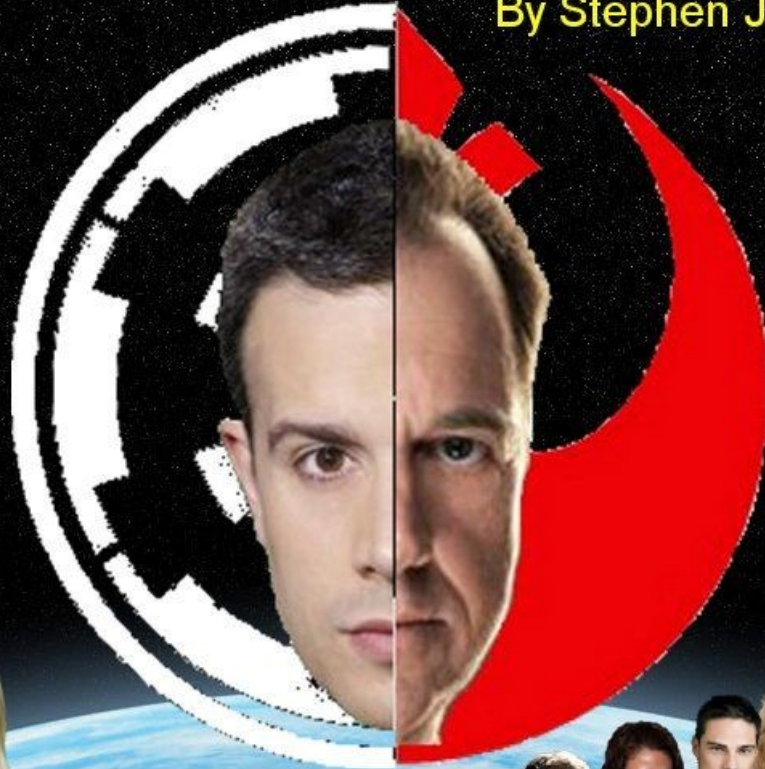


STAR WARS

1-04: Dead Drop

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...

DEAD DROP

ASSIGNED TO RECOVER A DATA PACKAGE FROM A LOCAL RESISTANCE CELL, THE
OCCUPANTS OF THE SILVER HAWK MUST EVADE A PURSUING ISB AGENT WITH A
PERSONAL AGENDA. CAN THE REBELS ESCAPE BEFORE AN UNPLEASANT
FATHER/SON REUNION OCCURS?...

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

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1.

"Tobis what are you doing?"

Tobis turned around to see his commanding officer, Vorn Larcus III, standing behind him as he tried to throw hoops over brightly coloured columns.

"I'm trying to win one of those," he answered and he pointed at a stuffed toy bantha that was hanging above the fairground stall.

"Why would you want one of those?" Vorn now asked, "You've never seemed like the cuddly toy sort of person to me."

"Its for Jaysica. She said she thought they were cute and I thought that if I could win her one..."

"She'd go out with you?"

Tobis turned back towards the stall.

"Of course not. But it would make her happy."

Vorn was not convinced by Tobis's denial of an interest in their fellow rebel Jaysica.

"How many goes have you had at this?" Vorn enquired, seeing how many hoops were scattered about the columns.

"I've lost count," Tobis answered as his final hoop missed and he reached into his pocket for more money.

Vorn looked up at the illuminated top of the stall where it stated that the cost was two credits for three hoops or five credits for ten. If Tobis, who was naturally very good with numbers, had really lost count then he had spent a considerable amount of money here this evening. Of course he could know exactly how much he had spent but be unwilling to admit it, but that would also mean that he had spent a lot on this endeavour that was unlikely to succeed. Vorn reached out and held Tobis's arm before he could give another two credits to the stallholder, a green skinned member of one of the Nikto species.

"Let's make this easier." Vorn said and he turned to the Nikto, "How much for one of those banthas?"

"You just have to get six hoops over the columns for one of the banthas," the Nikto replied.

"No I mean how much to buy one? Given that my friend here has probably already spent more than they cost you anyway."

"This is a fairground, not a marketplace," the Nikto answered.

Vorn produced a twenty credit note and held it close to his chest.

"We have a winner!" the Nikto shouted and he took one of the banthas from a shelf behind him and handed it over to Vorn, taking the money as he did so.

"I'll pay you back I promise," Tobis said.

Vorn was about to hand the stuffed toy over to Tobis when there was a high-pitched cry from behind them both.

"Oh that is so cute!" Jaysica called out.

"Oh no," Vorn said softly.

Jaysica was stood between two other members of Vorn's unit, the former mercenary Tharun Verser and pilot turned medic Kara Bilstran. Both of them towered over the shorter Jaysica.

"Got a new friend there boss?" Kara asked with a smirk on her face. Tharun instead just pulled a face, he had planned to say something similar but his mouth was full of the exceptionally sweet looking snack he had purchased for himself.

"Tobis was telling me how you wanted one..." Vorn began to say, hoping that he could still convince Jaysica that it was the engineer that had won it.

"So you won me one," Jaysica interrupted and she stepped forwards and snatched the bantha away from him. Then she held it tight against her and grinned.

Tharun swallowed his mouthful of almost pure sugar and leant in close to Tobis.

"Foiled again lad. Bad luck." he said quietly.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Tobis replied but the look of disappointment on his face was plain to see.

"Where's Mace?" Vorn asked when he suddenly noticed that the smuggler whose ship the rebel unit was based on was not amongst them as they began to walk away from the stall.

"Still waiting by the drop point." Kara said.

"You mean that our contact still hasn't dropped off the package?" Vorn said in surprise. Their mission here was a simple one for once. All they had to do was pick up a data package from a drop point in the fairground and pass it on to the Alliance's analysts for consideration. Of course for that to happen the local rebel cell had to take the package to the drop point to begin with.

"No," Tharun replied, "and I think that Mace is ready to give up."

"Not yet we don't," Vorn said, "that package is important. The locals claimed to have found something important and sector command wants to know what. Take me to Mace."

Mace Grayle was trying to look inconspicuous. Normally crowded areas like the fairground were easy for individuals to conceal themselves in, but he had to keep an eye on a trashcan for someone placing a particular type of soda can beside it. So instead of moving around the fairground like everyone else Mace had to keep returning to the same place making him more memorable to those nearby. He was relieved when the rest of the rebels he had come here with joined him; it was always more convincing to be standing as part of a group.

"Still nothing?" Vorn asked him.

"Nothing." Mace replied, "He should have been here before us."

"Could we have scared him off?" Jaysica suggested, "He doesn't know us after all."

Mutual anonymity was essentially to this sort of operation. If the Empire caught either the local cell or the agents collecting the package then they could not give one another away under interrogation. The idea behind the dead drop was that a local would leave the package in a specific place and then Vorn's unit would arrive afterwards to collect it.

"He should have been long gone by now." Vorn said, "Something's obviously gone wrong."

"And I think I know what." Tharun said, pointing through the crowd to where a group of soldiers in shiny white armour were making their way through.

"Stormtroopers," Vorn said, "Let's move."

The group of rebels began to move through the crowd ahead of the approaching elite Imperial troops. Unfortunately their progress was hindered because while they had to force their way through in places the crowd simply parted to make way for the stormtroopers and it was not long before they caught up.

"Stand aside," the squad leader said unexpectedly and the rebels did as they were instructed, letting the stormtroopers march past them.

"If they aren't here for us, then who are they here for?" Tharun said.

"Beats me," Vorn replied, "but I think that it's worth us finding out. After them."

"Oh great" Kara commented as they set off, "We're actually getting closer to stormtroopers on purpose."

"Don't worry," Vorn reassured her, "Just stay calm and everyone keep your weapons out of sight."

