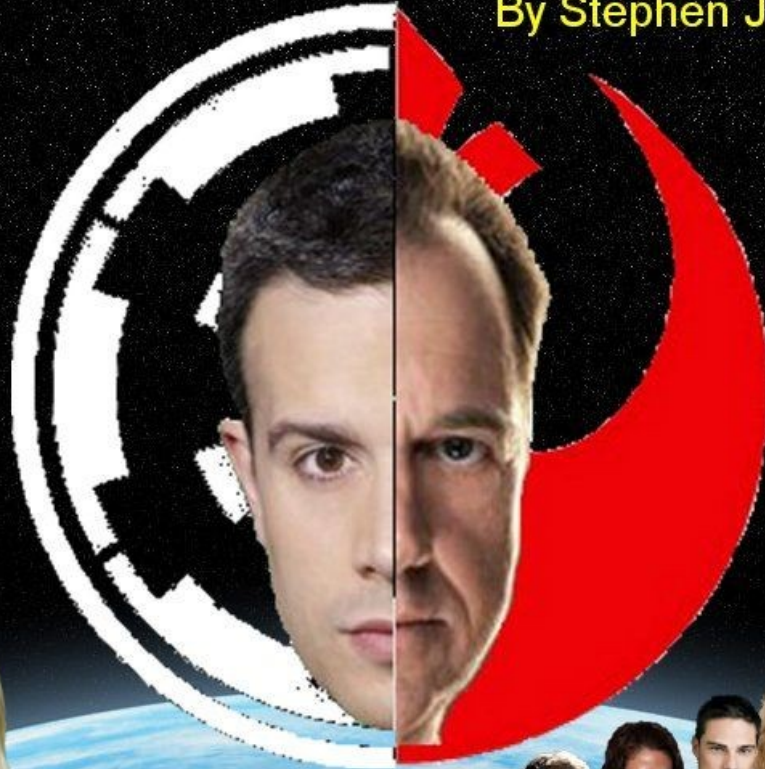


# STAR WARS

## 5-03: Turncoats

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...

## **TURNCOATS**

THE BATTLE OF HOTH MARKS A MAJOR SETBACK FOR THE REBELLION AND SOME  
OF THEIR NUMBER BEGIN TO QUESTION WHETHER THEY SHOULD GIVE UP THE  
FIGHT...

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 seal of the Galactic Empire dominated the wall behind the podium as Moff Gregor Horatian stepped up to it and faced the crowd of reporters. Behind him stood Fleet Admiral Praus Vretan, the commander of the sector's naval forces, General Julius Dern who commanded the army forces on the capital world of Estran and Rodge Larrs, the sector's most senior member of the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order. "I have a short statement to read." He announced, "I regret that I will not be taking any questions afterwards, but other business demands my presence." Then he paused for breath and went on, "At oh seven forty Estran standard time yesterday a large naval force under the direct command of Lord Vader engaged a rebel base located in the Hoth system that according to Imperial Intelligence was the location of the Rebellion's supreme headquarters. I am pleased to report that following a battle that involved both ground and space engagements our forces routed the rebels entirely. Casualties on our side were mercifully light while the few rebel survivors were scattered and at this moment are being hunted down."

As Moff Horatian stopped speaking the assembled reporters went wild and ignoring his initial comment began yelling out questions.

"Moff do you expect any of the rebels to attempt to flee to this sector?"

"Is Mon Mothma among the dead?"

"Moff Horatian! Admiral Vretan! Isn't it true that there was also a major naval engagement in the Spire Worlds last week that saw the loss of more than a dozen cruisers? Do you have any statement regarding efforts against the rebellion here in this sector?"

"Please calm down." Rodge Larrs said as he stepped forwards to take the moff's place at the podium, "Yes Miss Gorord it is true that our forces did engage the rebellion recently and losses were suffered. But you have my assurance that-

The screen went blank and the rebels assembled in the briefing room remained silent. In the centre of the room General Syres Kain took a step forwards and looked around at the concerned looks on the audience's faces.

"I'm afraid to say that it's true." He said, "The Hoth system was the Alliance's headquarters. But the base there received enough warning that several thousand of our people were able to get away while others remained behind to buy time for their escape with their lives. Right now these survivors are heading for whatever other Alliance posts they can reach. We don't expect any to arrive here, but we've already received requests for assistance from several neighbouring sectors while we regroup."

"Could you define 'regroup' please general?" one of the officers present called out.

"We've no way of knowing what intelligence the Empire recovered either from the base on Hoth or from any of the prisoners they took. With that in mind every facility that had direct links to headquarters must be evacuated and replaced as soon as possible. This will require effort on all our parts and divisional leaders will be handing out assignments shortly. If any of you were looking forwards to a few days of rest after the abortive assault on the star forge then I'm afraid you'll have to think again. Now unless there are further questions let's bring this meeting to a close and you're all dismissed."

Some of the rebels remained in their seats, talking amongst themselves while others instead got up to leave. One particular five strong group of those who decided to leave the briefing room found a quiet alcove in a nearby corridor and huddled together.

"This is so much poodoo." Captain Anzar Deller, owner and pilot of the barloz-class freighter the *Scarlet Knife*.

"I know." Major Jym Shrell, commanding officer of the field team that the *Scarlet Knife* carried responded.

"I quit being a mercenary because I was sick of putting my life on the line for nothing." Anzar added, "Do you seriously think that things are going to start getting better here?"

"Devid thought it would." Another of the rebels replied.

"And look what happened to him Travis." one of the two women commented, "Devid's dead. He opened a door and just got blown away. And he wasn't the first either was he? What about my predecessor?"

"Tayal I understand how you feel." Jym said.

"Do you?" Tayal interrupted, "Because I'm starting to wonder how long its going to be until I find an Imperial soldier right behind the next locked door you get me to open."

"Tayal does have a point major." Travis said, "Its dangerous out there and quite frankly we don't seem to be getting anywhere."

"And what about you Lannaye?" Jym then said looking at the fifth member of the group, a short woman who had yet to speak. She was Anzar's first mate who had joined the rebellion with him.

"I think everyone knows my opinion." She replied, "I only joined the Alliance because the captain did. I always thought it was too risky and it just seems to be getting worse."

"Major Shrell!" an alien voice called out from behind the rebels and they all looked around to see a member of the mon calamari species in a suit of lightweight armour standing close by.

"What is it sergeant?" Jym asked.

"Colonel Sallir would like to see you in his office as soon as possible. He has an assignment for you unit."

"Tell him I'll be with him shortly." Jym replied and the mon calamari soldier turned and walked away.

"See?" Tayal said, "They're just sending us right out again."

"We never even got any reward for that freighter we brought back." Travis added, "Larcus' unit got all the glory there."

"Devid would still be alive if it weren't for them." Tayal then said.

"Enough." Jym said, "It's clear that things need to change so we'll figure something out. Meet me at the ship when the colonel's done with me. We'll sort it out then."

Lieutenant Colonel Sallir was another mon calamari and was the highest-ranking member of the Alliance's field operations teams in the sector. In addition to undertaking missions against the Empire himself he also handed out assignments to all of the other teams.

"Ah Major Shrell do come in." the colonel said when Jym appeared at the door to his office.

"Sergeant Gysal said you wanted to see me." Jym replied.

"Yes I do, I have an assignment for your team."

"You know we're still short handed right?"

"Yes I am aware that you have yet to replace Mister Nerreck, but your team has shown itself able to function adequately even without a fourth member. Besides, one of your team members has skills directly related to this mission. Miss Lineer."

"Ah Tayal." Jym said, "So something needs stealing and so you want to use a professional thief to steal it right?"

"Two things in fact major. Two things that must be stolen at the same time if we are to get both of them away from the Empire."

"Two targets? So that means—"

"Two teams yes."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Jym said just as the colonel looked towards the door again.

"Ah, here's Major Larcus now."

"Of course." Jym commented.

"I'm not late am I?" Vorn Larcus asked as he entered the office and sat down beside Jym.

"No, I was just explaining to Major Shrell that I need your two teams to operate in tandem to obtain some items for us." Colonel Sallir replied.

"Of course." Vorn said and the colonel turned his computer monitor so that both Jym and Vorn could see it clearly.

"Both items are of extremely high value and will be being moved aboard an Imperial star galleon." He explained.

"A star galleon?" Vorn commented, "Stealing from one of those is practically impossible."

"I understand that major." The colonel replied, "Which is why you will have to steal the items before they can be loaded aboard the ship." Then he tapped at the touch screen to bring up an image of one of the rebels' targets, "The galleon will be carrying an assortment of high value cargoes gentlemen, but there are just two that interest us. The first is this shipment of hyperbarides. Approximately fifty tonnes."

"That's a lot of hyperbarides." Vorn commented.

"Indeed. Enough for the Alliance to be able to manufacture and arm an entire fleet of starships. Not to mention the inherent monetary value."

"Tens of billions of credits by my reckoning." Jym said and Vorn nodded in agreement, "I'm not surprised the Empire's using a star galleon to move the stuff."

"You said there were two targets colonel." Vorn then said, "What's the second?"

"The second item is somewhat less valuable and significantly smaller. But nevertheless will be of great use to our war effort." Colonel Sallir said and he tapped the display again, "It has come to our attention that the same star galleon is being used to transport a kilogram of corusca stones."

"Corusca stones?" Jym said, "Conservatively I'd say that a kilogram was worth about fifty million credits."

"Correct Major Shrell. Though of course the Alliance's primary interest is in their industrial application. The hyperbarides will provide use with the materials to make weapons while the corusca stones will allow us to make the tools and instruments needed to actually manufacture those weapons."

"So where are these things then?" Vorn asked.

"At this moment both are in the Mining Belt on a world called Tectas. Are either of you familiar with it?"

"I know of it." Jym replied.

"I've been there once." Vorn then said, "It was a trade mission while I was still part of the Estranian parliament. It's not exactly what I'd call a vacation spot. But then again none of the worlds in the Mining Belt are."

"Well both targets represent production collected from all across the belt for export to the Core." Colonel Sallir said, "Gentlemen, I want you to make sure that neither ever gets there."

"So what's the fish head come up with as his next great plan for us to get our heads blown off for the cause?" Travis asked when Jym returned to the *Scarlet Knife*.

