given the distance between the fleets at the start of the battle the rakata fleet had yet to be able to close the gap. The vulture droids were another matter however and several waves of them had attempted strafing runs on the rebel ships only to be driven off with heavy losses.

"Admiral there is a ship emerging from the star forge. It appears to be an action-six bulk freighter." One of the bridge crew said and then added, "She's signalling us."

"Major Larcus is that you?" the admiral asked.

"No admiral." Jym responded as his face appeared on a display in front of her, "Major Larcus and his team are still aboard that thing. I'm afraid we were unable to deactivate the battle droids."

Admiral Aphanar sighed and bowed her head.

"All craft prepare to retreat." She ordered.

The bridge of the *correllian* corvette *Renegade* was much more cramped than that of the *Wave Rider* and Captain Malia Mayan could almost reach out and touch each of her bridge crew.

"Captain I've got a transmission coming in on your private channel." The comscan officer reported and then he frowned and added, "It seems to be coming from the star forge."

"Mace honey?" Malia said, activating the communication channel, "Is that you?"

"Sure is Malia." Mace responded, "I'm afraid I need a favour."

"Name it."

"You couldn't swing by and give us a lift could you?"

"You're kidding." Malia said, "You know where you are don't you?"

"Captain there may be a way." One of the other bridge officers, a young woman said.

"Really Krissa? Do tell."

"Well we can plot a micro jump to the far side of the station." Krissa explained, "The rakata fleet is too far out to turn and intercept us."

"What about the station defences?" Malia asked.

"The station has yet to take any offensive action captain." The comscan operator told her.

"Yeah the major may have had something to with that." Mace commented, "Harvey's hooked into the star forge computer and he says that all command and control is down."

"Then get to an airlock and send us a beacon." Malia told him, "We're on our way."

Harvey rolled back from the computer access port and chirped.

"Harvey says that there is an air lock two levels above us." Jeeves translated.

"Then that's where we're heading." Vorn said, "Let's go."

"*Wave Rider* this is *Renegade*." Malia signalled to the admiral's flagship.

"Captain Mayan? What is it?" Admiral Aphanar responded.

"Admiral I've received a request for an extraction from the target. My navigator assures me that we can safely jump behind the enemy fleet and dock with the target long enough to get our people out of there and be away before the enemy fleet can react."

"But what about the target's own defences captain?"

"I'm told that they're inactive admiral."

"Very well captain you may break formation."

"Copy admiral. *Renegade* out."

Then as the link to the *Renegade* was broken Admiral Aphanar turned to her comscan officer.

"Get me the *Trading Dream*." She said and moments later a holographic image of a seated neimoidian in a rebel fleet uniform materialised in front of her.

"Yes admiral?" the hologram asked.

"Captain Kaaro the *Renegade* is moving to extract our people from the star forge. After that we will be withdrawing. How long can your group continue to avoid the enemy capital ships?"

"Not long admiral." Captain Kaaro answered, "We're already taking some fire from some of their lighter ships. If we have to remain here much longer then we're going to start taking heavier fire."

"Then standby to withdraw captain. The *Renegade* will make a micro jump beyond the star forge. When it does I want you and your group to withdraw to the first rendezvous point."

"What about our fighters admiral?"

"They must remain here until the rest of the fleet departs. Don't worry captain we won't be far behind you."

"Understood admiral." Captain Kaaro replied before his hologram faded away. On the bridge of the Trading Dream the real Captain Kaaro then looked to his crew, "You heard the admiral," he told them, "prepare to make the jump to hyperspace."

"Nav computer confirms jump co-ordinates captain." Krissa said and Malia smiled.

"Punch it." She said and the helmsman nodded once before activating the *Renegade's* hyperdrive.

The jump Krissa had programmed into the navigation computer took the *Renegade* into hyperspace for just a fraction of a second before dropping it back out into realspace just beyond the star forge. To the bridge crew this appeared through the viewport as just a sudden flash of light after which they found themselves just looking at the clouds of gas of the nebula.