Following the stormtroopers turned out to be easier than trying to stay ahead of them. All the rebels had to do was keep fairly close behind and they could make use of the same space opened up by the crowd to let the stormtroopers through in the first place.

"You there! Halt!" the stormtrooper squad leader suddenly called out and he raised his blaster rifle and took aim. The rebels looked past the stormtroopers to where their leader aimed and saw a small wiry man trying to escape through the crowd.

There was the sound of a blaster discharge accompanied by a blue flash as the stormtrooper leader let off a stun blast. The shot missed its intended target, instead striking an innocent bystander and the man slipped deeper into the panicking crowd.

"After him!" the squad leader shouted and the stormtroopers broke ranks and began to pursue the man.

"What now?" Jaysica said as the rebels watched the stormtroopers shoving aside anyone who was unable to get out of their way fast enough.

"Spread out," Vorn said, "Tharun with me, we'll go straight after him. Mace and Tobis go right while Kara and Jaysica take left. Let's get that man before the Imperials do."

The stormtroopers themselves were also spreading out to increase their search area, now forming a rough line abreast instead of marching in their normal double file. While Vorn and Tharun attempted to slip through this line and get ahead of the stormtroopers the other two pairs of rebels focused on trying to get around them instead.

Kara and Jaysica moved deeper into the fairground that was rapidly emptying of customers.

"Would you just drop that thing?" Kara yelled at Jaysica who was still keeping a firm hold of the stuffed bantha.

"I can run perfectly well with it," Jaysica replied, before she caught her foot on a rope holding up a stall and she cried out as she fell. Kara ground to a halt and turned to help her fellow rebel up.

"No worse than usual anyway." Kara said as she held out her hand.

Meanwhile Mace and Tobis' path took them away from the stalls and rides of the travelling fairground and into the area where the mobile residences of the workers had been set up. They slipped quietly between a pair of towed replusorhab shelters into the darkened area.

"This looks good," Mace said to Tobis, "People on the run like to hide in dark places."

"But stormtroopers can see in the dark, their helmets..." Tobis replied.

"I know that," Mace interrupted, "but its natural behaviour for people to seek out this sort of place to hide in."

Sure enough they soon heard the sound of heavy footsteps accompanied by heavy breathing and the small man they had seen run from the stormtroopers appeared from behind one of the repulsorhabs. Mace reached out and grabbed hold of the man by his collar before dragging him closer.

"Quiet," Mace hissed before the man could speak. The he plucked his comlink from his belt, "Got him boss," he said, "we're in the habs."

"Excellent," Vorn voice responded over the comlink, "everyone get there as quickly as possible."

Mace put his comlink away again.

"Right then," he said to the man, "the boss is on his way and then we'll have a chat about why you warrant an entire squad of stormtroopers coming after you."

"Err Mace," Tobis said.

"Not now."

"But Mace. The stormtroopers..."

"What about them?"

"They're here."

"What?" Mace turned rapidly to see the stormtroopers making their way between the repulsorhabs, blasters at the ready, "Oh no," he said and he pulled his blaster from beneath his jacket. Tobis did likewise.

"Are you armed?" Mace asked the small man.

"No," the man answered as he covered behind Mace, "I was at work when they came for me, I don't keep a weapon there."

"Then just keep out of sight." Mace told him and the man nodded.

Mace produced his comlink again and sent another signal, "Anyone nearby? We could do with an assist here."

"Standby," Vorn replied, "Tharun's got you."

Elsewhere amongst the mobile habitation units the former mercenary was creeping closer to one of the stormtroopers. Instead of his blaster pistol he had chosen to draw his knife and with a single quick lunge he drove the blade under the stormtroopers arm into the gap between his chest and arm protective plates and twisted it before pulling it free. The stormtrooper dropped to the ground without making a sound. Tharun put his knife away and picked up the stormtrooper's dropped blaster rifle. He then advanced on the remaining stormtroopers.

Behind him Vorn dragged the body of the stormtrooper out of sight. He removed the utility belt and then pushed the body beneath the nearest mobile hab.

Keeping low, Tharun had made his way to the edge of a clearing in the cluster of repulsorhabs. In the clearing he saw a trio of stormtroopers standing close together and he smiled and raised his stolen blaster rifle. He squeezed the trigger and fired a burst of powerful energy blasts at the soldiers. Though their armour was effective against impacts and near misses from blasters, it was unable to protect them from the full force of direct hits at close range and the three stormtroopers just had time to call out in pain before they died.

"Four down, five to go," Tharun said to himself.

Still hidden from the remaining stormtroopers, Mace, Tobis and the man they were protecting heard the blaster fire.

"What's happening?" the man asked with fear in his voice.

"A helping hand from a friend," Mace replied calmly and he chanced a quick glance around the corner of the repulsorhab. There he saw a pair of stormtroopers who had been about to wander around the corner to them now heading in the opposite direction. As Mace watched one of them dropped to his knees and they both took aim. Seeing his chance, Mace took aim himself and fired off a pair of shots from his powerful blaster. Both bolts caught the stormtroopers between the shoulders and they fell.

"Move quickly!" Mace said, "That will have attracted the other stormtroopers."

The three men began to run. Ideally Mace would have liked to take the weapons and equipment from the stormtroopers that he had just shot, but he did not want to chance the others turning up while they did so. So instead their valuable equipment would just have to be abandoned.

Mace and Tobis' comlinks chimed as they ran.

"I heard blaster fire," Vorn's voice said, "what happened?"

Without halting Tobis plucked his comlink from his pocket to answer.

"Mace just got two of them, we're relocating now. We're heading towards the speeder park."

Jaysica and Kara had not heard any of the gunfire from their location. They had heard the transmission from Mace about the man they were looking for being in the area where the fairground staff resided and had headed straight there, but they had found their way blocked by a lone stormtrooper standing watch when they reached the closest of the portable habs.

"What do we do?" Jaysica asked, "Shooting him would draw too much attention."

"If I could get close enough I could use my knife," Kara suggested.

"What about just walking right up to him? He's not looking for us is he?"

Kara turned to look at Jaysica and smiled.

"That's actually a good idea," she said and she slipped her knife into her hand before walking calmly towards the stormtrooper with it held vertically behind her arm.

"What's happening?" she asked as she got closer to the armoured soldier, but he did not reply, "Hello? I asked what was happening."

The stormtrooper looked towards Kara as she drew closer to him.

"Keep moving citizen," he said from behind his faceplate, "there is nothing to see here."

"Oh all right then," Kara replied and she continued to approach the stormtrooper.

"Wait, what's in your hand?" the stormtrooper said suddenly when he spotted the knife and he brought his blaster rifle to bear on Kara. Before he could fire Kara swung her arm around and slashed the knife blade across the stormtrooper's throat beneath his helmet. The stormtrooper dropped his rifle and collapsed. Kara bent down to pick up his weapon and beckoned for Jaysica to follow her into the habs.

The stormtrooper squad leader cycled through the range of communications frequencies as he requested situation reports from his men. Apart from the other stormtrooper standing beside him there were no responses.

"The suspect must not be alone," the squad leader said, "set for stun and shoot anyone who approaches us."

"Yes sir," the stormtrooper replied before the pair of soldiers continued their search.

Jaysica followed close behind Kara as the pair moved between the network of mobile habs.

"Do you know where we're going?" she whispered.

"Not a clue, just stay close," Kara replied.

"Over here," they suddenly heard Vorn call out and they turned to see Tharun and him dashing towards them.

"Mace has got the guy," Vorn told the two women, "He's taking him to the speeder park, so that's where we're heading now."

Jaysica and Kara just nodded and followed.