"Tayal," Jym said, ignoring Travis' comment, "do you still know where we can find any of you old contacts from before your arrest?"

"Not really." Tayal replied, "I have a few names but you know I've not been back home since you broke me out of prison."

"Why the interest in thieves major?" Anzar asked.

"Not thieves. Fences. I'm after someone who can help us dispose of something very valuable."

"So our mission is to raise funds for the Alliance then?" Tayal asked.

"No." Jym answered, "The Alliance expects us to steal something for them. But I'm thinking that a kilogram of corusca stones could set us all up quite nicely."

"Corusca stones!"

"Yes Kara, corusca stones. A kilogram of them." Vorn replied as he explained their mission to his unit aboard their ship, the *Silver Hawk*.

"And fifty tonnes of hyperbarides?" a large man in military clothing asked.

"Oh kriff the hyperbarides Tharun." Kara exclaimed, "You can't make earrings out of hyperbarides. Or anything for any other piercing I may or may not have."

"Kara I don't think that the Alliance wants us to undertake this mission just to obtain some jewellery for you." The *Silver Hawk's* owner, Captain Mace Grayle said.

"If we are after jewellery then I need to get some for Lyssa." Tharun then commented, "And you could do worse than get some for Captain Mayan, Captain Grayle."

"Ooh, I'd like some earrings too." The other female member of the team said and she looked at the man who had his arm around her and added, "Tobis don't you think I'd look good wearing corusca stone earrings?"

"What?" Tobis replied, "Oh, err. Yes."

"Jaysical! Kara!" Vorn snapped, "We are not shopping for jewellery. This is a serious military operation."

"But boss." Kara said, "I'm your wife and soon to be the mother of your child. Tharun's married to your daughter. Don't you want us to have nice things?"

"And me." Jaysica added.

"Oh never mind you." Kara told her, "You'd lose one inside of a week and we'd spend forever more trying to find where you put a million credit earring."

Vorn sighed.

"Look," he said sternly, "the Alliance knows that the shipment weighs one kilogram to within ten grams. So that's exactly the weight of corusca stones they're going to get. I don't care who sulks about it either. We're professionals and we've got a job to do. Understood?"

Like many of the populated worlds in the mining belt, Tectas was only barely habitable. Far from its star the world was cold and barren and violent storms frequently swept across its surface as its four large moons exerted their competing pulls. Constructing settlements that would last for any period of time had required the first settlers to head underground, making their homes in natural caverns that since then had been massively expanded. However, these had proven problematic for landing larger transports here and so eventually surface installations had also been built. These consisted of docking bays built in excavated craters that were topped with low level particle shields that could keep out the debris blown about by the storms but were not strong enough to prevent a ship from flying through.

Vorn looked up as he stepped from the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp. Above him the sky sparkled from the multitude of impacts against the shield and here and there bolts of energy arced across it.

"Just like I remember it." He said to himself.

"Indeed Major Larcus sir." The golden coloured protocol droid that came down the ramp behind him said,

"According to the data provided for this mission the shield generators are of the same type first put in place just over two thousand years ago. Though the precise hardware has been replaced over the years I hope."

"Thanks Jeeves." Vorn replied.

"Oh you are welcome sir. I-"

"Never mind." Vorn then interrupted as he saw another ship coming into land, "Mace!" he called out, "It's the *Scarlet Knife*." And when he saw an orange flash from the incoming ship he added, "And it looks like they're in trouble."

"Tobis!" Mace yelled as he rushed down the ramp, "Get Harvey and your tool kit and follow us. Major Shrell's unit may be in trouble."

Mace and Vorn set off running across the landing field towards where the *Scarlet Knife* was coming into land, flames clearly visible from the ship's drives. Behind them Tobis came running down the access ramp followed by an R5 astromech droid and the pair set off after Mace and Vorn.

Despite the obvious damage to his ship, Anzar set the *Scarlet Knife* down intact and the access ramp dropped open. Immediately Jym and Travis came rushing out clutching handheld fire fighting gear that they directed to the burning drive unit.

"What happened?" Vorn called out as he rushed up to them.

"Something blew as we passed through the shield." Jym replied, shutting off the extinguisher and stepping back as Harvey rolled into position and discharged his built in fire extinguisher, aiming it more precisely than Jym was capable of, "Fortunately it was something to do with the ion drive and we were already running on repulsorlifts."

"Sounded bad though." Travis added as he too ceased his fire fighting efforts and left the task to Harvey.

"Tobis, what do you think?" Mace asked as Tobis stared up at the scorched drive unit.

"Err." Tobis replied, "Well, err, I'd say that it looks like a particle focusing plate. The ship won't fly on ion drive until the plate is replaced but it'd only take me-"

"I can fix our own ship you know." Lannaye announced as she emerged from the *Scarlet Knife*, "You just look after your own."

Tobis turned to look at Mace.

"It alright Tobis." He said, "It's their ship after all. You just head back to the *Silver Hawk* and tell everyone to head for that cantina over there. We'll be along shortly." And Tobis nodded before he and Harvey headed back in the direction of the *Silver Hawk*.

"I take it that everyone's alright." Vorn then said to Jym and the other unit leader nodded.

"Damn it!" Anzar yelled as he and Tayal then came rushing from the ship to inspect the damage as well.

"The ion drive is dead captain." Lannaye said, "Until I can replace that focusing plate." And Mace and Vorn glanced at one another and smiled.

"Major Larcus' people are waiting in a cantina." Jym then said, "And frankly I think we all deserve a drink after that landing."

"Any landing you can walk away from is a good one." Anzar commented.

"I disagree." Tayal responded as Jym approached the bottom of the access ramp and shouted up into the ship.

"Red!" he yelled and a bright red protocol droid appeared at the top.

"Yes Master Shrell?" it asked.

"We're going to the cantina. Watch the ship."

"Of course master." The droid replied and as Jym backed away from the ramp there was a hiss as it closed slowly.

## 2.

The cantina was mainly filled with a mix of starport staff and starship crewmen, but scattered amongst them were individuals who looked more like miners and a handful in the unmistakable grey of the Imperial Navy. "Err, is this a good place to be?" Tobis asked as he looked around nervously at the bar.

"Relax lad." Tharun replied, "Now give me a hand with these drinks."

Tobis nodded and took two of the glasses before he and Tharun made their way to the alcove where Jaysica and Kara waited.

"This is all they had." Tharun explained as he set down the glasses he held, "Looks like some sort of local brew." And then as he placed a glass in front of Kara he added, "But just water for you." And she frowned.

"I'm telling you," she said, "this not drinking is killing me. As soon as I can after this kid is born I'm going to get so hammered I won't sober up until it's old enough to leave school."

"I thought not drinking would make you feel better." Jaysica commented.

"And I thought that now you and Tobis have been going out for a year he wouldn't still have to get you drunk to get you out of your-" and then she spotted the other rebels arriving and waved, "Boss! Over here!" she yelled.

"Low key as ever." Jym commented.

After buying drinks for themselves the newly arrived rebels headed over to the alcove to join the four already there. It was not designed to seat eleven comfortably and there was some confusion as people figured out where they were going to sit.

"Come on boss, I can sit in your lap." Kara said, ignoring Vorn's frown as she slid on top of him before turning to Jaysica and adding, "Come on, you and Tobis too."

"Kara if you could just let me see." Vorn said as he leant out from behind her.

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about all this." Tayal commented as she found herself balancing precariously on the end of the seat.

"Sorry major." Tharun said, "This was the biggest booth."

"That's alright." Vorn replied, "This'll just have to do. But enough of the ranks for now."

"But don't you dare call me mom. I got enough of that from Lyssa yesterday and I know it was you that told her to do it." Kara added and Tharun smirked.

"Getting to business." Vorn said sternly, "We need to plan out what we're going to do."

"Well the galleon obviously isn't here yet." Anzar commented.

"No and I doubt it will stay for long." Mace said, "I've seen those high security ships before. They get priority clearance for landing and departure."

"Plus they get first call on loading droids." Anzar added, "Even if they're already being used elsewhere."

"Well I've got a plan that would see us finished before the star galleon even gets here." Vorn said.

"Oh really? So its your operation now is it?" Jym asked.

"Do you have a plan?" Kara asked in return and Jym just frowned. Kara then turned her head as far round as she could and added, "Carry on boss."

"This is just a suggestion really." Vorn said, "I'd appreciate any input you've got as well."

"Sure." Jym said, lifting his drink to his mouth.

"Well I think the gemstones have to be a conventional break and enter." Vorn explained, "But the hyperbarides will be a bit more difficult."

"Yeah, I think people will notice all those crates being moved." Travis said.

"Oh, err, that depends." Tobis replied, "Shipping containers are moved about by droids. So if we could just fool the droids into thinking we were supposed to be moving them-"

"Actually I thought we could get the droids to move them for us." Vorn interrupted.

"What we just ask them nicely?" Jym said.

"No." Vorn replied and he looked at Mace, "Mace, shipping containers are all marked with coded serial numbers right?"

"That's right. A machine-readable serial number that is held in the starport cargo database. It lists the contents, shipping details and whether there are any special instructions. Temperature requirements, if it has to be loaded at the top of a stack, customs data and so on."

"So if we were able to generate our own labels," Vorn began and the other rebels all smiled, "then we could have the hyperbarides loaded on our ships automatically while someone else's cargo would get loaded onto the star galleon."

"But why would any containers be being loaded onto our ships?" Jaysica asked.

"Easy." Mace told her, "We just buy the same amount of containers as there are of hyperbarides and request they be auto-loaded."

"They can even be empty." Anzar pointed out, "Though putting something in to bulk up the weight would be handy just in case someone comes along and spots that they can push them with their bare hands."

"We'll need access to the starport computer network." Tayal said, "To find out where the stones and the containers are being kept and to make up the new loading labels."

"Plus we could do with scouting out the cargo holding area." Mace added, "I'd hate to be running around blind trying to find the right containers."

"Sounds like we have a plan then." Jym said and he looked at Anzar and Lannaye, "You two will have to fix the ship while we get everything ready." He told them and Anzar nodded.

"I was thinking that Jaysica and Tobis could gain access to the computer network." Vorn added.

