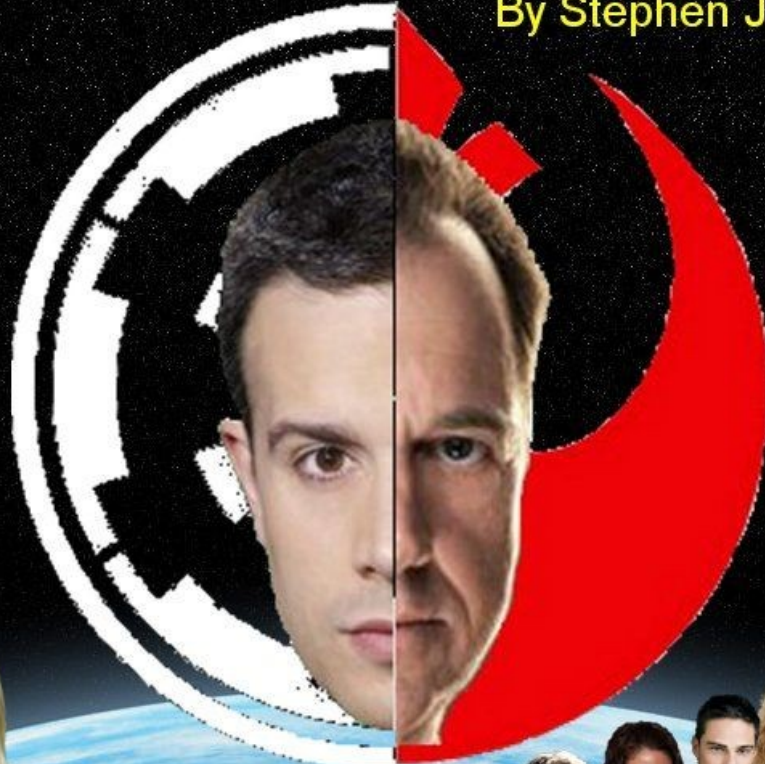


STAR WARS

5-12: Mutual Enemies

By Stephen J Dutton



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Civil war turns father against son

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

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

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

MUTUAL ENEMIES

IS YOUR ENEMY'S ENEMY ALWAYS YOUR FRIEND? WHEN THREE MUTUALLY ANTAGONISTIC GROUPS ARE BROUGHT TOGETHER IN A REMOTE LOCATION IT TURNS INTO A LIFE OR DEATH STRUGGLE FOR THEM ALL...

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

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1.

No one looked around when Keena Vayal entered the cantina but that was unsurprising. In this part of town people minded their own business just in case their curiosity led to their body being discovered in an alleyway or river. Keena however, was interested in one particular occupant of the cantina who she saw sitting in a corner. The man wore body armour while his helmet and a rifle lay on the table in front of him. Watching the man carefully Keena headed for the bar and attracted the attention of the barman.

"What is he drinking?" she asked, pointing to the man in the corner.

"Corrabeer." he replied.

"Then give me two of those." Keena said, placing a small stack of coins on the bar, "And you may keep the extra for yourself."

"Thank you." The barman said as he exchanged the coins for two bottles of beer. Keena picked both up and headed towards the man in the corner.

"Hey baby, one of those for me?" a large man asked as he placed his hand on Keena's shoulder. Without speaking she passed one of the bottles of beer to her other hand so both were grasped together and then reached up with her free one. Gripping the man's arm at the wrist she applied pressure and twisted, causing him to let go and recoil in pain. Then she continued to make her way to the corner.

"Kenit Durvell?" she said to the man sat alone at the table and he looked up at her.

"I don't know you." He said.

"Not yet, no." Keena said and she sat down and placed one of the bottles in front of him while taking a sip from the other herself. The drink was bitter and unpleasant to the taste, but she hid her dislike of it.

"Say your piece." Kenit said, pulling the drink towards him and taking a much bigger mouthful than Keena would be willing to take, "Then leave."

"Tharun Verser." Keena said and Kenit glared at her angrily.

"You better have a good reason for mentioning that name in my presence woman." He said, "If you're some friend of his then-"

"No. I am no friend of Sergeant Tharun Verser or any of his friends."

"What do you know of Tharun Verser and his friends then Miss – Miss?"

"My name is Keena Vayal and I have encountered Tharun Verser and his friends. They cost me a great deal of money."

"If money is all they cost you then be grateful. Tharun Verser cost me everything."

"So I heard. That is why I am here. Would it surprise you to know that Tharun Verser and his friends have a rather large price on their heads?"

"Ah, so you're a bounty hunter." Kenit said, setting the bottle down and Keena noticed that his hand slid down under the table. She smiled and suddenly lashed out with her foot, kicking straight forwards to pin Kenit's hand and the compact blaster it now held against the row of seats in which he sat. Then she twisted her foot to increase the pressure and forced him to drop the weapon.

"I'm not here for you." She hissed as Kenit winced, "This may come as a shock to you, but the price on your head isn't particularly enticing." Then she paused briefly and added, "Besides, you're not the only one at this table who's wanted by the Empire."

"You?" Kenit replied with a snarl.

"Let's just say that although my methods are effective neither the Empire nor the bounty hunting guilds endorse any of them." Keena replied and a smile spread across Kenit's face.

"Ah, now I see it. You need muscle and you can't go to anyone legitimate."

"Precisely. Now are you interested or not?"

"That depends greatly on exactly what you are asking." Kenit said, "You still haven't said."

"I've figured out a way of capturing Tharun Verser and all his friends but as you noted I don't think I can do it alone. Help me and we split the rewards down the middle."

"I'm not interested in handing Verser over to anyone." Kenit replied, "I want to kill him myself."

"Very well. We split the money down the middle, but if you find it necessary to kill Mister Verser then the money we lose comes out of your half. Do we have a deal?"

Kenit grinned again.

"Why yes we do, Keena. Yes we do." He said before lifting the bottle back to his mouth and downing the rest of the contents in one go.

From the shadows opposite the cantina Marshas Decken evaluated his target as she appeared from inside the building. As a fully licensed bounty hunter he held Keena Vayal in particular contempt for the bad reputation she gave to people of his profession. For years he had been tracking her and now he was closer

than ever to apprehending her here on this backwater planet in the Shadow Region. Marshas guessed that she had come to this place to meet with a client and he planned to deal with her when she left. However, when she appeared she was not alone. Accompanying her was a large human wearing military-style body armour and carrying a blaster rifle slung over his shoulder. As a former member of Naboo's Royal Security Force, Marshas considered himself a professional when it came to combat and part of that included knowing when the tactical situation was not in his favour, such as now. Marshas was fairly confident that he could take out either one with the first shot, but that would undoubtedly alert the other to his presence and ruin the chance of a rapid getaway with a stunned Keena. Holstering his blaster pistol out of sight, Marshas instead opted to follow the pair.

Keena operated a small scout ship designed by the same corporation that had developed the Empire's line of TIE fighters and therefore shared many features with them, possessing the typical wing-like solar panels and circular forward viewport. But the main fuselage of the craft was bulkier, offering enough room for four occupants for a prolonged period. Most significantly the ship also possessed a hyperdrive, meaning that it was not limited to a single system as the fighter variants were.

"Where did you pick this up?" Kenit asked as Keena sealed the access ramp behind them.

"Oh it belonged to a target." Keena explained, "He wasn't in a position to use it and neither was the associate that I'd been able to persuade to give me the access codes. So I thought that it'd be a shame to waste it."

