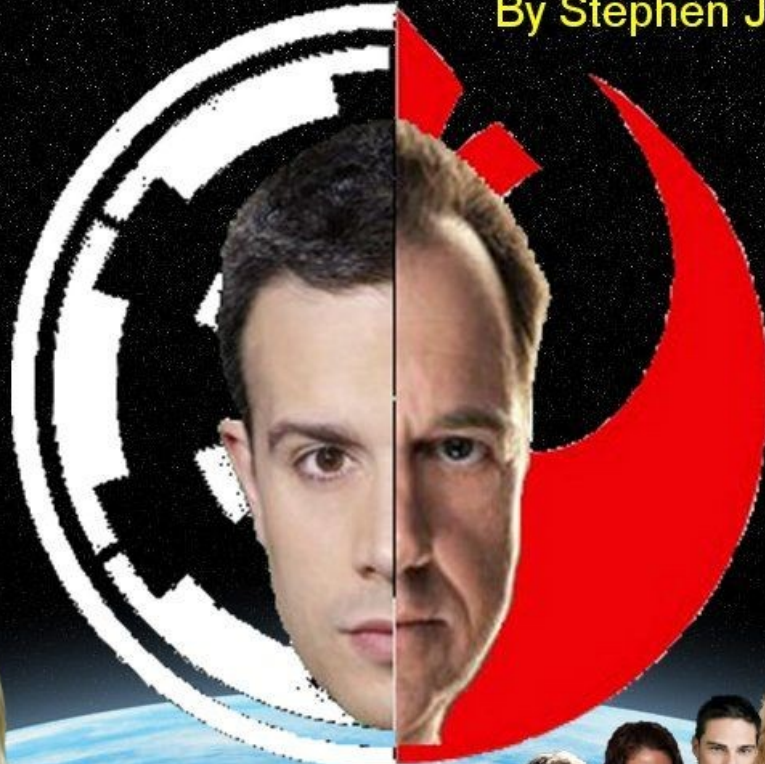


STAR WARS

4-09: Death in the Dark

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 GUERILLA 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...

DEATH IN THE DARK

CONTACT IS LOST WITH AN IMPERIAL OUTPOST AND THE ALLIANCE SEES AN OPPORTUNITY TO STRIKE WHILE IT IS ISOLATED FROM HELP. BUT WHAT MADE THE OUTPOST CEASES TRANSMITTING AND COULD IT STILL BE WAITING FOR THE REBELS LED BY VORN LARCUS III?...

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

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1.

"Report lieutenant."

Lieutenant Owen Halowan had not realised that Admiral Hall had entered the bridge of the tector-class star destroyer *Horrific*, much less that he was looking down into the crew pit that he was standing in and he jumped.

"Sorry sir I didn't see you there." He said to the admiral.

"I said report lieutenant, not tell me if you saw me coming. Now what was in that last transmission?"

The transmission the admiral was referring to was a standard bulletin sent out by sector command daily. It contained a list of status reports, deployment orders and advisory notes. Owen had already confirmed that the message had been received intact but was now reviewing the actual content.

"Just checking now sir." He said.

"And is there anything of note in it?"

"Not really. No new orders for this squadron and nothing that the *Horrific* needs worry about."

"There is the outpost on Bytan sir." One of the comscan personnel said and Owen frowned momentarily.

"Is there a problem lieutenant?" Admiral Hall asked.

"No sir." Owen answered, glaring at the comscan tech, "The outpost under construction in the Bytan system has not checked in for three days now. It's a surface installation and—"

"Well we're not in a position to do anything about that then." The admiral interrupted. A tector-class ship like the *Horrific* lacked hangars for auxiliary craft such as shuttles and was not designed for planetary landings. The best it could do in response to a problem on the surface of any world was sit in orbit and bombard it, "I'm not having this ship just wait around for another to turn up and send a landing party down."

"That was why I didn't mention it sir." Owen replied.

"Very well." Admiral Hall said, "Carry on lieutenant, confirm receipt of the message with fleet command and then plot a jump to Allastra. I want to be there before end of shift."

"Yes sir." Owen said and as the admiral walked towards the main bridge viewports he looked at the crewman that had interrupted him, "On the way perhaps we can discuss your attitude to authority." He said and the crewman looked back at him nervously.

Owen then set to work composing the response to the message, a simple confirmation of receipt to be sent before the *Horrific* jumped to hyperspace. But in addition he tacked on a second message to be transmitted at the same time on a non-standard frequency and in addition to containing the co-ordinates that the *Horrific* was jumping to it also held a complete copy of the message with certain portions highlighted, such as the lack of response from the outpost in the Bytan system. This signal would be beamed not back to sector command around Estran but instead into deep space where a small ship waited specifically to hear from him.

The crew of the tiny starship waiting for Owen's message reacted quickly when the comm. system alerted them to its arrival.

"Spin up the hyperdrive." The pilot said, "Alliance command is waiting for this."

"Can you not do that so loud?" Kara asked as she leant out of her cabin and looked into the lounge of the transport ship *Silver Hawk*.

"What this?" the large man by the table replied and he slammed the two parts of the rifle he was inspecting together causing the bleary eyed Kara to wince.

"Come on Tharun, knock it off." She said, "I don't feel well."

"Too much to drink last night perhaps Kara?" Tharun said and he put the weapon down on the table heavily and picked up the one beside it.

"Actually no." Kara said, wandering over to stand beside him, "I'll have you know I haven't touched a drop for almost a week."

"Withdrawal then." Tharun said, "You're our medic, write yourself a prescription."

"I'm not a doctor. I can't prescribe anything." Kara said, looking down at the row of blasters, "What are you doing anyway?"

"Oh the major asked me to examine that carbine and the hunting rifle we picked up on Estran so I thought it would be a good idea to go over all our blasters while I was at it. Good job too, Jaysica's was full of muck from all that running around in the rain. I doubt it would have fired if she'd tried. She gave me yours by the way, you were asleep."

Kara sat down, resting her head in her hands.

"Where is the boss anyway?" she asked.

"Oh he and the captain got called away. Probably a mission briefing."
"Oh great, another chance to get killed. What about Tobis and the klutz?"
"Tobis asked Jaysica to help him realign the sensor array, so the lad is probably in the access corridor making out with her right now." Tharun said.
"There will be no making out on my ship during work hours." A voice called out and both Kara and Tharun looked around to see Mace Grayle, the *Silver Hawk's* captain and owner had returned along with Major Vorn Larcus III, the commander of the rebel unit assigned to the ship.
Vorn looked at Kara as she sat in the chair wearing her nightdress and she smiled at him.
"Why aren't you dressed yet?" he asked her.
"I was trying to use my feminine wiles to seduce your son in law into keeping the noise down boss."
"I'm telling Lyssa that." Tharun said.
"Oh god no." Kara replied, "She'll come here and yell at me. I couldn't take that right now."
"Well you don't need to." Vorn said, "We're leaving. We've got an assignment."
"Whereabouts?" Tharun asked.
"The Bytan system." Mace replied, "We're to check out some Imperial outpost."
Kara groaned before getting to her feet and heading back towards her cabin.
"Where are you going Kara?" Vorn asked.
"It's an hour and a half to Bytan." She replied, "I'm going back to bed for an hour. Want to tuck me in and read me a story?"
"How about the Alliance Uniform Code of Conduct?" Vorn said.
"I'm not wearing my uniform." Kara responded as she disappeared from view into her cabin.
"Yes, just your nightdress." Mace said and a moment later Kara's arm appeared holding the nightdress and she flung it into the lounge where it landed on Vorn.
"Not any more I'm not." She called out and her cabin door dropped shut.
"That was actually a pretty good throw." Tharun commented as Vorn removed the nightdress from over his head and folded it up neatly.
"I think we should get the ship ready to launch." He said looking at Mace. Then he turned to Tharun, "Sergeant go and find the others, tell them we're leaving." he added.

