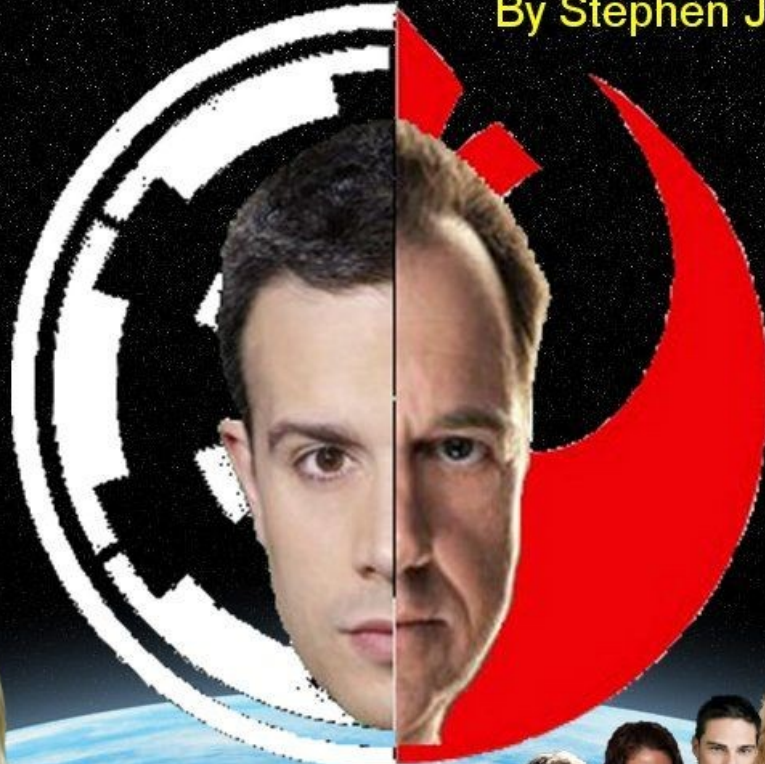


# STAR WARS

1-10: Seek and Destroy

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...

## **SEEK AND DESTROY**

THE OCCUPANTS OF THE *SILVER HAWK* THINK THAT THEY ARE GOING TO ENJOY A WELL EARNED REST WHILE THEIR SHIP IS OVERHAULED. BUT THE MIGHTY IMPERIAL STARFLEET IS SCOURING THE GALAXY FOR REBEL HIDEOUTS AND FOR MAJOR LARCUS AND HIS TEAM, THEIR BREAK IS NOT GOING TO BE QUITE SO RELAXING AFTER ALL...

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

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# 1.

“So the major had to look at this for how long when he infiltrated that hotel?” Tharun Verser, mercenary turned rebel asked. It was uncommon for him to have any business in the cockpit of the YT-1300-class freighter, the *Silver Hawk*. Even when he was here he rarely sat in the co-pilot’s seat as he was now while he looked out through the viewport.

“Two days.” Mace Grayle, the ship’s captain replied.

“Two days.” Tharun repeated, “I guess rank really does have its privileges eh?”

Both men sat and stared out of the viewport. After their recent trip to the homeworld not only of Mace Grayle, but also of Major Vorn Larcus III, Mace had brought his ship directly to a small Alliance starship-servicing outpost for an overhaul. The outpost was known informally as ‘the fishbowl’ because most of its structures were beneath the ocean and operated mainly by members of the aquatic Mon Calamari species. In order for the Mon Calamari to have easy access to the *Silver Hawk*, Mace had landed the ship on the beach near to where the structures were hidden beneath the waves. Right now he and Tharun were looking along the beach to where their two female crewmates, Jaysica Horbid and Kara Bilstran had decided to take the opportunity to do some sunbathing.

“What are you doing?” a voice asked from the doorway of the cockpit.

Without having to turn around both Mace and Tharun knew that this was Tobis Dorfus, the socially awkward engineer of the *Silver Hawk*.

“We were just considering that even though she’s a menace to be around, your girlfriend’s really hot.” Tharun said.

“Oh, Jaysica’s not my girlfriend.” Tobis replied.

“Did you notice how he knew which one I was talking about?” Tharun said to Mace without taking his eyes off Jaysica and Kara.

“Yes I did.” Mace replied, then he added, “Tobis if you don’t have any work to do I suggest you sit down and enjoy the view with us. In fact sit down and enjoy the view even if you do, I’ll let you off for this.”

“Won’t Captain Mayan be upset if she finds out you’ve been staring at Jaysica and Kara?” Tobis said as he sat down behind Mace and Tharun. Captain Mallia Mayan was the commanding officer of the Alliance Corellian Corvette the Renegade and she and Mace had become close since they had worked together recently on a mission to destroy a pirate vessel.

Mace shrugged.

“She’s not here. I’ll take my chances.” He said.

Major Vorn Larcus III was at that moment standing outside the passenger cabin that had been assigned for use by the *Silver Hawk*’s female occupants.

“Lyssa darling? It’s you’re father. Are you in there?” he said, knocking gently on the door.

It slid upwards suddenly and Vorn saw his daughter standing in the cabin.

“What is it now daddy?” she asked.

“Lyssa are you going to stay cooped up in there for our entire stay here?” Vorn replied.

“This place is worse than the space station I’ve been on since we left the safe world daddy.” Lyssa replied, “Everyone there may have been just as common as your underlings are, but at least there was a library to read and the inhabitants didn’t all smell like fish.”

“Now Lyssa,” Vorn said, “I know that the Mon Calamari are an aquatic species, but if you give them a chance you’ll find that they’re a very friendly species.”

“That smell of fish.” Lyssa said.

“Well yes they do,” Vorn said, “but that’s just because the ones here spend most of their time in the ocean. Why not sunbathe with Jaysica and Kara instead? I was so proud of you working with them against that bounty hunter.”

“The thug and the idiot? It was the idiot’s fault the bounty hunter found you in the first place.”

“That’s not strictly true Lyssa,” Vorn said, “and I wish you wouldn’t refer to them in that way. I didn’t think I raised you to be so rude about people. Now why not go outside and talk to them. I’m sure you’ll get along with them better if you spend more time with them while you’re all relaxing.”

“Where will you be? Lyssa asked.

“I have to go and meet with the outpost commander to discuss the overhaul of the *Silver Hawk*. There’s another ship here waiting to be serviced as well, so I need to find out how they’re scheduling the repairs. Though I suppose you could come with me to the meeting if you’d prefer.”

“To see the fish people?” Lyssa replied, “No thank you daddy. I’ll try the thug and the idiot instead.” And she stepped away from the door and closed it.

"Just please don't call them that to their faces dear." Vorn called out through the door before he walked away.

Jaysica and Kara had laid a pair of large towels out on the sand to lie on beside one another and were both lay on their backs with their eyes closed when they heard the sound of an approaching droid and they both opened their eyes and looked to see what was happening.