"Quite right. A ship like this would fetch a good price even on the black market without any registration." Kenit said.

"But worth more to me for getting around the sector." Keena replied, "Hitch hiking with a prisoner was difficult." And she walked past Kenit towards the front of the ship where a single seat was located at a control station, "Now take a seat while I get the ship started."

"So when do I get to find out the plan?" Kenit asked at the same time as he sat down and began to fasten his safety harness. For now he kept hold of his rifle, unwilling to let go of it until he knew more about Keena.

"This isn't the first time I've hunted the group headed by Vorn Larcus before." Keena answered.

"Yeah, you mentioned they cost you money."

There was the sound of the ship's engines starting up and the vessel lifted into the air before Keena continued with her explanation as she piloted it higher into the atmosphere.

"I was able to get aboard their ship and while there I took the opportunity to look around."

"So you planted a tracking device?"

"No. At the time I wasn't planning on having to go after them again. Besides, it's been more than two years now. They'd have found it and removed it by now."

"So what did you find out that's going to be so useful then?"

"The prefix address for their communication system." Keena answered.

"Ah." Kenit said, "So all we need to do is broadcast a signal including that and they'll pick it up."

"Exactly." Keena said, "There's an abandoned settlement on the other side of the planet, some mining facility that didn't pan out for the operator. We'll set up a transmitter there and use it as bait to lure in our targets and pick them off one at a time."

"That easy huh?"

"That easy. Nothing can go wrong."

"Lieutenant Larcus!" a voice called out and Kara Larcus turned around to see a bald headed man approaching her down the corridor. This was Colonel Harris Ergard, the Alliance's senior scout in the sector. Most of his time was spent surveying uninhabited systems but on occasion he had worked with the field team that Kara was a member of.

"Colonel Ergard." She replied with a smile, "How are you?"

"Oh I just got back from another survey flight of the Spire Worlds." He told her.

"So any signs of the rakata making a move?"

"No, none at all. Though the Imperial blockade may have something to do with that." The colonel said, "But look, I need to speak with Vorn."

"Oh, the boss is on Estran." Kara said.

"You didn't go with him?" Harris asked and Kara smiled and ran a hand over her swollen stomach.

"Oh I'm keeping out of the way until the baby's born." She replied and then her smile disappeared as she added, "Which means staying here with the boss' daughter instead. She keeps calling me 'mom'. It's creepy."

"Though technically correct. You did marry her father."

"Oh don't you start. She's older than me." Kara said, "Anyway, what do you need the boss for?"

"When I was on my way back I stopped off in the Bytan system and I picked up a repeating beacon from the primary world. It was broadcasting the *Silver Hawk's* communication prefix."

Kara frowned.

"Who'd be sending that?" she asked.

"Your guess is as good as mine. I thought I better let Vorn know."

"Well the rest of the gang won't be back for at least a week." Kara said. Then she paused, "Can you give me a ride to Estran colonel?" she asked and now it was Harris' turn to frown.

"You?" he responded.

"Yes me. I know how to find them. There's only a couple of places they'll be and I can deliver the message to them directly."

"What happened to staying here until after you had the baby?" the colonel asked.

"Oh it's not due for a couple of weeks yet and first ones are often late. You just get me to Estran and I'll do the rest. I know exactly how to get past customs."

"Okay I'll do it. But I've got a bad feeling about this. Just remember that my ship does not possess a maternity unit."

2.

"We're in luck." Kara said as Harris flew his scout ship over the star port, "That's the *Silver Hawk* down there. Just drop me off and I'll-"

"Oh no." the colonel interrupted, "No way am I letting you wander about alone down there. I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to you. Besides, there's no guarantee that there's anyone aboard the ship. If it's empty you'll have to come back here so I may as well go with you as sit here twiddling my thumbs."

"Fair enough. Look, there's a spare berth right over there."

"I see it." Harris replied and he guided his ship down.

While Harris shut down the ship's systems Kara disembarked to meet with the customs official who approached it. Kara knew that the local customs office had been bought off by a local crime lord that Mace Grayle; the owner of the *Silver Hawk* had worked for in the past and so knew exactly how to identify herself as someone not to be challenged. Of course this required a pay off, but it was better than having the scout ship searched. Harris watched this through the canopy of his ship and there was a whistling from behind him. "Don't worry Sparky." He said to the R2 unit that rolled into the cockpit, "We won't be here long. We just need to deliver a message that's all." Then he saw the customs agent leaving the docking bay and Kara waving to him, "Just wait here. I'll be right back." Harris told the droid and then he got out of his seat and exited the ship.

Now alone in the cockpit, Sparky let out a low tone as the hatch hissed closed and it watched Harris and Kara walking away.

The YT-1300 class freighter *Silver Hawk* appeared deserted at first glance when Harris and Kara entered the docking bay, but the fact that its access ramp was lowered indicated that there was someone aboard it.

"Boss!" Kara yelled at the top of her voice and Harris flinched.

"Warn me next time you're going to do that." He told her.

"I'm going to do it again." Kara replied. Then she repeated her yell, "Boss!" and the colonel still flinched.

"Kara?" a teenage girl responded as she ran down the ramp from inside the ship, "What are you doing here?"

"Really kid? Is that it? 'What are you doing here?' No 'It's great to see you' or 'Come aboard and I'll get you something to drink'?"

"I just wasn't expecting you that's all." The girl replied.

"Oh that's fine. You know me. Never one to stand on ceremony." Kara said. Then she looked up at the *Silver Hawk*, "So are the boss or your dad about?"

"Her father?" Harris commented, "Who is this person lieutenant?"

"Oh sorry. Time for introductions." Kara said. "Colonel Harris Ergard, meet Cass Grayle."

"Hi." Cass said as she approached the colonel with her hand out in greeting.

"Grayle?" he said, "As in Mace? I didn't know he had children."

"Oh he only adopted her a couple of months back." Kara told him.

"It was the only way to let me stay aboard the ship with the others." Cass added.

"Yeah, now what about the boss?" Kara asked again.

"Oh it's just me and Tobis at the moment." Cass replied, "The rest got a lead on Major Shrell and went to check it out."

"Then we better wait inside. Go tell Tobis we're here." Kara said and Cass rushed back aboard the *Silver Hawk* before Harris and Kara followed her. In the ship's lounge they discovered that although Cass and Tobis were the only human crewmembers still aboard the gold coloured protocol droid owned by Vorn was also still there.

"Lieutenant Larcus miss," it said when it saw Kara, "I thought you were supposed to be remaining at headquarters."

"Yeah, yeah. Everyone's surprised to see me." Kara said to the droid as she sat down in the first seat she reached, "How about you skip all that Jeeves and get me a glass of water and whatever the colonel wants."

And Kara looked at Harris.

"Caf's fine for me." He said.

"Of course mistress." The droid replied just as Cass reappeared accompanied by a man in overalls and an R5 astromech droid that chirped loudly.

"Yes I was surprised to see her as well." Jeeves replied to the droid.

"Oh, err, hi lieutenant." Tobis said, "I, err, I'm not sure when the others will be back. Do you want me to call them?"

"That could be useful sergeant." Harris said, "We've now way of knowing how time critical what we've got to tell you is."

"Just don't tell them about me okay?" Kara added and when Harris looked at her she added, "I want it to be a nice surprise."

"Fair enough." He said before looking back at Tobis, "Make the call please sergeant." And Tobis nodded then rushed towards the cockpit.