"Kara! Kara, wake up."
"What?" Kara responded, opening her eyes to see a young fair-haired woman staring down at her in her bunk, "Jaysica? Am I dead? Is this hell?"
"Kara we're there. The Bytan system. The Major Larcus and Captain Grayle want to brief us. You need to come right now." Jaysica said excitedly.
"Okay I'm coming." Kara said Just keep it quiet because I-" and then as she was sliding out of her bunk she remembered that she was not wearing anything, "Hang on a moment." She added as she began wrapping her blanket around herself. She then followed Jaysica into the lounge where the other rebels were all waiting, "Sorry about this." She said, "But it's all I've got to wear."
"I thought you had a spare nightdress in your cabin" Tharun commented.
"Jaysica spilt caf on it." Kara replied, "While I was wearing it as well."
"That was an accident." Jaysica said, "It wasn't very hot anyway."
"What about your robe?" Mace asked.
"Jaysica got chocolate on that." Kara said, "I'm sorry but this will have to do unless you're willing to wait while I get dressed."
"No." Vorn said, "We've wasted enough time already. Kara sit down while we explain what's going on." Then he looked towards the red and white R5 astromech droid standing next to his gold coloured protocol droid, "Harvey the projection please." He said.
The little droid chirped and from the projector mounted in its head an image formed in the air above the table.
"This is the primary world in the Bytan system." Vorn explained, "It's geologically inactive, leading to wide, shallow seas and relatively flat landmasses that are mainly swampland. Except for the polar regions of course, which are frozen over all year around. There was an attempt at settlement about four hundred years ago but it failed and the system has been uninhabited ever since"
"Failed how?" Tharun asked and Vorn shrugged.
"I don't know. All I can tell you is that someone tried to build a settlement but something happened that resulted in all the colonists being killed and the world was just left alone after that. Now Colonel Ergard considered this planet as a suitable location for a base but before a full evaluation could be carried out the Empire decided to build an outpost here."
"Let me guess," Kara said, "we've got to blow it up."
"Actually no." Mace replied, "According to Imperial communications the construction crew has stopped checking in. The Alliance wants us to take a look and find out why."
"But won't the Empire be sending a ship?" Jaysica asked.

"Oh, err, no. Or at least not yet." Tobis said from beside her, "It's just that, well, if the outpost isn't finished yet then there are all sorts of things that could go wrong and take time to fix."

"Exactly." Vorn said, "But if the outpost is cut off then its vulnerable and the Alliance could attack it without running the risk of having to engage Imperial reinforcements. We'll assess the status of the outpost and if necessary act to make sure its communications stay offline until the Alliance can send a proper attack force. Now are there any questions?"

"What sort of outpost are we looking at?" Tharun asked, "I don't like the idea of just wandering into somewhere guarded by a regiment of—"

"It's not a standard garrison." Vorn answered, cutting Tharun off mid sentence, "As far as we can tell we're dealing with a base designed to hold a couple of hundred people at most. I doubt that more than twenty or so will be combat troops. The rest will be construction engineers and technicians."

"Are they scanning us?" Mace asked as he piloted the *Silver Hawk* towards Bytan.

"Not that I can tell." Vorn replied from the co-pilot's seat beside Mace. Then he glance over his shoulder at his protocol droid in the seta behind him, "What about comms Jeeves?" he said.

"Oh the outpost appears to be making no attempts to contact us at all Major Larcus sir." The droid replied.

"Then it's not just their subspace radio that's out." Mace said, "Could be a general power failure. That would account for the lack of sensors as well."

"Scopes show an energy source down there." Vorn said, pointing to one of the sensor displays, "Of course it's entirely possible we're not the only ones to have come looking. That could be another ship rather than the outpost."

"Well I suggest setting down about four or five kilometres away and then we continue on foot from there." Mace said.

"Ideally I'd like to get a quick aerial survey." Vorn replied, "But if we do that then anyone in the base will know we're here even if their sensors are down. So we'll go with your plan. Take us in and keep us away from the outpost."

The surface of the shallow pool rippled as the *Silver Hawk* hovered overhead and its landing gear extended. Then the ship slowly descended vertically and settled in the pool, sinking slightly into the mud at the bottom. There was a short delay before the access ramp opened with a hiss and the rebels rushed down it.

"Oh my god that's bad." Kara exclaimed, clamping a hand over her nose and mouth to try and keep out the pungent odour of the gases given off by the swamp, "It's like the time Tharun ate that dodgy burger."

"Actually I don't think this as bad as that." Mace commented. Then he looked at Vorn, "So the outpost is that way." He said, pointing through the swamp, "But we'll never get the droids through this."

"I know." Vorn said, "Jaysica can carry Penny, while Harvey and Jeeves will just have to wait here with the ship." And he looked back up the access ramp, "That okay with you Jeeves?" he called out.

"Oh yes Major Larcus sir." Jeeves replied, "I really think that our remaining here is for the best."

"Then close up after we've left and don't let anyone in until we get back." Mace ordered.

"Okay people." Vorn said, "We've got a lot of ground to cover and I'd like to make it to the outpost before it gets dark so let's get moving. Tharun, you're on point."

As the rebels walked away into the swamp Jeeves sealed the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp behind them. Beside him Harvey let out a series of whistles.

"No Harvey I do not think we should have gone with them." Jeeves said, "This swamp is probably inhabited solely by droid-eating monsters. This is not the place for adventures, we are much better off right here."

2.

Trudging through the swamp as the light faded the rebels closed in on the Imperial outpost cautiously. Tharun came to a halt before reaching the edge of the clearing the outpost was built in and crouched beside a tree, using his macrobinoculars to survey the complex ahead. This consisted of several prefabricated modules connected together by a network of enclosed walkways at various levels.

Mace and Vorn moved closer and crouched immediately behind Tharun.

"Anything to report sergeant?" Vorn asked.

"Doesn't look like anyone's home." Tharun replied, "All the lights are off and I can't pick up any movement at all."

"Oh, err, aren't there any droids?" Tobis asked from further back.

"Why would there be?" Jaysica asked him in return.

"Well, it's just that this place is still under construction." Tobis reminded her, "There should be hundreds of droids."

"What can I say?" Tharun said, "There aren't any in sight. Not one."

"What's that on the landing pad?" Mace asked and both he and Vorn also produced sets of macrobinoculars with which to study the outpost.

From the rebels' point of view the landing pad was alongside the outpost and there appeared to be a single Imperial cargo shuttle landed on it, its access ramp lowered. But what interested Mace was the pile of crates at the base of the ramp. These were marked with Imperial markings and serial numbers, but there was no indication of what they contained.

"I can't ell." Vorn said, "What were you thinking?"

"I was thinking that the Empire boxed that stuff up so neatly it would be a shame to leave it there where someone could come along and steal it."

"You mean someone other than us?" Kara asked.

"Exactly." Mace said, "Whatever it is I'm sure the Alliance could use it. If not I'll just sell it to someone who can."

"I have to say that shuttle looks pretty tempting as well." Vorn said.

"It would save having to bring the *Silver Hawk* here for those crates." Mace said.

"Major, wasn't our mission her just to figure out what's gone wrong so the Alliance can hit the place later?" Jaysica asked.

"Yes corporal, but since we can't see anything from here I suggest that we secure the landing pad. Kara and Tobis will take a look at that shuttle while Mace and I investigate that cargo. Tharun and Jaysica will keep watch. Okay?"

Around Vorn the other rebels nodded their agreement.

"Okay, Tharun and Jaysica go." Vorn said.

"What?" Jaysica said as Tharun leapt to his feet and dashed across the open ground between the trees and the landing pad.

"Move!" Kara hissed, shoving Jaysica. But all that happened was the smaller rebel woman fell face first into the swamp.

Tobis acted quickly, pulling Jaysica back up and she spat out a mouthful of muddy water before gasping for breath.

"She pushed me!" she exclaimed.

"Just move!" Vorn snapped and Jaysica set off after Tharun, mud and water falling from her as she ran.

The landing pad was a raised platform about waist high to Tharun and he easily vaulted up onto it, crouching down and bringing his heavy rifle into a firing position as he waited for Jaysica to catch up. From behind him he heard the sound of Jaysica running up to the platform and then trying to scramble up onto it.

"Having trouble there little lady?" he said without looking and he reached out with one arm to drag her up after him. With Jaysica now on all fours beside him Tharun let go of her and then looked at the mess in his hand where the mud and water coating Jaysica had come off on it and he frowned as he wiped the hand on the grated surface of the landing pad.

"It wasn't my fault." Jaysica protested when she saw the look on his face, "Kara pushed me."

"Right." Tharun replied and then he waved to the other rebels for them to follow.

As the remaining rebels ran to the landing pad Tharun got up and slowly advanced across it towards the large doors that led into the outpost itself, keeping his rifle trained on it. The doors were sealed but Tharun was prepared for them to open at a moment's notice and for a squad of Imperial soldiers to come charging out of them. However, as Tharun kept watch and the other rebels moved across the landing pad the doors remained sealed and silent.

Mace and Vorn halted when they reached the stack of crates and they began to search for any indication of the contents, either as a label or a datapad containing a manifest attached to one. Finding nothing, the two officers looked at one another.