In front of them they saw Lyssa Larcus approaching wearing a robe and wide brimmed hat. Behind her, her golden protocol droid MZ-3PO followed with another large towel under one arm and a tray with a bottle and a glass on it clutched in the other.

"Right here Emsee." Lyssa said and she pointed at a spot on the beach about five metres away from the other two women.

"Come to join us then Lyssa?" Jaysica asked as Emsee rolled out the towel where Lyssa had instructed her to, "Why not come closer?" and Kara looked at Jaysica and frowned.

"I'm quite fine here thank you." Lyssa replied as she took off her robe and hat and sat down on her towel, "Daddy thought it would be a good idea for me to spend even more time around you two, but I think that this is close enough."

"I take it that daddy didn't take a look in the cockpit of the ship before he made that suggestion did he?" Kara said.

"Why do you say that?" Lyssa said, reaching up for the drink that Emsee poured for her.

"Oh nothing important really," Kara replied, "it's just that if he had he would have known that the boys are all in there staring at us."

"What?" Lyssa said and she reached for her robe.

"No don't," Jaysica said, "we're trying to think of something we can do to mess with them in return."

"Like what?" Lyssa asked.

"Well I did consider taking my top off but then sitting with my back to them." Kara said.

"But as I pointed out everybody saw her when she walked in the ship's lounge naked that one time." Jaysica said.

"Everybody?" Lyssa said, "You mean daddy-"

"Yeah he was there." Kara interrupted, "So I was trying to convince Jaysica to pull down her swimsuit instead. After all, your father's the only one to have seen her with nothing on and he's not in the cockpit."

"What? When?" Lyssa said, a look of horror on her face.

"Oh it was all in the line of duty." Jaysica said.

"Yeah," Kara agreed, "though you sharing a bed with him wasn't exactly part of the plan was it?"

"Ooh!" Lyssa exclaimed as she leapt to her feet. She returned her glass to the tray Emsee was holding, put her robe and hat back on and stormed off further along the beach. "Come along Emsee," she shouted at the droid, "we're moving further away from these commoners."

"Coming miss Larcus." The droid replied and it picked up the towel and followed her.

"She is so easy to mess with." Jaysica said as she lay back down.

"On this occasion I actually agree with you." Kara said as she did the same, "But if the boss asks I'm blaming you."

"Likewise." Jaysica replied, "But he'll believe me because he likes me more."

"He doesn't. He doesn't like you at all. I don't like you either."

"He does."

"Doesn't."

"Does."

The domed ceiling on the outpost control centre was transparent and Vorn found it eerie to have a full view of the ocean and the creatures that lived in it above his head.

"Magnificent view isn't it?" the bald-headed man stood beside him said.

This was Colonel Harris Ergard. Colonel Ergard spent most of his time piloting his scoutship with just an astromech droid for company. It was his job to seek out new locations for the Alliance to construct bases and safe worlds away from the prying eyes of the Empire. Right now he was here at the fishbowl for the same reason as the *Silver Hawk's* occupants were, having his ship refuelled and overhauled between missions.

"It is yes," Vorn replied, "I mean I've been to aquariums on Estran many times, but they just don't do justice to the real thing."

"Gentlemen," a deep voice said as Vishan, the outpost's commander approached, "I have completed the work schedule for you to review." And the Mon Calamari engineer handed each of the men a datapad.

The two rebel officers were studying the schedule when another of the outpost's staff called out.

"Sir, I have an unidentified object entering the atmosphere. Its trajectory indicates it will impact on the island."

"Show me." Vishan said and he went over to stand beside the Mon Calamari that had called out to him and looked at his console display. Vorn and Colonel Ergard followed him.

Both of the humans strained to see what the Mon Calamari were looking at on the display before them. The vision of the Mon Calamari was not the same as humans and all of the instruments at the fishbowl were set up for the frequencies of light that their eyes responded to best.

"Is that a ship?" Vorn asked.

"I don't think there's a transponder." Colonel Ergard said then he turned to the Mon Calamari technician, "Is there?" he asked.

"No sir." He answered.

"Its heading is ballistic." Vishan said pointing at one point on the display and moving his finger across it, though neither of the two humans could make out what he was pointing at.

"Sir it could be an escape pod." The technician suggested.

"That would explain the flight pattern." Colonel Ergard said, "An escape pod's automatic guidance system would just aim for land and there's precious little of that on this planet."

"You are correct Colonel Ergard sir," the high pitch voice of Jeeves, the golden coloured protocol droid that belonged to Vorn stated, "the odds of an object just happening to fall from space onto the island are approximately sixteen-"

"I don't need to know the odds." Colonel Ergard said and Jeeves stopped speaking and looked at the display.

"We need to get someone to take a look when it lands." Vorn said, "The beings inside it may need our help."

"Is that thunder?" Jaysica said, sitting up.

"Sounded like it." Kara said as she too sat up and looked into the sky.

High overhead a ball of fire streaked across the sky, roaring as it flew over them. The two women watched the fireball as it got further away and eventually dropped over the horizon. A moment later there was a flash followed after a brief delay by a dull 'thump'.

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

Before Kara could reply they were interrupted by Vorn heading across the beach from out of the cave used to access the underwater parts of the outpost.

"Kara." He called out, "Go grab your stuff. We're going to check out what just landed."

"Landed?" Jaysica said, "Crashed more likely."

"Why me boss?" Kara asked.

"Because beings may be hurt and you're our medic." Vorn said, "Plus because I'm your commanding officer so do as I say."

As Kara got up and walked off in the direction of the *Silver Hawk* Vorn noticed that Lyssa was some distance away.

"Oh what's she doing over there?" he said, "I specifically asked her to come and sunbathe with you two."

"I don't know." Jaysica said, "But she doesn't really like us, does she?"

"I know that." Vorn replied, "That's what I'm trying to fix. Go lie down by her would you?"

"Do I have to? Its not like this is a mission."

"Well I'm making it your mission to get along with my daughter."

"Okay, fine. I'll do it." Jaysica said and she got up and picked up her towel, "But I'm telling Kara you ordered me to do this. I'll at least keep that much dignity." Jaysica then took a step without noticing that she was standing on her towel with one foot and when the other one caught on it she fell face first into the sand.

"Are you alright?" Vorn asked, leaning over her.

"Yes I'm fine," Jaysica said as she spat sand out of her mouth, "but please don't tell Kara what just happened."

Vorn looked around towards the *Silver Hawk* where he could see Mace and Tharun in the cockpit, laughing uncontrollably. Behind them Tobis sat still.

"I won't tell." He said to her, knowing that it would make no difference.

Jaysica was back on her feet by the time that Kara returned with her bag of medical supplies.

"Is that really what you're wearing for this?" Vorn asked. Apart from adding some sandals, Kara was still wearing the bikini she had been sunbathing in "We'll be walking across most of the island."

"I'll be fine boss," she replied, "the sun is shining and I want a tan." And she hooked her arm under Vorn's.