"You know I'm pretty handy with that sort of thing as well." Tayal added.

"Yes I know." Vorn replied, "But we're also going to need places to conduct surveillance from and I'd like you and Kara to handle that. You may need to force access to the best spots and you're the one most able to do that subtly." And as he spoke Kara glanced at Jaysica and grinned briefly, "Tharun, I want you and Travis to check out the cargo handling area. We need a full layout. Don't worry about what's in any of the crates, that's Jaysica and Tobis' job. You two just get the feel for where all the different sections are and what sort of security they have. Think you can handle that?"

"Sure." Tharun replied.

"That just leaves the three of us." Mace said, looking at Jym and Vorn.

"Yes, we'll need to look into obtaining some cargo for ourselves. We want something sufficiently heavy and in the appropriate number of containers."

"And cheap." Jym added, "No sense in spending more than we need to after all."

"Indeed." Vorn replied and looking around at all the other rebels he added, "So are we all in agreement then?" and there were nods from around the table.

"So let's get moving then." Jym said as he got to his feet, "Anzar, can I just have a quick word with you and Lannaye about the repairs?" he then added and he took them aside, "So what's the situation with the engine then?" he asked.

"Worked like a charm." Lannaye replied, "You heard Mace's engineer. They think the plate needs replacing just like we intended."

"So they'll think that you'll be busy for a couple of hours then?" Jym asked.

"That's a good estimate." Anzar replied.

"Okay." Jym said, "I want you to wait about an hour and then call me. Say you need some tool that they're bound to have aboard the *Silver Hawk* so that Mace will let you into his ship. Then make sure you disable their hyperdrive. The last thing I want is them following us."

"What about the rest of you?" Lannaye asked.

"I'm sure Tayal can handle Kara. Tharun won't expect Travis to turn on him and when you two turn up we'll have the drop on Mace and Vorn."

"That still leaves Jaysica and Tobis." Lannaye pointed out, glancing in the direction of the pair.

"I wouldn't worry about them." Anzar said, "That Jaysica's more of a danger to them than to us and Tobis is so besotted with her that I doubt he'll notice anything else that's going on."

Jym smiled.

"This time tomorrow," he said, "we'll all be millionaires."

The taller buildings of the starport were set into the rock face of the crater sides, ensuring that even if the overhead shield should fail they would be afforded some protection from the storm. These were home to the businesses that invariably sprang up around starports such as couriers, vehicle rentals and lodgings. It was the last of these that interested Kara and Tayal. They discovered that one of the towers located close to the starport's cargo storage area housed an assortment of hotels. These varied in both price and quality, with the more expensive ones being located further up the tower.

The lobby of the hotel the two rebels selected featured a large glass wall that looked out over the entire crater and Kara stood side by side looking out of it as she waited for Tayal to deal with the check in.

"It's costing an extra twenty a night for one with crater viewing windows." Tayal said as she walked up to Kara who just snorted I return.

"Well the boss didn't set a limit on what we can spend when I told him about this place. But then we once stayed at a place that charged thousands every night." She replied, "A bill that was never paid I might add. Plus there was the time we stayed on that posh starliner."

"Let me guess you didn't pay the bill there either and you stole the towels." Tayal said.

"I stole the whole kriffing liner. It's the *Ocean Queen*." Kara told her, "Now do you have the key?"

"Not yet. Their computer is running slow. They said that they'd bring it right over as soon as\_" Tayal began before a droid approached holding up an access card.

"Excuse me," It said, "but your check in has been processed and I have your key. Do you require assistance in taking your luggage to your room?"



"No thanks." Kara replied, snatching the key from the droid, "We've just these two small bags. We'll be fine."  
"Of course mistress. Enjoy your stay. Thank you for choosing THX Hotels." The droid said before it turned and walked away.

"Oh we will." Kara muttered and then she waved the key at Tayal and added, "Let's go see what sort of room you've got for us then."

The room was one of the larger ones offered by the hotel, with two large beds. Like the lobby on the floor below the outer wall was entirely transparent and slid open to give access to a balcony. Making her way to the nearest bed, Kara sat down and sighed as she pulled off her boots.

"Oh that's better." She said, "Now where's the remote for this vid screen?"

"So how do you think we should get in?" Travis asked as he and Tharun stared at the perimeter fence surrounding the cargo holding area. Beyond the fence was row after row of cargo containers, all one of a handful of standard sizes with machine-readable barcode labels stuck to the sides. Clanking sounds came from between these as loading droids made their way around to select cargoes for loading.

"Let's see." Tharun replied, "Ferrocete floor and I count at least four tension wires running around the fence, not including the one that's mounted just above it. We can't go under, over or through without triggering an alarm.

"Doesn't leave us many options." Travis said.

"It leaves us one as far as I can tell. Which is just enough." Tharun said and he pointed to a building set into the fence where a speeder truck pulled up and waited while a guard checked it.

"So you think they'll let us walk right through the front door then?" Travis asked.

"Not us no. But I bet they'd let a couple of their own people through." Tharun answered and both men grinned.

The pair of Imperial Navy troopers halted when they heard someone calling out to them and they turned to see Travis standing at the corner of a nearby building.

"Hey guys could you come give me a hand with this?" he asked and both troopers frowned.

"Do we look like your servants?" one asked.

"No." Travis replied, "But you look like members of the Imperial Navy who'd be keen to help bring some known pirates to justice." And he produced a bounty hunter's licence and held it out for them to see, "I believe that part of the Navy's charter is to control piracy and me and my partner have some cornered." Intrigued the two troopers approached Travis, one of them inspecting the licence more closely. Had they had a datapad featuring a link to the sector's bounty hunting database they could have discovered that the licence had been revoked, but it did the job Travis wanted it to and both men followed him around the corner where they were out of sight of the street. Ahead of them they found Tharun standing beside a sealed door.

"So where are these pirates then?" one of the troopers asked him.

"Right in there." Tharun replied, nodding towards the door and the troopers walked up it and stopped.

"Then I suppose we should knock." One said and his hand went towards his blaster. However, before he could get hold of the weapon Tharun suddenly slammed into him from behind, pushing him into the wall beside the door.

"What the-" the second trooper exclaimed, also reaching for his sidearm. But Travis was already behind him with his heavy blaster pistol in his hand and pushing it under his helmet he pressed it to the back of the man's head and pulled the trigger.

While Travis was despatching his target Tharun wrapped an arm around the neck of his and half dragged the struggling man back to his feet, using his own weight to help choke him.

"Hurry up!" Travis hissed and Tharun looked around and frowned.

"Hey it's not my fault this guy won't die." He responded before there was a sudden 'crack' and the trooper went limp as his neck broke. Tharun then smiled, "Okay, let's get these' guys out of their clothes and then hide the bodies." He said.

Disguised as the naval troopers the two rebels approached the same building they had watched the speeder trucker go to when it arrived. There were four guards present, two standing at the large opening that allowed access to the cargo handling area and two more sat where they could just about be seen inside the building. They wore uniforms of a similar design to the stolen ones Tharun and Travis wore but the colour and markings indicated that they were in fact local security rather than Imperial agents.

"What are you doing here?" one of them asked when the rebels walked up to them.

"We've been ordered to run a security sweep." Tharun replied.

"One was run two hours ago." The guard told him, "And they used an entire team."

"Yeah, well they skipped a bit." Travis said, "So we thought that rather than bring a full scanning crew down here we'd come down and make it all official do a visual inspection. That way nobody ever needs to know that someone screwed up."

The two guards at the entrance looked at one another as they considered this.

"Hey," Tharun said, "we could just go away again if you want. That way we'd have to wait for the full crew to be available again and in the mean time you guys would be wholly responsible for that high security cargo should anything happen to it."

The threat of being held responsible for cargo worth billions of credits resonated with the guards and they stepped aside.

"Just make it quick okay?" one said, "Our supervisor can't stand the idea of anyone else wandering around his own little empire."

"You got it." Travis said, smiling as he and Tharun walked right through the checkpoint.

"Did you bring your datapad?" Tharun whispered to him.

"No why?"

"Because people always look more official when they're holding one."

"Well it's with the rest of my stuff. I gave it to Tayal."

"Then we'll just have to do without. Fortunately Kara leant me this." Tharun said and he took out a compact video recording rod, "We can record the entire layout." And he held up the recording rod and activated it.

Jym, Mace and Vorn sat around a computer terminal located in a room full of such devices. These were intended for individuals such as themselves who were seeking to purchase cargoes and listed the goods currently available from both local suppliers and from ships that had arrived. Of course the other people using the public trading centre were interested in specific cargoes whereas the trio of rebels were hunting through them all in search of anything that could be substituted for the containers of hyperbarides. Or at least that was what Mace and Vorn were interested in.

"Metals, metals, metals." Mace commented as he scrolled down the list of cargoes.

"What did you expect on a mining world?" Jym asked.

"This is good." Vorn added, "We need something dense and there seems to be a lot of choice. Look, there's plenty of refined iron."

"Iron's nowhere near as heavy as hyperbarides." Jym pointed out.

"Doesn't need to be." Mace replied, "No one's going to be picking up a container of either. It only needs to be heavy enough that someone will know that it's full of something heavy."

"By the time the droids get it aboard and figure out that there's a significant weight discrepancy we'll already be away with the genuine cargo." Vorn then said and he turned to Mace and added, "Buy it."

"How much?" Mace asked.

"How many standard containers would you use for fifty tonnes of hyperbarides?" Vorn asked him.

"Ten." Mace answered, "That works out to twenty tonnes of iron. Which according to this will cost us five thousand credits."

"Okay that's fine. Just make sure that we don't need to give an exact departure time." Vorn said as Mace selected some of the iron being offered for sale and bought it.

"Don't worry major, we can add that detail at any time. All we need right now is this reference number." Mace replied, pointing to a long string of characters that identified the transaction. Vorn handed him a datapad and he copied the data across to it.

"So now we just need to know how to switch it for what we really want." Vorn then said.

### 3.

The starport control building was the tallest freestanding structure in the crater, located at almost the exact centre and heavily armoured in case of shield failure. The uppermost levels protruded through the shield into the storm-wracked atmosphere, allowing them to mount the sensors needed to control traffic as it came and went. Nearer the ground were the levels that most people got to see, where anyone with business at the starport could meet with staff face to face. Finally in the floors between these two sections were the administrative offices, including the computers that managed all of the cargo and shipping.