Vorn was the first of the returning group of rebels to walk up the access ramp with Mace close behind him. Then came the final two members of the field team, Tharun Verser and a short woman called Jaysica who at that moment was covered from head to toe in bright blue paint.

"Ah colonel, Tobis said you were-" Vorn began when he saw Harris.

"Surprise boss!" Kara interrupted and she got up to embrace her husband.

"Kara." Vorn responded with his eyes wide, "What are you doing here? Is something wrong with-"

"Oh me and the baby are just fine." She replied, "We just had to - what the kriff?" and her jaw dropped as she saw Jaysica.

"The little lady slipped." Tharun commented.

"And now the klutz can't go near any wroonians without being accused of racially insulting them." Kara added with a smirk.

"This really itches." Jaysica added, scratching at her neck.

"If you keep doing that you'll leave marks corporal." Mace warned her.

"Don't worry," Kara said, "I'm sure Tobis will help you scrub it all off. Won't you?"

"What? Oh, err, well-" Tobis stammered.

"So what brings you here colonel?" Vorn asked.

"This." Harris replied, holding up a mem-stik, "May I use your droid?" and he pointed to Harvey. In response the little droid made a rude sounding noise.

"He is a colonel Harvey." Jeeves said, "He doesn't need to ask you first."

"Err, go ahead." Tobis said and Harris walked over to Harvey and plugged the mem-stik into a port on the droid's cylindrical body. Harvey then bleeped and using the holographic projector built into its head it projected the contents of the mem-stik into the air in the middle of the *Silver Hawk's* lounge. The hologram showed a repeating waveform and a conversion of this into text in the aurebesh alphabet.

"I detected this signal on my way back to headquarters in the Shadow Region." Harris explained.

"That's our call signal." Mace said, frowning, "Colonel, where exactly did this come from?"

"A ship?" Tharun added.

"No." Harris replied, "From the primary world in the Bytan system."

"Bytan? Have we ever been to Bytan?" Jaysica said, still scratching.

"Aboard the *Primarch*." Vorn said, referring to an Imperial star destroyer that the rebellion had hoped to seize control of when its commanding officer and most of its crew mutinied.

"Before it blew up." Kara added.

"So could it be a survivor from that ship?" Cass asked.

"No, the *Primarch* was destroyed in the Luscus system." Mace said, "I doubt any of the escape pods would have made it all the way down the Spire Worlds."

"But didn't some of the crew leave in shuttles? What about them?" Cass asked.

"Oh, err, they wouldn't know our prefix code." Tobis pointed out.

"So who knows us well enough to know the code?" Tharun asked.

"Balve." Mace said.

"Odras Balve?" Kara said, "That no good, low down nerf herder you owe money to? How would he know it?"

"Because I worked for him before I worked for the Alliance." Mace reminded her.

"But he's here on Estran." Vorn pointed out, "No, there's only one way that we're going to find out who's trying to signal us and what they want."

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Jaysica said.

"We're going to have to go to Bytan and check it out for ourselves." Vorn finished.

"Oh I knew you were going to say that." Jaysica said.

Harris' scoutship dropped out of hyperspace just ahead of the *Silver Hawk* and both ships headed towards the planet Bytan in the system of the same name.

"The signal's still transmitting. It's coming from a continent on the far side of the planet." Harris signalled to the *Silver Hawk*, "I'm picking up reflections from the first moon. Can you see them?"

"Not yet colonel." Mace replied, "Our sensors aren't as good as yours."

"Then follow me around the other side until you pick them up." Harris said and his ship suddenly accelerated away, heading around the planet.

"Show off." Kara said from one of the seats behind Mace in the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit, "Just because his ship's twice as fast as ours."

"That's why I'd rather you stayed aboard it with him." Vorn told her from the co-pilot's seat, the one right in front of Kara's, "If anything goes wrong—"

"Boss, if anything goes wrong I'd rather be on the ship that's got the people I've trusted my life to three years now. Well, the people I trust and the klutz." Kara interrupted.

"I've got the signal now." Mace said.

"Kara go let the others know that we're heading in." Vorn added and Kara pulled herself up out her seat and left the cockpit.

"So you think it's a trap?" Mace said as soon as he and Vorn were alone in the cockpit.

"Probably." Vorn replied, "But the question still remains who's set it? Who could know enough about this ship to be transmitting our prefix code."

"Your son the loyal Imperial agent maybe?"

"No." Vorn said, shaking his head, "He's only been aboard this ship as a prisoner. He doesn't know its prefix code. Besides, if he was setting a trap for us it would be easier to do it back on Estran."

"He tried to catch us on Tarlen." Mace pointed out, "Almost succeeded as well."

"Maybe so, but I still don't think that it's him. Frankly I'd rather it was."

"Why?"

"Because then we'd know what we were dealing with." Vorn said and Mace nodded in agreement.

"Okay I've got an exact source location." Mace said, "Looks like it's coming from a small settlement in the middle of the desert."

"Life readings?" Vorn asked.

"Not much. There could be a few people down there, but I'd say that mostly it's just small animals."

"I think we ought to get Tobis up here to take us in." Vorn said, "Kara's not in shape to man the turret and I don't think we should risk going in defenceless."

"I agree." Mace replied and he activated the ship's intercom, "Tobis get up here and take over the controls." He said and moments later Tobis appeared in the doorway, "Take over." Mace told him again, "The co-ordinates are in the system. Just take us in nice and slow."

"Oh, err, yes captain." Tobis replied as he replaced Mace in the pilot's seat.

As Mace headed to the *Silver Hawk's* turret Tobis followed the course laid in towards the source of the signal and before long a cluster of buildings came into view.

"Circle to the right." Vorn said, "I want to get a good look at this place." And he produced a pair of macrobinoculars that he then proceeded to use to study the settlement through the cockpit canopy. From the *Silver Hawk's* altitude the settlement appeared totally devoid of life and from the state of the buildings it looked as if it had been empty for some time.

"What have we got on infra red?" Vorn asked.

"Oh, err, there's a small signature to the north major." Tobis replied and Vorn turned his macrobinoculars in that direction.

"I don't see anything." Vorn said, "But the buildings look pretty dense in that direction. I tell you what, there's a clear spot where you can set us down to the east and we'll head in on foot."

"Yes sir." Tobis replied and he turned the *Silver Hawk* towards the area of open ground between buildings that Vorn had seen. Bringing the ship in low over this, Tobis brought it to a halt and hovered while he lowered the landing gear and then slowly descended. The sound of the *Silver Hawk's* repulsorlift engines slowly receded as Tobis began to cut back on their power but all of a sudden there was a loud groaning sound.

"What's that?" Vorn exclaimed.

"Err, I don't—" Tobis began before the entire ship lurched and there was an almighty 'Crash!' as the ground under one of the *Silver Hawk's* landing struts gave way.

"Tobis what are you doing to my spaceship?" Mace's voice demanded over the intercom as there were cries of alarm from elsewhere on the ship.

"Err, I think we landed on top of a sink hole captain." Tobis replied, "I'll have to go outside and check it."

"No!" Vorn snapped, "This could be deliberate. We go as a group. Kara and Cass stay inside while the rest of us find out what's going on."

Through a set of macrobinoculars the arrival of the *Silver Hawk* had been observed from a concealed observation post at the top of a nearby hill. But it was neither Keena nor Kenit that watched the ship closely as it landed. Instead it was Marshas. He had followed the other two to this remote place and was still trying to determine why they were here before decided on a course of action. He saw the ground give way under the *Silver Hawk* and the ship suddenly sink to one side. Then he saw the rooftop hatch open and several figures emerged. Marshas focused in on these figures, studying each one in turn until he came to one he recognised from a wanted bulletin.