As the pair of them began to walk away Kara spoke again in a good loud voice that Jaysica could hear.

"You like me more than Jaysica right boss? That's why you want to get me alone like this isn't it?"

Jaysica frowned and turned towards where Lyssa lay.

The impact had blown a massive crater in the jungle and taken the tops off trees before the object had crash-landed. The crater itself smouldered from the intense heat acting on the plant debris mixed in with the soil that had been kicked up.

The noise of the impact had scared all of the wildlife away and there was silence around the crater. That was until a humming sound came from with the crater itself and a machine that vaguely resembled one of the many arachnid life forms to inhabit the galaxy floated up into the air.

The probe droid spun its large head section around as it swept its scanners all about itself, looking for the tell tale magnetic emissions of modern technology. Finding nothing it instead identified the highest point on the horizon that it could find and set a course, determining that that location would give it the best chance of finding any signs of civilisation on this remote planet.

"Miss Horbid is here, mistress Lyssa." Emsee said as Jaysica stood beside Vorn's daughter.

"What do you want now?" Lyssa asked without even looking at Jaysica.

"I just thought it would be nice if we spent a bit more time together instead of both being on our own." Jaysica said as she laid out her towel beside Lyssa's.

"You mean daddy ordered you to come here." Lyssa replied.

"Well yes he did, but is that such a bad thing?"

Lyssa looked at Jaysica as the rebel was getting down onto her towel. She was about to state that she thought it was a very bad idea indeed when she got a good look at the black polymer swimsuit that Jaysica wore.

"Is that a Goroosh?" Lyssa said, sitting up straight and leaning closer to Jaysica.

"What?"

"Your swimsuit? Is that an original Goroosh design or some cheap knockoff?"

"Oh this," Jaysica said looking down at herself, "do you like it? I have four of them now. I did have another, but it got, err, well I had to leave it somewhere."

"It is real!" Lyssa cried out as she leant in close and saw the tiny markings on the shoulder strap, "How ever did you get this?"

"Its just something I was given for an assignment." Jaysica said, "Kara and I had to wear some nice things to infiltrate a posh hotel full of snobs and perverted computer geeks, so the Alliance let us have a bunch of clothes they had in storage."

"So you have more?" Lyssa said excitedly.

"Yes, Kara and I each have a crate full off them. We kept what we didn't leave behind. Nobody's ever asked for it back."

For once Lyssa looked at Jaysica without an expression of contempt.

"We're about the same size," she said, "could I try some of them on please? It's been so long since I've seen anything like this."

"Well the major did want us to spend more time together." Jaysica said cautiously.

## 2.

The Mon Calamari had hooked a datapad configured for the human sense of vision into their system so that Colonel Ergard could see what they saw on their displays.

"So there's no sign of any starships nearby then?" he asked, "And no debris either?"

"No colonel," Vishan answered, "though all of our sensors are passive ones so as to prevent detection by any ship that should happen to pass by."

"So where would an escape pod have come from?"

"Colonel Ergard," Jeeves said, "we are only two parsecs off a major shipping route, which is well within the range of a hyperdrive equipped escape vehicle. Though I must admit that the odds of a ship just happening to become disabled and forced out of hyperspace close to us is less than one in one hundred..."

"I don't need to know that." Colonel Ergard interrupted, "What I need to know is what just crash landed on our planet?" Then he turned towards Vishan. "Do we know how big the thing was?" he asked.

Vishan himself turned to the technician who had alerted them to the mystery object's entry into the atmosphere. "What do we know?" he asked.

The technician replayed the data recorded earlier as the object had made its way to the ground.

"Infra red suggests that the object remained a constant size." The technician reported.

"So its artificial then." Colonel Ergard said, "A meteor would have been shedding material all the way down as atmospheric friction tore bits off it. How big was it?"

The technician looked at the data again.

"Hard to tell colonel," he said, "the heat of re-entry made determining exact dimensions difficult. But I'd say that it was definitely under ten metres."

"Then it is an escape pod." Vishan said.

"I hope so," Colonel Ergard replied, "for all our sakes."

Vorn slapped his cheek as yet another flying insect bit him.

"Whatever these damn things are they're eating me alive." He said as he wiped the remains of a small winged insect off his hand onto a nearby rock, "Why aren't they attacking you as well?" he added looking at Kara.

"Two reasons probably boss," she replied, "firstly I'm covered in sun tan lotion that includes an insect repellent that the Mon Calamari crew here told me is effective against the local insect population."

"You said two reasons." Vorn said when Kara paused in her explanation.

"Well you're wearing a shirt and trousers boss," Kara said, "whereas I'm in a bikini. So you're sweating and I'm not and smell is an important sense to most predators. Keep that in mind next time you ask me if I'm properly dressed."

"Okay," Vorn said, "I apologise. Now do you have anything that will make these bites stop itching?"

Kara reached into her bag and was busy searching through it when Vorn spoke again.

"Hold that thought actually," he said, "look." And he pointed down the path that they were following.

The trail curved away and out of sight, but above the tree line a narrow plume of smoke was clearly visible in the clear sky.

"Looks like we're nearly there." Vorn said.

Mace, Tharun and Tobis had watched as Jaysica and Lyssa came back to the Silver Hawk with Lyssa's droid carrying their towels behind them.

"Is it me or are those two getting along?" Tharun said, looking at Mace.

"Nothing good will come of this." Mace said, "Trust me."

Less than a minute after the two young women came back aboard they appeared in the doorway of the cockpit.

"When you boys are done with whatever it is you do while staring at women I've got a favour to ask you." Jaysica said.

"Sorry little lady," Tharun replied and he looked at Lyssa, "the major said I'm not allowed to shoot her. Even on stun. He even wrote down - look." And he held up a datapad.

"I need my clothes," Jaysica said, "and the crate is too heavy for me to lift. Can one of you big strong boys do it for me?"

"I - I'll do it." Tobis said.

Jaysica laughed.

"No seriously, I need someone to lift the crate." She said and she stared at Tharun.

"Fine I'll do it." Tharun said as he stood up, "But this isn't a favour to be sneezed at."

"Now what does that mean? Not to be sneezed at?" Jaysica said after Tharun left the cockpit.

"Oh, err, Jaysica," Tobis began, "you have, err-"

"What is it Tobis?" Jaysica asked.

"Well, it's just that you have sand in your nose from when you fell over." He replied before he looked away from her.

"This is it boss." Kara said as she and Vorn stood at the edge of the path ripped through the jungle by the crashed object.

"Whatever it is, it's intact." Vorn said and he walked closer to the crater's edge.

"How can you tell?" Kara asked as she began to follow him, picking her way carefully across the debris-strewn ground.

Vorn pointed up at the trees where the object had smashed through them on its way down.

"Because all of the damage is that way," he said, "if whatever's in the hole had exploded then there would be bits scattered in all directions." Then he stepped up onto the rim of the impact crater and looked down at what lay within it, "We need to get out of here." He said suddenly.