"Comscan report." Malia ordered.

"Star forge is to the stern captain and I'm picking up a repeating pulse on one of our comlink frequencies."

Malia smiled again.

"Oh Mace I love you. You always do everything I ask." She muttered before adding, "Helm, take us around. Follow that beacon."

"Steering one eight zero, bringing engines to one half power." The helmsman replied and Malia felt the slight shift in the *Renegade's* artificial gravity field as he steered the ship around sharply. Now the star forge loomed large in the viewport and Malia looked at Krissa.

"Krissa get ready for a jump out of here." She ordered as she got out of her seat.

"Where are you going captain?" the young navigator asked in return.

"To the air lock. I want every trooper we've got to meet me there with full armour and weaponry. The last thing I want is for our people aboard that thing to be left behind now we've come this far."

6.

The two battle droids standing beside the air lock's inner door flew apart as the rebels opened fire the moment they saw them.

"Quickly!" Vorn snapped, "There could be more of them here at any moment and he waved the other rebels onwards.

Rushing up to the air lock door Tharun paused to check its status.

"Looks good major." He reported.

"Good." Vorn replied and he turned to Mace, "What about our beacon?" he asked.

"Still transmitting. Hopefully Malia will be along shortly."

"Very shortly." Kara added as she heard the sound of metal feet marching along the deck and looked around just in time to see the first of the battle droids coming around the corner.

"Fire in the hole!" Tharun bellowed as he plucked a grenade from his webbing and hurled it at the oncoming droids.

"Stang!" Kara exclaimed as she ducked, pulling Kay and Tobis to the deck with her.

The explosion echoed down the corridor as the droids were blasted apart and the fragments consumed by flames.

"My ears!" Jaysica exclaimed as she realised all she could hear was a ringing.

"Oh quit complaining. He just did us a favour. You'll be fine." Kara responded.

"What?" Jaysica asked.

"I said you'll be fine even though to be honest we'd all be better off if we never had to put up with your clumsiness again you worthless nerf herder." Kara said and then she smiled and gave Jaysica a thumbs up. Then she glanced towards Tobis and saw him scowling at her, "What?" Kara said.

"Major. We've got trouble." Mace then said as there was another sound from down the corridor, this time of something heavy rolling towards them.

"Destroyers!" Vorn snapped and he looked around for somewhere to hide.

"Into the air lock!" Mace yelled, opening the inner door.

The rebels dashed into the airlock and then Mace closed the door behind them. Drawing his pistol he placed the muzzle next to the inner door's control panel and pulled the trigger. He flinched as the panel exploded in a shower of sparks.

"Hopefully that will hold them back long enough." He said.

"Err captain." Kara said, "What exactly are we supposed to do?"

"Nothing." Vorn told her, "We just wait here until the Renegade docks outside that outer door and we just walk right through."

"What if the rakata just decide to blow us into space major?" Tharun asked.

"They won't." Vorn replied and he looked at Kay, "They need her alive."

"They're going to get in!" Kay yelled, "They'll get in here and kill you all then stick me back in that thing! Don't let them, please just kill me now!"

"Sergeant. If you wouldn't mind." Vorn said to Tharun and the former mercenary just nodded as he slung his rifle over his shoulder and stood right behind Kay.

"Sorry about this miss." he said as he wrapped his arms around her. With one arm around Kay's throat and a hand clamped over her nose and mouth Tharun applied just enough pressure to cut off the flow of air into her lungs and after a brief panicked struggle she went limp.

"You know I could have just sedated her?" Kara commented.

"This way we don't use up valuable medical supplies though." Tharun responded before there was a banging sound from the inner door.

"Looks like they know we're in here boss." Kara said.

"Tobis how long do you think that door will hold?" Vorn asked.

"What? Oh, err, well that depends."

"Best guess Tobis." Mace said.