"I don't believe it." He muttered to himself, "Vorn Larcus the third. Wanted traitor." Then he quickly got to his feet and put his macrobinoculars away before running all the way back to where he had hidden his own ship, a small Nubian yacht, in a cave.

"Out of my way Ford." He said to the R4 unit that met him at the top of the access ramp, "I've got a message to send. We've hit it big this time." And he rushed to the cockpit and activated the ship's long-range subspace transmitter. Then as soon as the system indicated that it had established a connection he spoke. "Put me through to the Imperial Security Bureau. I need to speak to Agent Garm Larcus. Tell him its Marshas Decken and tell him it's urgent."

3.

The rebels climbed down from the *Silver Hawk's* upper hull and gathered around where the ground had opened up to swallow the ship's forward portside landing strut. While the others took up positions to watch for anyone approaching Tobis got down on the ground and peered beneath the ship.

"What's the story lad?" Tharun asked, "Are we going to be struck here?"

"Err, I'm not sure." Tobis replied.

"That's not the answer I'm looking for." Mace told him.

"Just tell us what happened." Vorn said.

"I, err, I think that there's a building under the ground here." Tobis answered, "We landed on its roof and it wasn't strong enough to support the ship. One of the struts fell through the roof and I think it's caught. I can't see from this angle."

"Then you'll have to find a way down to find out." Mace said.

"Hang on." Vorn added, "Tobis is there any danger of the rest of the roof giving way?"

"Err, I don't know. I'd have to see it from underneath." Tobis replied.

"Okay then Jaysica should go with him." Mace said.

"Me?" Jaysica exclaimed, "But what if the roof falls in?"

"You've got that mouse droid of yours." Tharun pointed out, "I think the captain means for you to use that to scout ahead and make sure the structure's stable before you proceed. Right captain?"

"Exactly." Mace said.

"In the mean time we better get everyone out of the ship." Vorn said, "If it does suddenly fall then there's no telling how deep it could end up."

From a vantage point in a nearby building Keena and Kenit both studied the *Silver Hawk* through macrobinoculars. As soon as they heard the ship land they had rushed here from the underground structure in which Keena had been able to land her ship and arrived just in time to see the rebels preparing to move out.

"Looks like they're having a few technical problems down there." Kenit said.

"Yes they are." Keena responded, "This entire settlement was built over a previous one and the builders did not expect starships to be landed anywhere other than the designated areas. Hopefully that will keep them here for some time."

Then Kenit noticed that Jaysica and Tobis were heading away from the ship without the others.

"Looks like they're splitting up." he observed.

"Just as they should." Keena responded, "They need to know how bad the damage is."

"And there's Verser." Kenit added, snarling, "I could take him from here."

"Only if you want to alert them all to our presence." Keena reminded him, "Now get going. I assume that you can take care of those other two while I see what the rest do?"

"They aren't warriors." Kenit said as he put his macrobinoculars away and picked up his rifle, "I could take them both in my sleep."

"Whatever." Keena said as he then left the room.

Vorn reached down to help Kara out through the top hatch of the *Silver Hawk* and he kept hold of her as she began to walk across the upper hull.

"I'm not an invalid boss." She said.

"Okay. I just wanted to make sure you're alright." Vorn replied and he let go.

Kara smiled and took another step whereupon the ship suddenly shifted slightly and her eyes widened as she struggled to keep her balance.

"On the other hand this does feel a bit unsteady boss." She said and Vorn took her hand again, this time with him smiling as he helped her to the edge of the ship and from there down to the ground before he leapt down after her.

"Mace," Vorn said, striding over to where he and Tharun still stood keeping watch, "we need shelter. I'll take Cass and Kara and check out that building there." And he pointed to a two-storey structure at the end of a narrow street leading away from the square in which they had landed, "You and Tharun unload the ship. We'll need the rest of our gear plus provisions and the droids."

"Got it major." Mace replied and he nodded to Tharun.

"Okay ladies, if you'd like to follow me." Vorn then said and he began to walk away, heading for the building he had pointed out.

As the three rebels walked down the street Cass found herself staring at the debris that had been left behind when the settlement was abandoned. Now this was mostly buried by the desert sands that had blown in but here and there something recognisable could be seen.

"What happened here?" she asked as she saw a partially buried landspeeder at the side of the street.

"Well boss, any ideas?" Kara added.

"Oh you know how these out of the way places can be." Vorn replied, "Someone has the great idea to set up a settlement for one reason or another and it turns out to be a mistake. Eventually either the settlement finds alternative ways of supporting itself or people just move on."

"So the people here just left?" Cass asked.

"Probably." Vorn replied.

"I've got a bad feeling about this, but why do you say probably boss?" Kara said and Vorn looked up at the rundown buildings around them.

"Well despite the condition of the buildings there's no indication of battle damage so I don't think that the inhabitants were driven out by war or raiders. But I can't rule it out entirely. There are plenty of weapons that can be used against the inhabitants of a place like this that wouldn't inflict any structural damage."

"Oh, I wish I'd brought my blaster from the ship." Cass commented.

"Don't worry, the boss has got his, haven't you?" Kara said and Vorn reached into his jacket and produced his compact hold out pistol.

"So we've got just that to defend ourselves with?" Cass said, "Perhaps we should wait for dad and Tharun to catch up with the rest of our weapons."

"We're there now." Vorn said as he stopped at the entrance to the building and tried the door, pressing a button on the panel beside it. Then when nothing happened he added, "No power."

"Really? I'd never have guessed." Kara responded as Vorn walked along the front of the building until he found a window. It was broken, but there were still pieces of glass around the edge so he bent down and pulled a half buried length of metal pipe from the ground and swung at these remnants of the window pane, sweeping them out of the way.

"We'll go in through here." He said before climbing through.

"Give me a hand kid." Kara said to Cass as she went to follow Vorn through.

The inside of the building was littered with upturned furniture, much of it broken and from the looks of it the rebels were standing in the reception area of some sort of business. However, exactly what that may have been was not obvious.

"Where do these stairs go?" Cass said when she approached an open doorway and peered into the darkness beyond.

"Down." Kara said from behind Cass. Then she turned to Vorn while he was going through the drawers of the desk that was the only piece of undamaged furniture in the room and added, "Hey boss, looks like we've got a basement over here."

"And I've got someone's wallet." Vorn replied as he took a wallet from inside a drawer.

"Any money in it?" Kara asked.

"No, sorry." Vorn answered and then he came over to see what Cass and Kara had found, "I don't suppose that either of you brought a glowrod with you by any chance?" he then asked, but both women shook their heads, "In that case wait here while I go down for a look." He told them and he began to cautiously descend the stairs.

"Tobis shouldn't we have found an inspection cover by now?" Jaysica said as they continued to search the streets for a way down below the *Silver Hawk*.

"Err, well, I'd have thought so." Tobis replied, "Service ducts need emergency access points."

"Could all this sand have buried them maybe?" Jaysica suggested, looking down at the sand that seemed to cover everything.

"Err, I doubt it. At least some of them would have remained visible. After all there's no-" Tobis answered, but he stopped suddenly.

"What's wrong?" Jaysica asked, her hand moving closer to her blaster.

