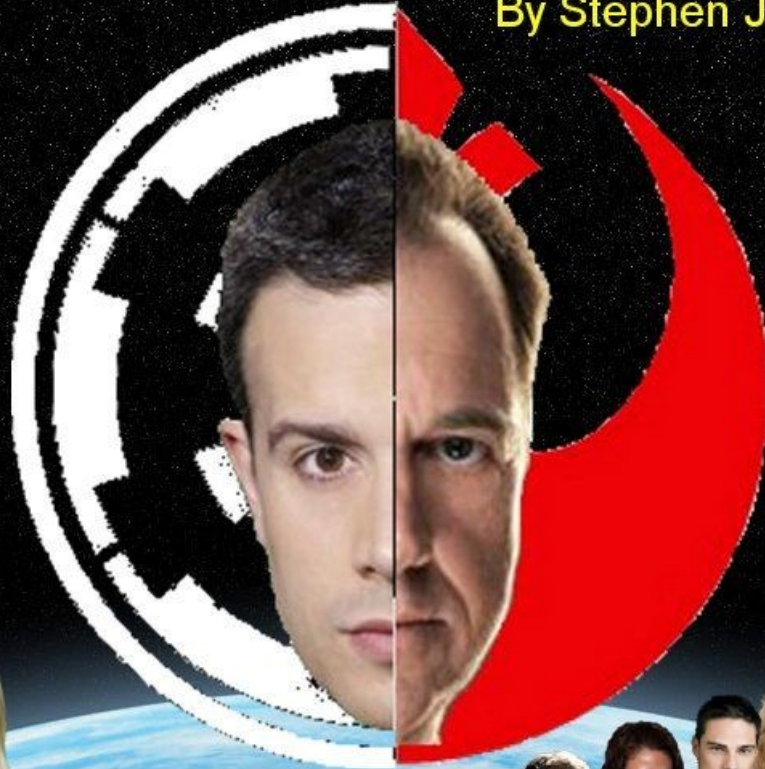


STAR WARS

1-09: Hunter and Prey

By Stephen J Dutton



*1-14
1-14*



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 MAGE 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...

TITLE

A JOURNEY TO ESTRAN TO VISIT AN INFORMANT SEEMS LIKE AN EASY RUN TO THE OCCUPANTS OF THE *SILVER HAWK*. BUT AN OLD ENEMY OF VORN LARCUS III IS PLOTTING HIS DOWNFALL. NOW THE REBELS FIND THEMSELVES TARGETED BY A LETHAL FOE...

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

Star Wars is the intellectual property of Lucasfilm Ltd. This story is unofficial and Lucasfilm has not approved any of it.

1.

Lord Maxamillion Torr had given his household staff the night off and sent them away. Even his wife was out for the evening so he was the only living being in the house when the front doorbell chimed.

"Get that would you Mack?" he said to his polished white protocol droid.

"Of course master." The droid replied politely and it shuffled out of the room.

When it returned a minute later a tall man with thick grey hair accompanied it.

"Lord Couran Dosh to see you master." The droid said to announce Lord Torr's guest.

"Ah Couran, do come in," Lord Torr said as he got up out of his chair, "can I get you something to drink? I have the most wonderful vintage Savreen brandy."

"Thank you yes, I'd love some Max." Lord Dosh replied.

Lord Torr went to the bar and poured a drink for himself and Lord Dosh.

"Here you are old boy." He said as he handed one of the glasses to his guest and the two men sat down.

"So tell me Max," Lord Dosh began after sipping at his drink, "what's so important that you've asked me out here at such short notice? Besides this wonderful brandy of course." He raised his glass.

"The rebellion." Lord Torr replied.

"The rebellion? What about it?"

"Those damned terrorists are becoming bolder all the time," Lord Torr answered, "why some of them even destroyed his majesty's latest military project."

"The death star?"

"Yes that's right, the death star. Do you know how much taxpayer's money was lost when that thing blew up? Not to mention the literally millions of dedicated service personnel that were killed aboard it. We even lost Tarkin himself."

"You'll have to forgive me old boy," Lord Dosh said, "perhaps its my old age but I don't really see how the pair of us sitting here sipping this exceptionally fine brandy are supposed to defeat the rebellion."

"We can't, obviously Couran," Lord Torr replied, "but we can help in striking a blow against them in this sector."

"Really? How?"

Before Lord Torr could reply to his guest's question there was the sound of footsteps in the hallway outside the room.

"I think the answer has just arrived." Lord Torr said, "Come on in Corva." He called out.

The door opened and a well built man much younger than either of the two lords entered. He wore no jacket and a heavy blaster pistol was clearly visible holstered beneath his shoulder.

"Did you bring her?" Lord Torr asked the new arrival.

"Yes my lord." Corva replied and he beckoned to a second figure still in the hallway, "May I present Keena Vayal my lords." He added as a dark skinned woman entered behind him.

Both of the lords stood up as Keena appeared before them. It was habitual for them to stand whenever a lady entered the room.

"Good evening miss Vayal," Lord Torr said, "and thank you for agreeing to join us this evening. Corva get yourself and the young lady a drink."

Corva nodded and went to the bar where he selected one of the bottles of cheaper liquor that Lord Torr kept for his staff.

"Your credits are all the thanks I need mister Torr," Keena said as she sat down. Lord Dosh noticed that the woman carried a gun and that she always kept a hand near it.

"So what is it that you do my dear?" he asked.

"Miss Vayal here is a bounty hunter." Lord Torr answered for her.

"And why would we need one of those?" Lord Dosh then asked.

"Because she's going to help us capture a dangerous rebel that we are both acquainted with." Lord Torr replied.

"You mean..." Lord Dosh began.

"Yes," Lord Torr interrupted, "that traitor Vorn Larcus the third."

The light freighter the *Silver Hawk* was on final approach to the planet of Estran as its engineer Tobis Dorfus made his way from the engine maintenance room towards the bathroom, intending to wash the grease and oil from his hands before they landed.

At this point on the planet, as well as aboard the *Silver Hawk*, it was morning and the ship's passengers were just beginning to get up. Tobis was however quite surprised, though in no way disappointed, to discover Jaysica Horbid sitting on the floor of the corridor where the cabins and bathroom were located in her nightdress and a pair of slippers resembling fluffy banthas.

"Err, good morning." He managed to get out. Tobis was not the best conversationalist, especially when it came to trying to talk to Jaysica, "W-What are you doing?"

3

"Queuing." Jaysica responded without looking up at him.

"W-What for?"

"For the b-b-bathroom," Jaysica said, mimicking Tobis's awkward speech pattern, "The major's little princess has been in there for almost an hour."

"Oh." Was all that Tobis could think of to say in return.

The person to whom Jaysica was referring was Lyssa Larcus, the daughter of Major Vorn Larcus, the leader of the rebel unit that the *Silver Hawk* transported. It was unusual for Lyssa to accompany her father anywhere as the pair had not seen eye to eye since he joined the rebellion, but on this occasion he had brought her along in an attempt to improve their relationship with a visit to their home world while he met with a contact.

Unfortunately Lyssa was even less friendly towards the other rebels than she was towards her father and her attitude had not endeared her to any of them. The former mercenary Tharun Verser had gone so far as to remain in the cabin he shared with Major Larcus for as much of the time as he could.

"Either I shut myself in here, or I shut her in a small box with no air holes." He had stated and no one had argued with him.

On the other hand, Jaysica and the other female rebel Kara Bilstran did not have the luxury of being able to avoid Lyssa as she was sharing their cabin for the trip. Now it appeared she was also causing havoc with the issue of the use of the bathroom.

"Maybe we'll be lucky and she'll have accidentally flushed herself down the toilet and into space." Jaysica commented.

"Actually I don't think the waste pipes are wide enough for... Oh, that was a joke wasn't it?" Tobis replied.

Jaysica finally looked up at Tobis.

"Am I really supposed to answer that?" she said, frowning. Tobis suddenly felt embarrassed. Yet again he'd said the wrong thing to Jaysica.