"Why? What's down there?" Kara asked and she followed Vorn up the rim of the crater and looked over the edge, "Oh." She added as they both looked down at the sight of an empty hyperspace pod. The type used by Imperial probe droids.

Vorn reached into his jacket and pulled out the compact blaster he kept holstered beneath his shoulder.

"Do you have your blaster?" he asked.

"Do I look like I'm hiding a weapon anywhere?" she asked, "Well a blaster anyway?" and she pointed at herself, "I just brought my medical supplies with me. No-one said anything about having to fight a probe droid."

"Stay close to me," Vorn said as he moved back down the crater's rim, "we have to get back to the outpost and warn them there's a probe droid on the loose. I daren't use my comlink, the droid will pick it up and report in that it's found something."

"I'm right behind you boss." Kara replied as she followed him.

Colonel Ergard was still studying the recordings of the mysterious object's entry into the atmosphere in the outpost command centre when Mace found him.

"Found anything more sir?" Mace asked.

"Ah hello, Captain Grayle isn't it?" The colonel replied when he looked up, "And in answer to your question no, nothing definite. I don't suppose your ship's sensors were active when this thing flew over were they?"

"Sorry no." Mace answered, "Pretty much everything on the *Silver Hawk's* shut down waiting for the Mon Cals to service her."

"Same with my ship," the colonel said, "which is unfortunate to say the least. All I have here are passive readings from some fairly limited sensors. They barely get beyond the gravity well of the planet."

"Do you want me to have Tobis come down and see if he can help?" Mace suggested.

"Tobis?" Colonel Ergard replied.

"Sorry, of course you don't know him," Mace said apologetically, "he's my engineer." And he reached for his comlink.

"Don't bother with that," Colonel Ergard said before Mace could activate the communication device, "if he's back on the island then you won't be able to reach him from down here." And he pointed upwards to where the ocean was visible overhead.

"I'll go get him." Mace said.

"No wait," the colonel said, "I've got a better idea." And he looked at the sensor technician, "Can I take a copy of this data?" he asked.

"Of course sir." The technician answered and the Mon Calamari took a mem-stik from a shelf above his console and inserted it into his console. After a few seconds of waiting the technician removed it again and handed it to the colonel. "There you are sir." He said.

"Thanks." Colonel Ergard said and he held up the mem-stik to Mace, "Let's go." He said.

The interior of Colonel Ergard's scoutship was much more cramped than the *Silver Hawk*, but both he and Tobis found there was enough room in the cockpit for them to study the recordings made by the outpost's sensors while Mace stood behind them and leant on the backs of their chairs to support himself.

"Its definitely artificial." Tobis said.

"Yes, we got that much straight away." Colonel Ergard said, "But we still don't know what it is or where it came from."

"Hyperspace." Tobis replied.

"What?"



"It dropped out of hyperspace." Tobis repeated, "Look here where the sensors first pick it up. It's right on the edge of the gravity well, but it's inside the sensors' maximum range. Whatever it is, it was forced out of hyperspace when it hit the gravity well. The outpost doesn't have hyperwave sensors, so they didn't pick it up until it was back in realspace."

"Well I'll be damned." Colonel Ergard said, leaning in closer to the display and seeing the object appear just as Tobis had said, apparently from no-where within the sensors' maximum range.

"I told you he was good." Mace said.

"You're right about that," Colonel Ergard replied, "but it still doesn't tell us what the thing is."

"Perhaps they know." Tobis said and he pointed out of the scoutship's cockpit bubble canopy to where Kara and Vorn had just emerged from the jungle and were running across the beach towards the cave that was the entrance to the outpost.

Tharun was just coming down the Silver Hawk's entry ramp as Kara and Vorn ran past the ship.

"Major! What's happening?" he called out.

"Get everyone in the outpost!" Vorn yelled back, "Including the droids. And make sure everything's switched off!"

Tharun stood motionless for a moment as he watched Vorn and Kara run directly into the cave. Then he shrugged.

"Officers." He said to himself and he turned to go back into the Silver Hawk to fetch Jaysica and Lyssa.

"Hey Tharun!" he heard Mace call out from the scoutship parked beside the Silver Hawk, "What's going on?"

"Don't know captain." Tharun replied, "But the major wants everyone in the outpost. Droids as well, and everything's to be turned off."

"Everything?"

"That's what the major said. Everything. He was in too much of a hurry to say why."

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Mace said, then he went back into the scoutship to tell Tobis and Colonel Ergard.

### 3.

"A probe droid?" Colonel Ergard exclaimed when Vorn explained what he and Kara had found at the crash site to the rebels clustered in the outpost's command centre.

"It's the only logical conclusion." Vorn said, "The pod we found was the standard probe droid hyperspace pod."

"Does the Empire know we're here?" Vishan asked nervously.

"Have you detected any transmissions?" Vorn asked and Vishan turned to one of his staff.

"No sir," the Mon Calamari technician said.

"Then we're safe for now at least." Vorn said, "If the probe droid knew we were here it would have reported in by now."

"But what happens when the droid finds this base?" Lyssa said, "The Empire will attack us won't it?"

"This outpost has been designed to be as difficult to detect as possible," Vishan reassured her, "the sensor array available to a probe droid will not be able to find us down here."

"Then we're safe?" Lyssa said.

"Not quite," Mace interrupted, "there is the issue of the two starships parked on the beach. As soon as the droid finds them it will report in."

"Can't we move them?" Lyssa asked.

"No." Colonel Ergard said, "If we start either of them up then the droid will detect the emissions from their repulsorlift engines straight away."

"But we could be away from here by the time the Empire arrived in force couldn't we?" Jaysica suggested.

"We cannot abandon this facility." Vishan protested, "It has taken a great deal of effort to construct and the service it provides is vital for the Alliance's war effort in this sector."

"Vishan is right," Colonel Ergard said, "and as the ranking officer here I'm ordering that this base be protected. Evacuation will be a last resort, we'll have plenty of warning if the probe droid calls for back up."

"So what's the plan?" Tharun asked. As the most experienced line soldier on the planet any mission to destroy the probe droid would inevitably involve him.

"First we need to find the droid." Colonel Ergard said and he looked up at a display that showed the island. Thankfully this one was in colours more suited to human vision than the Mon Calamari's sensor consoles.

"It will head for higher ground." Tobis said, then he stopped speaking when he realised that everyone was now looking in his direction.

"Well?" Colonel Ergard said to Tobis, "Out with the rest of it."

"It's just that since it hasn't found anything yet it will try to get to a location that gives it the best field of view for its sensors. So that means one of the hilltops on the island."

"We passed plenty of those between here and where the pod came down." Kara commented.

"It's a droid," Tobis said, "so it will act logically. They've got only limited reasoning abilities."

At this Harvey let out a rude sounding noise that Colonel Ergard's own astromech droid echoed.

"Ignore them," Colonel Ergard told Tobis, "and keep going."