The speeder park was just an open area of ground in which vehicles of assorted shapes and sizes had been parked and as the four rebels ran between them there was the high pitch sound of an approaching repulsorlift engine. A land speeder promptly stopped right in front of them and Mace leant out of the window.

"Get in," he said.

"Where did you get this?" Kara said as she got into the speeder.

"Ask Tobis," Mace said, "he's the one who hotwired it."

"Where to boss?" Mace asked Vorn.

Vorn looked at the man they had just rescued.

"Do you have somewhere safe we can go?" he asked.

"Yes there's a safe house about twenty minutes drive from here."

"Fine we'll go there then. But Mace, I want you to pull up a couple of blocks away and we'll go in on foot just in case it has been compromised."

The safe house was located in an apartment block and Vorn's caution turned out to have been justified.

Imperial troop carriers were parked outside and stormtroopers were waving the residents out into the street.

"Looks like they're conducting a thorough search of the entire building," Mace said, "It'll take them hours."

"Then we go somewhere else," Vorn said, "somewhere that he doesn't already know about," and he pointed to the man they had just rescued.

"I didn't tip them off," the man protested.

"No, but someone you knew did," Tharun said, "so the Empire probably knows about all of your hiding places."

2.

Another apartment block, this one disused in a run down part of the city provided the rebels with a place to hide.

“So how about we start with your name and why the Empire was chasing you.” Vorn said to the man they had just plucked from the grasp of the Empire’s troops.

“Rayl, Rayl Kivar,” the man replied, “and I’m part of the local resistance, though I assume you’d already figured that out.”

“Kind of obvious,” Tharun said. He remained apart from the others in the apartment they had chosen to hide in. He had taken up a position near to the window where he could keep watch on the street outside, “stormtroopers don’t chase fairground pickpockets.”

“I went there to meet up with members of the Alliance,” Rayl explained.

“You see that’s a problem for us,” Mace replied, “we’re the Alliance cell that was sent here and nothing in our instructions said anything about a meeting. This was supposed to be a dead drop.”

“I know,” Rayl answered, “but when the Empire came for me I tried to get to my cell’s meeting place and found that the Empire had got there before me. I think that my entire cell is probably dead, so I came looking for you to get me out of here.”

“So what was so important that you wanted us here anyway?” Vorn asked.

“I thought that you scheduled the drop. We didn’t have anything out of the ordinary for you,” Rayl said.

“It’s a trap.” Mace said.

“It looks that way yes,” Vorn said, “the Empire turned someone in your cell and they lured us here while telling you that it was our idea. They’re probably hoping that we can lead them to some of the other cells in the area using their drop points.”

“Can you?” Rayl asked.

“Unfortunately yes we can,” Vorn answered, “we were given several different locations to check before we came here. Because we thought that you had time sensitive information for us we had to be ready to leave instructions for the rest of them. With that information the Empire could dismantle the entire rebel network in the city.”

“Then we need to get away from here before the Empire finds us,” Rayl said.

“Yes, but first I want to try and find out who the traitor was,” Vorn said, “its possible that they may have been one of the contacts for another cell, in which case they are in danger also.”

“Even if they don’t know anything we can’t exactly let them get away with selling us out can we?” Kara said, putting into words what the rest of the rebels were thinking. They had a score to settle.

Vorn took out his datapad and passed it to Rayl.

“List the names and addresses of the other members of your cell,” he said, “then we’ll go and look them up.”

Vorn would rather have let the unit get a night’s sleep, but the urgency of the matter at hand required that they take immediate action. So as soon as Rayl had compiled the list of the six other members of his cell they left the apartment and went looking for the first name on the list. Assuming that the speeder they had taken from the fairground parking lot would have been reported as stolen by now the rebels were instead forced to take public transport.

At this time of night there were few monorail cars running and few passengers for them. Just in case the Empire had put out a bulletin on Rayl, Vorn instructed him to keep out of sight of the ticketing droid when purchased their travel passes. He knew that the machines were wired directly into the city’s security grid and so would immediately alert the authorities if they caught sight of a wanted fugitive.

It was after a short monorail ride followed a short walk that the rebels arrived at the home of the first name on the list. The house was located in a quiet side street where all of the homes had neat front gardens that were so similar in appearance that it was likely that a single droid was used to maintain them all. The lawn of the house they had come to was different however; it had scorch marks across it where blaster bolts had burnt the grass.

“I’m guessing that this guy wasn’t the traitor,” Mace said as he studied the building through his macrobinoculars from the end of the street.

“Probably not,” Vorn agreed, “but we should take a closer look just in case. Rayl is there a back way in?”

“Yes, there’s an alleyway that runs behind that entire side of the street.”

The rebels made their way quietly down the alleyway, counting off the houses until they reached the one that had been home to the rebel. Mace tried the gate, but found it to be locked.

“Give me a leg up,” Mace said and Tharun helped him climb the fence and look into the back garden, “Its deserted,” Mace said, “but it’s a mess. It looks like someone ripped up most of the lawn.”

"Let's get inside before we're seen," Vorn said.

Mace nodded and with Tharun's help once more he climbed over the fence and dropped down into the garden.

"Careful," he called out, though not too loudly, "I can see a security light from here. I must not be in one of its detection zones here."

Vorn looked at Jaysica.

"You're our expert with that stuff," he said, "get over there and deal with it."

"And try not to split your pants open this time." Kara added.

"That's not funny," Jaysica said as she too took Tharun's help to climb the fence and swung a leg over it. Then she stopped suddenly and her eyes opened wide. "Oh no," she said.

"What is it?" Vorn asked.

"I can guess," Kara said and she put her head in her hands.

"I'm caught on something," Jaysica whispered, "There's a nail or something sticking out of this fence panel."

"Oh great," Vorn said, "can you get down?"

Jaysica wriggled about on top of the fence and tried to find whatever it was that she was caught on.

"Hang on," Tharun said, "its your backpack. There's a strap snagged at the end of the panel," and pulling out his knife he prised the panel away from the fence post far enough for the strap to come loose. Suddenly deprived of the tension in the strap holding her in place, Jaysica toppled from the top of the fence panel. But she retained her grip on it and the large sheet of wood came away from the fence posts at each end with a crash.

"Get down," Vorn hissed as lights appeared in the windows of the houses to each side and the neighbours looked out to see what was making so much noise.

"Oh great," Kara said quietly, "we may as well have just gone in the front way."

"Its all right," Vorn said as he watched the lights go out in the neighbouring houses, "Now Jaysica, get us inside without attracting any more attention."

Jaysica looked towards the house.

"Can I borrow some macrobinoculars?" she asked and Mace produced his for her, "Thanks," she said as she took them and then used their light amplifying capability to study the house's security system more closely.

"I think the light is triggered by movement of infrared sources," she said, "very primitive."

"So how do we get close then?" Kara asked, "We're all heat sources."

"We just need something to block our body heat." Jaysica said.

"Like what exactly?" Kara replied.

"How about the fence panel," Tobis suggested, "since it's fallen off anyway."

The fallen fence panel was lifted from the ground and the seven rebels all crouched beneath it.

"Is this really going to work?" Rayl said as the panel was lifted higher so that they could stand up with it between themselves and the wall-mounted sensor.

"So long as we keep the panel between ourselves and the sensor, yes," Tobis replied.

"But our legs stick out underneath," Rayl pointed out.

"Doesn't matter," Jaysica told him, "these things ignore small stuff like that. If they didn't the light would turn on every time some rodent ran past them."

"If we're quite finished with the technical details, let's move," Vorn said, growing impatient.

The rebels began to shuffle forwards with the fence panel held above them. Being much shorter than the others, Jaysica had taken up a position at the front where she could bend down periodically to look under the panel and confirm that they were heading for the back door.