"What? Oh, err, I just had an idea." He replied and Jaysica noticed that he was staring at the bottom of a wall of a nearby building and he strode over to it and began to brush away some of the sand piled against it with his hand to reveal a small window at ground level, "There, err, there are basements." He explained, "I don't think that the *Silver Hawk* is stuck in a service duct. I think that there's a building running beneath it and we broke through the roof."

"So how do we get into the right building?" Jaysica asked.

"Ah. Well I think we'll just have to keep trying until we find the right one." Tobis replied and he drew his knife and crouched down to pry open the window, "Starting with this one."

Harris looked up from his bunk when his R2 unit began chirping loudly from where it had plugged itself into the scout ship's computer system.

"What's wrong Sparky?" he asked as he got up and made his way to the pilot's seat. The droid chirped again and Harris read the translation off a display in front of him.

"Kappa-class troop transport." he said, "Yeah, I see it. It's heading right for them." Then he reached for the communication panel, "*Silver Hawk* this is Colonel Ergard, do you read me?" but there was no reply, "*Silver Hawk* are you there?" he repeated but again there was no response from the surface. Harris sighed and looked at Sparky, "Well Sparky, I hope they see it coming, because if they don't there's nothing we can do to help them from up here."

4.

Marshas waved at the approaching shuttle and waited as it flew directly at him. The ship came to a halt less than a hundred metres away and as it hovered its wings folded up either side of its tail at the same time as its landing gear was deployed. The shuttle then descended and ramps dropped from either side to allow the occupants to disembark. The first amongst these were white-armoured Imperial stormtroopers, their shoulder mounted pauldrons marking them out as specialist desert troops. Then after them came the individuals that Marshas had been expecting. There was a man and woman, both of whom wore the pale uniforms of the Imperial Security Bureau.

"Agent Larcus!" Marshas called out to the man, "I'm glad you could get here so quickly."

"We just had to stop off and get reinforcements from the local garrison." Garm Larcus replied, glancing round at the stormtroopers.

Marshas then turned to the young woman. On every occasion that he had seen her before now she had worn a skin-tight black bodyglove, a garment ideally suited to environments with extremes of temperature such as the desert they currently found themselves in. To see her now in the same uniform as Garm, though with the rank markings of a junior agent, was something entirely unexpected.

"So what's with the uniform Vay?" he asked her.

"Oh it's Agent Udra now." She replied, "My internship was up and I decided to stay on full time." And then she smiled, as did Garm. He knew full well that Vay's recruitment to the ISB had been a method to thwart an attempt to have her shipped back to Coruscant but Marshas did not need to know that.

"So where is my father?" Garm asked.

"His ship landed in the settlement over in that direction." Marshas answered, pointing towards the settlement that was barely visible over the dunes, "But his people aren't the only ones here."

"Who else?" Garm asked with a frown.

"Remember Keena Vayal?" Marshas asked and Vay scowled.

"Oh yes, I remember her alright." She said, "She kidnapped me."

"Well she's here with some other guy." Marshas told them both.

"Who?" Garm asked.

"I don't know. Some military looking type. I was tracking her when she met up with him in a cantina in the capital and then they both came here sometime before your father turned up."

"But there are only two of them?" Garm said.

"That's right. Plus your father's team."

"Well we brought a full platoon." Garm said, "That ought to be more than enough to deal with them all."

The basement that Jaysica and Tobis climbed down into turned out to be part of a network of passageways and chambers running beneath the surface structures rather than just an underground level of one particular building.

"Err, I think we ought to unpack Penny." Tobis said.

"Sure." Jaysica responded, kneeling down and removing the backpack from her back. From inside this she took a compact box shaped droid that used wheels for locomotion. While she set the mouse droid known to the rebels as Penny down on the floor and activated it Tobis took out his comlink and datapad and connected the two devices together, "Are you getting the signal?" Jaysica asked him.

"Oh, err, yes." Tobis replied as he studied the feed from the concealed camera built into the droid's chassis.

"Okay then." Jaysica said, getting to her feet and looking down at Penny, "Off you go. That way. We need to find where the *Silver Hawk* landed."

The droid chirped in response and then rolled away. Jaysica then stood beside Tobis and they both watch the video feed transmitted by the droid the showed the condition of the structure ahead of them. This subsurface world was darkened, but Penny's camera was sensitive enough to make use of what little light was available and the processed image on the datapad offered a picture clear enough to be able to pick out the state of the structure.

"Do you think it looks safe enough?" Jaysica asked, looking at Tobis.

"Err, I think so." He replied and he began to follow Penny.

As well as assessing the amount of structural damage, Tobis used the video feed from Penny to build up a plan of the mazelike network of rooms and passageways. Several times the droid hit either a dead end or terrain that its limited ground clearance could not handle and was forced to retreat and try a different route, all of which were recorded by Tobis.

For the most part there was nothing of interest in this underground world, everything of value having been removed long ago. But as Jaysica and Tobis made their way into one of the larger chambers that they had

encountered so far the wide angled beam from Jaysica's glowrod picked up a familiar shape. "Is that an old clone helmet?" she asked, pointing to where a table was located against the far wall. Penny had travelled right past this, the built in camera having too narrow a field of view to have shown it. "Err, I think so." Tobis replied, "I, I think you should wait here while I check this out." And he passed the datapad to Jaysica. Then he produced his own glowrod and drew the blaster he had holstered on his leg. Then he crept towards the table.

Sure enough, resting on the table was an old pattern clone trooper helmet of a pattern that dated back to the later days of the Clone Wars. But that was not all that was there. As he moved closer Tobis noticed that there was something inside the helmet and he bent down to peer inside. His eyes widened and he let out a brief gasp as he found himself staring at the jawbone and skull of the clone trooper who had worn the armour. "What's wrong?" Jaysica asked, noticing his reaction.

"Oh, err, nothing." He replied, "Just stay there." And he peered over the table. Just as he had expected Tobis saw that the rest of the armour was piled up on the floor on the other side with more pieces of the skeleton visible where the bodyglove openings were located. All of a sudden Tobis noticed that the lighting was different and he quickly realised that this was because Jaysica's glowrod was no longer pointing towards him.

"Tobis." She said nervously and he whirled around to face her.

"How about you put that blaster down before someone gets hurt?" Kenit said and to reinforce his point he twisted the knife that he held against Jaysica's neck. Slowly Tobis crouched down and placed his blaster on the floor, "Good, now kick it over here and lie face down on the floor." Kenit ordered and Tobis did as he was told. Kenit pulled the knife away from Jaysica's throat and then held a set of binders in front of her, "Go put these on him." Kenit ordered, "Then get down beside him. Oh and don't get any ideas about trying anything. I'll have you both covered from here and your boyfriend will be dead before you can do it."

"Okay." Jaysica said softly as she took hold of the binders and then headed towards Tobis.

"Anybody home?" Mace called out.

"Down here dad." Cass replied from the basement and she headed back up the stairs to find him and Tharun standing just inside the now open doorway, "How did you get the door open?" she asked.

"Easy when you know how kid." Tharun replied, "We just had Harvey power the motor from his own cells." And then he stepped aside to allow Harvey and Jeeves to enter the room.

"I must say," Jeeves said, "this place is not doing my circuits any good at all. All this sand is most troublesome."

"Do you have our glowrods in there?" Cass asked, looking at the bulky holdalls that both Mace and Tharun carried.

"Sure." Mace told her as he set down the two bags he was carrying, "We grabbed everything we could." And after briefly rummaging through one of the bags he found a glowrod and tossed one to Cass.

"Thanks dad." She said and she turned back to the basement.

"What've you found there?" Tharun asked her.