Normally these levels were out of bounds to the public so for Jaysica and Tobis to gain access to them required some subterfuge on their part. Wearing an Imperial uniform that she kept aboard the *Silver Hawk*, Jaysica walked into one of the public areas with her mouse droid, Penny trundling along beside her. She paused before reaching any of the security checkpoints that led further into the facility, but Penny continued and was ignored by the staff that took the tiny droid to be one of their own. The droid proceeded around behind the security desk to where there was a drawer filled with visitors passes and while the two guards on duty focused on the beings standing on the other side of their desk Penny extended a manipulating arm and took hold of one of the passes. Retracting the arm and pass back inside its box shaped body the droid then shot back to Jaysica who calmly bent down, retrieved the pass and clipped it to her uniform.

"Good girl Penny. Now follow me." She said before she walked up to the security desk.

"Pass miss." the guard told her and Jaysica smiled as she handed over the stolen pass. The guard scanned it and frowned as the computer promptly rejected it.

"There seems to be a problem with this pass." He said, "The system doesn't think it's been issued."

Jaysica sighed.

"That's what I was sent to fix." She said, "Apparently the extra security put in place has caused some problems."

"What extra security?" the other guard asked and Jaysica placed her hand over her mouth.

"Oops. I probably wasn't supposed to mention it. It's all classified."

"Don't worry miss." the first guard replied as he tapped at his computer keyboard, "There, I've just re-issued it to you. Through you go."

"But be careful who you go blabbing to." He added as Jaysica walked past the security desk.

"Oh I will." She replied before heading straight for the nearest turbolift.

She travelled up to the floor where the main computer was located and followed the signs from the turbolift to the computer room without stopping to talk to anyone. Once inside she briefed a sigh of relief as she found herself alone with row after row of computer drives and processing units. Quickly she moved along the rows, reading off the labels as she went until she reached the one labelled 'Switchboard' and she opened up the case and took out her comlink. Briefly she activated the device and then shut it off again, sending just a brief electronic pulse to indicate to anyone listening in that the comlink had been activated before she then unplugged one of the cables running into the switchboard computer and instead plugged it into the port on her comlink more typically used to connect to a datapad and then just waited.

Outside the control tower Tobis waited with his comlink in his hand until it gave out a sudden bleep and went silent once more.

"Come on Harvey." He said to his droid and the pair of them headed into the building and walked right up to the security desk.

"Yes?" one of the guards asked, glaring at Tobis's overalls and somewhat battered astromech droid.

"Oh, err-"

"Come on. Spit it out. I don't have all day." The guard interrupted.

"I, err, that is I'm here about an environmental malfunction on level six." He said.

Frowning, the guard activated the intercom on his desk.

As soon as Jaysica saw the signal coming in from the security desk she activated her comlink.

"Hello?" she said.

"Front desk here. We've a maintenance man here about an environmental fault. Do you know anything about it?"

"Yes that's fine. I'll send that Imperial tech down to meet him." Jaysica said and then she turned off the comlink, unplugged it from the computer and put the cable back where it had been before, "Okay Penny," she then said to her droid, "Wait here while I go and get Tobis and Harvey."

When Jaysica returned to the security desk she found the guards issuing Tobis with a visitor's pass.

"He's all yours." A guard said, waving Tobis past. But as the rebel stepped past the security desk he and Harvey passed between the terminals of a security scanner and the readout began to bleep. "What the hell?" the other guard exclaimed as he hand instinctively went towards his blaster. "Oh, err, it'll be my tools." Tobis said and he handed his toolbox to the guards before stepping back and walking through the scanner again. This time there was no alarm. The guards opened up the toolbox and looked inside, confirming that there were no blasters hidden inside that would have triggered it. "Go on." The guard said as he returned Tobis' toolbox to him and the rebels headed for the turbolift before the guards could realise that the alarm had actually gone off when Harvey had passed through the scanner but that the droid had not been rechecked. "I thought we'd never get past those troops." Jaysica commented as the turbolift door slid shut while Tobis crouched down and when a hatch in Harvey's body opened up he reached inside and removed his and Jaysica's blasters. He placed his own full sized military pistol inside his toolbox while Jaysica tucked her compact holdout blaster in a pocket when he handed it to her, "Thank you." She said, "Now I already know where the computer room is and Penny's waiting for us there. Do you think that this will take long?" "Err. I'm not sure." He replied, "Perhaps we ought to let Major Larcus know where we're up to though."

"Go ahead." Jym said as his comlink sounded.

"Major its Anzar. The damage was a bit more serious than we first thought. There was a feedback pulse that blew out one of the magnetic field modulators."

"So replace it." Jym replied.

"Problem is that we don't have a spare." Anzar replied, "We used ours up and we haven't had time to replace it yet."

"Don't worry." Mace said as he overheard the exchange, "Tobis always keeps a couple of those on hand. It's a trivial part really, but if they go you're stuck."

"Jeeves is still aboard the *Silver Hawk*." Vorn added, "He can let them in."

"Thanks." Jym said and then he lifted his comlink close to his mouth again, "Anzar get over to the *Silver Hawk*. Their droid will let you in so you can get the part you need from their ship."

"It's in the workshop." Mace commented.

"Look in the workshop." Jym said.

"Got it major." Anzar replied, "Silver Hawk. Workshop." And then the line went dead.

Back on the *Scarlet Knife* Anzar looked at Lannaye.

"Well the first part worked anyway." He said.

The access ramp to the *Silver Hawk* lowered as Anzar and Lannaye approached the ship.

"Please do come aboard Captain Deller, Lieutenant Curve." Jeeves announced from the top of the ramp.

"We've come for an engine part." Anzar replied as he strode up the ramp.

"So I understand sir." Jeeves replied, "Major Larcus informed me. Though I must confess that I will be of little help if any in locating the item. I'm just an interpreter."

"That's alright." Lannaye replied, "We'll just have to find it ourselves."

"Can I perhaps provide you with a beverage?" Jeeves asked.

"No thanks. We just need to find the engine part and get back to our ship." Anzar said.

"Of course sir. Then I shall await you in the lounge." Jeeves said and the droid stood in the lounge area of the *Silver Hawk* and just watched as both Anzar and Lannaye headed for the workshop, closing the hatches behind them as they went.

"Keep an eye out for that droid." Lannaye said when they got to the workshop and Anzar nodded and waited by the door while Lannaye headed for where part of the *Silver Hawk's* drive system was exposed.

"What's wrong?" Tayal asked when she came out of the bathroom to find Kara sat on the side of one of the beds looking at a hotel datapad and frowning.

"That." Kara replied and she pointed to a small fridge set into the wall, "I've got the stock list of the minibar here and there's loads I want to try."

"I'm guessing you're not worried about the extortionate cost." Tayal said as she wandered over to Kara and looked at the datapad for herself, whereupon her eyes promptly widened, "How much for a shot of lum?" she exclaimed.

"You're right." If I could I'd have emptied that thing by now and stuffed everything I couldn't drink right now into my bag for later. But being pregnant means I can't touch a drop."

"Well what about the nuts and candy? You could have those. Oh and there's mineral water."

Kara frowned.

"Nuts candy and mineral water? Are you trying to make this worse? That minibar is taunting me with its boozy goodness knowing I can't have a drink."

"What if I took everything?"

Kara glared at her.

"Open it and I will hurt you." She said sternly. Then she turned back towards the fridge, "This is a battle of wills and unless the boss has us leave soon I know I'm going to break."

A smile appeared on Tayal's face.

"This isn't funny." Kara said, scowling at her.

"No, it's not that. I've got an idea." Tayal said and she rushed to where she had left her bag, "I know how to keep you away from the minibar." She said as she lifted the bag onto the bed and opened it up.

"Putting your bag in front of the door won't work. I'll still know its there." Kara said.

"That's not my idea." Tayal replied, "Lie back and lift your hands over your head."

"What?"

"Just do it. Travis gave me a load of his stuff to look after and I think it can help."

Kara frowned briefly and then lay back lifting her hands over her head.

"Good." Tayal said as she produced a set of binders from the bag and locked them around one of Kara's wrists.

"Hey!" Kara exclaimed as Tayal began threading the binders through the metal frame of the top of the bed and she quickly lowered her free arm.

"It'll keep you from the minibar won't it? Now give me your other arm."

Kara frowned again and then lifted her arm. Tayal simply smiled and locked the binders around Kara's other wrist.

"Now your feet." She said, taking a second set of binders from the bag and going to the end of the bed.

"What's that for?" Kara asked.

"To make sure you don't roll off the side of the bed and injure yourself." Tayal explained as she locked the binders around Kara's ankles, "Now how do you feel?"

"Stupid." Kara answered.

"Really? Well just try getting to the minibar now."

Kara looked at the minibar and then tugged at the binders holding her to the bed.

"Hey it actually works." She said.

"Hey. It's me." Tayal replied, "Of course it works. Now here's the remote for the vid screen. "You just lie back and find something to entertain you while I go watch the starport." And as she headed for the chair she had set beside the window she paused, turned around and added, "Don't go away will you?" but Kara ignored her, instead focusing on the large wall mounted screen as she cycled through the various entertainment channels that the hotel offered.

"Still feels stupid." Kara then muttered, wriggling again.

## 4.

"Ah, err, I think I've found it." Tobis said.

"Really? Let me see?" Jaysica replied and she leant over his shoulder to look at the screen. There she saw a list of secure cargo holding units along with details on the individuals who had rented them and the items stored there. Tobis however, pointed towards a unit listed as vacant.

"It's err, it's listed as empty." Tobis said, "But it's not on the list of units available for rent because it's been logged in as needing repair. But there's no listing in the maintenance log of what needs fixing."

Jaysica smiled.

"You are so smart. I love that." She said, kissing him quickly on his cheek before taking out her comlink, "Major it's me." She transmitted.

"Go ahead." Vorn's voice responded a moment later.

"Tobis has done it. He's found where the stones are being kept."

"Excellent. Where?"

"There's a set of secure units at the starport. They're in unit THX one-one-three-eight."