"We're there," she said eventually, "now lift it up while I pick the lock."

The panel was lifted higher and Jaysica took a closer look at the lock.

"Its not locked," she said, and she pushed the door open gently.

"Everyone inside," Vorn said, "and nobody touch anything."

Despite the darkness inside the house it was easy to tell that it had been ransacked. Every cupboard and drawer in the kitchen they now stood in was open and in places the carpet and wallpaper had been ripped off.

"Looks like the Empire's been through this place," Tharun said.

"Then they were interested in more than just the man who lived here," Vorn said, "I doubt he was hiding in the cutlery drawer," then he turned to Rayl, "What was kept here?" he asked.

"Nothing that I know of," Rayl replied, "We thought that if we kept all our equipment at our meeting place then our families would be safer."

"Well the Empire thought there was something here," Vorn said, "everyone take a look around and see if there's anything out of place. Except you Rayl, you stay put and hold that bantha Jaysica's still lugging about."

Leaving Rayl by the back door, the remaining rebels began to move slowly through the house. The other rooms were in a similar state to the kitchen, with every hiding place that the previous searchers had thought of being opened and checked. It was Tobis that noticed the alarm sensor in the hallway.

"Come and look at this," he said before waiting for the others to join him, "there are two sensors in this room, but only one of them lights up when we move in front of it. I'd never have spotted it if it wasn't dark in here." "So what's the other one for?" Kara asked.

"There's an easy way to find out," Tharun said and he strode up to the sensor, reached up and pulled it off the wall. Instead of a snapping sound as the plastic housed sensor was ripped from where it was screwed in place, there was just a 'click' as Tharun pulled it free of a simple clasp instead.

"Looks like the back comes off," Tharun said and he removed the rear of the sensor housing. Rather than exposing the circuitry of a typical burglar alarm sensor the housing was entirely hollow, instead leaving enough room for three mem-stiks to be concealed within. Vorn was about to congratulate Tobis for spotting the fake sensor when there was the sound of a powerful repulsorlift engine from the street in front of the house.

"Empire," Mace said as he took a quick glance from the window, "Looks like a full platoon at least."

"The neighbours must have seen us when miss acrobat there knocked down the fence," Kara said.

"No," Vorn said, "They'd have called the police, not the military. Now let's get out of here while they're still disembarking."

The rebels rushed back into the kitchen where Rayl waited.

"What's happening?" he said when Jaysica took back her stuffed bantha from him.

"We're leaving," Vorn replied, "Now."

"Wait!" Tharun said before Vorn could step out through the back door and the former mercenary moved into the garden ahead of him. He kept close to the wall and walked along it until he was beneath the security light where a cable ran from it down the wall. Tharun extended the stock on the blaster rifle he had taken from the dead stormtrooper and, grasping it by the muzzle, swung it up towards the light. There was the sound of breaking glass as the metal stock smashed the diode array that provided the illumination.

"Clear," he called back and he dashed across the lawn towards the hole in the fence.

"So how did they find us?" Jaysica said as the other rebels followed Tharun into the alleyway.

"Quickly! This way," Vorn ordered and he began to run down the alleyway the way they had come, but before he even got ten metres he halted sharply. A military speeder floated into view ahead of him.

"Chariot!" he shouted, correctly identifying the armoured vehicle as a chariot command speeder. The vehicle pivoted on the spot and turned to face down the alleyway, whereupon it shone a spotlight towards the rebels, "Down!" Vorn yelled. With no cover available the rebels all dove to the ground, "Kara, Tharun, kill that light!"

As instructed the rebels armed with their stolen weapons set to automatic and opened fire. Though powerful infantry weapons, there was little hope that the stormtrooper rifles would inflict significant damage on the armoured chassis of the chariot, but the spotlight lacked the armour protection afforded to most of the vehicle's systems and as the stream of energy bolts from the rebels found their mark the light was extinguished and the alleyway plunged into darkness once more. The engine noise from the chariot indicated that it backed off as soon as the light was hit, perhaps fearing an unlucky strike would bring them down and giving the rebels a chance to escape.

"Over the fence," Vorn ordered, "We'll cut through the gardens to the next street along."

The rebels scaled the fence beside them as quickly as they could, well aware that the chariot crew were likely to be summoning the soldiers carried by the other vehicles already. Not surprisingly the garden into which the rebels climbed was also fitted with a security light, which came on as soon as they began to rush towards the gap between this house and the next one along, a single bolt from Mace's blaster disabled it before any Imperial troops could appear and use the light it cast to follow their escape.

As the rebels ran through the gap between dwellings they heard the sound of repulsorlifts once more and when they emerged onto the well-lit street on the other side they were just in time to see the damaged chariot gliding around the corner towards them.

Normally chariot command speeders relied on other more powerful armoured vehicles for protection, but they carried their own weaponry too. A short burst of blaster fire erupted from beneath the vehicle's nose.

"How the hell did they know we were coming this way?" Mace exclaimed as the rebels dived for cover behind a parked landspeeder.

"They're probably just spreading out to try and cut us off," Tharun said in return and he fired a burst from his rifle towards the chariot.

Vorn looked across the street. Instead of another row of houses the far side of the road was dominated by the edge of a wood. The trees were planted in a regular pattern, suggesting that it was artificial and for aesthetic purposes rather than a natural feature of the terrain, but it would still provide the rebels with cover. If only because the spacing between the trees was too narrow to allow armoured vehicles such as the chariot to follow them.

"Into the woods," Vorn ordered.

"What about the chariot?" Rayl asked.

"That cannon's for shooting at vehicles," Tharun replied, "just move quickly and the gunner shouldn't be able to track you."

"Shouldn't?" Jaysica said, "Oh I've got a really bad feeling about this."

"Never mind that," Vorn said, "everyone just run. Now!"

All at the same time the rebels got up from behind the speeder and ran for the woods, both Tharun and Kara firing in the rough direction of the chariot. Surprisingly the chariot's gunner did not even try to return fire on the running rebels and it looked like they would easily reach the edge of the woods.

Until that was Jaysica tripped on the opposite kerb.

First Jaysica cried out as she began to fall, then Kara did the same as Jaysica slammed into her knocking her over as well. Kara's rifle skittered on the ground.

"Watch where you're going!" Kara yelled as she grabbed the rifle and picked herself up.

"It might help if you got rid of that toy." Vorn suggested when the two young women made it to the woods behind the rest of the rebels.

"We made it here didn't we?" Jaysica said, "They didn't even try and stop us."

"No they didn't, did they?" Vorn frowned.

"Something the matter?" Tobis asked.

"Possibly," Vorn replied, "but right now we need to concentrate on getting away from here. To start with lets get deeper into these woods where they'll have trouble following us."

In the chariot command speeder Agent Garm Larcus of the Imperial Security Bureau sat in the command seat.

"They're moving sir," the driver of the chariot said to Garm, "It looks like they're falling back into the woods. We're too big to follow."

"I know that," Garm replied, "Just keep monitoring them and guide our infantry in after them. Then he'll be mine," and he sat back and smiled.

The rebels paused when they found a gully running through the woods that had a stream at the bottom.

Tharun took his macrobinoculars and looked back the way they had come.

"That damn chariot's still there," he said.

"They're probably following us with their sensors," Tobis said.

"Then I suggest we move along this gully as far as we can and keep in dead ground," Vorn said and the rebels set off along the stream. After a short while Tharun chanced another look over the top of the gully.

"Its still there," he said.

"They must have seen you get up," Jaysica said.

"No, they were already there," Tharun replied.

"Let me see," Vorn said and he too looked towards the chariot command speeder, "They're good at this," he said when he dropped back down again, "and it looks like they're guiding a squad of stormtroopers towards us."