"Nothing yet." She replied, "It's too dark down there to see anything." And then she activated the glowrod and directed its light down the stairs.

Immediately there was an ear-piercing scream and both Mace and Tharun drew their sidearms and rushed to see what was happening.

"What's going on down there?" Mace asked out loud.

"Oh nothing." Vorn replied.

"Didn't sound much like nothing to me major." Tharun said.

"Kara just found herself centimetres away from a spider when Cass turned on the light, that's all."

"A spider? Seriously?" Cass said, grinning.

"Oh you think it's amusing do you? It was massive. Look." Kara asked and she reached down to where a piece of debris lay at her feet and used it to scoop up the spider. Then she swung it around so that the spider flew through the air at Cass who flinched and screamed as it landed on her head, waving her arms around try and dislodge it.

"Cut it out." Mace said sternly as he activated his own glowrod and brushed the spider from Cass' hair at the same time.

"So what do you think this place was then major?" Tharun asked as he descended the stairs.

"Well I think that the building was an office of some sort." Vorn replied, "But its all been deserted far too long for me to make any guesses about what happened here specifically. But for now I think that it'll make a good base camp until we find something better." Then his comlink chimed and he activated it, "Go ahead." He said but all that he heard was a rapid electronic bleeping.

"The structure must be interfering with it boss." Kara suggested and Vorn nodded in agreement before heading back up the stairs to the room above.

"Go ahead." He repeated, but once again there was just the same rapid electronic bleeping and he looked at his comlink, puzzled. At the same time Harvey chirped loudly.

"Excuse me Major Larcus sir," Jeeves said, "but Harvey indicates that the transmission you are receiving is an audio representation of a typical video encoding format. The same used by penny I believe."

"Penny?" Vorn replied, "But why would she be signalling me?"

"Something must have happened to Jaysica and Tobis." Mace said. Then he looked at Jeeves, "Jeeves, can Harvey convert that sound back into video?" and Harvey chirped again.

"He looked at me because he was directing the question to me." Jeeves told the astromech and Harvey let out another short burst of sound, "Of course I'll tell him that." Jeeves said and then the protocol droid looked back at Mace, "Harvey says that he can produce a video image from the audio data, but that it will not be of the best quality."

"Do it." Vorn said and from Harvey's holographic projector an image formed in mid air. The image showed a large man in body armour standing with a knife held to Jaysica's throat. His lips were moving as if he were speaking, but Harvey was unable to reconstruct any sound to accompany the video. The clip was short, barely a second or two in length and Harvey repeated it in a loop.

"I know that face." Mace said as he turned to look at Tharun.

"Who is it?" Cass asked.

"That's the guy who wants me dead." Tharun replied.

"So I take that he's the one who set up the transmission to lure us in then." Kara said.

"Where would he have got the *Silver Hawk's* prefix code?" Mace responded.

"That's not important right now." Vorn said as he walked over to the holdalls and searched through them for his blaster rifle, "What matters is that he's got two of our people and we need to get them back." Then he turned to his protocol droid, "Jeeves, you stay here with Kara. We'll take Harvey with us though, his sensors could come in useful."

"What about me?" Cass asked.

"Grab a carbine." Vorn replied, "Stick close to Mace and follow his lead. Above all be ready to use that blaster."

From her vantage point Keena watched the building where the rebels had apparently decided to set up their camp. When she saw four of them emerge, one a teenage girl that she did not recognise, she smiled as she guessed that Kenit must have achieved his initial objective. Though not without alerting the rest of the rebels it seemed. Turning away from the rebels she was just about to activate her comlink to contact Kenit when she spotted something in the distance, outside the settlement. There she saw a cloud of dust that suggested something moving across the desert and she raised her macrobinoculars to take a look. Heading directly for the settlement she saw a platoon sized force of Imperial desert stormtroopers and she cursed her luck for having a patrol turn up just at this time. But then she noticed that the stormtroopers were not alone, instead there were three other individuals amongst them and it was these three that she focused in on. Two of them wore ISB uniforms and Keena scowled as she recognised Garm Larcus and Vay Udra, guessing that they had tracked Vorn Larcus' rebel field team here and had unknowingly come to take her prize from her. But then she took a closer look at the third figure and recognised his face as Marshas Decken, the bounty hunter that had been tracking her for several years now and it occurred to Keena that it may not be the rebels that they were hunting for at all. It was quite possible that they were hunting for her.

"Kenit." She transmitted using her comlink.

"What?" the mercenary's voice responded.

"Where are you?"

"Heading back to the ship. I've got the two they sent underground to check out the damage to their own vessel. Why?"

"Well first of all the others know that something's happened already."

"How? Neither of these two was able to raise the alarm?"

"I don't know. But four more of them just came rushing out of their camp looking like they're ready for trouble. That new one's with them."

"Okay then. You said that that was the first thing. What else is there?" Kenit asked and Keena raised her macrobinoculars to her eyes again.

"We've got more company." She said, "Stormtroopers."

"Stormtroopers? Here? How many?"

"Looks like a platoon."

"Could just be a patrol."

"No, I thought that. Then I saw the three people with them. I know them all and they know me. I think that's why they're here."

"So what are you suggesting we do?" Kenit asked, "Leave?"

"No. Anything but. Two of our new arrivals are in ISB uniforms and I happen to know that both of them are worth money to the right people as well. If we can grab them as well-"

"I didn't sign on to fight a platoon of stormtroopers with just the two of us." Kenit interrupted.

"Maybe not, but if we give up now what do we have. Two low ranking rebels. Think about this for a second Kenit. If we can pull this off we'll be rolling in cash. Trust me. Now after you've secured the two you've got, go after the one left in their camp while I go check out these stormtroopers."

In the passageways underground leading back to Keena's ship Kenit scowled as he turned off his comlink.

"This deal's getting worse all the time." He muttered to himself. Then he looked back at Jaysica and Tobis and gave a tug on the syntherope he was using to lead them, "Come on you two, move. There'll be plenty of time to take it easy when you're on your way to whatever dungeon is owned by whoever pays us the most for you."

5.

As soon as the settlement came into view the stormtroopers raised their weapons and made use of the optics built into their helmets to search for any signs of hostile activity.

"As far as I can tell it's deserted aside from your father's rebel team, Keena Vayal and some guy she brought with her." Marshas said.

"Then let's get moving." Garm said, "We're too exposed out here and I'd rather not give any of them any warning that we're on our way."

The platoon advanced rapidly, weapons still held at the ready and aimed at various locations that the stormtroopers thought likely hiding places for snipers. When they reached the edge of the settlement they too saw the condition of the buildings and the debris left in various places.

"What happened here?" Vay said as she looked around.

Something terrible.

Vay's eyes widened slightly as the spirit of one of her ancestors responded through the Force, but she was careful not to give away any indication of this to those around her. The existence of the spirit of the ancient Jedi Lara Udra was something she did not want others to know about.

"I think there was trouble here during the Clone Wars." Garm replied, "The Separatists raided the Shadow Region numerous times." Then he looked at Marshas, "So which way now?" he asked.

"This way." Marshas replied, pointing down a side road, "I saw their ship come down over here."

Garm glanced at the stormtroopers' platoon commander and right away the armoured soldiers began to advance in the direction indicated by Marshas. They moved in squads, with one rushing forwards while the other three covered them and they paused to wave Garm, Marshas and Vay onwards so as to keep them in formation. All this was apparently done without any verbal commands, though whether they were making use of the communication systems built into their helmets could not be told for certain.