"THX one-one-three-eight. Got it." Vorn replied, "What about the hyperbarides?"

Jaysica looked at Tobis.

"Err." He said.

"Tobis is still looking major."

"Well tell him to get a move on. We've bought a cargo of iron that will be at the cargo port by nightfall. I want us out of here by sunrise." Vorn told her.

"Understood major. I'll let you know as soon as we've found anything."

"Did you two get all that?" Vorn asked Jym and Mace and both men nodded.

"I think I should check in on Anzar and Lannaye." Jym said, "We're going to need both ships up and running if we want to make a rapid escape."

"Let me know if they need anything else from the *Silver Hawk*." Mace commented as Jym wandered away, "Strange." He then added.

"What is?" Vorn replied.

"Why go wandering off just to call up his own people all of a sudden? What didn't he want us to hear?"

"Let's face it Mace, our two teams haven't exactly got on that well for the last six months or so. Perhaps he'd rather be the first to hear if his people need our help." Vorn suggested.

"Probably." Mace replied, "But-"

"But what?"

"But I've got a bad feeling about this all of a sudden." Mace said and from his pocket he took his comlink and began to adjust it.

Without looking away from the window Tayal picked up the comlink when it sounded.

"Tayal its Jym."

"What do you want?" Tayal asked.

"I want to know your exact status. It's just me here." Jym said and Tayal glanced around at Kara.

"Well the big fat pregnant lady is secure." She said.

"Fat?" Kara exclaimed, "I'm hardly showing yet. Hey wait. What's going on?"

Tayal ignored Kara and instead got to her feet and picked up a large piece of fruit from the bowl provided by the hotel.

"I've been checking out the entire starport area and I haven't seen any signs of extra security. If its there it's well hidden." She said.

"Well I've got the location of the stones. Vorn's people are occupied looking for the hyperbarides right now so we've got an opportunity."

"Great. I'll be ready to go in a couple of minutes. Just one more thing I need to take care of." Tayal said and she shut off the comlink.

"What the kriff is going on?" Kara demanded, "And get me out of these-" but then she was cut off mid sentence as Tayal forced the piece of fruit into her mouth, wedging it between her teeth. Then she snatched away the remote for the vid screen and used it to turn up the volume.

"Can't have you calling out for help now can we?" Tayal said before she picked up both her bag and Kara's and headed for the door, ignoring Kara as she struggled to either get free of the binders or spit out the fruit that was gagging her. Tayal's last act before leaving the room was to switch on the 'Do not disturb' sign beside the door.

Jym spotted Anzar first as he and Lannaye came walking into the plaza where Jym had been waiting with Mace and Vorn. Quickly he made his way through the crowd to join them before either of the other two officers could spot them.

"Over here." He called out and when they turned towards him they saw him wave them into the cover of a vending machine.

"It's all done major." Anzar said.

"Will it hold them for long?" Jym asked.

"Not really." Lannaye replied, "I wanted something that wouldn't show up on a standard systems check just in case they spotted it before they tried to launch. But when they leave the atmosphere they won't be able to switch over to their ion drives and they'll be left adrift. What I did will be obvious to them by that point but it'll give us the time to get out of the gravity well and into hyperspace."

"That's good." Jym said, "Tayal's taken care of Kara and is on her way to the starport's secure holding area. All we're waiting on now is Travis."

"What about Mace and Vorn?" Anzar asked.

"Over there." Jym told him, looking back to where they stood, "They don't suspect a thing."

"I'll just call this in." Travis said, holding up his comlink. He and Tharun had completed their survey of the cargo holding area and returned to the secluded spot where they had hidden their own belongings.

"Sure." Tharun replied as he took off his blast helmet and began to undo his tunic.

"Major it's Travis here. Survey complete. Awaiting further instructions." Travis said into the comlink and he waited for the reply.

"We're on." Jym replied, "Tayal's already moving. Meet her at the secure storage section."

"Understood major." Travis replied and he moved his hand towards the blaster holstered at his waist.

"What's going on?" Tharun asked, turning his head just enough to notice as Travis started to draw his blaster. Tharun reacted quickly, tossing the tunic he had just removed towards Travis' face just as the former bounty hunter turned to fire and then diving aside.

The blaster bolt flew over his head close enough that he felt the heat of its passing and Tharun rolled across the ground, drawing his own blaster and pointing it towards Travis before firing a single quick shot that also missed, instead blasting a chunk out of the wall beside him.

Travis dived for cover behind several containers of trash and Tharun's second shot blasted one of these apart. Whatever had been in the container produced a bright flash of flames that startled both men and as the fire continued to burn a thick cloud of smoke began to expand. Seeing his chance Travis leapt to his feet and ran back towards the street, firing randomly into the cloud as he went. Remaining on the ground Tharun saw every blast go well over his head. He looked in Travis direction, but the cloud blocked his view completely and he was unwilling to risk firing his blaster in a direction that could lead to the bolt ending up in a crowded street. Instead he reached for his comlink only to find that he had dropped it avoiding being shot. Looking around he could not see it anywhere. Rather than waste time looking for the tiny device he holstered his blaster and scooped up the tunic and helmet he had removed before running in the opposite direction to Travis.

"Major we've got a problem." Travis said into his comlink as he strode through the street still disguised as a naval trooper, "Tharun got away from me."

"How?" Jym replied.

"He's damned quick, that's how."

"Then it's only a matter of time before he warns the others. Get to Tayal as quick as you can. We'll take care of Mace and Vorn here." Jym told him and he shut off his comlink and produced a hold out blaster from beneath his jacket, "Okay then," he said to Anzar and Tayal, "let's do this." But when he turned his attention back towards where he had left the other two rebels they were no where to be seen.

"Yep, he's got Anzar and Lannaye with him now." Mace said as he watched Jym moving through the plaza, "Good job I remembered the comlink frequency they use."

"I need to check on Kara." Vorn said, reaching for his own comlink.

"Major wait." Mace said, grabbing his wrist, "Right now we need to deal with these three. Then we need to get after Tayal. We can send Jaysica and Tobis after Kara."

Vorn frowned.

"Mace I can't just abandon her. She's my wife and she's-"

"You're not abandoning her." Mace interrupted, "But you're no good to her if Jym and his people kill us before we can get to her. Now are we going to do this?" and he drew his heavy blaster pistol.

Vorn nodded and produced his own hold out blaster.

"Let's go." He said, "But I'd rather take them alive. If they've hurt Kara though-"

"I get it." Mace said as he checked on the position of Jym's people again, "Okay we need to take down Lannaye first."

"Lannaye?" Vorn said.

"She's got the best weapon. Neither Anzar nor Jym have their rifles and their pistols are lightweight models. We take out Lannaye and that's their only military spec weapon gone."

"Unless one of the other two stops to pick it up." Vorn pointed out.

"They stop, they're dead." Mace said and then he brought his pistol up in one swift motion and fired.

At the last moment Lannaye halted to look around and it was then that Mace fired. The shot rang out around the plaza and the effect was immediate. All around people screamed and panicked, running to either try to get away or reach loved ones.

"Stang! Missed!" Mace snapped as he ducked back into cover just before a blaster bolt came flying back towards them.

"Come let's move." Vorn said and he and Mace ran, moving around the outer edge of the plaza as they looked for a better position from which to attack. But Jym's group went after them as terrified civilians scattered in front of them.

A gap opened up in the crowd in front of Jym and he fired, but Mace and Vorn were too far away for his tiny weapon to be useful and the shot went wide. In response Mace spun and returned fire from his heavier pistol and only narrowly missed Jym who winced as the near miss of the high energy bolt still burned his flesh. A wailing sound from overhead attracted the attention of both groups and they looked up to see an airspeeder with police markings descending over them.

"This is the police! Lay down your weapons and surrender!" an amplified voice called out.

"Time to go I think." Vorn said as two more police speeders came into view and Mace nodded in agreement. The first speeder touched down in the plaza and its doors swung upwards to allow the occupants to get out. The first police officer to step from the vehicle was still drawing his weapon when Anzar shot him, the blast striking his armoured vest at the very edge and he fell backwards. The second officer used the speeder as cover while he fired, the bright red of the blaster bolts indicating that he was not using the stun setting on his weapon.

Jym looked around and was just in time to see Vorn vanishing around a corner beyond the police speeder."

"Forget them." He exclaimed, "They're gone. Let's go join up with Tayal and Travis. The sooner we've got the stones the sooner we can get out of here."

With his disguise as a naval fleet trooper once again in place Tharun ran to the starport control tower and headed inside just as Jaysica and Tobis were emerging from a turbolift.

"Jaysica!" he called out, waving to her.

"Ooh look Tobis, there's Tharun." She said, waving back at him.

Tharun ran to the security desk and waited as the other rebels came over, handed in their passes and then exited the secured area. This time the guards just waved them through when the blasters hidden inside Harvey triggered the alarms again.

"Do either of you have your comlinks?" Tharun asked quietly as they headed for the exit.

"Of course. We both do." Jaysica replied.

"Then give me one little lady. Now." Tharun said.

"What on Coruscant for?" Jaysica asked.

"Major Shrell's unit has turned on us." Tharun told both her and Tobis.

"What? Oh, err. But why?" Tobis stammered.

"I don't know that lad. But Travis did his best to kill me."

"You're still alive though." Jaysica said as she produced her comlink.

"That's because staying alive is a habit I find hard to break." Tharun said and he snatched the comlink from her grip, "Major Larcus can you hear me?" he transmitted, but there was no reply and he frowned, "Lieutenant Larcus are you there?" he then tried, but once again the channel remained silent, "Stang!" he exclaimed.

"What's wrong? Why is nobody answering?" Jaysica asked and Tharun glared at her, "No. They can't be dead." She added, shaking her head and she looked at Tobis, "Tobis we have to do something."

"Err-"

"Okay this is what we're going to do." Tharun said, "To start with we send Harvey and Penny back to the *Silver Hawk*. We need to move fast and they'll just slow us down." And at this point Harvey let out a rude sounding noise at the same time as the hatch concealing the blasters opened again, "Then Tobis and I will go look for Major Larcus and Captain Grayle. In the meantime little lady, you go find that hotel the lieutenant said they were using as an OP."