As Jaysica glared at Tobis the bathroom door suddenly slid upwards and Lyssa stepped out into the corridor and walked past Jaysica and Tobis without saying a word to them. Jaysica leapt up to her feet, but with Tobis standing so close to her she just bumped right into him and as she tried to disentangle herself from the engineer, the door to her and Kara's cabin slid open and Kara emerged with a towel wrapped around her. "I'm next!" Kara shouted as she dashed around Jaysica and Tobis and into the now vacant bathroom and shut the door behind her.

"Ooh!" Jaysica exclaimed, "This is your fault Tobis!" she said and she shoved the engineer away from her before disappearing back into her own cabin and shutting the door.

Tobis sighed and sat on the floor beside the bathroom door where it was still warm from Jaysica having sat there. Moments later another of the cabin doors opened and Vorn Larcus appeared.

"What are you doing down there?" he asked Tobis.

The engineer held up his dirty hands.

"Queuing for the bathroom." He said.

The holographic projection displayed an image of both Lords Torr and Desh with a group of other men.

"This holo is several years old now." Lord Torr explained.

"Yes, it was taken before I retired." Lord Desh added.

"The important thing though," Lord Torr continued, "is that it clearly shows Vorn Larcus here." and he pointed to a man in the image floating in the air before them.

"And this is the man you want me to locate then?" Keena asked.

"It is indeed." Lord Torr replied.

"And how much are you offering?" she then asked him.

"Forty five thousand credits," Lord Torr answered, "plus expenses payable on a successful capture. But he must be returned to me alive."

"And how will the bounty be paid?"

"I'll provide you the funds on a credit stick." Lord Torr told her.

"I prefer cash." Keena replied, "It is far more anonymous and less traceable. Precious metals in easily negotiable amounts are also acceptable."

"Aren't you interested in why the bounty has been set?" Lord Desh asked as he finished off his brandy.

"The bounty itself is all the reason I need." Keena replied, "The only other information I need is anything that may help me locate him."

Corva grinned at this.

"Vorn Larcus is a member of the Rebel Alliance." Lord Desh said.

"That complicates matters," Keena said, casting her eyes at Lord Torr, "the rebels don't advertise the locations of their bases."

"Indeed they do not," Lord Torr agreed, "But this man has a habit of returning here to his home world to stir things up. He travels by means of an independent freighter that we haven't been able to identify yet. Apparently it operates under a number of false identities."

"Does he have family here?" Keena asked, "I've had good results in the past by targeting family and friends of targets."

"He has no friends left," Lord Torr said, "at least none in the law abiding classes that I know of. As for family..."

"You'd do better to keep out of his family's way." Lord Desh interrupted.

"Why?" Keena asked.

"Because his son works for the Imperial Security Bureau," Lord Torr answered, "in fact he's recently been promoted to some special investigator position working for Moff Horatian himself."

"Has he really?" Lord Desh said suddenly, "I must call the boy and congratulate him."

"If we could stay on topic." Keena said.

"Another drink would help." Lord Desh said and he held up his empty glass.

Lord Torr nodded to Corva who took the brandy bottle to Lord Desh and the nobleman poured himself another glass.

"As I was saying," Lord Torr continued, "he comes and goes by means of a light freighter operating with several false transponders. However I have been able to obtain some images of his suspected associates. Find them and he probably won't be very far away." At that point Lord Torr leant towards the holo-projector and changed the image of the group of noblemen to several poorer quality images showing the members of Vorn's rebel unit.

"Be especially careful of this one." Lord Torr said, pointing to an image of Jaysica Horbid, "She's an escaped prisoner and deserter. She may not look like much but she has left a trail of destruction behind her on several occasions. She is not to be underestimated."

"I will need copies of these images." Keena said.

"That's been arranged." Lord Torr said and he handed her a datapad, "There are copies on this, plus as much other information about Vorn Larcus as we could dig up."

Keena took the datapad.

"I will contact you when I have him." She said.

"No." Lord Torr replied, "Contact Corva. He will arrange for you to deliver Vorn to us. I will then pay you what you are owed."

Odras Balve took a look around the cantina. As usual it was packed with people enjoying the drinks he sold cheaply because his suppliers did not use the traditional regulated methods of obtaining the merchandise he bought from them. Plus many rival businesses in the area had gone out of business when refused fire insurance for the third or fourth time.

But it was not the black market liquor business that really made Odras his money, though it did contribute quite a lot extra to it. His main area of business was in finance. Not the sort where your home was at risk if you failed to keep up repayments, but the sort where your life was at risk instead. So it was somewhat unusual for someone to come up to him and be offering him money for once.

The woman was not a stranger to Odras. In fact he had made use of her services to locate several beings that had attempted to avoid paying what they owed.

"I just need some help finding someone that you may be acquainted with." Keena told him after he led her into his private office, his wookiee bodyguard close behind.

"I see," Odras replied as he sat down, "and why would you think that I would be able to help you?"

"Because I believe that the person I am trying to locate is involved with smuggling," Keena told him, "and if anyone knows smugglers around here, its you." Then she handed Odras the datapad that Lord Torr had given to her. "Do you know any of these people?" she then asked.

Odras looked at the datapad. It showed images of six different humans. Immediately he recognised one as Mace Grayle, a smuggler that was currently paying off rather a large loan to him. Another of the images showed Mace's bumbling engineer, while the other four were the rebels that Odras had discovered Mace to be working with. These included a pair of attractive females that Odras had suggested to Mace could be used to settle his debt entirely if Odras were able to acquire them as slaves.

"Here's the thing Keena," Odras said as he set the datapad down and slid it across the table to her, "I do know one of those people. But they owe me rather a lot of money and it would be a shame if I lost that because you carted them off to be killed."

"The man I'm interested in isn't the smuggler." Keena said, "It's the leader of the rebel unit that travels with him."

"Ah, well that changes things." Odras said and he smiled. If Vorn Larcus were out of the way then Mace may be more amenable to selling the two young women to him, "But I want some guarantees from you before I help you."

"Such as?"

"You must not harm my customer, nor must you harm any of your target's other companions. They may be of use to me."

"I will try and avoid any unnecessary harm to them," Keena said, "but if I have to hurt them to get my job done then I will."

"Very well." Odras said, "But I must warn you that if I lose money because of this I will consider it a debt that you owe me. Understood?"

"Understood. Now who I am looking for?"

"Mace Grayle. Unfortunately you've just missed him," Odras said and he tapped his finger on the image of Mace shown on the datapad, "he was in here just before midnight making his regular payment."

"Did he say where he was staying?" Keena asked.

"He didn't say and I didn't ask," Odras replied, "but he did mention that he was going to be around for a couple of days. He arrived on foot, so I'm guessing that his ship is located at one of the private docking ports scattered all around here. Will that do for you?"

"Yes mister Balve, that will do." Keena said and she got up to leave.

As she turned around Odras considered how she could be used to settle Mace's debt should things go wrong. Of course her feisty attitude would need adjusting first, but that was a simple surgical matter.

2.

"No honey, I have to go somewhere else today," Vorn said to his daughter when she came into his cabin and asked him if he would be spending the day with her as he prepared to leave with Mace.

"What, so you're just leaving me here alone?" Lyssa responded.

"You won't be alone at all Lyssa." Vorn said, "Kara's staying here too."

"What? The thug who attacked her superior? You can't leave me with her."

"Then go with the others," Vorn suggested, "they're heading out to pick up some supplies. I'm sure that they'll be happy to have you tag along with them."

"Oh, so I have the choice of staying here with the thug or going out with a pair of labourers and an idiot who can't stop breaking things."

"Jaysica is not that bad." Vorn said immediately before the sound of something heavy being dropped followed by, "It was an accident!" in Jaysica's voice came from the lounge.

"Now that was just bad timing." Mace commented from the doorway.

"Look," Vorn said and he pulled a credit stick from his pocket and handed it to Lyssa, "there's five thousand credits on this. Buy something for yourself while you're out, I'm sure Jaysica will be happy to help you pick something out."