"It's just up ahead." Marshas said as they neared the *Silver Hawk*.

"Have your men spread out." Garm told the stormtrooper officer as he drew his blaster. Beside him Vay did likewise, though her weapon was a holdout pistol much smaller than Garm's full sized military style sidearm, "Surround the ship and we'll make sure no one can escape."

The stormtroopers began to spread out, using side streets and alleyways to form a perimeter around the *Silver Hawk* while still remaining out of sight. Only when this was complete did Garm give the order to advance.

"Move in and remember weapons on stun. I want them alive."

As one of the stormtrooper platoons rushed forwards. One soldier in each squad carried a light repeating blaster for support and these troops halted as soon as the freighter became visible, covering the advance of their comrades. The rest of the platoon rushed right up to the edge of the *Silver Hawk* before they halted. Those on the same side as the ship's access ramp peered underneath to see whether it was open, while on the other side the stormtroopers helped one another onto the upper hull where they headed for the top hatch.

"Agent Larcus the ship is sealed and appears deserted." The platoon commander called out from on top of the ship.

"Are there any signs of where they went?" Garm replied as he too approached the *Silver Hawk* with Marshas and Vay, "Or how long ago?"

"There are tracks leading off in this direction." Another stormtrooper said, pointing in the direction of the rebel camp. The other one reached down to where he spotted something lay where it had been trampled into the sand.

"Look sir! Droids!" he called out as he picked up a piece that had shaken loose from one of the rebel droids.

"There are more tracks over here." A third stormtrooper added and Marshas rushed over to him.

"I'd say two people." He said as he looked at the tracks, "And from the size of the footprints I'd say that one of them was a woman."

"The look to be more than that this way." Vay added as she inspected the first set of tracks. Then she stood up straight and asked, "So why split up?"

"Well I'd say that they sent two of their number to investigate the damage to their ship from this collapse."

Garm replied as he looked at where the *Silver Hawk's* landing gear had fallen through the ground beneath it, "And that means that the rest of them likely headed off to do whatever they came here to do. Meet up with that Vayal woman most likely."

"Sir, I think you should see this." One of the stormtroopers said out loud and he approached Garm holding an enhanced communications device that was capable of monitoring more than just standard comlink frequencies.

"What is it?" Garm asked.

"I'm monitoring a subspace transmission sir." The soldier replied, "A low level repeating beacon."
"Let me take a look." Marshas said as he returned to Garm's side, "That looks like a starship identification."
He said, "The sort of thing you use to send a transmission to a specific ship over interstellar distances."
Garm grinned.

"That's what brought my father here." He said, "That's likely where they're heading."

"None of the tracks lead in that direction." Vay commented.

"No they don't." Garm agreed, "We'll have to split up. Vay take a squad and follow those tracks, Marshas you do the same with the pair that went that way. I'll take the rest of the platoon and see where this signal leads us."

Kenit dragged Jaysica and Tobis into the massive chamber where Keena's scout ship was located, the access ramp at the rear of the ship still sealed.

"Over here." Kenit said sternly as he pulled them both towards a set of stairs that led up to a raised walkway. Both the stairs and the walkway were partially corroded and they shook as the three walked up them.

Coming to a halt by a narrow doorway Kenit turned and pulled both rebels right up to him. Tobis noticed that a lock had recently been attached to the exterior of the door and its frame while inside the room a chemical light provided illumination.

"This is where I'm leaving you." Kenit said and he began to untie the syntherope line from around his prisoners. Then he pulled Jaysica to the doorway and released her binders, "Get in." he said, pushing her into the room beyond. Then he repeated this with Tobis, releasing him from the binders and pushing him into the room after Jaysica. Then the door slammed shut and there was a brief buzzing sound as Kenit activated the lock.

"Oh Tobis what are we going to do?" Jaysica said, embracing him.

"Err." Tobis responded as he looked around. The room had no furniture in it, just the chemical light dangling from the ceiling and a layer of sand covering much of the floor. At first Tobis ignored this, but then he frowned.

"What is it Tobis?" Jaysica asked him when she saw the expression on his face.

"Oh, err, well, it's just I'm trying to figure out where this sand came from." He told her.

"It must have blown in from outside." Jaysica said, looking down at the floor.

"But, ah, there's no exterior door." Tobis said and he pulled away from Jaysica and began to inspect the ceiling.

By using Harvey's sensors Vorn and the rest of his team were able to track Penny's transmissions into the underground tunnel network and recover the tiny droid.

"Well there are no bodies and no blood major." Tharun said as he looked around the room.

"So they're alive then?" Cass said.

"It looks that way kiddo." Tharun replied.

"Can you track which way he took them?" Vorn asked him and he crouched down to examine the floor.

"I think so major." Tharun said, "It's not like either Jaysica or Tobis were trying to disguise their tracks. Then Harvey let out a sudden burst of sound.

"What's wrong with him?" Cass asked.

"Shush." Mace said and he dashed into the adjoining room where there was a narrow window set up against the ceiling and turned out his glowrod.

The thick layer of dirt on the window combined with the build up of sand in the street outside made it difficult to see much, but Mace was just about able to make out several sets of white boots of a type that he had seen all too often before.

"Stormtroopers!" he hissed, backing away from the window as the others joined him from the other room.

"What the hell are they doing here?" Vorn said softly as he rushed to see for himself. Carefully he reached up to wipe away some of the dirt from the inside of the window and he saw that the Imperial troops had come to a halt just outside. Then he heard a voice that sent a shiver down his spine.

"What's wrong trooper?" Garm asked the stormtrooper communication specialist.

"I thought I picked up something else for a moment." The stormtrooper replied, "Looked like something on a comlink frequency."

Vorn backed away from the window at this point, "Check your comlinks." He cautioned the others quietly, "Make sure they're off." And then he turned back to the window.

"There's no sign of it any more Agent Larcus." The stormtrooper said, "But I am still getting the subspace beacon."

"Okay then, let's keep going." Garm said and the stormtroopers began to move on.

"Oh great. Now your son's here as well?" Mace said, frowning.

"At least we know where he's heading." Vorn said, "So we ought to be fine so long as we keep away from the beacon."

"But what if the beacon's where Jaysica and Tobis have been taken?" Cass asked nervously.

"I doubt it." Mace replied, "The beacon's supposed to be bait to draw us in. It'd make more sense to stash Jaysica and Tobis somewhere else to prevent them getting in the way."

"Company." Tharun said suddenly and he pressed himself up against the doorframe with his heavy blaster rifle raised to his shoulder.

In the darkness he suddenly saw a flash of white and fired, the blaster bolt lighting up the underground chamber. Sure enough this revealed a pair of stormtroopers just as Tharun's shot blew a hole through one of the them.

"Stormtroopers!" he yelled as he flicked his rifle to fully automatic and fired again, spraying the wall at the far end of the room with high energy blasts.

"Fall back!" Vorn snapped as he heard a groaning sound and realised what was about to happen. The groan then became a almighty crash as the room between the rebels and the stormtroopers suddenly collapsed, bringing down the structure above it as well.

As Vorn had ordered the rebels fell back away from the destruction before they could find out whether the stormtroopers were able to come after them.

"We need to get back to Kara." Vorn gasped, "She needs to be warned about this and we daren't use comlinks."

Marshas looked at the pile of rubble as the stormtroopers under his command attempted to dig through it.

"Give it up." He said, "We're not getting through there any time soon."

6.