"Well it will head for the nearest peak visible to it," Tobis said, "and if it fails to find anything from there it will pick the next nearest one and then the next that it hasn't already tried and so on and so on until it has either tried every peak on the island or its found something to break the pattern."

"You mean us." Mace said.

"In this case yes, us." Tobis replied.

"Then we should be able to construct a search pattern based on the location at which the pod crashed and our detailed maps of the island," Vishan said, "and then with a datapad containing that information..."

"No." Vorn interrupted, "No datapads. We can't take anything with us that could give off anything that the droid could pick up on. So no comlink signals or droids either."

"Oh that is a relief," Jeeves said to Emsee, "I was worried they were thinking of taking us with them. We're programmed for etiquette, not search and destroy missions."

"Then it's settled." Colonel Ergard said, "Vishan, draw up a map and issue hard copies to myself and Major Larcus's unit. Then we'll head out and try and find this thing while you and your staff do your best to conceal our ships should it get past us. And keep someone on the communications console at all times. If you detect any signs of a signal from the probe droid then send up a flare and start loading up for an evacuation as soon as we can get back. Now are there any questions?"

"What do I do?" Lyssa asked.

"You're staying here." Vorn said.

"Yes, we wouldn't want her to break a nail or something." Kara whispered to Tharun.

With a plan of action in place the rebels began to disperse to prepare for their roles in it. Colonel Ergard took Vorn aside.

"It's not really important," he said quietly to Vorn, "but I notice that out of your people one is in a bikini and two are in ball gowns. Do you always hold meetings like this?"

"No." Vorn replied, "But I'm relieved that none of those three are trying to kill one another at the moment.

Plus Kara looks very good in that bikini."

"Oh I'm not arguing with that."

The probe droid extended its sensor antennae as soon as it reached the top of the next hill and rotated its head section to scan in all directions. Just as with the previous scans it had conducted since it had first emerged from its transport pod the results were negative for every criteria specified to indicate the presence of advanced technology.

The droid then switched to a visual scan of the horizon to identify other areas of high ground. The nearest peak was the previous one it had scanned from, so that was immediately discounted. Instead another peak two hundred metres further away was selected.

The droid retracted its antennae and with its repulsorlift drives humming softly it glided towards the next hilltop.

When he entered the dome in which the other rebels that would be hunting the probe droid had gathered, Colonel Ergard was relieved to see that all of them were suitably dressed. While ball gowns and bikinis would be nothing more than a distraction in a briefing, they were not suited for combat missions.

"Your people ready then?" the colonel asked Vorn when the major approached him.

"Yes sir," Vorn replied, "Tharun's giving them all a check now to ensure they've got everything that they need."

"Have they?"

"Well we're still waiting on Vishan to come up with the maps he's promised us and he's going to see what weapons he has that he can lend us, but aside from that I think we're set to go."

"What's this about weapons?" Colonel Ergard asked.

"Well we're not an infantry unit, so our firepower is a bit limited. We've got Tharun's rifle of course, but apart from that it's mainly blaster pistols of one sort or another. I'm afraid my rifle isn't going to do much against an armoured droid. Though Jaysica's prepared some explosives."

"Hang on a moment," Colonel Ergard said suddenly, taking hold of Vorn's arm, "isn't she the accident prone one? I've seen her trip over her own feet just standing up. You actually let her near explosives?"

"Yes sir," Vorn replied, "for some reason she's perfectly safe with explosives. Not that anyone's ever figured out why, she just is."

"Hmmm," Colonel Ergard said, frowning, "well... I'll take your word for it Major Larcus. But I'll leave it to your people to handle her charges."

At that point the two officers were approached by Tharun who snapped to attention and saluted them. He held the position until the officers both returned his salute a few seconds later.

"All present and correct sirs." The former mercenary said, "I've checked all comlinks and datapads to ensure they are shut down."

"Very good sergeant," Colonel Ergard replied, "carry on."

Tharun saluted again and returned to where he had left his own equipment and began to put on his armour. At the same time there was the sound of a handcart being pushed across the floor and Vishan entered the dome with one of his staff and a cart loaded up with weapons.

"Ah Vishan, just in time." Vorn said and he looked at the weapons, "I take it these are for us?" he added.

"Indeed major," Vishan replied and he picked up one of the blasters and handed it to Vorn, "we have only a few carbines here, but what we have are at your disposal."

Vorn took the blaster carbine from Vishan and then a powerpack that the Mon Calamari offered as well. The weapon was old, one of the DC-15 blasters issued during the Clone Wars to the Republic's forces. This weapon was the forerunner to the E-11 rifle that Tharun carried. Though of a similar size and weight it lacked the long-range performance of the newer weapon but it had similar stopping power.

"Thank you," Vorn said as he loaded the weapon, "these will do." Then he looked towards the other rebels, "Everyone but Tharun, take a carbine." He called out.

"I'll take one of those too," Colonel Ergard said as he stepped to the cart and took a blaster from it, "I've only got my pistol myself."

"What about extra ammunition?" Jaysica asked when she picked up one of the carbines for herself. Before anyone could answer she promptly dropped the carbine on the floor.

"Perfectly safe with explosives though?" Colonel Ergard whispered to Vorn.

"Perfectly." he whispered back.

"We're just hunting one droid," Tharun said in response to Jaysica's question as she picked up her weapon and loaded it, "not an entire legion of stormtroopers. I suggest everyone sets their weapons to automatic. We want to maximise our chances of bringing the thing down before it can tell the Empire we're here and sustained bursts will help make up for your lack of experience with these weapons."

"What about the maps?" Vorn said to Vishan.

"I have them here." The Mon Calamari responded and he plucked a roll of paper from inside his tunic and handed it to Vorn, "There are seven copies, one for each of you."

Vorn took the paper and passed the individual sheets around.

"I can't make sense of this," Jaysica said, "I don't recall the electronic maps of the island looking like this."

"Turn it around." Kara replied and she showed Jaysica the map she was holding the other way up.

"Perfectly safe." Vorn said when Colonel Ergard looked at him and opened his mouth to speak.

"These maps are marked with what we believe is the route that the probe droid will have taken since it arrived here," Vishan explained out loud, "though this assumes that the droid finds nothing of interest to draw it off this course."

"You mean like us?" Mace asked.

"Indeed," Vishan answered, "but the lack of any intercepted communications suggests that it is still unaware of our presence here. We have plotted the route as far as a point that would give the probe droid a view of your ships."

"That's where we'll start then," Colonel Ergard said, "and we'll work back along the route shown here until we encounter the droid."

"What do we do when we find it?" Tobis asked.

"First one to spot it should let the others know immediately." Vorn said.

"Quietly," Tharun added, "we don't want the droid hearing as well. Oh and keep still, they can pick up on movement too."

"Exactly," Ergard said, "and when we know that it is the droid we've found we'll assess the situation and engage it directly."