"We're off now sir," Tharun said as he, Jaysica and Tobis appeared behind Mace.

"Wait a minute." Vorn said and he turned to Lyssa, "Are you going with them?"

Lyssa smiled and took the credit stick.

"I'm coming too." She said to the rebels stood at the door as she turned around and she pushed past them to get a coat from her cabin. Jaysica, Tharun and Tobis just stared at Vorn.

"Please be nice to her." Vorn said, but the trio just stared back at him without speaking. Vorn reached into another pocket and pulled out roll of bank notes.

"Here's two hundred credits," he said, "that's fifty each for you two," and he pointed at Tharun and Tobis, "and one hundred for you Jaysica."

"Why does she get more?" Tharun asked.

"Because I have to share a cabin with her." Jaysica said.

"Its so you can go shopping with her." Vorn said, "Now please try and be nice to her. And make sure she doesn't get any silly ideas about staying here."

"Well, I'm ready." Lyssa said, appearing behind them, "So where are you taking me?"

"I can think of a few places." Tharun said, staring at Vorn before he, Jaysica and Tobis headed for the entry ramp with Lyssa following them.

Now alone, Mace looked at Vorn.

"You actually sat down and prepared to bribe everyone just to keep your daughter happy didn't you?" he said.

"Yes, do you have a problem with that?"

"No. But just for future reference my rates start at two hundred credits for an hour."

Vorn grinned and walked past him. Mace followed and they both paused when they got to the lounge and found Kara reading a magazine.

"Are you sure you'll be alright?" Vorn asked her.

"I'll be fine boss," she said, "at least I will now I know I'll have the cabin to myself for a while. I didn't get much sleep last night with all the arguing so I'm heading back to bed while the droids are recharging." And she picked up her magazine and headed for her cabin. As she passed Vorn she kissed his cheek.
"Now don't stay out too late." She said.
"Where's my kiss?" Mace said to Vorn, "That's favouritism."
"Let's go." Vorn said.

Keena had been searching the docking bays for almost two hours now. Surprisingly few of them held YT-1300's like the one described in the datapad given to her by Lord Torr and so far all of the ones that she had found had proven not to be the vessel she was hunting.

"Can I help you young lady?" a voice came from behind her as she looked at the ship occupying the next docking bay on her list of places to search. It was a YT-1300, though whether it was the one she was looking for was another matter.

"Yes, maybe you can." She said and she looked around to see who was there. The figure in front of her was an elderly Cerean who thanks to his elongated skull was significantly taller than her, "Are you the dockmaster here?" she asked.

"Why yes I am," the Cerean replied, "Now what are you looking for?"

"It's not a what, it's a who." Keena replied, "I'm looking for Mace Grayle. He's a freighter captain."

"Indeed he is," the dockmaster said, "in fact this is his ship right here." And he pointed at the *Silver Hawk*.

"Why thank you." Keena said and she walked closer to the ship while the dockmaster returned to his office.

Standing beneath the entry ramp to the *Silver Hawk* Keena looked around to make sure that she was not being observed. Then she opened the ramp's access panel and inserted a narrow probe into it. She pressed the probe against the key scanner and there was a 'clunk' as the ramp unsealed itself. She stepped backwards as the ramp lowered and put the probe away. Then she pushed her hands into her coat pockets. The pockets were specially modified to allow her to conceal bulky weaponry in them. Today she had a blaster pistol in one and a grenade in the other. The grenade was filled with Bothan stun spores that would incapacitate an opponent. Or least that was the theory; some people experienced a severe reaction to the spores that made them lethal. But it was still much safer than a fragmentation or concussion grenade. With her hands on her weapons she crept up the ramp into the silent interior of the ship.

Kara was just drifting off to sleep when she heard the sound of the ramp opening.

"Oh great," she said to herself, "someone's back already." And she swung her legs out of bed and stood up. Yawning, she shuffled across the cabin and opened the door.

"What's the matter?" she called out as she continued on her way into the communal area of the ship, "Did you forget something?" The she saw Keena.

"Who the hell are you?" Kara demanded, now feeling wide-awake and she stepped back towards her cabin.

"No you don't." Keena said and she pulled out her blaster pistol and pointed it at Kara, "Now where is Vorn Larcus?"

"Out." Kara said as she raised her hands.

"Where?" Keena asked, but Kara just stared back at her. "You know," Keena said, "I promised someone I'd try and avoid harming you. So I'm not going to use up valuable time torturing you. Now get over there." And she pointed towards the storage room that doubled as an airlock for the *Silver Hawk's* top hatch.

Kara edged towards the room and stopped only when she reached the closed doorway.

"Open the door and stand aside." Keena said and Kara hit the button to open the door.

Keena took a quick look inside the room before waving Kara in.

"Against the ladder. Hands behind you." Keena said and Kara stood beside the ladder leading up to the top hatch and put her arms behind her.

Keena walked around behind Kara, putting a hand into her bag as she did so and Kara could not see what she was doing. But a moment later she felt a set of metal binders being locked around her wrists, securing her to the ladders. When Keena reappeared in front of Kara she had put her blaster away and was instead holding a reel of tape.

"Right then," Keena said as she broke off a length of tape and stuck over Kara's mouth, "we'll just wait here for one of your friends to come along and see if I can persuade them to tell me where Vorn Larcus is. Or maybe I'll get lucky and the man himself will turn up."

"You know," Lyssa began, "when daddy said that I could go shopping with you I didn't think that we would be coming to a grocery store. Especially not one as cheap as this."

"We're just here to pick up a few items to supplement our ships stores." Tharun replied as he tried to get the trolley he was pushing to go in a straight line, "Plus a few luxuries that we can pass on to others."

"By others you mean the allia-" Lyssa began.

"Shush!" Jaysica hissed at her, "We don't want to draw attention to ourselves do we?" and she reached out for a can from a shelf beside her. Unfortunately the cans were stacked far above her head and as she

reached up she nudged some of the cans further down and they came clattering down around her feet, leaving Jaysica standing amongst the scattered cans with one of them in her hand.

"I'm so sorry," she said to the stacking droid that glided over to pick up the cans and put them back how they had been, "it was an accident."

"What was that you were saying about not drawing attention to ourselves?" Lyssa asked sarcastically. The she muttered, "You are such an idiot."

"She is not." Tobis said quietly and he bent down to pick up one of the cans before the droid could reach it and he put it into the trolley.

"What was that?" Lyssa asked, "Did you actually speak to me?"

Tobis pointed at a sign hanging from the ceiling.

"Dented cans are ten percent off." He said and he picked up another one.

Tharun and Jaysica looked at one another and then crouched down to see if there were any more damaged cans on the floor.

"I can't believe that daddy thinks I should spend time with you." Lyssa said as she stood and watched the three rebels hunting for reduced goods.

"Well this is it," Vorn said as he and Mace entered the cantina named the Spacer's Retreat.

"So your friend will be meeting us here then will?" Mace asked.

"That's the plan. Look, there's a booth we can take. Its got a good view of the door but is out of the way."

"Right then, you go grab the booth and I'll get us some drinks. Your usual?"

"Yes please." Vorn said and the two men separated.

Mace joined him in the booth a few minutes later with three glasses.

"I got one in for your friend as well." Mace said, "I hope he likes the same."

"Actually I don't think that he will. I'm only drinking this stuff because I've got used to not having much choice." Vorn replied and he took a gulp of his drink. The expression on his face suggested that he didn't like it, "Good grief." He exclaimed, "This is even worse than I'm used to."

"Give over my lord," Mace joked, "its not that bad." And he lifted his own glass to his lips, "Actually yes it is."

He said taking it away again, "Next time I must be specific about not wanting mynock urine."

A tall hooded figure appeared beside the booth and spoke to the rebels.

"Hello my boy." The figure said to Vorn and it sat down opposite the two rebels, "Is this for me?" the newcomer said, reaching out for the third glass.

"I wouldn't if I were you Couran." Vorn said and Lord Couran Desh lowered his hood.