"About ten minutes." Tobis said before part of the door began to glow, "Less if they blast through."

"I don't suppose you've got any more grenades?" Kara asked Tharun.

"Just smoke." He replied.

Then there was another sudden pounding sound, but this one came from beyond the outer door as something came into contact with the outer hull and then a red light beside the door turned green to indicate a docking seal.

"The *Renegade*!" Mace exclaimed, "Tharun get that door open."

Tharun turned and released the outer door seals. The heavy armoured door slid open to reveal the outer door of the *Renegade's* air lock which in turn slid open to reveal Malia and a force of Alliance Fleet Marines, all pointing blasters towards them.

"Whoa its us!" Mace yelled as he rushed forwards and embraced Malia. In return she kissed him and then slapped him across his cheek, "Ow! What was that for?"

"Because you never take me anywhere nice." Malia replied.

"Err, if you're quite finished." Vorn said as the rest of the team boarded the *Renegade* with Kay carried between Kara and Tobis once more, "I think we should be leaving."

"Good idea." Malia replied, "Get that door sealed." And as the *Renegade's* hatch was closed she went to a nearby intercom panel, "Helm we're done. Detach from the station and get us moving." Finally she turned to Mace, "So are you coming or what?" she asked.

"Right behind you." He replied.

The *Renegade* detached from the star forge just as the battle droids succeeded in forcing open the inner door and since the rebels had left the outer door open behind them the air lock and the corridor beyond it were left exposed to the near vacuum of the space outside. The sudden rush of escaping air blew dozens of battle droids into space, many of them slamming into the hull of the departing *Renegade*.

"We'll have to make sure they didn't damage the paint." Malia said as she entered the bridge ahead of Mace and sat in her chair.

"Jump co-ordinates locked in captain." Krissa announced.

"We're not leaving yet." Malia replied.

"We're not?" Mace exclaimed.

"No we're not." Malia told him and then she turned to her crew, "Helm bring us around and give me a pass along the full length of that thing. Weapons, fire at will."

"Commander the star forge is under attack." One of the battle droids on Ordon's bridge told the super tactical droid.

"Have we re-established contact yet?" Ordon replied.

"No sir, there's still no word from them."

Then another droid spoke up.

"Commander the enemy is running away."

"Explain." Ordon ordered.

"Well they're all jumping to hyperspace."

"What is their exit vector?" Ordon asked.

"It looks like they're retreating along our standard approach route commander."

Ordon paused while the information was processed.

"Broadcast to all ships, recall all vulture droids and prepare to jump. We will pursue the enemy."

When the *Wave Rider* dropped out of hyperspace at the rendezvous point Admiral Aphanar consulted the tactical display.

"Is this complete?" she asked.

"Yes admiral." One of the bridge officers replied, "We lost nine starfighters but no capital ships."

"What about that freighter?"

"It's not in our tactical database yet admiral. But I'm adding it now."

"Good. That ship will be a useful addition to our support fleet." The admiral commented before her comscan operator spoke up.

"Admiral I have Major Larcus for you aboard the *Renegade*."

"Put him through."

"Admiral." Vorn said as the channel opened, "We need to keep going."

"Major we are in no danger here. If the rakata try to follow us without recovering their fighters then they will leave their capital ships vulnerable to attack. On the other hand if they wait to recover them then we will have too much of a head start for them to catch up with us."

"No we won't admiral. The rakata have been travelling this route for thousands of years. They know every mass shadow along it and their ships can move incredibly fast along it. We need to get moving now."

Standing on the bridge of his personal flagship, the Imperial-class *Iron Warrior*, Fleet Admiral Praus Vretan gazed out of the forward viewports.

"Here you are sir." A voice said and one of his officers handed him a pair of macrobinoculars.