What now boss?" Kara asked.

"We split up," Vorn said, "Tharun, do you still have those mem-stiks?"

Tharun nodded.

"What mem-stiks?" Rayl asked.

"The ones we found in the house your friend didn't keep anything relevant in," Mace said.

"We're splitting up," Vorn said, "Tharun, you and Kara wait here and we'll lead them away from you. Keep comms silence and we'll meet up back at the ship when we're sure we've lost them."

"Why are they staying here?" Rayl asked.

"Because Tharun's my best soldier and Kara can fly the ship if we don't make it," Vorn answered.

"I should stay too," said Rayl, "I know the area better than any of you."

"That's true boss," Tharun added, "a little local knowledge could be useful."

"Fine," Vorn said, "We'll see you all later then."

3.

Garm watched the optical scanner as the rebel group broke from the gully and ran through the woods. He grinned when he recognised his target amongst them.

"I have you now," he said to himself softly. But then he noticed that the signal they had been following had not moved. Adjusting the scanner for better resolution, he counted the fleeing rebels and saw that there were only four of them. The other three were still in the gully.

"Damn it!" he said out loud when he realised that he would have to let his personal target escape for now. His duty required him to follow the tracking signal the other group had been broadcasting since leaving the house of the dead rebel.

His father would just have to wait.

"The chariot's still there," Tharun said after checking again, "the major couldn't lure them away."

"So what do we do now?" Rayl asked.

"We keep going," Tharun answered, "where does this gully lead to?"

"A storm drain," Rayl said, "my cell scouted it out as a possible location for a hiding place."

"Good," Tharun said, "the structure should give us enough protection to hide us from their sensors," and he put his macrobinoculars away and set off down the gully.

"After you," Kara said to Rayl.

To Garm's horror, the signal on the scanner suddenly vanished.

"What happened?" he demanded.

"Checking now sir," the third crewman said, reviewing the last transmission of the homing signal, "The transmission was interrupted sir."

"I saw that you fool. What I want to know is why? Have the rebels found the beacon and disabled it?"

"I don't think so sir. The signal strength dropped before we lost it, I think that they've moved into a shielded area."

"You think? How about you find out for sure."

"There is an access to the city's storm drains nearby sir," the driver spoke up, "If they've gone down there..."

"Yes I know," Garm interrupted the driver, "we don't have the manpower to stage a full scale search so we'll just have to wait for them to come out again. Now where is the other rebel group?"

"I don't know," the third crewman said, "they're outside our scanner range."

Garm slammed a fist down on his console in frustration.

"Which way now?" Tharun asked when the group reached a chamber with several other exits in the network of underground drainage tunnels. The water in this part of the system was up to their waists, and only a narrow ledge that ran around the sides of the chamber provided a visible surface on which to stand.

"Give me a moment," Rayl replied, "it is been a while since I was down here last."

"Take your time," Kara said, "I don't think anyone else is down here."

A low rumbling sound came down one of the passageways.

"Don't be too sure about that," Tharun said as both he and Kara raised their blaster rifles, "Hey local boy, there aren't any dianogas down here are there?"

"Dianogas?" Rayl repeated, "There have been a few sightings, but only in the areas of deeper water."

"You mean like this room?" Kara said.

"Get to the ledge," Tharun said, "Out of the water now!"

All three of the group rushed through the water towards the nearest section of the ledge and began to scabble up out of the water. Rayl and Kara made it with time to spare, but as Tharun was dragging himself up out of the water a massive tentacle lashed out from the darkened pool and wrapped itself around Tharun's waist. He yelled as the dianoga pulled him back into the water.

"Tharun!" Kara exclaimed as he disappeared beneath the surface of the water. She swung her blaster around, searching for a target in the still turbulent pool, "Can you see him?" she asked Rayl.

"No nothing. We should get out of here."

"I'm not leaving him."

Rayl was about to press his argument further when he caught sight of something in the water.

"What's that?" he asked, "Shine your light over there," and he pointed to a point in the water.

Kara held out her glowrod, keeping the blaster rifle pointing in the same direction that Rayl was pointing. There in the murky brown water she could see traces of red.

"Is that blood?" Rayl said.

"I think so."

"Then he's done for, we should leave while we're still alive."

Before Kara could protest, the surface of the water burst upwards and the former mercenary appeared, gasping for breath, he held his knife in one hand.

"Give me a hand," he said as he struggled to get out of the water. Kara slung her rifle and held out her hand to help him up.

"What happened?" Rayl asked.

"I explained to that thing that I didn't like it trying to drown me," Tharun said, "and I think it got my point," and he held up his knife before he returned it its scabbard, "I lost the rifle though."

"Tharun, your leg," Kara said when she saw the state of his right leg below the knee.

"Yeah, the damned thing managed to tear a piece out of me. It wouldn't have happened in my usual gear."

Normally Tharun wore a combat jumpsuit that was extremely resistant to cuts and abrasions but for this mission he, like the others, was wearing civilian clothes that were no match for the suckered tentacles of a dianoga.

"Let me see it." Kara said, and she crouched down beside Tharun.

"I'll be fine." he said.

"You're not fine," Kara replied, "I'm the medic here remember."

"Medic?" Rayl said, "I thought Vorn said you were a pilot."

"I was," Kara answered, "But I had to give it up."

"Why?"

"Because she gave her squadron leader a black eye for not promoting her." Tharun said, then he added,

"Ow!" as Kara jabbed at his wound.

"You deserved that." Kara said, "Just like that mynock of a squadron leader of mine did," then she stood up,

"We need to get you out of here before I can treat it properly," she said.

"Then its back to you local boy," Tharun said, "what's the quickest route out of here to somewhere nice and quiet."

"See anything?" asked Vorn.

"Nothing," Mace answered, "the chariot must have stayed put when we made a break for it."

"So what do we do now?" Jaysica asked.

"We have to try and take out that chariot," Vorn replied, "Who's got that utility belt?"

"I've got it in here," Jaysica said. She set down the stuffed bantha and removed her backpack before rummaging through it. A moment later she produced the stormtrooper's utility belt and handed it to Vorn.

"Good, now since we had to leave our explosives back on the ship let's see what the Empire can offer us." Vorn said as he took the belt.

Vorn emptied each pouch of the utility belt in turn and laid out the contents on the ground in front of the rebels. Of most significance were the two grenades. Correctly placed these could inflict severe damage to a speeder, but in addition there were spare energy cells for blasters; flares, syntherope line and first aid supplies, which Vorn divided up between the rebels.

"Hang on a moment." Tobis said suddenly, "Where's the comlink?"

"He's right boss," Mace added, "when have you ever heard of a stormtrooper not having a spare comlink in his belt?"

It was true, though stormtroopers normally relied on the communications equipment that was built into their armour; they invariably carried a spare comlink in their belts for emergencies. Vorn looked at the belt in his hands. All of the pouches were open and empty, but there was no sign of the comlink.

"Check your bag." Vorn said to Jaysica and she began to rummage through her backpack once more to see if the device had fallen out in there.

"Its not here," she said, "and this one's mine," she added, holding up her own comlink from her jacket pocket.

"Well if its not here, then what happened to it?" Mace asked out loud.

"I must have lost it when I took the belt from the stormtrooper's body," Vorn said.

"I hope so boss," Mace replied, "because I don't see anything good coming of it otherwise."

The cover to the storm drain access Rayl lead Kara and Tharun to required a shot from a blaster to remove the lock that had been applied to the topside of it, after which Kara was able to swing it open with ease and stick her head up for a look around.

"What is this place?" she said as she climbed up out of the drain, followed first by Rayl then Tharun. All around the drain cover were structures covered in ducts and pipes, though there was no sign of any life at all.