The blaster bolts ripper through the undergrowth and tore up dirt. A frightened native animal let out a loud shriek and ran from where it had been stalking prey of its own. The probe droid compared the silhouette of the creature to its database to confirm that it was not catalogued as a sentient species that it would have to report in.

Satisfied that it was nothing more than an animal the droid determined that the movement it had detected was not a sign of rebel activity. The droid folded its blaster away and rose up higher into the air once more before it returned to the course it had been following.

## 4.

The sun was getting low in the sky as the rebel party set out to hunt for the probe droid.

"How much light do we have left?" Mace asked.

"According to the data I got from Vishan, about two and a half hours." Colonel Ergard said.

"That's not much." Vorn commented.

"I'm guessing we can't use glow rods." Jaysica said.

"Correct," Vorn replied, "They'll give the probe droid too much warning."

"I've done this sort of thing before," Tharun said, "so I suggest I take point and you all just keep behind me."

"Be my guest." Colonel Ergard said and he indicated for Tharun to assume the lead position.

The former mercenary brought his rifle up to his shoulder straight away and advanced ahead of the rest of the group.

"Just let me know which way I have to go." He said as he walked off ahead of them.

When Kara and Vorn had walked across the island earlier in the day they had chosen a route based on how easy the terrain was to cross, sticking to trails and riverbanks. However, this time the rebels were forced to take a direct route from each point of high ground to the next. The Imperial probe droid's repulsorlift engines would allow it to move over intervening trees and undergrowth and the rebels could not take the chance on it slipping around them because they had chosen an easier route. As they moved through the jungle, sometimes being forced to hack away at the undergrowth to clear a path, they heard the sounds of the native animals around them.

"Is there anything dangerous around here?" Jaysica said nervously and she gripped her carbine tightly, "I mean why do the Mon Cals keep these blasters if they don't need them?"

"Don't worry little lady," Tharun reassured her, "there aren't any large predators around. Certainly nothing that would risk attacking a group of this size."

"Yeah," Kara added, "remember that I've already been out here once today. Do you think the boss would risk the safety of himself and me with nothing but his blaster and my stunning good looks to protect us?"

"Are they always like this?" Colonel Ergard asked Vorn.

"Not always," Vorn replied, "you're catching them on a good day."

Tharun suddenly held up his hand and the rebels halted and crouched down.

"What is it?" Vorn said softly from behind him.

"We've reached the summit major," Tharun said back, "I'm going to take a look around."

Tharun, like several of the rebels had macrobinoculars with him, but using the electronically enhanced optical devices would risk giving away their position to the Imperial probe droid if it were nearby. So instead of using them he instead brought his rifle up and looked down its built-in optical sight. The compact arrangement of lenses gave off no electronic emissions that the droid could pick up on so Tharun felt safe in using it to search for their quarry.

"See anything sergeant?" Colonel Ergard asked.

"No sir," Tharun replied, "the area's clear. Wait. No, I think I've got it."

The rebels waited in baited silence as Tharun stared through his scope.

"What are you waiting for?" Jaysica whispered, "Shoot it."

"It's out of range." he replied and he reached to where he had tucked the printed map into his belt, pulled it free and glanced down from his scope to look at it. "It's moving along the segment labelled 'Leth', moving south." He said and Colonel Ergard, Mace and Vorn all looked at their own copies of the map.

"That puts it about three thousand metres from here." Colonel Ergard said.

"And that's in a straight line," added Mace, "through jungle all the way."

"But it's still following the route we expected it to," Vorn said, "so that's good news. We can use that."

"You mean set a trap?" Tharun asked.

"Exactly," Vorn replied, "we pick the best point of the route for an ambush and we lay in wait for it to come by us."

"Good idea." Colonel Ergard said, "So where do we think is the best place for our ambush?"

The probe droid noted the deteriorating level of ambient light. To the droids sensors this meant very little, it was equipped to scan beyond just the spectrum of light visible to most species of organics. In fact, it added another option to the droid's list of criteria for assessing the presence of sentient life. Most sentient species used artificial light sources when moving about during the night and these were easy to detect against the darkened background that could be expected.

The droid paused briefly while it adjusted its sensors to pick out any such sources and then continued on its way to the next hilltop.

From this next vantage point the probe droid rose up above the trees and repeated the sensor sweep it had already carried out on the previous hilltops, this time also monitoring the level of light in each direction and factoring in the position of the setting sun. Just as with every other scan that the droid had conducted the results were negative and it instead surveyed the topography of the surrounding terrain. Selecting the nearest visible hilltop it set off once more.

Jaysica let out a squeal as her foot caught on a tree root that the others had all avoided. She let go of her weapon in an attempt to steady herself but not before she began to roll down a slope towards a river.

"Jaysica!" Tobis called out and he rushed towards where she was falling towards the water below.

Jaysica rolled all the way down the slope to where it suddenly dropped about a metre. She squealed again as she rolled over the edge of this drop, flew briefly through the air and landing with a splash in the river.

"Get her out quick!" Colonel Ergard exclaimed as the rebels all began to move closer to where she had fallen in the water.

Fortunately Jaysica had not been harmed by the fall and she resurfaced immediately and made her way to the edge of the river where she had fallen in. As she pulled herself from the water she slipped again and landed face down in the mud of the riverbank. Tobis took hold of a tree root to steady himself and reached down to help her up.

"Take my hand." He said and without replying Jaysica grabbed hold of his outstretched hand and let him pull her back up onto the slope.

"Nice one Jaysica," Kara said, "two screams and a big splash. Its a wonder the entire Empire doesn't know we're here." Then she looked at the mud covering Jaysica, "At least you're well camouflaged now. Plus all that mud should work wonders for your looks."

"You think so?" Jaysica asked as she glanced down at the mud covering her for herself.

"Oh yes, it hides your face quite nicely."

"Oh hah ha, very funny." Jaysica replied, "Come give me a hug." She said to Kara and she stepped forwards with her arms outstretched and promptly tripped on another tree root.

"A good day?" Colonel Ergard said to Vorn.

"Well maybe about average." Vorn replied.

"Are you alright Jaysica?" Vorn asked as Tobis helped her back to her feet and handed her the carbine she had dropped.

"I think so." she replied before sneezing, "But that water's freezing. And I think its ruined my charges, the detonators aren't waterproof." She added and she took one of the explosive charges that she had prepared from her backpack and shook it. "Yes," she said, "they're waterlogged, just like me."

"We'll have to do without them then." Colonel Ergard said, "We can't risk building a fire to dry them out. Or you either for that matter."

"I hate to interrupt colonel," Tharun said suddenly, "but I think that we have a problem."

"What is it?" Vorn asked. Tharun, who had been looking through his rifle's scope again while the others were all focused on Jaysica.

"It's the probe droid sir," he said, "it's not following the plotted route any more."

"What?" Colonel Ergard exclaimed, "Let me see."

The colonel rushed to stand beside Tharun who handed him his rifle and pointed.

"Over there sir." Tharun said as Colonel Ergard took the weapon and looked for himself.