"Yes, I saw the reaction on your faces from the doorway." Lord Desh said. The he looked at Mace, "So I take it that you are the man who helped my friend here escape from Estran after the unpleasantness." And he held out his hand, "Thank you." He added as Mace took his hand and shook it.

"I know you don't I?" Mace said softly, "You're Lord Desh. The Lord Desh. The most respected parliamentarian on Estran ever. I hear even the sector Moff asks for your input."

"Yes, yes, I know who I am." Lord Desh said, "Though you may call me Couran, and yes I do meet with old Gregor every now and again. How else would I be able to find out all the gossip that Vorn here loves to hear so much?" and he produced a mem-stik from beneath his cloak and handed it to Vorn.

"Don't you just love the way that Couran refers to the Moff as 'old Gregor' when he's almost ten years younger than Couran is?" Vorn said as he took the mem-stik and slipped it into his pocket.

"So how are you anyway?" Couran asked Vorn, "You're looking well."

"My current career guarantees plenty of exercise." Vorn replied.

"Most of it while being shot at." Mace added.

Lord Desh fumbled with his cloak for a moment and pulled out a small silver flask and three matching cups.

"Well let's dink to our continued health then." He said and he poured out three shots from the bottle, "Unlike what they serve here this stuff will not make you go blind." He added.

"You knew!" Mace exclaimed, "You asked to come here as a joke."

"Why of course I did my boy." Lord Desh said, "The last thing I needed was for you to get here early and be drunk before I got her to join you." And he held up a cup. Mace and Vorn took a cup each and held them up also.

"To your good health my friend." Vorn said.

"And to yours." Lord Desh replied, "Oh and to your son's promotion too."

Vorn froze.

"What about Garm?" he asked.

"Haven't you heard? Well I only heard myself a few hours ago. He's been appointed to the Moff's personal staff. I'm sure that the extra money will help. I did what I could for him of course for old times sake, but I think he did have a bit of a hard time when he was suspended after you left."

"That's all we need." Mace said to Vorn, "Not only is Garm obsessed with capturing you, but now he's got pull with the Moff as well."

"Actually my boy," Lord Desh said, "your son isn't the only one who's after you right now."

"Really?" Vorn replied, "Who else do I have to watch out for now?"

"An old colleague." Lord Desh told him, "Lord Maxamillion Torr."

3.

After buying what they wanted from the grocery store the three rebels agreed that they deserved a break and headed for nearest cantina themselves. As they began to consume the meals they bought the subject of conversation turned to how they would spend the afternoon.

"Daddy promised me that you'd take me shopping." Lyssa said.

"Yeah, that's the plan." Tharun said, "We've got money to spend as well."

"Daddy's only given me five thousand credits." Lyssa said, "So we'll have to find somewhere cheap."

The rebels looked at one another.

"Five thousand?" Tharun said.

"I know," Lyssa replied, "for that I'd have to buy something... off the peg. I can barely bring myself to say it even." Then she noticed that the three rebels were staring at her. "I'm sorry," she said looking at Jaysica, "I know that for you five thousand credits is probably more than the value of all your clothes, but I like nice things."

"You know that's the only time I've ever heard you say the word sorry," Jaysica replied, "and you've used it in an insult. This is not worth a hundred credits." And she took the money that Vorn had given her from her pocket and put it on the table before getting up and walking out of the cantina. Tobis began to get up himself when Tharun put his hand on the engineer's shoulder.

"That's the major's orders lad," he said, "plus fifty credits remember?"

"Did daddy pay you to spend time with me?" Lyssa said, her eyes open wide.

"Err." Tobis said, turning to look at Tharun who was still eating his meal as if nothing had happened.

"Of course he did." The former mercenary said between mouthfuls, "We all hate each other remember? You wouldn't be here if he hadn't given you five thousand."

"Well at least it shows I mean more to him." Lyssa said and all three still at the table finished their meals in silence.

"That pompous fool?" Vorn said, "I don't think I need worry about his household thugs much. My people can take care of them easily enough."

"It's not his staff you need to worry about," Lord Desh replied, "Max has taken on a bounty hunter. A ruthless one at that. He knows you keep coming back to Estran and has hired her to capture you."

"Does he know I'm coming here to meet you?" Vorn said.

"Of course not." Lord Desh replied, "If he did he'd hardly have brought me in on the plan would he? He was quite eager to show off his scheme to me last night."

"How much does she know?" Mace asked.

"I don't know." Lord Desh replied, "She was given pictures of five of you and four others. She knows that you use an independent freighter to travel about it, but as far as I know that's about it."

"So she doesn't know where we are then?" Vorn said.

"No, I doubt she even knows for certain that you are on planet now."

After storming from the cantina Jaysica headed straight back to the *Silver Hawk*. Her anger at Lyssa was such that she did not notice that the entry ramp to the ship was open until she had walked all the way up it.

"Kara did you know you'd left the door wide open?" Jaysica asked as she walked through the ship. There was no reply so she tried calling out again, "Kara?"

This time she thought that she heard something, a muffled sound from the far side of the communal area of the ship.

"Kara is that you?" Jaysica asked as she walked slowly towards the source of the sound.

Beyond the communal area was a storeroom that also served as an airlock to the ship's top hatch and Jaysica could see that the door to it was open. Through the door she thought she caught a glimpse of Kara standing by the ladder up to the hatch itself.

"Kara what are you doing in there?" she said and then she noticed how Kara was standing. Her shipmate was stood with her back to the ladder, dressed in her nightdress with her arms behind her. But what really stood out was the piece of tape stuck over her mouth.

"Kara what's happened?" Jaysica asked and she dashed towards Kara. As she did so Kara stared back at her and shook her head while trying to say something, "What is it?" Jaysica asked as she stepped through the doorway. Then she felt something press against her head.

"She's trying to warn you about me," Keena said coldly.

Jaysica considered going for her own gun, but she knew that this other woman would kill her before she had drawn it. So instead she raised her hands. Still keeping the blaster to Jaysica's head, Keena felt under Jaysica's jacket and took her compact blaster from where she kept it.

"I think I better hang on to this before anyone gets hurt. Now go stand by your friend." Keena told her and Jaysica stood beside Kara, "Good, now take off yours clothes." Keena added.

"What?" Jaysica asked.

"Your clothes, I can't take the chance you've something else hidden in them." Keena said, "So hand them over. Don't worry I don't need your underwear."

With Keena's blaster still pointing at her, Jaysica did as she was told and removed her outer clothing. When she dropped it to the floor Keena kicked it away from her.

"Now stand in front of your friend and put one of your arms through the ladder." Keena told her and Jaysica did as she said again. Keena walked around the ladder and produced a set of binders that she then used to secure Jaysica to the ladder with her arms wrapped around Kara.

"Now tell me where I can find Vorn Larcus." Keena said.

Kara shook her head.

"She's right," Jaysica said, "I'm not telling you anything."

"Really?" Keena said, "Well I guess I'll have to change your friend's mind then," and she reached out and pinched Kara's nose shut, gripping it firmly.

With the tape sealing her mouth and now Keena's fingers gripping her nose Kara couldn't breathe.

Frantically she tried to shake Keena's grip loose but she couldn't move her head away far enough while she was bound to the ladders.

"Stop it!" Jaysica cried out, "You're killing her!"

"No, you're killing her." Keena replied without any hint of emotion, "Tell me where to find Vorn Larcus and I'll leave. Unless you want your friend to choke."

"I can't. Please let go of Kara." Jaysica pleaded but Keena just kept hold of her, "Alright, I'll tell you!" she then yelled, but Keena still kept hold of Kara.

"I'll let go of your friend after you've told me." Keena said.

"He's in the cantina." Jaysica said.

"Which one?"

"The Spacer's Retreat." Jaysica said, "Now let her go."

Keena released her grip on Kara who then sucked in as much air as she could in rapid breaths.

"I'll be going now then." Keena said, "Take care while I'm gone."

"You can't just leave us here like this." Jaysica protested and to emphasis her point she rattled the magnacuffs binding her wrists against the ladders.