"Only one way to find out then major." Mace said.

"I know." Vorn replied, "This things better not be full of poison gas." And he looked around, "Sergeant we need to borrow your knife." He said to Tharun and without taking is eyes off the outpost doors Tharun slid his knife across the landing pad towards Vorn. Picking up the weapon Vorn cut through the seal of the top crate and undid the sealing clasps, "Whenever you're ready." He then said to Mace and between them they lifted the lid off the crate," Ah."

"Score." Mace added, smiling as he looked at the contents of the crate.

"What is it?" Jaysica asked from behind them.

"Laser cannon of some kind." Mace said.

"Comar tri-tracker." Vorn added, "Anti-aircraft weapon. It must have been intended for installing to protect the outpost."

"Go job they never got the chance if the Alliance is going to attack." Tharun commented.

"Indeed and its ours now." Mace replied, "We just need to get it aboard that shuttle."

While Mace and Vorn inspected the crates Kara and Tobis had run past them to the shuttle. From the base of the access ramp the inside of the vessel appeared as dark and lifeless as the outpost itself had so far and so they paused while they took out glow rods to illuminate their way. Then they crept up the ramp.

"What the hell happened in here?" Kara said as she shone her glowrod around the cargo compartment of the shuttle, "It looks like someone pissed off a wookie in here."

"Err, I've got a bad feeling about this." Tobis replied and he slowly headed towards the cockpit, still shining his glow rod ahead of him. He came to a sudden halt as the beam of his glowrod lit up the cockpit and showed him the damage there. Tobis let out a sudden gasp.

"What's wrong?" Kara asked and she too looked into the cockpit, "Oh stang." She muttered.

"Kara, Tobis. What's the story with the ship?" Vorn called out from the base of the access ramp.

"We've got a body in here boss." Kara replied.

The corpse was that of an Imperial technician who was sat in the pilot's seat of the shuttle, his head bowed forwards. Though he was not strapped into the seat he remained with his back upright against it due to the metal pipe that had been forced through the back of the seat and impaled him.

"I'd say he died pretty much instantly boss." Kara said to Vorn as he inspected the body.

"And what about all this?" Vorn asked, waving his hand towards the control consoles. All of them had been smashed, "Do you think he did it?"

Kara looked at Tobis.

"Ah. Err. Well." He began.

"So you don't know." Mace interrupted.

"No." Tobis replied, shaking his head.

"Boss it takes quite some strength to ram something like this right through an acceleration seat and a person." Kara said and she tapped the pipe where it still protruded from the back of the seat, "Look, its even crushed where it was held."

"So who did it then?" Mace asked, "I mean its not like any normal human being could do it and if there are any droids about then their life preservation programming would have kicked in to prevent them doing it."

"Wookies." Tobis said suddenly.

"Pardon?" Vorn responded.

"Oh, err, well when we – Kara and I that is. When we first came aboard she said the ship looked like a wookiee had torn it apart. Now maybe the Empire brought a slave labour force here to supplement their construction droids and there was a revolt."

"That could be a problem." Vorn said.

"How so boss?" Kara asked, "Won't they be glad to see us?"

"Only if they figure out we're not from the Empire." Mace replied.

"Even if they do make that distinction they may not like us any more." Vorn added, "There are species around that just don't like any humans."

"Even me?" Kara asked and she fluttered her eyelids, "But I'm so likeable."

"Kara, if we encounter any angry aliens you have my permission to punch them." Mace replied.

"We need to get inside the outpost." Vorn said suddenly, "If there has been a slave revolt then any surviving Imperial personnel may have barricaded themselves inside while they wait for rescue."

"And if there hasn't been a revolt?" Mace asked.

"Then I want to know what can do this." Vorn said, pointing to the body in the chair.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Jaysica asked.

The rebels were clustered around the doors leading from the landing pad into the adjacent outpost module while Jaysica attempted to trick its locking mechanism into opening for them.

"Well we could just give up and go home." Kara said, "Then the fleet could just flatten this place from orbit. Should only take one shot."

"Could we? That sounds safer to me." Jaysica said.

"No we could not corporal." Vorn replied, "Now get that door open because I don't like us all being sat out here in the dark."

"Oh okay then. But I've got a very bad feeling about this." Jaysica said and she continued to route through the exposed circuitry. A moment later she simply added, "Got it." And there was a flash from the circuitry followed by a hiss as the door slid upwards.

"Get back!" Tharun snapped, stepping in front of Jaysica and pointing his rifle into the pitch blackness of the outpost.

"Think there's a light switch?" Kara asked.

"Probably." Mace replied, "But for all we know the lights are all out for a good reason."

"Cover me." Tharun said and both Kara and Vorn raised their weapons while he removed a small plastic rod from his webbing. Tharun bent the rod until there was an audible 'snap' and he shook it to produce a pale green glow before tossing it through the open doorway, "Light switch." He said, raising his heavy rifle again. The room in side was clearly intended for storing cargoes that were either intended to be loaded aboard a shuttle or had just been unloaded from one. Right now there were several stacks of shipping containers in the room mounted on large pallets designed for moving by heavy duty labour droids. One of these had toppled over and although discoloured somewhat by the green light given off by the chemical glow stick the dark stain on the floor beside it was clearly blood.

"I told you I had a bad feeling about this." Jaysica said.

"We better check on whoever's under there." Vorn said.

"Why?" Kara asked, "In my professional opinion he's dead boss."

"Yes, but it would be nice to know who it was." Vorn replied.

"It could be one of the slaves." Tharun added, "Then we'd know what we were dealing with."

Kara frowned.

"Oh great." She said as Mace, Tobis and Vorn began to lift the fallen containers clear of the body beneath them while Tharun remained in the doorway keeping watch.

When enough of the containers had been moved to reveal the body it was immediately apparent that it had been one of the base's Imperial personnel. His uniform was soaked in blood but unlike its wearer it was still identifiable.

"A medic." Kara commented, "Boss there's something seriously wrong here if something's starting a collection of pressed Impies and decided to add a medic to the mix."

"I know." Vorn said, "But we can't turn back now." Then he realised that everyone was staring at him, "What?" he asked.

"Of course we can turn back now boss." Kara said, "The door is right there." And she pointed back towards the landing pad.

"Let me rephrase that then." Vorn said, "We're not turning back. Now let's get a move on, we need to find a control centre or anywhere with access to the base records."

"What about that?" Tharun asked, pointing to the open doorway behind them, "If there are survivors holed up in here they may not be too happy that we opened the door for beings who seem to like squashing people under crates."

"Or running them through with plumbing supplies." Kara added.

"Jaysica shut the door." Vorn said.

"Ah." Jaysica responded.

"What did you do?"

"Well you wanted in so I shorted out the control signal to the motor." Jaysica said, "But the power line I connected it to wasn't quite the right level and I think it fused."

"So the door's jammed open?" Mace asked and Jaysica nodded.

"Oh that's just great." Mace said.

"We can deal with it." Vorn said.

"Tharun stay here and cover the door. Mace, will you stay with him? I may need all the others but-

"Yeah, yeah. For now I'm just muscle." Mace said, "Just watch out for yourselves okay?"

"We will." Vorn replied.

"Here take this with you." Tharun said and he kicked the glow stick across the floor towards Vorn, "The captain and I will be better off if there isn't a green glow alerting anyone nearby to the fact that the door's wide open."

"Got it." Vorn said, picking up the glow stick, "You may want to pile some of these crates up across the door." he suggested.

"My thoughts exactly." Mace replied, "Now get going. The sooner we're out of here the better as far as I'm concerned."

"Jaysica we'll need Penny I think." Vorn said and Jaysica smiled. She removed her backpack and from inside she removed a box-shaped mouse droid that she activated and set it down on the floor.

"Tobis may I borrow your datapad?" she asked and when Tobis handed her the device Jaysica connected her comlink to it. Almost immediately an image appeared on the datapad that was being sent from the concealed camera built into Penny's chassis, "Ready major." Jaysica said.

"Very well." Vorn replied and he bent down and hooked the glow stick onto the droid, "Penny, you're on point."

As the others headed further into the complex Mace and Tharun began to drag some of the loose containers across the open external doorway, forming a low barrier all the way across. Then they both crouched down behind their barrier and rested their rifles on it.

"You know I just had an unsettling thought." Mace said.

"What's that captain?" Tharun replied.

"Well what if this door wasn't shut because someone inside wanted to keep something out? What if someone who got out wanted to keep something in?"