"Thank you lieutenant." He said as he took them and then he lifted them to his eyes as he looked out of the viewports again. The cloud of gas that was the stellar nursery that bordered the sector of course dominated the view, but with the magnification provided by the macrobinoculars the admiral was also able to pick out the ships he had deployed to counter the rebel fleet currently skulking within the nebula. In addition to his own *Iron Warrior* there were another twenty Imperial-class ships, Admiral Sayer's allegiance-class *Pride of the Empire* and a pair of tector-class destroyers. In addition to these massive war machines were the three venator-class ships of Captain Sayla Naje's line, along with more than fifty victory-class star destroyers. Supporting the star destroyers Admiral Vretan had also assembled a significant force of smaller cruisers, mainly gladiator-class heavy cruisers but there were also more than a dozen interdictor cruisers positioned to the rear where the admiral could not see them. In addition to the almost two hundred capital ships were the multitude of TIE fighters held within their hangars. The trio of venator-class ships alone carried more than a thousand and they represented less than half the total number available. Unsure of exactly when the rebels would emerge from the nebula most of these were still in their hangars, with their pilots waiting to be given the order to launch. Just over a hundred fighters were already in space, ready to engage the fighters that would undoubtedly be accompanying the rebel fleet as soon as it appeared. Within the Core Worlds of the Empire such an armada was nothing special. Coruscant itself was defended by a fleet of more than a hundred star destroyers, plus larger ships such as battlecruisers and star dreadnoughts, but out here in the Mid Rim this was a significant force. As the rebels were about to discover.

The final jump before the rebel fleet exited the nebula was completed without any sign of the rakata fleet pursuing them. "It seems that Major Larcus was being a little over cautious." Admiral Aphanar commented as she studied the sensor display, but it soon became obvious that he had not. "Admiral! Enemy vessels dropping out of hyperspace to stern! Ten. No twenty. Thirty. Thirty plus capital ships launching fighters." "All ships full thrust." The admiral ordered, "Get us out of the nebula so we can jump again. We can't repel the firepower of a fleet of that magnitude." The rebel ships all began to accelerate, heading out of the nebula. But as the clouds began to clear and the disruption to their sensors was cleared they saw that open space was not the salvation they sought. "Admiral Imperial ships dead ahead! It's a trap!"

"Admiral the rebel fleet is emerging from the nebula."
"Excellent. Just as predicted." Admiral Vretan said with a smile, "Get me fleet wide communication."
"You're on sir."
"This is Fleet Admiral Vretan to all ships. Move in."

Flashes of green from the Imperial ships heralded the start of the bombardment and the bridge of the Wave Rider became a hive of activity as officers rushed from one station to another. "All ships angle all shields double front." Admiral Aphanar ordered, "Accelerate to maximum speed and head between those star destroyers." "But admiral at point blank range we won't last long against-" one of her crew protested. "We'll last longer than if we stay here between them and the rakata." The admiral interrupted, "All ships are to try and break through the Imperial interdiction fields and are to jump to hyperspace as soon as they can. We're going to use Fleet Admiral Vretan's ships to divert the rakata's attention away from us."

"Admiral the rebel ships are closing on our position at maximum speed."
"What? Aren't they even bothering to defend themselves?" Admiral Vretan demanded, approaching the crew pit.
"No sir. None of our ships are reporting coming under fire."
"Then what the hell are they up to?"
"Admiral I have a new group of contacts emerging from the nebula."
"Identify them." Admiral Vretan ordered.
"Some sort of starfighter sir. Number, err, number two thousand plus."
"Two thousand? The rebels don't have that many starfighters in the sector. They can't have."
"Another wave of capital ships is appearing admiral. Lucrehulk-class battleships, Commerce Guild destroyers and munificent-class frigates."
"Where the hell did the rebels get those ships?" Admiral Vretan asked out loud.
"Err admiral there's something strange about these readings." The comscan operator reported and then he paused.
"Well? Spit it out man."

"It's just that I can detect the enemy capital ships and their fighters, but I can't pick up on any life signs aboard any of them,"

"What? Give me a visual of one of those fighters." Admiral Vretan and a moment later a hologram appeared in front of him of a vulture droid with its wings deployed for flight, "Those aren't rebel ships." Admiral Vretan said to himself, "They're Confederates."