Keena looked at the two women for a short while.

"Yes, I think you're right." She said and she pulled the reel of tape from her bag, "Now hold still," she said to Jaysica as she tore off a piece, "because if it gets stuck in your hair it'll hurt getting it off even more." And then she pressed the piece of tape firmly over Jaysica's mouth.

"There you are that's much better, now neither of you can try calling for help after I leave. So are you both quite happy with your situation now? Because if you're worried about how stuffy it is in here I can always relieve you both of what little you're still wearing."

Both Jaysica and Kara shook their heads frantically.

"I thought so." Keena said and before stepping out of the tiny compartment she switched off the light. Then when the door slid shut Jaysica and Kara were plunged into darkness.

Lord Desh left the cantina first, leaving Vorn and Mace to consider their next move.

"Given what we know I think it would be a good idea if we got you off planet as fast as possible." Mace suggested.

"That certainly seems prudent," Vorn agreed, "though I'm concerned about how much this bounty hunter may know about you and the others."

"I wouldn't worry about that too much," Mace replied, "if there's only a bounty out on you then no self respecting bounty hunter is going to waste their time on the rest of us are they? No money in it."

"I suppose so." Vorn said and he looked at the chronometer on his wrist, "We've given Couran long enough to get away from here," he said, "let's get going ourselves."

"Good idea," Mace said, "but just to be safe you keep behind me. I'll check that the coast is clear first."

Keena had watched Mace and Vorn through her macrobinoculars from the rooftop opposite the cantina. She knew that they'd met with someone else, but because of the positioning of the window through which she had been observing them and the angle of the seat in which his contact had sat she had been unable to get a look at his, or her, face and when they had left the cantina they had concealed their identity with a hooded cloak.

As soon as she saw Mace and Vorn get up to leave she ran to the ladder that was positioned to the side of the roof and descended it as quickly as she could. Then she took up a position at the end of the alleyway she was now in and looked towards the cantina door.

Just in time to see Mace Grayle step out and take a look around. She stepped back into the alleyway before he could look in her direction.

"Coast's clear I think." Mace said.

"Oh you think do you? That's very reassuring " Vorn said and he stepped out of the cantina and stood beside Mace.

"Well you try identifying a bounty hunter in this part of town." Mace said, "I'd bet the only beings here without bounties on them somewhere are bounty hunters looking for the rest of them. Next time how about you arrange to meet your friend in a five star hotel?"

"Because the last time I was in one of those I had to leave out without paying the bill." Vorn said, "Now lets go." And he began to walk down the street in the direction of the docking bay where the *Silver Hawk* was located. Mace took another look around and then dashed to catch up with him.

"Look," Vorn said suddenly, "I want you to keep hold of this. Just in case." And he took the mem-stik that Lord Desh had given to him from his pocket and handed it to Mace.

"Okay, I'll take it." Mace said, "But I don't think that you've anything to worry about."

That was when the blaster shot hit him in the back.

4.

Lyssa pointed out that she was already carrying the only shopping bag that belonged to her when it was suggested that she help carry the groceries back to the *Silver Hawk*, which left Tharun and Tobis to carry them all between them. She did however offer to open the *Silver Hawk's* entry ramp for them when they got back to the ship.

"Kara!" Tharun shouted out as he walked up the ramp, "We're back. Jaysica are you here too?"

There was no reply.

"They must have gone out." Tharun said to Tobis as they put down their shopping bags by the galley station and Lyssa headed for her cabin.

"That's odd." Tobis said, "They should have activated one of the droids if they were going out to keep an eye on things and he headed for the engine maintenance compartment where the droids were typically hooked up to the *Silver Hawk's* power systems to be recharged.

"The droids are all still there." Tobis said.

"Hang on a minute." Tharun said and he wandered off in the direction of the cabins. He stopped by the cabin used by the female occupants of the ship and knocked on the door.

"What do you want now?" Lyssa said when she opened the door.

"Is Kara or Jaysica in there with you?" Tharun asked.

"Thankfully no." Lyssa replied, "I don't know where they are, I just hope they stay there a long time. Ask one of the droids."

"They'll all still recharging." Tharun said.

"Well they probably left you a note," Lyssa said and she walked passed Tharun to the communal area where she around the table for a note, "I am of course assuming that either of them has had enough of an education to able to write anything down." Lyssa continued, "Especially that Jaysica. I'd be surprised if she could hold anything as sharp as a pen or pencil without disembowelling everyone within ten metres."

Tharun went over to the abandoned shopping bags and bag to unpack them.

"They've probably just forgotten to leave a message because they're too angry about you being here." He said as he tried to get dented cans to stand up on a shelf.

"Do you hear something?" Lyssa asked.

"What?" Tharun replied as he continued to transfer food from the shopping bag to the cupboards, "Me commenting about how obnoxious you are?"

"No," Lyssa said back, "some sort of humming I think. But its muffled, like it was underwater or something."

"There's nothing on the ship that should make that sort of noise." Tobis said.

"Then this heap is obviously broken." Lyssa snapped back at him and Tobis looked away.

"Wait," Tharun said, "I think I do hear it now. I think its coming from in there." And he pointed towards the storage room.

The three people in the *Silver Hawk's* lounge all went over to the closed doorway where Tobis activated the control to open it and then turned on the light.

All three were taken aback as the lights came on to reveal Jaysica and Kara bound together and gagged with tape. Both were trying to scream, which was clearly the source of the mystery noise.

Tobis saw the pile of Jaysica's clothing at his feet and bent down to pick up her jacket before he draped it over her shoulders. Then he grasped the corner of the tape across her mouth and ripped it away.

"Ow!" she cried out, "Tobis that really hurt." And she took in several deep breaths.

"I'm sorry." He replied.

"Never mind that now," Jaysica said, "there's some crazy woman after the major."

"After dad?" Lyssa said suddenly.

"Yes," Jaysica answered, "she made me tell her where he was and then left us here like this. You have to go and make sure he's alright."

"Come on then!" Tharun shouted, already heading for his cabin where he kept his weapons, "We need to move now!"

Both Tobis and Lyssa followed Tharun towards the cabins to arm themselves. After that they dashed straight out of the ship.

"There you go," Jaysica said as she heard the ship's entry ramp closing behind the others, "they'll save Major Larcus I'm sure of it." Then Jaysica looked up at Kara.

Kara tried to say something. Jaysica could not tell what it was, but she could tell that Kara was frowning.

"Oh." Jaysica said suddenly, "You think I should have got them to release us first maybe?"

Kara nodded her head slowly up and down.

"Never mind," Jaysica said, "Tobis took off my gag so I can talk to you while we're stuck here."

Kara closed her eyes and banged the back of her head against the ladders repeatedly.

Vorn reached out to grab Mace as he fell. The energy blast that had hit him had at least been the distinctive blue colour of a stun shot rather than the red of a lethal one, but that was of little comfort given that it still meant that they were under attack. Keeping one arm around the unconscious Mace, Vorn slid his hand beneath his coat and pulled out the compact blaster he had holstered beneath his shoulder.

A second shot flew past his head and Vorn spotted their assailant. It was a dark skinned woman standing in the mouth of an alleyway across the street from the cantina and he guessed that this was the bounty hunter that Lord Desh had warned him about. He levelled his own gun and fired twice, sending bright red energy bolts towards the bounty hunter.

He would have fired again, but by this point panic had set into the crowd in the street and beings were trying desperately to get away from the firefight. Vorn saw this as an opportunity to use the crowd to cover his escape and he began to drag Mace down the street.

Something hit him from behind and he fell, dropping both Mace and his gun. He rolled over to see the bounty hunter standing over him and he kicked out at one of her legs in an attempt to bring her down too. The woman was agile, Vorn had to give her that. She easily sidestepped his strike. Vorn's thoughts turned to his lost blaster and he remembered that Mace had also been carrying a concealed weapon. He reached into Mace's coat and felt the grip of the smuggler's heavy blaster pistol in his hand. He was about to pull it free of its holster when another blaster shot rang out.