"It was a droid manufacturing plant," Rayl said, "but it went under after the Clone Wars. It used to make battle droids for the Separatists which didn't endear it to the winning side, and no-one's redeveloped it yet."

"It'll do," said Tharun, "let's get inside."

"Sir, the signal is back," the driver of the chariot said and Garm looked at the display for himself.

"Where?" he asked, not able to see it for himself.

"There," the driver answered and he pointed to a spot on the display, "the return is very weak, but it's our beacon for sure. There must be something interfering with it."

"What's in that area?" Garm asked.

"Nothing anymore sir," the driver replied, "Just empty buildings."

"Just the sort of place for rebels to hide," Garm said, "Take us there now."

"They're moving off," Mace said, "and just when we were about to do something about them too."

"I don't like this," Vorn said, "the stormtroopers in those troop carriers weren't even trying to search the woods and now all of a sudden their entire force decides to just float away. I've got a feeling that something strange is going on here."

"You mean like how they could track us in dead ground and knew that Kara, Tharun and Rayl didn't make a run for it with the rest of us?" Mace added.

"Exactly, I can understand that they knew someone stayed behind because they could probably count how many of us ran. But that doesn't explain how they seem to have known where we were for most of tonight. Whatever the answer is, I'm concerned that it has something to do with something that Tharun and Kara have got with them."

"You mean those mem-stiks we found?" Jaysica asked.

"Possibly," Vorn answered, "but that's not necessarily all they've got that doesn't belong to us."

"What else is there?" Jaysica asked.

"The comlink," Mace said.

"Exactly," Vorn added, "the comlink."

4.

Kara and Rayl helped Tharun into a deserted office where they found a long abandoned chair for him to sit in.

"Sit here," Kara said, "and let me take a look at that leg."

Tharun sat down and lifted the leg of his trousers to expose the wound inflicted by the dianoga's tentacle. Meanwhile Kara opened up the bag she used to keep her medical supplies in and removed one of the universal medpacs.

"It needs cleaning first," she said as she opened up the medpac and began to tend to Tharun's injury.

"I'll take a quick look around," Rayl said, "just to be sure."

"Good idea," Tharun replied, "but take the rifle just in case."

"What about you?" he replied.

"We've still got our own blasters," Kara said without looking away from Tharun's injured leg, "we'll be just fine."

Rayl nodded and taking the blaster rifle with him, he set off to look around the factory.

"So how bad is it doc?" Tharun asked.

"You'll live," replied Kara, "there don't seem to be any bits of the dianoga left in the wound. So it's just a matter of keeping it cleaned and dressed. I'll give you something for the pain as well."

It was at that point that Kara and Tharun's comlinks both chirped. The two rebels looked at each other. The comlinks sounded again, producing a regular pattern of beeps.

"I thought we were supposed to be keeping comms silent," Tharun said.

"So did I," Kara agreed, "but that's our recognition signal."

With Kara still working on his leg, Tharun pulled his comlink from his pocket and activated it.

"Kara? Tharun?" they both heard Vorn's voice.

"It's me boss," Tharun replied, "I thought we weren't supposed to be using the comlinks."

"This is an emergency," Vorn told him, "Where are you?"

"In some old droid factory Rayl knew about. Somewhere to the south of the city centre I think," Tharun told him.

"Rayl? Are you sure its safe?"

"No sign of the Empire here boss, we were careful about that when we got here. Rayl's walking the perimeter now to make sure. So what's so important anyway?"

"We think that the Empire's tracking you party somehow."

Kara and Tharun looked at one another again.

"Tracking us?" Tharun asked.

"Yes," Vorn said, "you need to check those mem-stiks to see if they've been tampered with."

"Pass me my backpack," Tharun said to Kara and she handed him his backpack from where he had set it down when he sat in the chair. Tharun reached into a side pocket and removed the mem-stiks, "Okay I've got them boss," he said into his comlink, "What do I do now?"

"Tobis says you have to hold your comlink right next to them and move through the frequencies. If the mem-stiks are being used as transmitters you should be able to detect the signals even though you won't be able to read the data."

"Hold on," Tharun said and he broke the link. Then he adjusted the frequency setting on his comlink to one of the extremes and held it in the same hand as the mem-stiks. Next he carefully adjusted the frequency setting of his comlink and listened for any signs of a signal until he reached the far end of his comlink's frequency range. Finally he readjusted the frequency to the one the rebels used and switched the comlink on again.

"You there boss?" he said into the comlink.

"Still here," Vorn replied, "What happened?"

"I've tested the mem-stiks like you said and there was no sign of any of them sending any signals to anyone. Any other ideas?"

"Just one," Vorn said, "We can't find the comlink from the dead stormtrooper's utility belt. Check your gear to see if you've got it."

Tharun glanced at Kara.

"What?" she said, "I've not been near the belt."

"Me neither," Tharun replied then he spoke into his comlink again, "Neither of us have seen the comlink boss. A far as we knew it was still in the belt."

"Well take a look anyway," Vorn said, "then get back to me," and the comlink went silent.

Tharun put his own comlink away and he and Kara then set about searching their belongings for the stormtrooper's missing comlink.

"See - nothing," Kara said as she began to put her things away once again.

"I've not got it either," Tharun responded.

"Then its either been dropped somewhere or it was never there in the first place," Kara said, "Either way its not our problem."

"Not quite," Tharun said as a thought occurred to him, "The local boy could have picked it up. Go find him and check."

"Why me?"

"I'm injured remember," Tharun replied with a smile and he lifted his bandaged leg and waved it about, "I'll be waiting right here."

Kara shook her head and stood up.

"Fine, I'll go then. I'll leave my bag with you in case you need more pain killers you baby," she said and she left the office to look for Rayl.

"We need another speeder," Mace said, "if the Empire is tracking the others then we'll never get to them in time to help any other way."

"I know," Vorn replied, "Okay everyone, we're in a residential area so there should be plenty of vehicles around. I want you all to try and find one we can steal easily."

"Err, wouldn't we be better of just taking a taxi?" Tobis suggested and the other rebels turned and stared at him.

"That is so stupid," Jaysica said.

"It was just a suggestion. I just thought that a taxi would know the way," Tobis said and he looked down at his feet.

"Actually that might just work," Vorn said, "we have money and we can easily conceal everything that gives us away as rebels. We can call one from any public comm. booth. Nice thinking Tobis."

Tobis smiled and looked up again. He threw a glance at Jaysica, but she had already turned away and his smile disappeared.

"Do we have a definite fix yet?" Garm asked the crewman sat beside him as the driver continued to thread through the near empty city streets.

"No sir." the crewman answered, "The signal appears to be reflecting off something, so I can't give you anything narrower than a hundred metre radius."

"That's over three hundred thousand square metres!" Garm snapped.

"I'll try and do better." the crewman said, "It should get easier to differentiate between the original signal and reflections as we get closer to the source and the signal strength increases."

Garm just scowled. Technically he had no jurisdiction over the Army personnel that operated the chariot speeder, but when this mission was over and he had recovered the data and the rebels he would be having words with someone about their efficiency.

Summoning a taxi was just as straight forwards as the rebels had hoped. Even better, the public comm. booth they found had an automatic link to a droid taxi firm that despatched a robo-hack to their location at the push of a button. That meant that there was no organic taxi driver who could ask awkward questions or get in the way if there was a fire fight with the Imperial forces they had seen trailing them. The robo-hack didn't even bother when the rebels began to unpack their weapons while en-route to their specified destination, that being outside of the droid brain's simple programming.

"So everyone knows what we're doing then?" Vorn asked.

"Sure thing boss," Mace replied, "You and Tobis head for Kara and Tharun while Jaysica and I keep an eye out for the Empire. Then after you've confirmed that they're not being tracked anymore we get off this planet as quickly as we can."