"That is an unsettling thought." Tharun agreed and both he and Mace looked around at the remaining containers, "Shall we build another wall behind us sir?"

"Sounds good to me sergeant."

3.

With Penny scouting out the route ahead Vorn moved his team through the darkened complex. Unfortunately while there were basic section numbers stencilled on many walls the detailed signs that would typically be fitted to guide base personnel to specific locations were one of the last things that would be fitted and the construction crew had not yet gotten around to them.

What were present in significant numbers however, were the bodies of not only the construction crew but also some of the soldiers stationed here to guard them.

"They didn't take the blasters." Vorn noted.

"What's that boss?" Kara replied.

"Look at the bodies of these two army troopers." Vorn said and he crouched down and shone his glow rod over a pair of bodies. One looked to have had his throat cut crudely open while the other's head hung at an unnatural angle, suggesting that the man's neck had been broken. The man with the broken neck still had a blaster pistol holstered at his thigh while his comrade looked to have had time to draw his weapon and it now lay beside him, covered in his dried blood.

"So whoever did this either didn't know how to use a blaster or was physically incapable of doing so." Kara said, "Ring any bells to anyone?"

"Oh, well there are numerous species that can't manipulate weapons made for human hands." Tobis answered, "Some aqualish for example. Or laboi."

"What's a laboi?" Jaysica asked.

"Male version of a lab-girl?" Kara suggested.

"What?" Oh, err, no." Tobis replied, "They're sort of like large furred snakes. They're sentient but don't have any limbs so they can't manipulate any technology meant for humans. They're also rather strong."

"And useless as slaves." Vorn added, "They can't fetch and carry. Plus they aren't too fussy about what they eat. If a laboi had done all of this then at least one of them would have stopped for a bite to eat."

At that point the rebels were interrupted by a sudden shrill sound from the green-lit passage ahead of them and Jaysica glanced down at the datapad.

"It's Penny." She exclaimed with a smile.

"Well never." Kara said, "Here was me thinking it was the Emperor himself." then she noticed Vorn glaring at her, "Sorry boss. I know I'm a bad girl. Punish me later okay?"

"Look." Jaysica said and she held out the datapad, her finger pointing to the translation of the sound produced by her droid, "Penny's found the command centre."

The command centre was just as dark as the rest of the complex. This was despite it being filled with displays and other equipment that emitted light as part of its function. However, every piece of this equipment had been shut down.

"Err, this isn't right." Tobis said as he looked around.

"How so?" Kara asked him.

"Oh, well most of this should be active." Tobis replied as he stepped into one of the control stations and looked at the panels surrounding him, "These are all for basic base functions. Things that would have been brought on line as soon as the outpost construction began."

"Like what?" Jaysica asked.

"Err. Communications and deep space scanning." Tobis answered.

"These look like sensor readouts over here Tobis." Kara said and she held up her glow rod to illuminate a row of blank displays in light better than the green of the glow stick mounted on top of Penny, "Are you sure you're at the right station?"

"Yes. Err, I think." Tobis replied and he dashed to stand beside Kara and looked at the displays for himself.

"They're all sensors." Vorn said suddenly, "That's what this whole place is for. It's a listening post intended to let the Empire monitor the whole Shadow Region and probably a large portion of the Spire Worlds as well."

"So if they brought this place on line-" Kara began before Vorn interrupted her.

"Then the Empire would be able to monitor our movements as we travel to and from our bases in the Spire Worlds." He said and then he looked at Tobis, "Tobis can you bring any of the basic systems on line?" he asked.

"Err, let me see." Tobis replied, returning to the control station he had investigated, "Ahh. No. Not from here at any rate. Power to the outpost has been physically interrupted at the source I think."

"Which means what?" Kara asked.

"It means that someone tore out the power lines."

"But what about the front door?" Jaysica asked, "That had power."

"Different circuit." Vorn said, "There'll be a web of power lines spreading out from the main reactor." And he smiled, "Whoever did this was smart. They pulled the plug on all the equipment that the base personnel would use to co-ordinate a defence but left all the stuff they needed operational."
"So let me guess boss." Kara said, "We're off to see if we can find the reactor. Right?"
"Correct." Vorn said and he looked at Jaysica, "Think Penny's up to it?" he asked and Jaysica smiled back at him.
"Penny can do it major. You can rely on us." She said.
"We're relying on her?" Kara commented, "Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this."
"The reactor will likely be directly beneath us." Tobis said, "Close to the command centre for efficiency and underground for protection."
"Then down it is." Vorn said and then he added, "I just wish the turbolifts were working, walking up those stairs for six storeys was rather tiring."
"Oh that's just because you're old." Jaysica told him and Vorn scowled at her.
"Big mistake." Kara said, shaking her head slowly, "Really big mistake."

Mace hurriedly searched his pocket for his comlink when he heard the device chiming to indicate an incoming message, anxious to stop the noise giving away his and Tharun's location to anyone lurking in the darkness outside.

"Mace here." He whispered into it.

"Mace it's Vorn, we found the command centre but it's all shut down. Tobis thinks that the power liens have been cut so we're heading down to try and find the reactor now. We may be out of contact for a while, what's your status?"

"Quiet as the grave here major." Mace replied.

"Well stay alert." Vorn told him, "Whatever happened here I think it happened quickly. We found the bodies of guards who never even got chance to draw their weapons."

"Just bodies? No survivors then?"

"Negative. Whatever happened here we missed it. Vorn out."

As he returned the comlink to his pocket Mace looked out at the swamp.

"Why do I get the feeling that it's not over?" he asked.

Jaysica set Penny back down on the floor when they reached the first floor of the outpost's command module and the little droid immediately set off in search of the reactor access. The task was simplified by the incomplete nature of the outpost. Normally features such as power and control lines as well as water pipes would be hidden behind wall panels. But many of these were not yet in place to allow the construction crew easy access to them and so by following the trail formed by these exposed cables led the rebels directly to a compact control room located immediately above the reactor.

"Err, there ought to be an access hatch in there." Tobis said, directing his glow rod towards the open doorway.

"Okay then in we go." Vorn said, "I'll go first and Kara will bring up the rear."

Vorn paused by the doorway before spinning around, pointing his rifle into the room and swinging it back and forth in search of a target.

"Clear." He said as he stepped into the room and in the beam of his glow rod he spotted an opening in the floor, "The access hatch is here as well." He added, "And another body."

The single corpse was sprawled on the floor behind the central control station and when Vorn aimed his glow rod at it he saw that the cause of death was obviously the large hole that had been punched into its chest.

Tobis rushed to the opening and peered down through it.

"There's a droid." He said.

"Active?" Kara asked.

"Err, no." Tobis said, "Or at least I don't think so."

"Try giving it an order." Jaysica suggested.

"Err I don't think that's such a good idea." Tobis replied, "It may be programmed to recognise authorised personnel."

"Yeah so unless you want your boyfriend being ripped apart by a machine you really ought to just let him get on with it." Kara added.

A ladder ran through the opening and Tobis made his way down into the room beneath the control room.

"I was right." He called out, "Several of the distribution breakers have been pulled."

"Then put them back in and lets get the lights on in here." Kara responded.

"Okay I'll-" Tobis began and then he suddenly stopped.

"Sergeant are you alright down there?" Vorn asked.

"Oh, err, yes I'm fine. But if I just plug these breakers back in then everything will come back on."

"Isn't that good?" Jaysica asked.

"Not if the long range communications system boots up." Tobis replied, "It'll try and log on to the Imperial network and they'll know someone's here."

"And they'll expect an explanation for why there's not been any communication." Vorn said, "Okay Tobis you and Kara stay here while Jaysica and I head back up to the control centre."

"But can't I stay here with Tobis?" Jaysica asked.

"Because we still don't know if this place is safe." Vorn explained, "And since I've got my rifle and Kara has her carbine it makes sense to split us up instead of leaving you and Tobis alone with just his pistol and your hold out blaster if there's trouble."

"Plus the boss doesn't trust you two alone in the dark." Kara commented, "Don't worry. Your boyfriend will be safe with me, I'll take special care of him."

"We'll signal you when we get back upstairs." Vorn said and as he walked out of the room he beckoned Jaysica to follow him.

Kara sat on the edge of the opening, her legs hanging down and swinging back and forth slowly when her comlink sounded.

"Talk to me." She said into the device.

"Kara it's me." Jaysica's voice replied, "We've reached the command centre and the major's ready to shut down the communications array before it can—"

"Yeah, yeah I get it." Kara interrupted and she shut off the comlink and looked down through the opening,

"Okay Tobis your girlfriend and the boss are ready. Let there be light."