"Damn it!" he exclaimed as he caught sight of the large oval that was the probe droid's head floating above the undergrowth as it floated across the landscape, "What the hell is it doing there?"

"May I take a look?" Vorn asked as he stood behind the colonel with his copy of the map in his hand. Colonel Ergard passed Tharun's rifle to Vorn and the nobleman alternated between looking at the map and down the scope of the rifle. "Yes I thought so." He said and he gave the rifle back to Tharun. "Look here," he said pointing at one of the peaks marked on the map where the droid would have conducted a scan, "Now when the droid was here we expected it to follow in this path marked 'Nern' to this peak here," and he ran his finger along the line drawn on the map, "But when Vishan put this map together I think that he overlooked the possibility that the droid would be elevated when it conducted its scan, so this peak here that it's heading for now would be visible to it, whereas it would have been hidden by the peak it had just come from if it scanned from ground level."

"So what does that mean for us?" Mace asked.

"It means we're out of position," Colonel Ergard said, "and there's no way that we can catch the thing before it gets a good look at our ships."

"Should we risk a signal to the outpost?" Kara asked, "If we signal while the probe droids on the move it may not pick up the transmission."

"We don't need to," Vorn said, "we can bring the droid to us right here, in fact it will kill two mynockes with one blaster bolt."

"How?" Colonel Ergard asked.

"We light a fire." Vorn said and the other rebels all smiled as they guessed what he was getting at, "The probe droid should detect the light when it next conducts a scan and come to investigate. Since there won't be any artificial electromagnetic emissions it won't signal our presence here until it's had a look at what's emitting the light. When it turns up to take a look we can ambush it."

"You said it would serve two purposes." Kara said.

"He means that I can get dry as well." Jaysica said, "You see, he does like me."

Once again the probe droid scanned the surrounding landscape for signs of habitation. It began by looking for the gravitational anomalies created by repulsorlift engines, then the electromagnetic fields generated by modern communication and computing devices. With nothing detected it resorted to a crude scan in the visible light spectrum.

The probe droid's head halted suddenly as a light source not compatible with the patterns of ambient illumination. Additionally there was a corresponding thermal signature at the same location; there was no doubt that a fire had been deliberately set. This was a clear indication of inhabitation by sentient lifeforms, but not yet proof of a rebel presence. This was an uncharted world and it was not impossible that a primitive culture existed here. Further investigation was required before a report could be made.

The probe droid calculated the distance between its current location and that of the fire, and then it set off directly towards it.

"Quite frankly I don't care if this works or not right now," Jaysica said as she sat by the fire, "right now I'm just glad I'm warm." And then she sneezed again.

"Well don't get too used to it," Tharun said, "because I think that the probe droid's on its way."

"Okay everyone, this is it." Colonel Ergard shouted, "We need to get into position before that thing gets close enough to detect us."

It was well known that an Imperial probe droid was capable of picking up the heat given off by a human body at close range and the rebels had taken this into account when they selected a hiding place. They retreated down the sloping ground that Jaysica had fallen down earlier on and climbed down to the riverbank. The combination of the sloping ground and the drop at the bottom would block out their heat signatures until the probe droid was right on top of them, by which time they would be able to attack it.

"Safeties off, people," Tharun said, "and remember what I said about keeping your weapons on automatic. Don't worry about counting ammo, you've got a hundred shots each before you run out."

The rebels waited in silence for the probe droid to appear. From where they were located they could make out the glow of the fire and could hear the occasional 'snap' as wood burnt, though they could not see the flames for themselves.

Then a soft humming sound came from somewhere beyond the top of the slope. Tharun raised his hand, then braced his rifle against his shoulder and looked through the scope. The other rebels all copied him and readied their weapons.

The probe droid had a clear view of the fire now. A small pile of wood had been gathered together in a small pit dug in the ground before being ignited. The probe droid's programming told it that it was possible for both the shallow excavation and the gathering of wood to be the behaviour of a non-sentient animal, but the lighting of the fire was proof of a sentient presence.

The droid halted and conducted a scan of the area. There was no sign of thermal signatures or movement within scanning range, however audio sensors indicated the presence of flowing water several metres away. The probe droid's artificial intelligence calculated a high probability that whatever had lit the fire beneath it now would be found near the river, probably gathering either food or water and the droid drifted in that direction.

Tharun didn't wait for an order to fire when the probe droid appeared silhouetted against the skyline at the top of the slope, he just squeezed the trigger of his rifle and fired a burst of powerful energy bolts towards it. "Fire!" Colonel Ergard yelled just after Tharun had already opened fire and the remaining rebels also opened fire at the probe droid, seven streams of blaster fire streaking up the slope.

The probe droid reacted immediately, pulling back from the top of the slope and disappearing from view.

"Where did it go?" Jaysica said out loud as the rebels ceased fire, "Did we get it?"

"One way to find out." Tharun said and he leapt up onto the slope and proceeded to run up it. As he neared the top he slowed down and advanced more cautiously.

"It's not here." He shouted back down the slope as the other rebels made their way up the slope behind him.

"Damn it!" Mace called out.

"We'd better warn the outpost," Colonel Ergard said and he plucked his comlink from his jacket and powered it up, "we need to organise an evacuation."

The colonel then switched his comlink to transmit mode and lifted it to his mouth.

"Ergard to base." he said into the device, "Contact made with target, but destruction negative. I say again destruction negative. It got away from us."

"But colonel," Vishan's voice came from the comlink in reply, "we have monitored no transmissions other than this one. The probe droid has not reported back to the Empire at this time."

The rebels looked at each other.

"That's not right," Tobis said, "it'll be programmed to report in as soon as possible and it's had plenty of time to do that."

"I think I know what's happened." Tharun said suddenly as he looked down at the ground beside the fire and pointed. The other rebels gathered around and looked down at the ground where he was pointing.

"That's the droid's transmission antenna," Tobis said as he looked at the mangled length of metal lying there in front of them all, "without that it can't send for help."

"What so now its harmless right?" Jaysica said, "I mean one droid against all of us plus the Mon Calamari at the base, we can deal with it at our leisure right?"

"Not quite." Vorn replied, "It still has another transmitter."

"The pod." Kara said.

"Exactly," Vorn said, "if it can make it back there then it can still patch into the pod's systems directly and use its communications system to report in."

The probe droid ran a full check on all of its systems. The attack had destroyed its broadband subspace transmitter and damaged its repulsorlift engine. This level of damage would normally trigger the droid to activate its self destruct system to prevent the recovery of its systems, but the requirement to report in took precedence over the requirement to keep its technology out of the hands of the Empire's enemies. This could now only be done by connecting to the systems of the hyperspace pod that had brought it here and this required making its way across enemy ground while being pursued.

The probe droid's sensors and weapons were in full working order however, so it still possessed the ability to detect the approach of enemies and protect itself against them. The droid promptly scanned the area behind it where the fire was located. As the droid had expected it could make out the heat signatures of a group of beings there now, additionally one of them was using an comlink to communicate with someone in a remote location.