"Hey Rayl," Kara called out when she caught sight of him on a walkway above her.

"What is it?" Rayl replied, "I was just heading up to the roof."

"Better not," Kara said as she headed towards a staircase that would take her up to the walkway, "we think that Empire's tracking us somehow. If they are then they've probably got a satellite pointing at the roof and they'll see you."

"Tracking us? How?"

"Do you have that comlink from the stormtrooper's utility belt?" she asked.

Rayl's hand drifted towards his jacket pocket.

"You do have it don't you?" Kara said.

"Yes, I found it when we stopped in the empty apartment. I thought maybe it was one of yours, but I forgot about it before I could ask you."

"Give it to me," Kara said and she held out her hand.

Rayl reached into his pocket and took out the missing comlink before handing it to her. Kara took the comlink and looked at it. The device was switched on and had been set to transmit a low power locating signal. Kara frowned, the comlink would not have been stored in this state, so it must have been set this way deliberately.

5.

Tharun sat up with a jolt when he heard the blaster fire and he pulled his blaster pistol before hobbling to the office door. He had been in enough firefights both before and since joining the Rebellion to recognise the sound of a standard issue blaster rifle being fired in its semi-automatic mode. He pulled out his comlink and activated it, not caring about communications silence at this moment.

"Kara are you there?" he said, "Kara, can you hear me?"

For a few moments there was nothing, but then the comlink came to life.

"Tharun it's Rayl, the Empire's here. Kara's down."

"Is she alive?"

"Yes, it was just a stun blast."

"How many are there?"

"I don't know I'm not sure if they've seen me too."

"Where are you?" Tharun asked.

"On a walkway one level above you, I was heading for the roof when..."

"Never mind that," Tharun interrupted, "stay put and I'll come help you," and Tharun broke the link.

Tharun moved as quickly as his injured leg would allow, checking in all directions for any signs of Imperial troops. He stopped when he caught sight of Kara lying helpless on the walkway overhead. Of Rayl there was no sign, clearly the local rebel had run off to hide Tharun shook his head in disgust before hobbling towards Kara.

He dropped to the floor when he reached the unconscious rebel and placed a finger against her throat, looking for a pulse. He found it quickly and was relieved that it was strong; Rayl had been right about her only being struck by a stun blast. Tharun looked around again, searching for the Imperial troops but he could see no sign of them.

Then Tharun looked out of the window that the walkway ran past. It looked out onto the open area in front of the factory that had once been the workers' parking lot and he saw that it was empty. If the Imperials had arrived by air then the rebels would have easily heard them and if they had used the same sort of ground transports that they had been using earlier then they would be parked in the parking lot right now. So either the Imperial troops had walked all the way here, or they were not here at all.

Then Tharun remembered the noise of the blaster fire again, a standard issue Imperial blaster rifle. Just like the one that he had told Rayl to take with him.

The doorway to the roof flew open as Rayl rushed out with the stormtrooper's comlink in his hand.

"Agent Larcus," he shouted into the comlink, "This is agent Kivar. Can you read me?"

"Sir we have them!" the chariot crewman reported, "The signal is clear and agent Kivar is reporting in now."

"Kivar what's happening?" Garm said, activating his communication headset.

"I'm with two of the rebels now sir," Rayl answered, "They have the mem-stiks we are looking for with them."

Garm looked at the crewman beside him and the trooper looked at his control panel then nodded to him.

"Good, we have your location and we will be with you shortly." Garm told Rayl, "Make sure that the rebels don't get away before then."

"Kara? Kara can you hear me?" Tharun said as he tried to rouse the incapacitated rebel. Unable to bring her round, he instead decided to move her back to the office where her medical supplies still lay.

Tharun holstered his blaster pistol and hooked his arms beneath Kara. He winced as he stood up and lifted her up with him, the added pressure on his injured leg being too much for the painkillers Kara had given him. Then he began to move backwards, dragging Kara towards the office and all the time keeping an eye out for Rayl.

Making it back to the office, Tharun saw Kara's bag exactly where she had left it and he lowered her to the floor beside it. He took a moment to catch his breath before he got down to search the bag. Normally he would have been able to move someone the size and weight of Kara over such a small distance with little effort, but his injury was slowing him down.

The bandages and painkillers that Tharun found would be of no use to him right now, what he was looking for was one of the medpacs that she had used to treat his leg earlier. Fortunately Kara kept an ample supply of the kits and he found one relatively quickly. Though not as expert as Kara, Tharun had experience in delivering first aid on the battlefield and he knew what he was looking for inside the medpac without needing to refer to the instructions that came with it. He took a self-contained stimulant injector and pressed it against her neck and there was a 'click' as the device fired the drug through her skin into her bloodstream.

Before Tharun could check to see if Kara was showing any signs of recovery he heard a noise from outside and he drew his pistol just in time as Rayl appeared in the doorway with his rifle at the ready. Rayl ducked back again when he saw Tharun take aim and he had disappeared before the blaster shot Tharun fired took a chunk out of the doorframe. Tharun got to his feet as fast as he could, wincing as he put too much pressure on his injured leg again and he began to rush after Rayl. But when he got to the doorway he stopped and turned to look at Kara who was still lying on the floor. He couldn't take the chance on leaving her here alone in case Rayl was able to get past him and found her, therefore he retreated back into the office.

He checked Kara again, but there was no sign that she was waking up yet so Tharun sat and waited, keeping his blaster trained on the doorway. All of a sudden his comlink chirped. Tharun plucked the device from his pocket and activated it.

"Tharun?" he heard Vorn say.

"Hold transmission," Tharun said quickly, remembering that Rayl had used Kara's comlink to talk to him earlier, "Frequency is compromised."

"Confirmed," Vorn replied curtly, "Switch to secondary frequency."

The link was broken and Tharun adjusted the settings on his comlink. Though the device could store several preset frequencies Vorn's rebel unit committed several to memory so that they could switch between them should they suspect that a particular one was being monitored. Real military eavesdropping technology would still beat this technique, but it was sufficient for most purposes. With his comlink retuned, Tharun activated it again.

"Frequency test," he said.

"Test positive," Vorn replied, "What's happening?"

"It's Rayl. He's shot Kara and taken her comlink. I think he's been signalling the Empire."

"Kara's been shot?" Vorn replied, the concern in his voice evident, "Is she..."

"She'll be fine," replied Tharun, "Rayl just stunned her, she's still out cold but I've given her a stimulant. The Empire must want us alive."

"Well we're on our way. We'll deal with Rayl when we get there. Vorn out."

With the link broken Tharun put his comlink away again and as he did so he heard a soft moaning from Kara. He looked around and he saw her starting to move. He reached out and shook her by the shoulder.

"Wake up sleepy," he said, "Time to go to work."

"Mmmm," Kara murmured, "Tell them I quit."

With an exact location provided by his fellow ISB agent, Garm Larcus had his force move at top speed towards the building that the rebels were hiding in. This late at night there were only a few other vehicles on the roads and they swerved out of the way as soon as they caught sight of the heavily armoured military speeders racing through the streets.

"I want weapons set for stun. It is essential that we take the rebels alive," Garm said over the communications net between the vehicles in his force, "When we get there I will accompany the stormtroopers into the building while the vehicle crews remain on watch outside. Report any signs of rebel activity to me immediately. Larcus out."

Garm drew his blaster pistol and adjusted it to its stun setting before returning to his holster, confident that in the two armoured personnel carriers that were following his chariot command speeder two squads of stormtroopers would be doing the same. Garm smiled as he considered how close he was to achieving his aim. With these rebels in his grasp he would finally have the means to find the father that had betrayed everything that Garm believed in.