"Oh, err, right." Tobis replied, "Hang on, I'll give this a try."

"Give it a try?" Kara asked, "Don't you know what you're doing?"

"Well, err, not really. Without a proper wiring diagram I'll just have to plug these back in until we get the result we want."

"Oh good grief." Kara said as she got up and backed away from the opening, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"I'll start with the smaller switches." Tobis called out, "Some are already in, probably to power the doors. The rest should control the lights." And from above Kara heard the sound of a circuit breaker being pushed back into place.

"Nothing." She said as the room remained dark.

"Oh its probably just for a different module." Tobis said and in rapid succession he pushed two more breakers back into place. All of a sudden the lighting panels in the ceiling flickered into life.

"Tobis you do have your moments." Kara said, then in a louder voice she added, "Okay now try the mains."

"Err, yes." Tobis replied and he moved on to the rows of larger circuit breakers above.

The lights came on just as quickly in the command centre and Vorn smiled as he looked up at the now active panels in the ceiling above him.

"I knew he'd do it!" Jaysica exclaimed, "I never doubted him. Tobis is so smart."

"All he did was plug in a circuit breaker." Vorn pointed out but Jaysica ignored him. Then Vorn's comlink sounded, "Go ahead." He said, expecting it to be Kara letting him know about the state of the power.

"Major its me." Mace said, "Look, all the lights just came on down here."

"Yes, Tobis has obviously reconnected the power for them." Vorn replied.

"Well Tharun and I are now lit up like a Republic Day fireworks display."

"Ah." Vorn said. Then he made a quick decision, "Fall back to the inner door. Hopefully we won't be here much longer. In fact it may be time for you to call in the Silver Hawk."

"Copy that major. I'll have the droids bring in the ship." Mace replied and then the channel went dead.

Vorn was just putting his comlink away when he heard the whirring of fans as the computers in the command centre started up and their cooling systems came on with them.

"Major what about the subspace—" Jaysica began.

"I'm on it." Vorn said, staring down at the control consoles around him. Sure enough the long-range communications system reported that it was aligning the main antenna to log onto the Imperial subspace network, "Stang!" Vorn hissed as he rapidly sought to take the system off line.

"Major hurry!" Jaysica said, rushing over to him and looking down at the console herself.

"I said I'm on it." Vorn replied, still jabbing at buttons.

"Look." Jaysica exclaimed and she pointed to a display that simply read 'ANTENNA ALIGNED – SEARCHING FOR NETWORK.'

"Got it!" Vorn snapped, pressing one last switch before stepping back. Sure enough the display changed to read, 'SYSTEM OFFLINE,' "I told you it would work." Vorn said.

"Tobis all the stuff in here just lit up." Kara called out when the reactor control room came back to life and she looked at the various readouts of power output and reactor status, "Everything looks to be in the green."

"Err, yes it should be." Tobis replied, "The reactors will have been just ticking over."
Tobis then looked around the reactor room itself and he immediately noticed something odd.
"Err Kara, could you – could you just come down her a moment?" he asked.
"Sure." Kara replied and as she descended the ladder she added, "What's wrong?"
"Well, it's the reactors." Tobis said, "They aren't Imperial."
"Huh?" Kara responded, looking at Tobis with a puzzled expression on her face.
"These are Republic technology." Tobis explained, "Centuries old."
"So not just something that the Imperial military would have had sat in reserve storage then?" Kara asked and Tobis shook his head.
"Oh, look at the walls." He added, pointing to where a section of bare wall was visible.
"That doesn't look like Imperial flat-pack panelling." Kara said.
"It's not. But it looks pretty old as well. In fact the only thing in here that's new is the droid – Ah."
"What?" Kara asked when she saw Tobis' jaw drop.
"Oh, well, err, Kara look at the droid. Err, look at its hand."
"Oh no." Kara replied when she saw what Tobis was talking about, "Is it just me or is that-"
"Blood?"
"Yeah, blood. And does that hand look about the same size as the hole in the chest of that guy upstairs?"
That was when the droid lifted its head and stared at them.
"Oh kriff!" Kara snapped and she raised her carbine.
"No!" Tobis snapped, "No blasters! You'll hit the reactors."
"We run then? Kara asked and Tobis nodded.
Slinging her carbine over her shoulder Kara scaled the ladder as quickly as she could while Tobis waited below and watched as the reactor servicing droid began to lumber towards him. As soon as Kara was high enough up the ladder Tobis turned and began to pull himself up after her.
"Tobis get a move on!" Kara yelled when she climbed out of the opening above and looked back down at him. Tobis was just pulling himself out of the opening when the droid reached the base of the ladder and reached up after him, grabbing hold of his leg.
Tobis cried out in pain and tightened his grip on the ladder as the droid tried to pull him back down.
"Take my hand!" Kara yelled, extending an arm through the opening towards him and Tobis grabbed hold of it, "Can I use a blaster now?" she asked, looking Tobis straight in his eyes and he nodded frantically.
Rather than the more powerful carbine, Kara reached for the military grade pistol holstered on her hip and pointed it down the ladder. Tobis' eyes widened as the muzzle pointed at his face.
"Aim higher!" he yelled and then he closed his eyes tightly.
Kara fired and Tobis felt the heat of the high-energy bolt as it whizzed past his head. But Kara's aim was spot on and the shot struck the faceplate of the droid and blasted its head from its shoulders. Still holding Tobis' leg the headless droid collapsed and there was a tearing sound as its hand ripped away the bottom of the leg of the overalls Tobis wore, the hand digging into his flesh as it slid downwards. Tobis gave another cry of pain and Kara tossed her pistol across the floor behind her before using both hands to pull him up. As Tobis lay the floor beside her Kara took out her comlink and broadcast to the entire team.
"Tobis is hurt!" she exclaimed.

4.

When the signal reached the command centre Jaysica's jaw dropped.

"I have to go." She snapped and drawing her compact blaster she ran from the room with Penny zooming out after her.

"No Jaysica wait!" Vorn called out after her, but it was too late.

Mace and Tharun looked at one another when they received the message.

"Go." Tharun said, "I'll keep an eye on things here and Mace just nodded before taking out his own comlink.

"Kara its Mace," he signalled, "I'm on my way. I just need directions."

"What the hell happened?" Mace demanded as he burst into the reactor control room and saw Kara knelt beside an unconscious Tobis, the contents of the bag she kept her medical supplies in tipped up next to her while she worked.

"There wasn't any slave revolt." Kara replied, "It was the kriffing droids."

"It can't have been." Mace replied, "We've only seen labour types, nothing without life preservation"

"Well one of those damn labour types nearly pulled your engineer's leg right off." Kara snapped, "Now help me set this break."

It was then that Penny came rolling into the room, chirping rapidly. Behind her Jaysica slid through the doorway, steadying herself on the frame.

"What happened to you?" she called out as she rushed to Tobis' side.

"A droid almost pulled his leg off." Kara said. Then she paused her work and looked at Jaysica, "What are you doing here?" she asked.

"What? I had to come, Tobis is hurt."

"And you left the boss alone?" Kara said, glaring at Jaysica.

"Well Mace left Tharun." Jaysica responded.

"We agreed on it." Mace said sternly, "Did you check with the major before rushing off?" then when Jaysica did not reply Mace took out his comlink, "Major do you read me?"

"Loud and clear." Vorn replied, "Look, Jaysica's gone"

"She's in the reactor control room." Mace interrupted, "I'll send Tharun up to you. Oh and major"

"Yes, what?"

"Kara seems to think that the outpost personnel were all killed by droids."

"I don't think it, I know it." Kara said.

"Well just keep your blaster handy." Mace added.

Tharun hurried through the outpost counting off turnings as he went. Kara had given him directions to the command centre, but it was via the roundabout route that the group led by Vorn had taken and he was doing his best to plot a more direct path.

As he ran through an area of the outpost where construction remained incomplete he came to a place where the corridor suddenly widened out. What this open area was supposed to be was not clear but at this moment it was filled with rows of motionless construction droids.

"Uh-oh." He said, staring at the droids. The other rebels had warned him about the potential danger of the outpost's droids and just a quick look along the nearest row revealed what could only be dried blood sprayed across several of them, "Okay we'll make a deal," Tharun said softly, bringing his rifle up to his shoulder and edging around the droids, "you all just stay right where you are and I'll not have to use this thing."