The stun blast hit Vorn in the side beneath his arm and the noble collapsed on top of Mace.

Stepping forwards, Keena holstered her weapon and produced a set of binders from her bag that she used to bind Vorn's wrists behind his back. She hooked her arms under his and dragged him back into the alleyway where she had a landspeeder waiting.

"Stop!" Tharun said to Lyssa and Tobis suddenly as they neared the Spacer's Retreat cantina.

"What is it?" Lyssa asked, "Is it dad?"

"Cops." Tharun replied and he pointed down the street to where a trio of police speeders were parked outside the cantina.

"This isn't good is it Tharun?" Tobis said.

"No it isn't." the former mercenary replied, "You two wait here, I'm going in closer. I'll signal you if I need you." He removed his backpack and stuffed his blasters in it before handing it to Tobis. "Take this," he said, "The last thing I need is for one of those cops to spot me carrying a gun."

Tobis took the bag and Tharun headed off in the direction of the cantina and the police gathered around it. As he drew closer he spotted Mace sitting on one of the police speeders sipping at a clear drink. That the officers had not restrained him suggested that he was not under arrest, which was a good sign to Tharun. But worryingly there was no sign of Vorn.

"Move along please sir." A voice said to Tharun as he halted to assess the situation more carefully and he looked around to see a policewoman standing there.

"I'm sorry," he said, "I came here to meet with my friend. That's him over there." And he pointed at Mace.

"Then come with me please sir." And the policewoman led him towards the speeder on which Mace was sat.

"This gentleman claims to know the victim sergeant." She said to the officer who was questioning Mace.

"Is this true?" he asked Mace.

"Yeah, I know him." Mace replied.

"Then perhaps you can talk some sense into your friend." The sergeant said to Tharun, "He's refusing to be taken to hospital in spite of being shot."

"Was it in the head?" Tharun said, "Because there's nothing in there to be injured."

"This is a serious matter sir." The sergeant replied.

"I'll be fine." Mace said, "It was only a stun blast and I'm in good health. I can have my ship's medic check me out when I get back there. If you ever let me go that is."

"I would have thought that you would be more worried about your missing friend." The policewoman commented.

"Oh I am," Mace replied, "but I don't see how you keeping me here is helping when I keep saying that I didn't see anything. I was hit before I knew we were under attack."

"Very well sir," The sergeant said, "you may go now mister Grey." And he stood back from Mace.

"Mister Grey hey?" Tharun said when they were out of earshot of the police officers.

"Yeah, didn't want them running my real name through their database just in case they knew more than I want them to." Mace replied.

"Well we should get out of here anyway," Tharun said, "Lyssa and Tobis are waiting at the end of the street."

"Lyssa?" Mace said in surprise.

"Yeah, she was plenty eager to come with us to help you out when she heard that her father could be in danger. Looks like the ice princess has some real feelings after all."

"What about Jaysica and Kara?"

"They couldn't come. They're a little tied up right now."

Kara didn't know how long it had been since the others left the ship and she had been forced to endure Jaysica talking none stop at her, but at a rough guess she thought it seemed like about two hundred years. So when she heard the sound of the *Silver Hawk's* entry ramp lowering she let out the loudest cry that she could manage with her mouth taped shut. A few moments later Mace appeared in the doorway.

"Afternoon ladies." He said and he reached out and ripped the tape from Kara's mouth.

"Where's the boss?" Kara said between taking in deep lungfuls of air now that she could breath properly again, "This idiot told some crazy woman where to find you."

"It wasn't my fault." Jaysica protested, "She was going to kill you."

"Vorn's gone." Mace said solemnly, "From what people have said the bounty hunter dragged him off."

"Bounty hunter?" Kara said.

"Yeah, Vorn's contact warned us one was after him right before she hit us."

At that moment there was an electronic chirping sound and Mace looked around to see Tobis's R5 unit rolling towards him.

"Ah, here's Harvey." He said to Jaysica and Kara, "He'll have you two free in a couple of minutes. Then get some clothes on and we'll figure out what to do next."

"I've got an idea," Mace said when everyone was assembled in the *Silver Hawk's* lounge area, "but I'm not sure you're going to like it."

"Does it get the boss back?" Kara asked.

"Hopefully yes." Mace said, "We know that the major was alive when the bounty hunter took him away, so it likely that he'll stay that way for some time yet."

"Likely?" Lyssa exclaimed, "What do you mean likely?"

"I mean I don't think she's going to kill him because there's some nobleman wants him alive. But we can't afford to take any chances."

"So how do we find him then?" Tharun asked.

"We need money." Mace replied and he put a pile of bank notes onto the table, "Everyone put in what you've got."

The rebels all reached into their pockets and took out what cash they had. Lyssa threw in the credit stick that Vorn had given her.

"I've spent most of it," she said, "There's only about six hundred left."

"Well that gives us about a thousand," Mace said as he counted what was there, "It'll have to do."

"What will it get us?" Lyssa asked.

"I know someone who knows everything worth knowing about bounty hunters around here." Mace said.

"Oh no." Tobis said, "Not him."

"Who?" Lyssa demanded.

5.

"Is he in?" Mace said to the barman.

"Back already?" the barman replied, "I though you'd already paid this month." Then he spotted the group of people standing behind Mace. "Mister Balve doesn't like unexpected guests." He said.

"He'll see us." Mace replied and he slid a pile of money from under his jacket.

"Wait here." The barman said frowning and he disappeared into the back room.

After a couple of minutes he reappeared and stood in front of Mace.

"He'll see you now." He said.

Mace nodded at the other rebels and they followed him into the back room.

Odras Balve was sat behind his usual desk when the rebels entered his presence.

"Ah Mace. So nice to see you so soon again." Odras said, "And I see you've brought the entire gang this time. No wait you're missing one aren't you? But you seem to have acquired a replacement already. A much prettier one too."

"Shut up Balve!" Mace snapped and behind him Odras's wookiee bodyguard growled. Mace looked around at the wookiee then turned back to the crime boss behind the desk. He reached slowly into his jacket and placed the pile of money on the desk. "There's a thousand credits there Balve."

"Mister Balve to you." Odras said.

"Never mind that," Mace replied, "there's a thousand credits there. Tell me what you know about a bounty hunter that attacked me today."

"There was a young lady in here asking about you and your friends," Odras replied, "but she paid me for what I told her and as you know I keep my business dealings confidential. Though perhaps I could be persuaded to tell you if you had something more than a small amount of cash to bargain with." And he glanced at the three women who were standing behind Mace.

"Why you-" Mace said and he reached out and grabbed Odras by his collar.

Immediately the wookiee let out a growl and reached out for Mace. Before he could grab the smuggler all of the other rebels pulled out the blasters they had concealed on themselves and pointed them at Odras. The wookiee stopped and looked at his master.

"What about it Balve?" Mace said, "Do you think your walking carpet can take us all out before one of us gets off a shot? Or are you going to take the money and tell me what I want to know?"

Odras nodded at the wookiee and he took a step back. After this the rebels all lowered their weapons, though they did not put them away and Mace let go of Odras.

"She's called Keena Vayal." Odras said as he took the money, "She has a scout ship docked in bay sixty."

"Thank you." Mace said and he turned to leave.

"Its always such a pleasure to do business with you Mace." Odras called out after him as the rebels left his office.

Vorn's eyes snapped open suddenly and he found himself sat inside a small starship. He could feel something cold wrapped around his wrists that were bound behind him and he tugged at his bonds. He cried out as a sudden electrical jolt passed through him as soon as he put pressure on the binders.

"I wouldn't try that too much if I were you." A woman's voice said and Vorn looked up to see Keena Vayal climbing down the ladder from the deck above, "Those are stun cuffs, they'll give you a shock every time you struggle." She added, "So you just sit still and we'll get you to the man paying me for you just as soon as we can." The she walked past Vorn to the pilot's seat and began to prepare the ship for take off.