"Sure." Jaysica said she turned to leave.

"And one more thing little lady." Tharun said and she looked back at him.



"What?"

"If you see any of Shrell's people then you shoot them and you shoot to kill. No warnings. You understand?"

Jaysica nodded.

"Good. Now go and let's hope that the Force is with us."

## 5.

As they ran through the streets Mace and Vorn could hear the sound of repulsorlifts from the police speeders hunting them.

"They're not giving up are they?" Mace commented.

"Who'd have thought that a blaster fight in the streets would attract so much attention?" Vorn replied. Then he pointed ahead, "Look, we're almost at the crater edge. If we head into the underground then those speeders won't be able to follow us."

"Good idea. Just one flaw." Mace said as he skidded to a halt.

"What?" Vorn asked as he stopped just in time to avoid barging into Mace.

"Them." Mace answered, pointing to the group of police officers blocking their path. All of them wore enhanced body armour and carried blaster rifles in addition to their pistols.

"Drop your weapons!" one of them yelled as all four of them raised their rifles and took aim at the rebels.

"Major?" Mace asked, looking around at Vorn.

"Do as they say Mace." He replied, "We're not getting out of this one without a miracle." And he laid his blaster down on the ground and raised his hands. Sighing Mace did likewise.

"Now take three paces forwards!" the police officer ordered and both rebels did as they were told, "Now get-"

"Hey!" a voice familiar to the rebels then called out and a figure dressed in black came running up, "You caught them. Excellent." Tharun said to the police officers.

"Who are you?" one of them asked him.

"Navy. That's all you need to know." Tharun replied, "I'm here to take these two off your hands."

"They're our prisoners." One of the police told Tharun, shaking his head.

"They're rebels." Tharun said, "So unless you'd rather I referred this to the ISB and let them come see you, you really ought to hand them over to me."

"No chance. This is a legitimate arrest. If the Imperial Security Bureau wants them they're welcome to come and ask. You're taking them now over our dead bodies."

"Oh you just had to say that didn't you?" Tharun said and all of a sudden he lashed out and struck the closest police officer in the throat. Startled by this sudden attack, the other three dithered about turning to confront Tharun or keeping Mace and Vorn covered and in that moment of doubt Tharun struck again. He grabbed the barrel of one of their blasters and pulled on it, twisting it around so that when the police officer holding it squeezed the trigger the muzzle of the weapon was pointing directly at one of his comrades. Fired at point-blank range the bolt had no difficulty in punching through his armoured vest and he fell backwards.

The remaining officer recognised Tharun as the greater threat and turned to face him, but he was prevented from shooting him because of his comrade serving as a human shield while he wrestled with the rebel.

Another shot then sounded as Tobis appeared and shot the officer in the back. This gave Mace and Vorn all the opportunity they needed and both rushed forwards. Mace dived into the officer that Tharun was struggling with, delivering a blow to his nose that produced a 'crunch' and a spurt of blood. On the other hand Vorn targeted the officer who had suffered the blow to the neck who was still attempting to catch his breath. Vorn reached out and plucked the stun baton from the officer's belt and activated it. Then before the officer could react Vorn jabbed him with the weapon and there was the crackling of an energy discharge as the officer collapsed in a heap. Vorn then turned, ready to use the weapon again on the last remaining police officer, but he was just in time to see Mace and Tharun slam the man's head against a wall and since he had lost his helmet at some point in the struggle he went limp.

"Major!" Tharun then exclaimed, "Major's Shrell has-"

"We know." Mace interrupted, "We overheard Travis' report about his failure to kill you. They're after the corusca stones."

"Tharun," Vorn then said, still trying to catch his breath after the chase and the fight, "Have you heard from Kara?"

"No sir I haven't. But I sent Jaysica to check on her."

Having run most of the way to the hotel Jaysica slowed down to a walk as she entered the lobby so as not to attract undue attention. With one hand holding the blaster in her pocket she approached the main desk and waved at the droid behind it.

"Yes mistress? How may I assist you?" the machine asked.

"I'm looking for a woman called Larcus." Jaysica said, "It's official Imperial business."

"There are no guests of that name staying here at present." The droid told her, "Do you want me to check future bookings?"

"No. Try Bilstran, that was her maiden name."

"There are no-

"Guests of that name. I get it." Jaysica said as she tried to think of what name Kara would have used to check in. Then she remembered that Kara had not been alone, "Okay try Lineer." She said, recalling Tayal's last name.

"A Miss Lineer checked in earlier today. Do you wish me to contact her room?"

"No. Just give me the number, I need to go and see her myself."

"Certainly mistress. It is room eleven forty-three."

"Thanks." Jaysica said and she turned and strode towards the turbolift.

There were other people in the turbolift, but this did not bother Jaysica who exited the lift at the appropriate floor and followed the signs to the room that the droid had directed her to where she saw the 'Do not disturb' sign active above the door. She could hear the sound of the entertainment system turned up to a high level from within and was about to press the intercom when she realised that she had no idea if Tayal or any of the other members of Jym's team were inside. Knowing that pressing the button would attract the attention of anyone inside Jaysica decided to attempt a more subtle entry and she headed back to the turbolift.

Going up one floor she then headed for the room directly above and tried the intercom to see if they was anyone inside. When no one replied she looked around as she took out a compact multitool and then removed the lock panel from the wall. It took only a few seconds to gain entry to the room and Jaysica ran to the balcony. Looking over she could see the light being cast out from the room below and she carefully climbed over the side of the balcony and began to lower herself down. She had just placed her feet on the safety rail of the lower room when she realised that not only had she not thought of how to then get down without letting go of the rail of the balcony belonging to the upper room but she also doubted that she would be able to pull herself back up and lacking any ideas she paused to think.

"Ooh. I should have put more thought into this." She said to herself softly. The only idea she could come up with was to lower her feet off the safety rail and then let go, letting herself fall and hoping that with her feet within the area of the rail she would end up landing there. Jaysica took a deep breath as she stepped off the rail and felt herself drop and she gasped as her arms suddenly took her full weight. Then she took another deep breath and let go.

Avoiding the urge to cry out Jaysica landed in a heap on the balcony, but did not stop moving there and she rolled forwards into the glass door, her head slamming against it. Dazed, she got back to her feet and rubbed her forehead. Then her eyes widened and her jaw dropped as she saw Kara tied to the bed and with a piece of fruit wedged in her mouth.

"Kara?" she exclaimed and forgetting about the glass door she took a step forwards and walked right into it, "Ouch!" she called out as she staggered back and narrowly avoided falling backwards over the safety rail.

Trying the door, Jaysica found it locked and she drew her blaster and simply shot the lock away. Sliding the door open she then rushed to Kara and pulled the fruit from her mouth.

"I'll kill that kriffing nerf herder!" Kara yelled. Then she looked around, "Isn't anyone else here to rescue me?" she asked, "What about the boss?"

"No it's just me."

"Oh gods, I'm going to die tied to a bed." Kara said, "What's going on out there?"

"Travis tried to kill Tharun and now he and Tobis have gone to try and find the major and the captain because we couldn't contact them. Tharun sent me to save you."

"What did I do to deserve that?"

"What?" Jaysica asked.

"Never mind. Just get Tobis to come here and get me out of these binders."

"Sure." Jaysica said and she reached into her pocket for her comlink, "Oh. I gave my comlink to Tharun. Where's yours?"

"That bitch stole it along with the rest of my stuff." Kara replied, "You'll have to go and get him."

"I can pick the locks." Jaysica replied, taking out the multitool again and she leant towards the binders around Kara's wrists.

"No don't." Kara said, trying to move her wrists out of Jaysica's reach.

"Just stay still. I can do this." Jaysica said as she took hold of one of Kara's wrists.

"Jaysica, those are precision devices. One wrong move and – Ow! Ow, you've just made them tighter. Go get Tobis before you cut my hands off entirely."

"I can do it."

"No you can't." Kara said and with Jaysica leaning over her she was able to lift her head up enough that she was face to face with her, "Go – get – Tobis." She said slowly scowling.

"Err, I'll go and get Tobis." Jaysica replied. Then she clambered off the bed and ran for the door.

"Damn." Kara muttered, turning her attention back to the wall mounted screen after Jaysica left, "I should have got her to change the channel."

"So we can't contact Jaysica because you've got her comlink?" Vorn asked Tharun as the group headed towards the edge of the crater.

"Afraid so major. I never even noticed that I kept it at the time."

"So how will she find us?" Tobis then asked.

"How did you find us?" Mace asked him in response.

"Err, well we just went to the plaza where we were supposed to meet up." Tobis answered.

"Then we followed the chaos." Tharun added.

"Ah, Jaysica's resourceful." Tobis then said, "She'll find us." And the others all stared at him, "What?" he asked.

"Do you know another Jaysica?" Mace asked, "Because I think it's far more likely that we'll be able to find her by heading towards the next big explosion."

"She'll find a way." Tobis muttered, "You'll see." And then his comlink chimed.

"Who knows we're here?" Mace asked as Tobis rummaged through his pockets for the comlink.

"Got to be the droids." Tharun replied.

"Hello?" Tobis said as he activated his comlink.

"Tobis it's me." Jaysica's voice replied.

"How the hell did she manage that?" Mace exclaimed.

"Err, Jaysica, Tharun's still got your comlink. How are you calling us?" Tobis asked.

"I'm back at the ship." Jaysica replied, "It was all I could think of."

"Is Kara with her?" Vorn asked.

"Is Kara with you?" Tobis then repeated into the comlink.

"No, she's still at the hotel. That Tayal left her tied to the bed with binders in room one one three eight and she wants you to go and untie her."

"Err, me? Why me?"

"She wouldn't say. But she was really insistent."

"Right I'll—" Tobis began before Vorn interrupted.

"I'll go." He said, "I want everyone else to go after Jym's people. We can't let them get away with the stones."

"What about Jaysica?" Tobis asked.

"What about me?" Jaysica's voice then said from the comlink, the device having only picked up Tobis' part of the conversation.

"Tell her to stay put and let us know if Jym's people turn up. If we miss them they're bound to head back to their ship. They may even try and take ours to leave us stranded here." Vorn said.