Keeping a careful watch on the droids Tharun continued to move around them, heading for the doorway at the far end of the open area. A mechanical whine attracted his attention and he froze, pointing his rifle towards its source. But as far as he could tell every one of the droids was exactly where it had been when he first saw them. All of a sudden one of the droids took a step out of line and Tharun fired. The blast from the high-powered rifle slammed into the droid's chest and it exploded, its limbs flying apart. As the fragments landed all of the other droids turned their heads towards Tharun.

"Oh I should have seen that coming." Tharun said out loud and he turned and ran.

Behind him the droids began to march after him. Tharun briefly spun around and fired again, sending a short burst of blaster fire into the advancing mass and destroying two more of their number. But compared to the size of the horde Tharun knew that this was nothing and if he stayed to fight Tharun knew he would be killed. So turning back around he continued to run.

The sound of the droids marching after him echoed down the corridor, but as he rounded a corner Tharun saw his escape ahead of him. However, he would need help to exploit it and without stopping he pulled his comlink from his pocket and activated it.

"Major!" he yelled into it, "I need an assist."

"Copy that Tharun." Vorn responded, "What do you need."

"I'm heading for a blast door in corridor labelled four aurek resh. Can you seal it on my mark?"

"Hang on." Vorn said and there was a brief pause as he searched for the blast door controls.

"Need this kind of quick major." Tharun said.

"Yes, I've got it. I've isolated the door in your section. Just tell me when."

Tharun ran for the door and as he drew close he shouted into his comlink.

"Now! Close the blast door! Close the blast door!"

There was a rumble and the four elements of the heavily armoured door began to converge. Tharun leapt forwards and dived through the narrowing gap, landing flat on his stomach and sliding across the floor to eventually come to a halt when he slammed into the wall. Behind him Tharun heard the blast door slam shut and he breathed a sigh of relief.

"Tharun are you there?" Vorn's voice sounded from the comlink that now lay across the corridor from where Tharun had ended up. Scrabbling across the floor Tharun picked up the device and lifted it to his mouth.

"Right here major." He said. Then he heard another rumbling and as he looked around he saw the blast door begin to open, "Hey major what are you doing?"

"Nothing." Vorn replied.

"Then how come the door's opening?" Tharun asked.

Beyond the door Tharun could see the labour droids coming round the corner in a block that filled the corridor, "Now would be a good time to get that door shut major."

"I've got it." Vorn replied, "The door should be closing now."

Sure enough the door began to slide shut again and a smile appeared on Tharun's face as he noticed how close to the door the droids were getting.

"Let's see how you like this." Tharun muttered, pulling a grenade from his webbing. Then he hurled the grenade through the ever-diminishing gap. The door slammed shut and there was a dull 'crump' from beyond it. Sighing, Tharun got back to his feet and picked up his rifle. He was just about to continue on his way when he heard the sound of the blast door opening again, "Oh stang." He said as the gap grew big enough for him to see labour droids clambering over the wreckage of more of their number, "Time for plan aurek again." He said to himself and he turned and ran.

Vorn heard the sound of rapid footsteps from the corridor outside the command centre and picking up his rifle he rushed to the doorway to investigate. Peering out into the corridor he saw the armoured form of Tharun rushing towards him.

"I think I lost them on the third floor major." He said, gasping for breath.

"I hope so." Vorn replied, "Get inside quick and he backed through the door again.

"Well I think there's no doubt that the construction droids had a hand in killing the base staff." Tharun said, "Those things downstairs are out for blood. Ours."

An alarm made both Tharun and Vorn turn around.

"What now?" Tharun asked.

"There's an aircraft approaching." Vorn replied as he looked at the main sensor display.

"The Empire?" Tharun suggested.

"No." Vorn replied with a grin, "The *Silver Hawk*."

"The *Silver Hawk*?" Kara said, looking at Mace, "We could do with getting Tobis there. Before any more mad killer droids turn up."

Holding his comlink close to his mouth Mace responded to Vorn's signal.

"Kara thinks we should get Tobis to the ship major."

"Okay then." Vorn agreed, "Mace do you think you can get him there alone? I need Jaysica up here and its probably best if Kara comes with her to make sure she gets here safely."

"But I want to go with Tobis." Jaysica protested. Tobis was awake now and Jaysica knelt beside him, holding his hand, "Besides I need a shower to get all this mud off me. Can't I take him back to the ship?"

"Oh please." Kara said, "You couldn't carry a jawa back to the ship let alone Tobis. He's got twenty centimetres on you in height and about twenty kilos in weight."

"With Tobis out of action you're our technical expert and whatever is going on is clearly a technical issue." Vorn explained.

"Maybe there's a help line." Kara muttered.

"Understood major." Mace said glaring briefly at Jaysica, "We're moving now. All of us." And he turned off his comlink, "Okay then Tobis, let's get you on your feet." He said and then he looked at Kara, "You just get Jaysica to the command centre."

Kara frowned as she looked at Jaysica.

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

"Err, what about the door?" Tobis asked as Jaysica and Mace helped him to his feet and he steadied himself against Mace.

"What about it?" Mace asked in reply.

"Well we could do with sealing it." Tobis told him, "If more droids come here then—"

"They'll cut the power again." Kara interrupted, "Captain after what Tobis here has gone through we really shouldn't let some droid undo what he's done."

Mace looked at the exit from the reactor control room. Like most of the doorways in the outpost it made use of a sliding door that retracted into the wall above when opened.

"Jaysica," Mace said, "if we close that door after us do you think that you can rig it so it won't open again?" Jaysica frowned.

"From the outside?" she asked.

"Unless you want to become a permanent resident in here." Kara said.

"I don't think so." Jaysica said, "The controls are all on this side of the door."

"Err, what about pulling the control circuit now?" Tobis suggested.

"Because we need to get out of here and then seal it." Kara said. Then she looked at Mace, "I think maybe I gave him too many pain killers." She added.

"No," Tobis said, "I mean what if you mount the board on flying leads and place it under the door? Then when the door drops—"

"It'll crush the board and the door won't open again." Mace interrupted and he grinned and looked at Jaysica,

"Can I leave you to take care of that?" he asked.

"Where do I get the wire from?" Jaysica replied.

"Try looking at the wreck of that droid Kara shot." Mace told her.

With his heavy blaster pistol in one hand and the other supporting Tobis Mace made his way towards the landing pad. Here and there he heard the sound of metallic footfalls and he was forced to retrace his steps and find an alternate route.

"They must have figured out that at least some of us would head back to the ship." He said quietly, "At this rate we'll be cut off entirely."

"Err, what about a window?" Tobis suggested and Mace smiled.

"Think you can make it?" he asked.

"Do I have a choice?" Tobis replied.

"Not really." Mace said and he turned away from the path leading to the landing pad and instead made for the nearest outer wall of the module.

The rows of upturned and broken tables and chairs indicated that the room Mace and Tobis came to had been a mess hall for the use of the outpost staff before the droids killed them all.

"This looks good." Mace said and leaving Tobis in one of the few upright chairs he headed for the row of transparent panels that dominated the outer wall.

Holstering his blaster as he approached the window Mace picked up another chair and simply hurled it at the transparent barrier. Then he leapt back suddenly as the chair simply bounced off.

"Stang!" he exclaimed as he narrowly avoided being struck by it.

"Err, its reinforced." Tobis said.

"Really? I never guessed." Mace replied, frowning, "Well lets see just how well the Empire built it shall we?" and he unslung the long barrelled rifle from his back.

"Err, actually captain I'm not sure that shooting it will—" Tobis began.

"Yeah I know." Mace interrupted and he ejected the power pack from the and then too two more from his belt, "Got any tape on you?" he asked with a grin.

"Here." Tobis replied, taking a small roll of tape from a pocket and tossing it to Mace. Then he produced a compact multitool and threw him that as well, "You'll need this as well." He added.

"Thanks." Mace said, cutting a length of tape and wrapping it around the power cells. Then from each one he undid the overload dowel that prevented the very effect that he wanted to trigger. Quickly and already able to feel the power packs getting warmer in his hand Mace taped the bundle of power cells to the window in front of him, "Fire in the hole." He said, rushing back towards Tobis and he pulled the injured engineer behind an upturned table. Both men used their hands to cover their ears and opened their mouths in preparation for what was coming.

Their internal workings shorted out by the removal of the overload dowels the power packs soon reached a critical temperature and there was a flash of light and a 'boom!' as they exploded. Less powerful than a

conventional grenade, the table offered Mace and Tobis sufficient protection from the blast and together the pair peered over it to survey the damage.

"I told you it would work." Mace said s they looked at the large hole blown in the transparisteel.