Docking bay sixty was located on the outskirts of the part of the city where ships could be landed. Here there was little in the way of services available, just an empty parking structure away from eyes. That made planning to storm the docking bay a lot easier.

"Tharun and I will go in first." Mace said, "Kara, you and Tobis follow us." And both Kara and Tobis nodded.

"What about me?" Jaysica asked.

"I think you've done enough already." Kara said, "You're the one that told the bounty hunter where to find the boss."

"It was that or let her kill you." Jaysica replied.

"She was bluffing, trust me. The major wouldn't be a prisoner now if you'd just kept your nerve." Kara snapped back.

"Cut it out!" Mace said. "Jaysica I want you to keep near Lyssa. Watch out for anyone coming and protect her."

"Protect me from what?" Lyssa asked, "I'd feel safer with you than this idiot. Kara said it herself, it's her fault daddy's in this situation."

"It's not her fault." Tobis said quietly.

"Oh do speak up." Lyssa said to him, "Then everyone can hear you making a fool of yourself."

"Are we doing this?" Tharun said suddenly.

"Yes we are." Mace replied, "Ready? Now!" and both he and Tharun ran across the street towards the way into the docking bay.

Mace slammed his fist on the control to open then door and Tharun dived through it. He swung his blaster rifle around, searching for a target as Mace followed him in. Seeing no one they then ran towards the scoutship parked in the docking bay ahead of them.

The engines of the scout ship suddenly roared into life and just as Kara and Tobis entered the docking bay it rose up from the ground and into the air.

"No!" Kara yelled and she raised her blaster pistol and fired repeatedly at the scout ship as it grew smaller, more in desperation than with any hope of inflicting any damage on the vehicle.

"Easy there." Tharun said as he walked over to her and place his hand on one of her arms and lowered her gun.

"What's happening?" Lyssa shouted from the door of the docking bay.

"We were too late." Kara said, "The boss is gone." And she glared at Jaysica.

When Lord Couran Desh opened the door to his home on his return he could hear his communicator sounding to warn him of an incoming call and he ran to the nearest terminal.

"Yes?" he said before he saw who was calling on the screen, "Ah Max my boy, you've caught me. I've only just got home."

"Well I've got excellent news Couran." Lord Torr told him, "Corva's heard from the bounty hunter. Apparently she's already found Larcus, she's bringing him in now."

"She's found him?" Lord Desh said in amazement, "But you only hired her last night."

"Yes, I know. It seems that she's very good at her job."

"So where is she now?" Lord Desh asked.

"She's heading back to the city with him." Lord Torr answered, "Corva's hired a private docking bay for her to land in. he's waiting there for her now. He'll check on the condition of Larcus and signal me. Then I'll go collect him and pay the bounty hunter."

"I'd like to be there as well." Lord Desh replied, "Which docking bay is it?"

"Six." Lord Torr said, "But its better if you come here first. We'll go there together."

"Of course." Lord Desh said, "I'll be with you within the hour." And he shut of the communicator.

Lord Desh slumped down in a chair. His attempt to warn his friend about the bounty hunter had been in vain it would seem and he was far too old to start trying to organise a rescue mission. Then he remembered Vorn's rebel friends and he activated his communicator again.

"Hello operator?" he said, "I need to be connected with a starship that I believe is currently on the planet."

When the rebels returned to the *Silver Hawk* Tobis recoiled as Lyssa lashed out towards Jaysica and he leapt into the way.

"You caused this!" Lyssa yelled at Jaysica as Tharun wrapped an arm around her and pulled her away.

Kara stepped towards Tobis to inspect where Lyssa's blow had caught him across the head.

"Very noble Tobis," she said, "but Jaysica's not worth it."

"It's not my fault!" Jaysica yelled back.

"It never is, is it?" Kara said.

"Enough!" Mace shouted, "Now this is my ship and I'm also the ranking officer here. So anyone who can't behave can get off my ship now."

"What's the plan captain?" Tharun asked his arm still wrapped around Lyssa.

"I don't have one." Mace said and he sat down.

The rebels stood in silence for a short while until an electronic voice interrupted them.

"Captain Grayle!" it called out and Mace looked around to see Vorn's protocol droid standing in the doorway that led to the bridge, "Harvey says there's an incoming message. Apparently it's from a Lord Couran Desh."

"Jeeve's you're a life saver." Mace said to the droid and he leapt up and ran to the bridge where Harvey was plugged into the ship's systems. Mace sat down in the pilot's seat and activated the communications system. Lord Desh's face appeared on the screen as soon as he did.

"Ah, glad to see you're alright my boy." Lord Desh said, "Can we talk freely?"

Mace looked around just as the others all appeared in the doorway behind him.

"Yes, they can be trusted." Mace said.

"Most us anyway." Lyssa added, looking at Jaysica.

"Ah Lyssa my dear," Lord Desh said when he saw her, "I hope your keeping well."

"I'm fine right now Uncle Couran, but Jaysica told a bounty hunter how to find daddy."

"Well I may be able to help you there." Lord Desh said, "Lord Torr just called me to boast about how his bounty hunter is on her way with your father. Apparently she'll be landing at docking bay six in Estran city. One of his thugs is waiting for her. Anyway I have to be going now, I've arranged to be with Lord Torr when he gets to the docking bay with the money to pay the bounty hunter. I do hope my arrival there is later than yours." And the signal was cut off.

"Okay everyone," Mace said, "now I have a plan."

Corva stood at the edge of the docking bay looking up at the scoutship as it came in to land and then he waited for its engines to be shut off before he approached the rear of the vessel. As he drew near to it there was a hiss and a ramp was lowered to the ground. At the top of the ramp stood Keena.

"Where's Larcus?" Corva asked.

"Inside," Keena replied, "come on in and see for yourself."

Corva walked up the ramp, keeping his hand near his blaster just in case it was a trick. Keena didn't know that he didn't have the money for her payment on him after all.

Keena stood aside and from the doorway Corva saw Vorn sat in a chair with his arms bound behind his back.

"Ah Corva," Vorn said, "I though I recognised your foul stench when we landed."

"Shut up 'my lord'." Corva replied. Then he turned to Keena, "Did he give you any trouble?" he asked.

"None." She replied, "Stun cuffs are good for that."

Corva pulled out his comlink.

"I'll signal Lord Torr," he said, "and he'll be along shortly with your payment."

Tobis sat at the controls of the *Silver Hawk* as it flew in over Estran city.

"The beacon for docking bay six is straight ahead," he said into the ship's intercom, "I estimate we'll be there in five minutes."

"Good." Mace said back from the cargo bay, "Now you know what I want you to do?"

"Yes," Tobis replied, "I just position the ship over the bounty hunter's vessel so that she can't take off again while you go down there and save the major."

"Good lad." Mace said and he shut off the intercom.

In the hold Mace looked at the other rebels present.

"This is it then." He said and he activated the control that opened the cargo hatch in the floor. As soon as the door slid open there was the roaring of air as it rushed beneath the belly of the *Silver Hawk*.

"Here you are captain." Tharun said and he handed Mace a rope that Mace passed through a safety harness he was wearing. Tharun wore a similar one himself, as did Kara and Jaysica.

"Those will hold will they?" Kara asked, "I thought they were just for stopping you falling out through that hatch, not sliding down a twenty metre rope line."

"They'll hold," Tharun replied, "at least they will long enough for us to rope down to the ground. Then you and Jaysica can follow us down."

"What do you need me to do?" Lyssa asked.

"Just wait here by the winch controls." Mace said, "We're taking an extra harness down for your father and we'll signal when we need you to lower it to pick us up. Can you do that?"

"Of course I can," Lyssa replied, "I'm not the idiot here." And she glanced at Jaysica.

6.

"How long is this going to go on? Keena said to Corva, "I want my money."

"Lord Torr is on his way with it now." Corva replied, "You just need to be patient."

"Somehow I don't think that patience is one of her strong points." Vorn commented.

Keena drew a knife, but Corva grabbed her hand.

"Lord Torr wants him unharmed." He said.