"Really Lieutenant Larcus mistress," Jeeves said as the droid continued to tidy the basement room now serving as the rebel camp, "the previous inhabitants should have taken more care to leave this location in a more orderly state."

Kara glanced up at the droid from the datapad she had been reading.

"I think that they had better things on their minds at the time." She said before adding in a much lower tone of voice, "Though what that was is beyond me."

"In my experience there is never any excuse for such untidiness mistress." Jeeves responded, "And it does not help that Captain Grayle and Sergeant Verser merely deposited their bags upstairs rather than bringing them down here to unpack them properly." The droid then made its way across the room to the bag on the table beside Kara's chair, "If you ask my opinion—"

"Which I didn't." Kara muttered. However, Jeeves continued to speak as if she had said nothing, putting it down next to her to rummage through the bag.

"—our struggle against the Empire would be greatly helped if people would just keep their environment in a more orderly—" and then Kara simply reached out and pressed the button mounted on the back of Jeeves' head and shut the droid down.

"Ah, that's better." She said as she looked back down at the datapad.

There were no visible signs of life from the building that the rebels' tracks led to but Vay could sense the disturbance created in the Force by sentient beings so she knew that someone was inside.

"Follow me." She told the stormtroopers and from under her tunic she slipped her lightsaber before advancing cautiously towards the building.

She paused at the entrance, peering into the wrecked interior and she noticed not only the tracks on the dust-covered floor leading to the stairs to the basement. But Vay was not willing to risk being surprised by any other rebels who may be hiding elsewhere in the building and she waved at the stormtroopers.

"Sergeant, send half the squad to check the rest of the building." She whispered, "Everyone else with me."

And then she made her way inside to the basement door. From here she saw Kara sat reading, her back to the door and a deactivated droid slumped across the floor nearby. Vay held a finger to her lips to caution the stormtroopers to keep quiet before beginning to descend the stairs. As she did so she looked around, this close she could sense the presence of more than one person close by but Kara was the only one she could see.

"Boss is that—" Kara began, looking back over her shoulder at the stairs. Then when she saw Vay and the stormtroopers she gasped and dropping the datapad she reached for the bag on the table beside her.

"Don't!" Vay snapped, activating her lightsaber and at the same time the stormtrooper immediately behind her fired a single shot from his blaster as a warning. Kara flinched, pulling her arm back from the bag, "Get on your feet." Vay ordered and Kara stood up, raising her hands above her head, though she kept her back to Vay. With a single leap Vay jumped from the stairs to land right behind Kara and she held her lightsaber close to the back of her head, so close that Kara could feel the heat from the blade and hear its hum quite clearly, "Where's your friend?" Vay asked.

"Huh?" Kara responded.

"Your friend. I know you're not alone down here. Now where are they?" Vay told her and then Kara simply turned around and smiled.

"Surprise." She said as Vay's jaw dropped at the sight of her stomach, "Well? Aren't you going to congratulate me?"

"Agent Udra," a stormtrooper said from the top of the stairs, "we've searched the rest of the building and there are no signs of any more rebels."

"Agent?" Kara said, "You're not just playing dress up in that uniform then?"

"No I'm not." Vay replied, shutting off her lightsaber, "Aren't you going to congratulate me?" then she looked at the stormtroopers' squad leader, "Sergeant leave two of your men here with me and take the rest to find out where the other rebels went."

"Yes ma'am." The stormtrooper replied.

From a building at the end of the street Kenit watched as the stormtroopers emerged onto the street and spread out looking for tracks. When one found evidence of the rebels' route he beckoned the others to follow.

"Eight." Kenit muttered to himself, counting the soldiers as they headed away from him, "That only leaves two." Then he waited for the stormtroopers to disappear from view and stepped out onto the street. Keeping his blaster rifle at the ready he then crept towards the building they had emerged from.

Vay stood back and watched as a stormtrooper secured Kara's hands behind her back. "Head upstairs and keep watch." Vay ordered and the stormtrooper nodded before he headed up the stairs. "Mind if I sit down?" Kara asked and without waiting for an answer she sat back in her chair. Then she noticed that Vay kept looking at her stomach, "What?" she asked. "The child." Vay said, "Who-" "Who's the father?" Kara interrupted, "I think you already know that don't you?" "You told me that you weren't involved with Garm's father." Vay said. "Yeah, well things change. The boss and I are married now." "I guess my invitation got lost in subspace." Vay commented. "No. We just didn't send you one. Oh and it's a boy by the way. I took a test and we've had several scans." *Garm's brother.* Vay took a deep breath, doing her best to ignore the unwanted intervention of Lara's spirit. Let her go. Vay scowled. "Get up." She ordered, but Kara remained seated. "I'm afraid you're going to have to help me. I seem to be having trouble with my arms right now." Kara replied. "No jokes. Get to your feet." Vay said sternly and she reached down and pulled Kara to her feet, "Now let's get moving. I'm sure your son in law will want to give you his congratulations as well. Or maybe not."

As Kenit closed on the building he heard movement and stopped still, dropping to his knees. "Over there!" one of the stormtroopers snapped and he fired, a single blaster shot passing close by Kenit before he returned fire. The mercenary fired three rounds, all of them striking the other stormtrooper in the chest and the soldier fell backwards. As he fell his finger tightened around the trigger of his rifle and it discharged. The weapon was set to fully automatic and as he fell dead the stream of energy blasts it released tore through the structure of the building above. There was a groaning sound as the already weak structure was suddenly rendered unable to its own weight and moments later the whole thing came crashing down on itself.

Still trying to find their way back to their camp through the underground tunnel system Vorn and the rest of his group felt the tunnel shaking. "What was that?" Tharun said. "Sounds like a building just came down." Mace replied. "But why would a building just collapse?" Cass asked. "It wouldn't." Mace told her, "Nothing we've seen so far suggests that any of them around here are that unsound." "That means that somebody must have done something to make one of them fall down." Tharun added. "Oh no." Vorn said, "Kara."

The stormtroopers Garm was leading were making no attempt to conceal themselves and this made Keena's task of following them far easier. Early on it had become obvious that they were heading towards the beacon that she and Kenit had set up to lure in Vorn and his team. "I estimate the distance to the beacon to be no more than three hundred metres now sir." The stormtrooper communication specialist told Garm. "Is it still just the same repeating signal?" Garm asked. "Yes sir. It hasn't changed at all." "Very well. Prepare to-" Garm said before he was interrupted by the sound of a building collapsing and he whirled around to see a cloud of dust rising from behind several other structures. Garm reached for his comlink and activated it, "Vay, Vay can you hear me?" he transmitted, "Vay are you there?"

Vay's eyes flickered open to find herself lying on the floor, debris all around her. The glowrod that had been set up to provide illumination had been damaged and the light it cast out was irregular. Looking up the stairs she saw that the exit from the basement had been blocked by falling rubble. Then she heard a groaning sound and she looked around to where Kara also lay on the ground. "Did you get the serial number of that AT-AT that just stood on me?" Kara said as she opened her eyes and looked back at Vay. Then she blinked and added, "What happened?" "There was blasterfire and then the building fell down it seems." Vay said. "And here was me thinking that stormtroopers couldn't hit the side of a building." Kara replied. "Never mind that now, we need to get out of here." Vay said and she got to her feet and then went to lift Kara to hers.

Pain.

Kara screamed as Vay tried to lift her.

"I think I'm bleeding." Kara exclaimed and Vay looked down to the floor beneath them.

"Now you're not." She said as she saw the liquid, "I think your water just broke. You're in labour."

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Kara said.