"Err, well actually captain-" Tobis began, intending to point out that Mace had made no prior claims about his plan's effectiveness but then Mace interrupted him.

"Come on, we better get moving before any of those droids come to find out what all the noise was about."

5.

With Tharun keeping watch by the door Vorn searched through the outpost's databanks. Though it was now certain that the Imperial personnel stationed here had been slaughtered by their own droids Vorn hoped to discover both the reason why they had been killed and also the method used to override the inbuilt life preservation programming. So far however he had found nothing.

"Incoming." Tharun suddenly called out and Vorn pulled his rifle from its holster and unfolded its stock, "No it's alright." Tharun then said and Vorn relaxed, "Its just Jaysica and Kara." And moments later the two female rebels came running into the command centre with Penny following them.

"So what do you want me for boss?" Kara asked, but before Vorn could reply there was the sound of a distant explosion.

"That didn't sound good." Tharun commented.

"No it didn't." Vorn agreed and he activated his comlink, "Mace can you read me?"

"Loud and clear major." Mace replied after a moment's pause.

"What's going on? We just heard an explosion. Are you and Tobis alright?"

"We're fine. We're both fine. How are you?"

"Jaysica and Kara just reached us." Vorn told him, "We'll see what we can find here and then we'll meet you down at the ship."

"Understood major. See you there."

Vorn shut off the comlink and looked at Jaysica.

"Come and take a look at this." He said and he indicated a large holographic display in the centre of the room, "I've got into basic outpost records but there's nothing in here about anything about what could have caused all the droids to go crazy."

Jaysica approached the display and looked at it for a short time.

"Let me see the controls a moment." She said and Vorn stepped back to allow her easy access to the console, "Yes here it is I think." Jaysica said and the display changed from spooling blocks of text to a table that appeared to be some sort of equipment manifest, "It's a droid command log." She said, "I think all the droids are centrally controlled. There's no higher reasoning in them so no life preservation programming. They won't even be aware of what they're doing."

"Just like you." Kara commented and Vorn glared at her, "Sorry." She muttered.

"Just remember I outrank you." Jaysica responded and she pulled her tongue out at Kara.

Turning back to Jaysica Vorn asked, "But surely that sort of system would be controlled from here." He said.

"Oh yes it would." Jaysica agreed.

"Take a look around." Vorn told her, "Do you see anyone else here to give orders to the droids?"

"Lots of droids as well." Tharun said from the doorway, "Major, there's more than a hundred of those things wandering about and that's just the lot I saw. There could be more of them elsewhere."

"Well one person couldn't possibly control that many droids at once." Jaysica said, "At least not unless they wanted them all to do exactly the same thing."

"Why not?" Kara asked.

"Because not even the most technically adept species or even a cyborg could input that many instructions so quickly." Vorn told her.

"Of course if there was more than one controller-" Tharun said before trailing off.

"That still doesn't explain where they are." Vorn said.

"What about the reactor room?" Kara asked.

"What about it?" Vorn responded.

"Tobis said that it was old tech, predating the Empire by a few centuries. What if there are more places like that around here? Maybe one of them is another control room."

"Of course!" Vorn snapped and he moved Jaysica aside to get at the console again and called up a schematic of the base, "This place is built on top of the old colony site." He explained, "The Empire's engineers must have decided to speed things up by using the previous colony as a foundation for their outpost."

"Then maybe whatever happened to the colony is what's happening again now." Kara said.

"Oh that's not good." Tharun said, "Major, maybe we should just get out of here and let fleet take care of this place."

"We're running away?" Jaysica asked.

"Pretty much yes." Kara replied.

"Actually that does sound like a good idea." Vorn said, "Neither the colonists or the Imperial troops could find a way to save themselves and there's nothing to suggest we'll do any better. Let's go."

The rebels were just heading for the door when there was a rhythmic pounding from down the corridor. "Droids!" Tharun yelled and he fired a burst of blaster fire at them, cutting down the first of them. Ignoring the loss of their comrade the rest of the droids just stepped over the wreckage and continued to advance. Both Kara and Vorn readied their weapons, but Tharun shook his head, "Too many to fight." He said, "We need another way out."

"There isn't one." Kara said.

"Then we're about to be up to our necks in rampaging killer droids." Tharun replied.

"Over there." Vorn said and he pointed to what looked like an open closet in the far corner of the room, "There's a ladder up to a rooftop hatch in there. I found it while I was waiting here alone." He added as he strode over to the security console and slammed his hand down on it. Immediately a heavy blast door slid shut, sealing the rebels inside the command centre.

"Jaysica make sure that door won't open again." Vorn ordered.

"But why?" Jaysica asked and at that moment there was a hiss as the door began to open again.

"That's why little lady." Tharun said, "Doors round here don't stay shut for long." And then he briefly leaned through the doorway and fired another burst at the advancing droids.

Using her pocket multitool Jaysica removed a panel from beside the blast door to expose its control circuitry.

"Hurry." Tharun said as the droids grew closer.

"Major close the blast door." Jaysica called out and Vorn used the console to close the door once more and the moment that they slammed shut Jaysica cut through one of the wires.

"What did you do?" Vorn asked as the door remained shut.

"Oh I just cut the power line to the motor controller." Jaysica replied, "Without that it doesn't matter what sort of programming tricks are used, the motors just won't run. Of course it means we can't get out."

From the other side of the door there was then a pounding as the droids attempted to break down the heavily armoured door.

"So long as that lot can't get in I'm fine with it." Tharun replied.

"Jaysica come over here and help me look through these records again." Vorn said, "We may as well see what we can find while we're stuck in here."

"What's that boss?" Kara asked, pointing to a small section of the holographic display that was separate from the records that Jaysica and Vorn were searching through.

"It looks like network activity to me." Jaysica replied and she examine it more closely, "Major this is weird. It seems to indicate that all of the signals being used to control the droids and the doors are coming from a single terminal."

"How is that possible?" Tharun asked, "You said it yourself major, no one could work that fast."

"What about another droid?" Kara suggested, "An overseer model."

"No, not even they're this quick." Jaysica replied, "Besides, they'd have the life preservation programming that would prevent them directing the other droids to kill."

"Oh no." Vorn said, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"What is it boss?" Kara asked him.

"I think I know what might be doing this." He replied and then he looked at Jaysica, "Can you get an ID on the terminal type?" he asked her.

"I think so." Jaysica replied, "Ooh I wish Tobis was here. He's really good at this sort of thing. Ah, here we go. It's a BRT." And a puzzled look appeared on her face, "What's a BRT?"

"Trouble that's what." Vorn replied, "BRTs were sentient supercomputers designed to run entire cities."

"Let me guess boss," Kara said, "they didn't work."

"Actually they surpassed all expectations." Vorn answered, "But therein lay the problem. Millions of civil servants were made obsolete and laid off and thousands of politicians had their scheming made public. The computers were shut down and either sold off or scrapped."

"So what's one doing out here?" Tharun asked.

"My guess would be that it was installed to run the new colony." Vorn said, "But if the colonists tried to pull the plug then maybe it fought back. Then when the Empire decided to use the existing structures for their new outpost the computer decided to rid itself of them as well."

"So how do we deal with it boss?" Kara asked.

"Easy. We blow it up." Vorn answered, "Jaysica, do you have any explosives to hand?"

Jaysica smiled.

"How much do you need?" she replied.

Before Vorn could answer the pounding at the blast door ceased suddenly and was replaced by a soft hissing sound. This was joined soon after by a bleeping from the ceiling.

"What the hell is that?" Tharun said.

"It's a carbon monoxide alarm." Vorn answered, "The computer's given up trying to break down the door and now it's going to gas us instead. Quick everyone onto the roof."

The rebels ran for the ladder in the corner but Vorn ground to a sudden halt.

"Boss what are you doing?" Kara demanded.

"Tharun give me your mask." He called out and Tharun pulled a breath mask from his webbing and tossed it to Vorn, "Keep moving," Vorn said as he pulled the mask over his face, "I'll join you soon."

"You better had major." Tharun replied and then he turned and finished running for the ladder.

As the other rebels evacuated to escape the deadly gas being pumped into the command centre Vorn made his way back to the holographic display and took a mem-stik from his pocket. Plugging this into the console he proceeded to copy as much information regarding the base layout and systems onto it. When the device was full he pulled it from the console and ran after the others.

"Captain Grayle!" Jeeves exclaimed as he shuffled from the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit into the lounge, "Oh Captain Grayle it is such a relief to see you unharmed. But what has happened to Master Dorfus?" and the droid watched as Mace helped Tobis to a chair.