"Admiral the first wave of rebels is now approaching point blank range. Still not firing."

"Ignore them."

"Sir? Did you just say ignore them?"

"You heard me mister! Fire only if fired upon. Target the Confederate fleet and open fire. Everyone open fire."

The *Renegade* shook as a turbolaser blast from a gladiator-class cruiser slammed into its shields.

"This is going to be rough." Malia said to Mace as he held onto the back of her chair for support.

"Captain the Imperial fleet is no longer targeting us." The comscan officer announced.

"Looks like the admiral's plan worked then." Mace said.

"Yes it does." Malia added and she looked at the helmsman, "Take us through. Get us clear of that interdiction field and make the jump to hyperspace as soon as possible. Get us back to headquarters."

"Then I'm going to need a lift to Estran." Mace commented.

"Why?" Malia asked him.

"Oh I left the *Silver Hawk* there. Plus I've got to take someone home."

Aboard the *Iron Warrior* Admiral Vretan barely even noticed as the rebel fleet flew right through the blockade of ships he had assembled. His attention was instead focused on the much larger quantity of droid-operated ship that was pouring out of the nebula behind them. He had more capital ships than the droid force, but the massive *lucrehulk-class* battleships dwarfed even the *Pride of the Empire* and his ships, particularly the smaller cruisers needed to operate in combination in order to overwhelm their shields and destroy them. "Where the hell did they come from?" the admiral asked himself again just as there was a brilliant flash of light that heralded the destruction of a gladiator-class cruiser.

In the command centre of the star forge the rakata commander surveyed the damage.

"Report." He said as he heard the approach of a subordinate.

"They escaped with the core sir."

"Then pursue them." The commander said sternly.

"The fleet did sir. The droid commander followed them as far as the edge of the nebula when our way was blocked by a fleet of Imperial warships."

"They expected us? How?"

"No, not us. The others. The so-called rebels. They were lying in wait and the arrival of our fleet they were able to escape from both the Empire and from us. Our losses were severe."

The rakata commander scowled.

"We cannot replace our losses without a core!" he snapped.

"We will recover her."

"No. We need to find someone that the humans do not know we can use."

"But the primary subject is well protected sir."

"Then find another. Anyone. I don't care who they are so long as we can use them."

"Yes sir. Oh and there is one more thing."

"What?"

"We discovered the crew of the supply ship in one of the cargo containers. What shall we do with them?"

"They failed us. Kill them."

"Tharun!" a woman's voice shouted as he stepped off the *Renegade* upon the rebels' return to the space station that served as the Alliance's headquarter in the sector and he turned to see his wife Lyssa, Vorn's daughter rushing towards him.

"Lyssa!" he called out in return and he held his arms apart to embrace her as she reached him.

"Oh I was so worried about you." She said as they kissed.

"Well I'm back now." Tharun said with a smile, "And I've got good news."

"What?"

Tharun looked around at where Kara and Vorn had also just exited the *Renegade* and grinned.

"It's about your step mother." He said softly and Lyssa scowled.

"What about her?"

"Guess what you can call her that'll really wind her up."

On the sector capital world of Estran the police speeder van pulled over beside a derelict building and a squad of armoured and well armed officers burst out.

"Inside!" one ordered, "The tip says she's being held in here somewhere."

With their weapons held ready the police split up into pairs as they made their way through the run down rooms of the building.

"This way." One said to his partner, "I think I just heard something."

They ran down a short passageway that was strewn with debris from where parts of the ceiling had collapsed to a door at the end. Standing either side of the door the officers kicked it open and burst into the room beyond. There they found a hooded figure sat tied to a chair in the centre of the room. Rushing up to her one pulled the hood from Kay's head and then ripped the tape from over her mouth.

"It's alright." He told her, "You're safe now."