There was the sound of a repulsorlift engine from the sky outside of the scoutship and a shadow fell over the docking bay that was visible from inside.

"At last," Keena said, "you're boss is here with my money."

"That's odd," Corva said, "he didn't say anything about coming by air." And he stepped out onto the ramp and looked up into the sky above him.

Just in time to see the soles of Tharun's boots heading towards him.

Corva brought up his hands to protect himself just as the rapidly descending Tharun struck him and the two men collapsed in a heap. Hearing the commotion outside, Keena rushed to see what was happening just as Mace landed at the base of the ramp.

As Tharun wrestled with Corva and mace struggled to release his harness Keena drew her blaster and holding it in both hands she aimed it at the smuggler. Before she could fire however, there was the distinctive pulsing sound of blaster fire from above, audible even over the noise of the *Silver Hawk's* repulsorlift engines and a blaster bolt struck the ramp beside her. Looking upwards, Keena saw Kara and Jaysica now sliding down ropes towards her. Kara gripped her line with just one hand while she used the other to fire her weapon down at the bounty hunter. Kara's aim while rappelling down from the *Silver Hawk* was poor, but it forced Keena to retreat inside her ship.

"Having trouble?" Vorn asked as Keena backed away from her ship's access ramp while keeping her gun pointing at the doorway.

Outside the ship, Corva had managed to get a hand beneath Tharun's chin and was maintaining a firm grasp on his throat while he reached for his blaster with the other one. As he drew the weapon Jaysica landed on top of him, sending the blaster flying from his grip as she rolled across the ramp. Startled, Corva relaxed his grip on Tharun slightly and the former mercenary pulled Corva closer to him and slammed his own, helmeted head into Corva's unarmoured one. There was a crunch and a spray of blood from Corva's nose and he collapsed.

"Nice timing little lady." Tharun said to Jaysica as she picked herself up, "Now give me a hand up would you?"

Kara and Mace, having both relieved themselves of their harnesses now came running up the ramp, blasters in their hands. From inside the ship there was the sound of blaster fire as Keena fired at the rebels and they ducked for cover. Jaysica squealed as she rolled across the ramp too far and fell to the ground below.

"I'm fine!" she called out, "Keep going."

Tharun crawled further up the ramp, Keena's blaster fire passing above him.

"Everyone got your masks?" Tharun asked.

"Of course." Mace replied and Kara nodded in agreement.

"Good," Tharun said, "get them on."

The three rebels all pulled the facemask segments of breathmasks from beneath their jackets and slipped them over their heads. Kara and Mace secured theirs over their noses and mouths, while Tharun just held his in his hand for now.

"Major are you alright?" Tharun called out.

"Just fine!" Vorn shouted back from inside Keena's ship, "Nice rescue by the way!"

"Thanks major!" Tharun yelled, "Now hold your breath and shut your eyes."

Vorn took in a deep breath and shut his eyes tightly, while out on the ramp Tharun pulled a smoke grenade from his webbing and removed the pin.

"Fire in the hole!" he yelled as he hurled the grenade in an arc into the back of the scoutship and then pulled his breathmask over his face and tightened it in place.

Seconds later there was a 'poof' and bright red smoke began to pour from the grenade and fill the inside of the scoutship.

Keena had no choice but to cease firing and reach for her own breathmask and when she did so all three rebels got and charged into her vessel. Kara grabbed Vorn by his arm and pulled him up from his seat.

"This way boss!" she shouted through her mask and she pulled him blindly through the smoke towards the doorway, "We're clear!" she shouted as soon as they were outside and Vorn opened his eyes and breathed again. Kara set her blaster pistol to stun and pressed its muzzle against the locking mechanism of the stun cuffs and fired. The electromagnetic pulse overloaded the circuitry that held the binders in place and they fell from Vorn's wrists and clattered across the ramp. "Come on," she said to Vorn and she guided him down the ramp while waving up at the *Silver Hawk*.

Watching from the cargo bay, Lyssa saw Kara waving up at her as she ran down the ramp with her father while Jaysica stood with her blaster pressed to the face of Corva and she activated the winch mechanism, lowering a hook down to the ground. Kara helped Vorn into a harness that had been left there for him and hooked him up to the winch. She waved upwards again and Lyssa activated the winch to lift her father from the ground.

When he reached the *Silver Hawk* above him, Lyssa reached out and pulled Vorn aboard and threw hers arms around him.

"Oh daddy, I was so worried about you!" she cried out, "It was all that idiot Jaysica's fault!"

Inside the smoke filled scoutship both Mace and Tharun charged towards Keena as she struggled to get her breathmask on. Seeing the two men come rushing at her through the smoke she held the mask over her face with one hand and pointed her blaster towards them in the other. She aimed at Tharun, but before she could fire Mace rammed his fist into her face and her breathmask fell away. Instinctively Keena dropped her blaster and clamped her hands over her nose and mouth, trying to stop herself from inhaling the smoke that had flooded her vessel. Seeing her do this, Mace tackled her and knocked her to the floor. Keena began to cough and gasp as smoke entered her lungs and she lost the strength she needed to fight back as Tharun grabbed her and dragged her out into the fresh air.

Mace remained inside the scoutship and sat down in the pilot's seat. He struggled to see the controls through the cloud of smoke, but he soon found the ship's environmental systems and he activated the extraction fans to clear the air of the smoke. He glanced towards the primary flight systems and tried to activate them. After all, the scout ship itself would be valuable to the Alliance, but he found that the controls were locked out.

"So what do we do with these two now captain?" Tharun asked, indicating Corva and Keena who lay slumped on the ramp, both gasping for breath because of facial injuries and smoke inhalation.

"Forget them," Mace said, "we've got the major back and I doubt we'll get the ship's access codes from them easily."

"No way!" Jaysica yelled, "I want payback with this freak." And she kicked Keena.

"That's the first sensible thing you've said in – well forever I think." Kara added and she looked at Mace, "Captain I will bring you breakfast in bed for a week if you just let me and Jaysica have a teensy bit of fun." And she held up her thumb and forefinger a tiny distance apart.

"Go on then," Mace said, "but I don't want to know about it." And he headed down the ramp.

Lord Torr's driver got out of the front of the luxury landspeeder and walked to the rear to let his master out.

Lord Torr stood up straight and stared at the silent exterior of docking bay six.

"So where's your man then?" Lord Desh asked as he got out of the speeder behind Lord Torr, "Shouldn't he be waiting for us here?"

"He must be inside." Lord Torr replied and he looked at his driver, "Follow us with the money." He said and he strode into the docking bay with Lord Desh close behind him.

Inside the docking bay was just as quiet as its exterior. The scoutship was sealed up and there was no sign of movement from within.

"Leave the case there," Lord Torr said to his driver when the man came in, "and take a closer look."

The driver set down the briefcase of money and he walked all the way around the scoutship, looking in through all of the windows at ground level.

"I can't see anything my lord," he said, "there are curtains drawn over all of the windows, including the cockpit viewport."

"Perhaps we should just open the ship up old boy." Lord Desh suggested.

"Do it." Lord Torr ordered his driver and all three men went to the rear of the ship. The driver walked up to the control panel beside the ramp and activated it.

"It's not locked my lord," the driver said as the ramp began to lower.

"Good," Lord Torr said, "now let's see what's going on here." And the three men walked up the ramp together. As they got further up the ramp they heard muffled cries coming from within the scoutship and they all halted in surprise when they saw Corva and Keena wearing only their underwear bound to the ladder to the upper deck with tape stuck across their mouths to gag them. The word 'PAYBACK' was written across Keena's forehead in what looked to be lipstick.

"Cut Corva loose now!" Lord Torr hissed to his driver. Then he looked at Corva and said, "I'm very disappointed in you Corva."

"What about her my lord?" the driver asked after he cut the synthrope binding Corva to the ladders.

"She's of no further use to me," Lord Torr said, "leave her to find her own way free." And he turned around and headed back to his speeder, picking up the case of money as he passed it.

As he watched all this transpire Lord Desh just smiled.