"Target building ahead sir," the chariot's driver said and Garm felt the vehicle come to a halt. As the third crewman got up from his seat and opened the hatch, Garm got up after him and stepped outside.

"I can't believe he shot me. That little piece of..."

"Never mind that," Tharun interrupted Kara as she began to regain her senses more fully, "I reckon that he's already signalled his friends with our location, so we could be up to our necks in stormtroopers any minute." Kara reached into her jacket.

"Where's my blaster?" she said.

"I haven't seen it. Rayl must have taken it."

Before Kara could respond there was noise from elsewhere in the building. It started with a crash and was followed by the sound of a large number of footsteps.

"That's too much noise for the major," Tharun said, "The Empire must be here."

"And we've only one gun between us." Kara said, "This is just great."

"Grab your bag, we'll try and find a way out past them."

Vorn inserted his credit chip into the robo-hack's payment port when the droid-controlled vehicle came to a halt a block away from the factory Tharun and Kara were holed up in. The rebels leapt out of the vehicle as soon as its door slid open, even before it could give out its pre-programmed thanks and suggest that they retain the contact details of its owners for future travel.

"I hear engines," said Mace.

"Heavy duty repulsorlifts," Tobis added, "as used on military vehicles."

"Let's move," Vorn ordered and the rebels sprinted towards the sound of the vehicles.

By the time they reached the front of the abandoned droid factory Mace was leading the way. He rushed around a corner to where he could see the main entrance and then ducked back again as quickly as he could.

"It's the Empire alright," he said as he pressed himself against the wall beside him, "Two troop carriers and that chariot again."

"How can you tell it's the same one?" Jaysica asked.

"Because they haven't fixed the light that Tharun shot out yet," Mace replied.

"Oh," Jaysica said.

"How many guards?" Vorn asked and Mace took a look around the corner.

"I see five of them," he said, "they look like the vehicle crews."

"Two APCs means four men, plus three more for the chariot," Vorn said, "so there's another two at least. We need a distraction," and he pulled out his comlink, "Tharun are you there?" he said.

"Still here boss," Tharun replied after a moment's delay. His voice was barely more than a whisper so he was obviously aware of the presence of Imperial troops.

"We're at the edge of the parking lot," Vorn said, "but we're cut off from you by some armoured vehicles. Can you distract them for us?"

There was a pause, and then Tharun replied again.

"I'll see what I can do sir," he said, "but Kara and I are down to just one blaster, so I can't promise much."

"Just do what you can," Vorn said and then he broke the link, "Right then," he said looking at Jaysica and Tobis, "when Tharun distracts those troops I want you two to get up close to those vehicles and put the grenades where they'll do some good."

"I'll take care of the chariot," Jaysica said, taking the two grenades from her backpack and handing one to Tobis, "You just throw the other one in the back of one of those transports."

Tobis just smiled as he took the grenade. Both he and Jaysica removed the safety pins from the explosives and just held them tightly.

Suddenly there was the sound of breaking glass, followed by blaster fire. Vorn looked around the corner and saw that a window in an upper floor above the main entrance had been broken and someone was firing a blaster on semi-automatic out of it. One of the Imperial troops standing watch over their vehicles was hit immediately and the rest all turned to face the direction of the attack and began yelling at one another. They shouting became more intense when something burning brightly was hurled from the window and landed on top of the chariot. Clearly Tharun had decided to use a signal flare as part of his distraction. Of course the Imperial soldiers had no way of knowing what had just landed on the roof of the command vehicle and, fearing that it was a bomb, they rushed to get clear of it.

"Quickly, move now," Vorn said and Jaysica and Tobis dashed from their hiding place towards the armoured vehicles.

The gaping holes at the back of the APCs where their entry ramps had been lowered made for easy targets and when Tobis hurled his grenade it sailed straight into the back of one of the vehicles. There was a dull 'thump' as the grenade detonated and a fireball erupted from its open rear. Momentarily distracted by the blast, Jaysica took her eyes off where she was going just long enough to trip and fall flat on her face and she cried out. Miraculously she kept hold of the grenade.

"Rebels behind us!" one of the Imperial soldiers shouted out and he fired a burst from his rifle over Jaysica.

After throwing his grenade, Tobis had already begun to draw his blaster pistol and he had it in his hand in time to shoot the soldier before he could lower his aim. Then, while Mace and Vorn emerged from around the corner to provide covering fire, he ran to help Jaysica.

"Are you alright?" he asked when he reached her. But instead of answering Jaysica just jumped back to her feet and ran the short distance to the open hatch of the chariot command speeder. Once there she nearly bumped right into the driver who had decided to get out until whatever had landed on his roof could be removed.

The driver stopped and fumbled with his blaster, attempting to draw it from its holster. But before he could manage it Jaysica tossed her grenade past him and dived clear. The driver screamed when the grenade detonated and shrapnel flew through the doorway into his back.

"Check the other vehicle!" Vorn shouted as he and Mace ran across the parking lot and another quick pair of blaster shots from Mace took down another soldier.

One of the Imperial soldiers had taken up a position beside the surviving APC and he took aim as Jaysica and Tobis drew close to him. With her own compact blaster pistol now in her hand, Jaysica fired at the same time as Tobis and before he could get off his own shot the Imperial soldier was hit twice and fell. Now facing the four rebels in the parking lot plus whoever was shooting from the window, the last remaining Imperial soldier made a break for it and ran for the factory entrance. But before he could reach it a blast from Mace's pistol struck him in the back and he died with the door handle just out of reach.

"Can you drive that?" Vorn said to Mace, pointing at the APC with its engine still idling.

"Sure thing," Mace replied and he ran up the access ramp into the back of the armoured vehicle. Meanwhile Vorn came to a halt and activated his comlink.

"Tharun, what's your situation?" he asked.

"Stormtroopers closing on all sides. We've nowhere to go boss," Tharun replied.

"You'll have to jump," Vorn told him.

"What, out of the window? But its three floors."

"Don't worry, there's a functional APC down here. I'll have Mace pull right up to the building with it. You just jump onto the roof and we'll be out of here."

"Tharun, they're getting closer," Kara said, looking around as she heard the sound of running from all around them.

Tharun said nothing in return, instead just putting away his comlink and blaster.

"What are you doing?" Kara asked, "We'll need that gun."

"Not where we're going," Tharun replied.

"Where is there to go?" Kara asked.

"Out of the window," Tharun told her before, ignoring his injury, he kicked at the remaining panes of glass in front of them to make a large hole.

"What?" Kara said in amazement. Then she heard the sound of the APC's engines as Mace brought the hovering vehicle to its maximum altitude just below them, "Oh right," she added.

Tharun held out his hand to Kara and she grasped it.

"On three," Tharun said and Kara nodded.

"One," she said.

"Two," Tharun said.

"Halt! Get your hands up you rebel scum!" came a shout from behind them.

"Three!" both Kara and Tharun shouted as they leapt from the window.

Garm stood in silence, staring at the remains of the destroyed armoured vehicles in front of the factory. Even worse than the destruction of these vehicles was the fact that the only vehicle not destroyed by the rebels had instead been stolen by them in order to escape him.

"Sir we've found him," a stormtrooper said from behind Garm and he turned around to see Rayl Kivar standing to attention between two stormtroopers.

"I... I know they got away sir," he stammered, "and we didn't recover the data. But I did capture some of their equipment," and he handed Kara's blaster and comlink to Garm who took them from him without a word.

"We needed the data," Garm said eventually, "and I wanted their leader."

"I know sir, I'm sorry," Rayl said.

In one swift motion Garm raised Kara's blaster and fired it into Rayl's chest at point blank range.

"Apology accepted agent Kivar," he said.