Tobis nodded and as Vorn turned to leave he heard the engineer explaining the plan to Jaysica.

Jaysica ran from the cockpit right past Jeeves.

"Mistress Horbid could you please explain what is going on?" the droid called out to her and it began to follow her towards the crew cabins, "Harvey and Penny have just given me the most ridiculous tale about Major Shrell's unit turning on us. But that can't be true surely."

"It's true." Jaysica responded as she headed into the cabin that Tharun and Vorn shared.

"Mistress Horbid that is not your cabin and I believe that Sergeant Verser has been quite clear that you're not allowed in there." Jeeves said.

"There's something in here I need." She replied and she went straight to the locker at the far end of the room and tried to open it, "Locked." She commented as she took out her multitool and began to pick the lock.

"But what you possibly want in there mistress?"

"If I'm guarding the ship then I want the biggest gun I can get hold of." Jaysica replied.

"But I thought that since our last mission to the star forge you also had a carbine."

"I do." Jaysica said as the locker door sprung open, "But this is bigger." And she took out Tharun's Blastech A280 heavy blaster rifle and smiled.

"Oh Mistress Horbid, I've got a bad feeling about this." Jeeves said to her.

## 6.

Vorn found the door to the hotel room unlocked and burst in.

"Boss!" Kara exclaimed, "Where's Tobis?"

"Gone with Mace and Tharun after Jym's people." Vorn replied as he rushed to the bed, "I'm here to rescue you."

"And did you happen to bring a key to these binders?"

"No, but I've got this." Vorn told her and he drew his blaster and released the safety.

"Are you insane?" Kara exclaimed, "I'd expect the klutz to try and blow my hands and feet off, not you."

"Oh calm down." Vorn said, sitting on the bed beside her and he lifted her hands up. Then he pressed the muzzle of his blaster against the part of the frame that the binders were wrapped around and averting his gaze he fired a single shot.

"Whoa! Warn me when you're going to do that." Kara said then as Vorn pulled her still bound wrists through the gap blown in the frame she added, "At least I can move my arms more now though."

"Now lift your feet." Vorn said as he turned towards the far end of the bed and when Kara lifted up her feet he blasted another section of the frame away so that she was no longer bound to the bed.

"Now what?" Kara asked, "Am I supposed to just hop everywhere?"

"Oh Kara I'm disappointed in you." Vorn replied as he ejected the power cell from his blaster, "Now give me your feet."

"Oh that trick. I hope it works." Kara said before there was a sudden bright flash of light as Vorn pressed the contacts of the power cell against the binders around Kara's ankles, shorting them out. The sudden energy discharge also overloaded the electronic locking system of the binders and they fell away, clattering to the floor.

"Now take my jacket." Vorn said, removing his jacket and folding it over the binder around Kara's wrists to hide them from view, "See? Now no one will notice. Now let's get going and hope we don't run into any trouble because I'm all out of ammo."

"So this is it, then is it?" Anzar asked as Jym's unit looked at the building where the corusca stones were being held, "Doesn't look like much."

"I think the Empire's relying on stealth for security." Travis replied.

"Yeah I've seen it loads of times before." Tayal said, "if you put obvious security around you just make it obvious that you're protecting something. Of course the trick is not to leave something valuable insufficiently protected because you're so hung up on not having visible security."

"So what's the plan Tayal?" Jym asked.

"They'll have weapon scanners on the doors so we can't just walk right in and start shooting." She said.

"Well whatever we can do, we better be able to do it quickly." Jym said, "Larcus' people aren't likely to sit around waiting forever. They'll figure out that we're headed here and try to stop us."

"Give me a datapad." Tayal said, holding out her hand to Jym.

"What for?" he asked as he handed his to her.

"Because this has some very valuable data on it and I want to put it somewhere safe. It's so valuable I've even got a pair of big strong bodyguards." Tayal told him and she looked at Anzar and Travis, "Okay boys, lose the blasters and follow me. Oh and remember that you work for me."

"Of course ma'am." Travis replied, frowning as he handed his blaster to Jym for safekeeping.

"Better take the tunic off as well." Jym told the bounty hunter who was still wearing the navy uniform.

When all three of those entering the security building were suitably dressed and disarmed they headed towards the entrance with Tayal in the lead. Sure enough as they walked through the doorway Travis noticed not only the tell tale coils set into the walls designed to detect blasters but also the edges of a blast door that could be closed to seal off the entrance.

"Good day, how may I help you?" one of the staff said as he approached them.

"I need to keep this somewhere secure." Tayal told him, "I want to use your maximum security vault."

"Of course madam. I'm Mister Drummon and if you'd like to come with me I will show you to the maximum security vault." The man said and he beckoned for her to follow him towards an armoured blast door set into the far wall.

There was a guard by the door who took out a key as they approached and when he inserted it into a slot beside the door it slid open to allow them past several doors marked with three letter codes.

"As you can see we maintain the best possible security here." Drummon explained as he led them through, "Your item will not only be protected in a locked storage unit that only you have access to, but the very vault itself is always kept sealed and guarded. Only staff keys will open the main vault from the inside or any of the

storage sections, while it takes the guard to open the main vault from outside.”

”What about guards in here?” Tayal asked.

”There are none. The walls are reinforced alloys of the same type used in warship construction, multilayered with monitored vacuum gaps between to prevent any attempt to cut through from the outside. The doors to each individual section and the storage units are constructed of similar materials. Ah, here we are. Section trill herf xesh. This is where we keep all the most sensitive items under ten kilos that do not require specialist environments.” And then Drummon produced a key from his pocket on a chain that he inserted into the lock. The door slid upwards instantly to reveal walls lined with tiny doors, each of which featured both a slot for a key and a numeric keypad.

”So this is it then is it?” Tayal asked, ”I’d like to see inside one.”

”Of course. This is the unit I’ll be assigning you.” Drummon said and he walked over to one of the doors and inserted his key into the lock, ”At present the door is unencrypted.” He explained as he opened it, ”But if you examine the inside of the door you’ll see another keypad and a key similar to mine plugged into it. You enter a code of your own choosing from five up to forty digits long and remove the key. Once closed the door will then only open when both your key is inserted and the correct code entered.”

”Excellent.” Tayal said, ”But what’s that?”

”What’s what?” Drummon asked, turning away from Tayal just long enough for her to slip a cylinder from her sleeve and with a flick of her wrist expand it to about a metre in length. Swinging the baton she knocked Drummon’s legs out from under him and as he fell both Anzar and Travis leapt forwards. Anzar grabbed him, wrapping an arm around his chest while clamping his other hand over the man’s nose and mouth while Travis delivered a pair of rapid punches to his exposed throat. Then as Anzar let him fall Travis brought his foot down on his chest to finish him off.

”Okay let’s open some boxes.” Tayal said as she collapsed her baton and took out her multitool.

”With that?” Anzar asked, ”How are you going to pick one of these locks with that?”

”I’m not.” Tayal replied, ”I’m going to remove a keypad. But not until I’ve programmed this key.” And then she tapped the keypad inside the storage unit that had been presented to her with the digits one two three four five.

”That’s the same combination I used to have on my luggage.” Travis commented and Tayal frowned at him before taking the key and closing the door.

”These locks are actually poodoo.” She said as she began to remove the screws holding the keypad in place, ”You can undo the keypads from the outside and expose the circuit board. Then you can just cut the wires to remove it. Though not yet.”

”Why not Travis asked as Tayal stepped away from the door and began reading the serial numbers on the others.

”Because the memory they use is volatile. Disrupt the power for more than about thirty seconds and the combination will be cleared. There’s a battery backup but it’s at the back of the unit. Ah here we are. One one three eight.” And she repeated the procedure of removing the exterior keypad. This time however Tayal also removed some of the insulation from the wires connecting to the circuit board, ”Okay now I just need to get that other board in here.” She said.

”I only see two of them.” Mace said as he peered around a pillar to where Jym and Lannaye waited close to the storage facility.

”Err, that’s good isn’t it?” Tobis replied.

”Not necessarily lad.” Tharun told him, ”The other three are probably inside.”

”But if they’ve split up aren’t they easier to deal with?” Tobis asked.

”These two yes. But if the others use a different way out then we’ll lose them.” Mace said.

”It’s your call captain.” Tharun then said to Mace.

”We wait.” He answered, ”I’d rather not engage them here anyway. Too public and I bet the police are set up to react quickly to any alarms from this place.”

With the circuit board from the other unit in place Tayal replaced the keypad and screwed it down.

”Now we see if this has worked.” She said, holding her breath as she then inserted her key into the lock and entering the code one two three four five. She exhaled heavily as there was a ‘bleep’ and the door unlocked, ”I told you it would work.” She said, opening the door to expose the bag of precious stones behind it.

Reaching inside she removed the bag and poured some of the contents into her hand, ”Guys, we’re rich.” She said.

”Then let’s get out of here.” Anzar said, ”Grab that guy’s key and let’s get going.”

Using the deceased Drummon’s key the trio exited the THX section and headed back to the main vault door, using the key to open that one from the inside.

The guard outside watched as Tayal and Travis emerged and frowned.

”Where’s Mister Drummon?” he asked.

"Right here." Travis replied, pointing back into the vault and as the guard peered through the open doorway Anzar grabbed hold of him, pulled him into the vault and slammed his head against the interior wall. Then all three speedily headed for the exit.

"Sound the alarm! Lock down the building!" the guard called out as he began to recover his senses and dragging himself back to the vault doorway he drew his blaster and fired. Still disorientated the shot went wide, but instantly there were screams from other staff and customers. More significantly though the alarm began to sound and the blast door at the entrance began to close.

"Move!" Anzar yelled as they ran for the doorway, diving between the blast door sections before they could close.

"Okay they've got the stones and they're on the move." Mace said, drawing his blaster, "Let's get after them and get those stones back for the Alliance."

Jym's unit began to run in the opposite direction and Mace's group went after them.

"Captain this isn't the way to the main starport." Tharun commented just before it became obvious why their quarry was heading in the wrong direction as they ran up to a parked landspeeder and got in.

"Where the hell did they get that?" Mace exclaimed as the speeder began to drive off in the direction of the *Scarlet Knife*.

"Probably a rental." Tharun commented.

"Well we'll never catch them now." Mace replied.