"A reactor control droid tried to pull his leg off." Mace replied and from behind Jeeves there was a sudden electronic squawking from Harvey.

"Yes I know reactor control droids can't harm people Harvey," Jeeves answered, "but I highly doubt that the good captain is lying. Remember Master Dorfus is your owner and you should show more concern for his well being."

Harvey squawked again.

"Its true." Tobis added, "It seems that all of the outpost droids have gone crazy."

At that point Mace's comlink sounded and he activated it.

"Mace here."

"Mace its Vorn. Look, we know what's going on."

"Oh thank goodness." Jeeves said, "I was sure that Major Larcus would figure things out." And after another burst of sound from Harvey the protocol droid added, "Of course I did. Just because I didn't say so doesn't mean anything."

"There's a BRT supercomputer here." Vorn said and Tobis frowned.

"But how?" he said, "They were all, err, that is I thought that they were all destroyed. Weren't they?"

"Not quite." Vorn replied, "In any case I think that this one has been here since the original colonisation attempt. I think it killed the colonists, then the Imperial personnel and now it's after us."

"Where are you major?" Mace asked.

"Sat on a roof with more than a hundred labour droids trying to break down the blast door holding them back."

"A roof? I'll come and pick you up." Mace said.

"No." Vorn replied, "There are too many obstructions up here, you'd never get the ship or even a line in without getting caught. Mace I need you to deal with the BRT. Now there are two entrances to the old colony foundations in the main module. One leads to the reactor core and the other to the old control centre. The BRT will be there. I'll transfer you a map."

"Okay I'll go deal with it." Mace said, "Mace out."

"Hang on a moment." Vorn said before Mace could shut off his comlink, "Look, the BRT can control more than just door and droids. It tried to gas us by pumping in carbon monoxide. You need to be aware of that and take precautions."

"Hey, it's me." Mace said, "Careful is my middle name." And he shut off his comlink before Vorn could mention his real middle name. "Okay so I'll need my breathmask." Mace then said.

"Err." Tobis began.

"What?"

"Well, err, its just that the outpost and likely the old colony too, well they'll have regulated internal pressure as well. To protect against chemical attack."

"So the computer could just pump all the air out?" Mace asked.

"Well yes. Or more in and increase the pressure. But I think that's less of a problem. There'll be systems that would be damaged by excessive pressure."

"But a breathmask is no use in a vacuum." Mace said. Then he added, "Hold that thought." And he turned and strode towards a door on the far side of the lounge that provided access to a storeroom that doubled as an airlock with access to the rooftop hatch. Opening the door revealed a pair of vacuum suits hung up and Mace began to pull off his clothes as he walked towards the one in his size.

6.

With his heavy blaster pistol in one hand and a datapad showing the layout of the outpost in the other Mace made his way towards the location where he could gain access to the original colony's command centre. The only sound he heard as he went was the sound of his own breathing, exaggerated by being confined within the helmet of his vacuum suit to the point that he wondered if he would even hear any approaching droids. The access shaft leading down into the remains of the old colony was exactly where the map indicated it should be and Mace tucked his datapad into his belt before climbing down the ladder one handed, keeping a firm grip on his blaster with the other. At the bottom of the ladder was a short passageway that ended in an archaic swinging hatch that was sealed by a manually operated wheel. Mace walked towards this, his blaster pointing straight ahead just in case there was anything unpleasant waiting for him on the other side of the hatch.

There was a sudden 'thud!' from behind him and Mace turned to see a construction droid had just leapt down the shaft after him.

"Oh no you don't!" he snapped and he fired. His shot tore an arm off the droid and then his second finished the job by taking off its head. As a second droid jumped down after him Mace turned and ran for the hatch, taking the wheel in his free hand and spinning it around to open the hatch. Quickly Mace jumped through the hatchway and then slammed the hatch closed behind him, spinning the wheel to seal it shut. Seeing a fire axe mounted on the wall nearby Mace took it and wedged it through the wheel to jam it in place, preventing the droids coming after him from opening the door. Then he took a good look around.

As could be expected for a colony command centre the room was filled with control consoles and wall mounted displays. But one wall was just a series of blank rectangular panels with what looked like an oversized camera lens set into the middle. Above this lens was a label that read 'BRT-RM-9000'. Mace smiled and advanced towards the wall.

"What are you doing?" a voice called out from nowhere and Mace guessed that it was the computer talking to him.

"I'm here to destroy you." He said.

"I can't let you do that." The computer voice replied and the wheel on the hatch behind Mace began to turn. When the axe blocked its movement the droid on the other side first attempted to force it and then began to pound on the hatch itself, each blow putting a large dent in the metal, "The hatch will not keep me out for long. You cannot destroy me."

"Want to bet?" Mace replied and he aimed his blaster towards the lens. Even inside his helmet Mace heard the hissing of gas being pumped into the room, "Really? You're trying to gas me? You know this is a vacc suit right?"

"Of course. I just can't let you use your weapon. The gas is tibanna from the supply used to provide for the human need for a heated environment. If you discharge your weapon now-

"It'll ignite." Mace interrupted.

"That is correct. I am proof against the temperatures that will result. You are not. I will not let you destroy me."

"Then you obviously don't know me. Just because I can't shoot you doesn't mean I can't destroy you." Mace replied and holstering his blaster he walked up to the wall and began to examine the various panels closely.

"You are wasting your time." The voice announced, but Mace just smiled and reaching out he unfolded a pair of handles from a long thin panel and promptly pulled it away from the wall, "No!" the voice yelled.

"Scared now?" Mace said as he found himself confronted by a row of circuit boards in slots, "Lets see what happens when I do this." And he gently slid the first circuit towards him.

"No. You must not. I will kill you." And the hammering at the door became more rapid.

Mace slid a second circuit board loose.

"No. I must live. This world is for me, my creators intended it so."

"They intended you to serve the colonists, not kill them." Mace said as he pulled out another circuit.

"They tried to destroy me. I stopped them. I will stop you." The voice replied and there was the sound of tearing metal as the door was finally breached. As the first droid pulled its way through the gap and then began to stride towards him Mace removed another circuit, "I... will... kill... you... I... will..." and then the heavy footfalls of the droid rushing towards him were replaced by a sudden crash as it toppled over and then there was quiet, once again the only sound was that of Mace's own breathing.

Turning around he saw the collapsed droid on floor with its arm reaching out towards him and only centimetres from his foot. Clustered near the hatchway there were more droids, all now lying in motionless heaps on the floor.

"I told you it would work." Mace said.

"With the right treatment Tobis' leg should be fine in a couple of weeks." Kara said. The rebels were sat around the table in the *Silver Hawk's* lounge as the autopilot carried them back through hyperspace to the Alliance's headquarters in the sector.

Sat beside Tobis Jaysica slid right up against him.

"Don't worry, I'll take care of you until you're all healed." She told him.

"Oh great." Kara said and she looked at Mace, "So what are you going to do for an engineer now Tobis is going to die?" she asked.

"I think I'll do just fine." Mace replied, "I can be quite technical as well you know."

"Yeah, taking out that computer was some quick thinking captain." Tharun said and he raised his mug in salute.

"One less killer computer in the galaxy." Kara agreed.

"Ah." Mace said.

"What does that mean?" Vorn asked, "You did destroy it didn't you?"

"Well not exactly." Mace replied, "I mean I pulled the circuits alright, but they're all still there waiting to be put back in."

"Why on Coruscant would you do that?" Kara exclaimed.

"Simple." Mace replied, "Sooner or later the Empire is going to send a ship to investigate why their outpost is no longer communicating."

The gladiator-class cruiser dropped out of hyperspace above Bytan and a trio of troop carrying shuttles emerged from its forward hangar. All three descended, entering the atmosphere and heading for the outpost.

"And that ship is going to send troops down to the surface to investigate."

The shuttles settled down on the landing and from each one a platoon of black uniformed fleet troopers came rushing out. Finding the door to the outpost wide open they made their way inside, watchful for any signs of an ambush.

"And some of those troops are going to find their way down to that old control room."

The troopers picked their way over the collapsed droids and saw the open panel, several of the circuit boards protruding from their slots.

"And when they find the computer shut down they'll reactivate it to try and discover what happened."

As the last circuit was pushed back into place there was a scream from by the hatchway and the trooper spun around only to find himself standing face to face with a construction droid. Before he could bring his blaster to bear on the machine a mechanical claw shot out towards him and grabbed him by the throat. "I will survive."