"Hey guys!" Kara's voice suddenly called out and the three men looked around to see her head poking out of the window of a taxi that also had Vorn in it, "Need a ride?"

"Follow that speeder!" Tharun yelled as they ran to the taxi.

7.

Jaysica sat in the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk* with Tharun's rifle in her lap and his armoured vest on despite it being far too large for her.

"Oh Mistress Horbid I do wish you'd reconsider this." Jeeves said, "To take on so many opponents at once is highly risky. The odds of success are less than one in—"

"Look!" Jaysica suddenly snapped, sitting up and pointing as she saw a landspeeder pull up close to the *Scarlet Knife* and leap out. Jumping out of her seat Jaysica pushed past Jeeves and ran for the access ramp, opening it and rushing down before it was fully deployed, "Stop!" she then called out, pointing Tharun's rifle towards Jym, "I'll shoot you."

Jym and his group ground to a halt and looked at her. Jym grinned.

"Put that big gun down little girl." He said with a snarl, "You look like a fool."

"She is a fool." Tayal said and she reached for her blaster.

Jaysica saw the movement and pulled the trigger of the rifle. Unknown to her it was set to fully automatic and the weapon produced not one but a steady stream of blaster bolts, none of which hit anyone. Letting out a high pitched squeal Jaysica ceased fire and dived to the floor just as Travis drew his pistol and fired two shots that passed through the air where she had just been and instead struck the hull of the *Silver Hawk*.

"Blast her!" Jym ordered and all of his team reached for their weapons. However, before they could fire there was the sound of a repulsorlift engine as a taxi sped up and came to a sudden halt.

Tharun was the first out, followed swiftly by Mace and both of them came out firing. The flurry of blaster bolts forced Jym's unit to seek cover behind the *Scarlet Knife*'s landing gear rather than fire on Jaysica. Jym looked in the direction of the taxi as the rest of Vorn's team exited and the vehicle sped off as fast as the driver could manage. Though neither Vorn nor Kara appeared to be shooting at his own team, giving them a slight numerical advantage Jym knew that it would not be long before starport security reacted. For all he knew there was already a force of stormtroopers on the way.

"Anzar open the ship! We're leaving." He yelled before taking a shot with his hold out blaster at Mace that proved to be out of range.

Sending a signal from his comlink Anzar unsealed the *Scarlet Knife*'s access ramp.

"They're trying to get away." Vorn yelled, "Don't let them up that ramp."

Reacting to this Jaysica aimed Tharun's rifle towards the *Scarlet Knife* and opened fire again, sending out another stream of energy blasts. Once again she failed to hit anyone, but the sustained burst was directed at the access ramp and none of Jym's team were willing to risk their lives in running up it while she was still shooting.

With their attention focused on the members of Vorn's team who were firing on them, Jym's ignored both Kara and Vorn himself and when Kara noticed that none of the handful of blaster shots being fired at their team were coming towards her she saw her chance. Tossing aside Vorn's jacket she darted towards the stern of the *Scarlet Knife*, away from Jym's team at the prow.

"Kara get back here!" Vorn hissed, anxious not to alert Jym's team to what she was doing but she ignored him and continued on her way.

Using the ship's landing struts and access ramp to hide her progress she then crept forwards, keeping Tayal in view at all times. The thief was located at the back of Jym's unit, which put her closest to Kara. However, although Kara was keen to take her revenge on the woman she did not want to die doing it and so she waited.

There was the sound of more powerful engines from across the starport and all of the rebels, both current and former looked around to see a pair of armoured troop transports heading towards them. The sudden appearance of these vehicles caused all the blaster fire to cease, including that from Jaysica that was keeping Jym's team from getting aboard their ship.

"Now! Go!" Jym yelled and he leapt up and ran up the access ramp before she could open fire again.

The rest of his team did the same but as Tayal got up she felt the impact of Kara as she barged into her from behind.

"Oh no you don't!" Kara exclaimed as she tried to wrap her still bound wrists around Tayal's throat. Tayal pushed Kara off and scrambled back but Kara was not done trying to prevent her escape and she reached out to try and grab hold of Tayal's belt. She failed to get a strong enough grip to prevent her from getting out of reach, but she did rip open one of the pouches on the belt and from it fell the bag of corusca stones that spilled open as it hit the ground.

"No!" Tayal screamed as she saw their prize scattering all around.

From his position on the access ramp Jym also watched in horror as Tayal lost the stones, but his attention was quickly drawn back to the two approaching armoured vehicles and he scowled.

"Tayal! Forget about them!" he yelled, "We need to get out of here."

"But-" Tayal began as she wrestled with Kara.

"Just move!" Jym yelled, "We don't have the time!"

"Bitch!" Tayal snapped as she struck Kara across the face and then made a dash for the access ramp, reaching it just as Anzar reached the cockpit and started the engines.

"Kara get away from there!" Vorn shouted.

"But boss the stones." She responded as she looked around at the scattered corusca stones.

"Leave them." Vorn yelled and Kara frowned before getting and running towards the *Silver Hawk* just before the *Scarlet Knife* began to rise into the air.

Inside the *Silver Hawk* Mace and Vorn headed straight for the cockpit while Kara sat down in the lounge and held her hands out towards Harvey.

"How about you cut me free?" she said to the droid and in response there was a rude sounding noise.

"I'm sorry Mistress Larcus, but Harvey says how about you say please?" Jeeves translated and Kara snarled.

"How about I get a kriffing can opener and remove the cutter from inside Harvey and do it myself?" she said and Jeeves turned towards the astromech droid.

"Harvey I suggest you just do it." He said.

At the same time Tharun approached Jaysica and plucked his rifle from her grasp and glared at her. In return she smiled at him nervously.

"I'm really sorry. I didn't know what else to do." She said.

"Err, I'm sure she didn't mean any-" Tobis began before Tharun turned and pointed at him. Then he smiled and turned back to Jaysica.

"You did good little lady." He said, rubbing her hair.

There was the sound of the engines starting up and the ship then lurched slightly as it lifted into the air, leaving the starport security forces as well as the precious corusca stones behind. Then there was a clattering sound as the binders fell from Kara's wrists and she leapt back to her feet.

"Cheers Harvey." She said before rushing to the cockpit, "Boss what's going on?" she asked.

"The *Scarlet Knife* is dead ahead." Vorn replied, "They can't outrun us in realspace." And Kara grinned.

"Does this mean I get to shoot them down?" she asked.

"It sure does." Mace told her, "Get to the turret."

"Already on my way." Kara said, turning and rushing back out of the cockpit again.

When she reached the turret and climbed into the gunnery chair the sky was already turning the dark black of space and at any moment Kara expected to feel the surge of power as the *Silver Hawk's* ion drives took over from its repulsorlifts. However, when the sound of the repulsorlifts ceased there was only silence instead as the ship just drifted forwards under its own momentum.

In the cockpit Mace and Vorn looked at one another and scowled.

"I let them on my kriffing ship!" he exclaimed, getting up from his seat, "Tobis!" he yelled, "We need to figure out what those nerf herders have done to my ship!" and then just before he left the cockpit he turned to Vorn and added, "Get ready to get us away from here so we can get to hyperspace. I'll tell you when."



Vorn moved to the pilot's seat and looked at the instruments and his eyes widened as he saw a small group of sensor contacts behind the *Silver Hawk*.

"Kara we've got company." He said into the intercom at the same time as he raised the *Silver Hawk's* deflector shields, "Looks like a flight of TIE fighters."

"On them boss." Kara replied as she spun the turret around and opened fire.

The pilots of the TIE fighters had not expected the *Silver Hawk* to suddenly lose power and so they were still heading for where the ship should have been, close on the tail of the *Scarlet Knife* when the attack came.

The burst of fire from the turret mounted laser cannon tore through one of the lightweight fighters while the remaining three looped out of the way and veered towards the *Silver Hawk*. Almost immediately they began firing, with emerald coloured laser blasts impacting on the *Silver Hawk's* shields. Fortunately Mace had been able to obtain a very powerful shield generator and although the *Silver Hawk* rocked slightly it remained undamaged as Kara blasted a second TIE fighter to pieces.

By now however, the Imperial fighter pilots had noticed that the *Silver Hawk* was just coasting through space and they reacted by manoeuvring underneath the freighter where Kara could not fire at them from the dorsally mounted turret and strafed the ship from there, hoping to overwhelm the ship's shields.

"Boss I can't hit them unless we can steer." Kara said into the intercom.

"Mace how are we doing?" Vorn then asked.

"Tobis has found it." Mace replied, "Ready in thirty seconds, maybe a minute."

"Good because that's all we've got." Vorn told him, "We've got a customs frigate coming around the planet and I doubt they'll be too happy about us shooting down those fighters."

"Done it!" Mace suddenly called out and Vorn transferred every bit of power not needed for the shields or environmental systems into the *Silver Hawk's* ion drives. This included the power to the turret and Kara cried out in frustration as the laser cannon that was her only weapon shut down.

It was still too late for the *Silver Hawk* to catch up with the *Scarlet Knife* however and Vorn saw the flash of light that heralded the barloz-class freighter entering hyperspace through the viewport just before Mace returned to the cockpit.

"How are we doing?" he asked.

"We've lost them." Vorn replied as he made way for Mace, "The only thing left for us to do now is get back to headquarters and explain why we don't have the stones, the hyperbarides or Jym's team."

"We're leaving the gravity well. Are the co-ordinates programmed in?" Mace asked.

"They are." Vorn replied and without another word Mace triggered the hyperdrive and the stars outside the ship blurred into a tunnel of light.

"I'm sorry." Tayal said to break the silence in the *Scarlet Knife's* hold.

"You should have just slit her throat in the hotel room." Travis said.

"I couldn't do it." Tayal replied, "Not like that."

"Not even after what happened to Devid?" Lannaye asked but before Tayal could answer Jym spoke up.

"It's alright." He said.

"It is?" Anzar asked.

"Yes. Sure we lost the stones but we're free. The Alliance won't be sending us on any more pointless suicide missions. From now on we just do whatever we need to do to survive." Jym said and after a brief pause he finished with, "And if along the way I happen to get the chance to kill Vorn Larcus and every member of his team then so much the better."