The droid computed the chance of it reaching its hyperspace pod while being pursued by the beings gathered around the fire given their numbers, the known power of their weaponry and the relative location of the hyperspace pod.

If it were to move in a straight line and above the level of the trees for maximum speed then its enemies would likely gain a clear line of sight to the droid and use that to destroy it before it could reach the hyperspace pod. On the other hand if it were to keep to a lower altitude and use the trees for cover then it could not guarantee that the beings that had attacked it would not catch up with it before it was able to reach it's hyperspace pod.

The final option open to the probe droid was to travel in an evasive course rather than along a straight line. It would not attempt to keep ahead of its enemies; instead it would focus on keeping out of sight and if the opportunity arose it would attack them using hit and run tactics.



## 5.

"It'll take far too long for Vishan and his people to bring either of the ships back on line," Colonel Ergard said, "so we can't count on any air support for this mission."

"Then we've no choice but to make our way to the hyperspace pod on foot." Vorn said, "We know where it is and we can use our electronic gear now to help us navigate."

"But isn't the droid a lot faster than us?" Jaysica asked.

"Yes, but it will be trying to keep out of sight," Tharun answered, "and if it pops its oversized head up over the treetops to take advantage of its top speed then we'll see it and shoot it down easily. Its only choice is to keep at ground level where it can't travel quite so fast. If we set off now we may be able to catch up with it."

"Then what are waiting for people?" Colonel Ergard said, "Let's move out. Sergeant, you're on point again."

"Yes sir." Tharun said, grinning and bringing his rifle to his shoulder again he headed in the direction of the probe droid's hyperspace pod.

The probe droid directed its sensors back in the direction of the ambush by the fire. It could make out the heat profiles of seven distinct beings now heading in the approximate direction of the hyperspace pod. All seven appeared to be human, though there were several species with similar body temperature profiles so the possibility that one or more were aliens could not be entirely dismissed.

A quick comparison of the route that the droid's pursuers appeared to be taking indicated that they would pass near to a natural sink hole that the droid had skirted around earlier on and it determined that it offered the best chance for a surprise attack.

The droid confirmed that its repulsorlift engine was still capable of producing enough power to get it to the sinkhole before the party of humans and hovered away.

Tharun halted at the edge of a jungle clearing. In front of him the terrain was open and flat before rising up and then becoming wooded once more. Off to his left he could just about make out a dip of some sort, though how deep or steep it was he could not tell.

"What is it sergeant?" Colonel Ergard called out from further back in the column formation that the group had adopted.

"Nothing specific sir," Tharun called back, "I was just checking out the lie of the land ahead." Then he set off again across the open ground with the other rebels following behind.

From its hiding place in the sinkhole the probe droid's motion sensors told it that a group of creatures was passing the sinkhole now and that they were definitely heading in the direction of the hyperspace pod. The droid paused while it processed the incoming data and attempted to calculate how many were in the group. Because the creatures were all moving together the droid could not get an accurate count but it was at least five and no more than eight, which fit with the profile of the pursuing hostile force. The droid waited for the last of the group to pass by before it diverted more power to its repulsorlift system and rose up from out of the sinkhole.

"Down!" Mace yelled when he heard the faint sound of a repulsorlift engine and the rebels all threw themselves to the ground just as the probe droid rose up out of the sinkhole that they had just passed by. The droid fired as soon as its built in blaster had a clear field of fire at the rebels, but their rush for cover had thwarted its initial targeting calculations and the energy blasts passed harmlessly overhead.

Tharun aimed his rifle back at the probe droid and fired a short burst. But the droid was expecting a counter attack and floated out of Tharun's line of fire before any of his shots could strike it.

The droid fired again and this time its blaster shots blasted the ground beside Tobis and the engineer cried out in pain as red-hot dirt and rock splashed across him.

Kara scrambled towards Tobis as fast as she could, while the remaining rebels all began to shoot back at the probe droid that was now circling them.

"Cease fire!" Colonel Ergard yelled when the droid disappeared into the jungle ahead of them. Then he turned towards Kara, "How is he?" he asked.

"He'll be fine," Kara called back as she pulled a medpac from her bag, "but he should keep the weight off his leg for a while."

"Then we'll have to leave him behind." Colonel Ergard said, "We need to keep moving quickly if we're going to keep up with the droid."

"Colonel, that droid stopped and waited for us to catch up with it," Vorn said, "I think we can use that to our advantage."

"Go on." Colonel Ergard replied.

"Well we know that it has to return to its hyperspace pod if it's going to signal the Empire right?" Vorn began to explain, "But it obviously doesn't think that it can beat us there so it's trying to pick us off instead."

"That seems a fair assessment," Colonel Ergard said, "so what do you suggest we do?"

"We split up." Vorn said, "Kara should stay here with Tobis and I'll head for the nearest trail and try to get to the pod before the droid does." then he looked at Jaysica, "How are your charges?" he asked.

"Still damp." she replied, "That won't affect the explosives themselves, but the detonators need to dry out properly."

"Don't you have any spare?" Vorn asked.

"Yes, I've got a wireless one left."

"Good," Vorn said, "combine all your charges into one and fit the dry detonator to it. You can come with me to the pod. We'll try and destroy it before the probe droid gets there."

"And what are the rest of us supposed to do while you're off running around without us?" Colonel Ergard asked.

"Keep following the probe droid," Vorn said, "it has to know that it's still being followed so it keeps on stopping to engage you. Otherwise it may just race back to the pod faster than we can manage."

"Sounds good to me." Colonel Ergard said.

"I'll leave this with you then," Vorn said to Kara as he put his carbine down on the ground, "I don't need its weight slowing me down. Jaysica, leave yours as well."

Jaysica set her carbine down also before she and Vorn rushed off towards the nearest trail. Before they were out of sight Colonel Ergard nodded to Mace and Tharun and they set off after the probe droid instead.

When the probe droid next stopped to scan for signs of pursuit it could find only three heat signatures behind it. After repeating the scan it paused while it processed the reduction in numbers of its pursuers. There was a possibility that they had simply split up as part of a plan to surround and destroy it, but the probe droid calculated a far greater chance that one or more of them had been injured during the brief fire fight and that these three were the only ones able to continue the pursuit.

Confident that its strategy had reduced the number of pursuers by more than fifty percent in a single skirmish the probe droid began to search for another place from which to ambush the remainder of them.

Debris scattered around him as Vorn slid down the slope beside the trail across the island that he knew was the fastest route to the hyperspace pod's crash site. He turned as he heard a scream above him and saw Jaysica tumbling down after him.

"Are you alright?" he asked as he helped her back to her feet.

"I'm fine," she replied as she batted dust off her clothing, "I just lost my footing somehow. I don't know how."

"Well never mind that for now," Vorn said, "let's just get going."

"Alright then." Jaysica said with a smile and she began to run down the track.

"Err Jaysica," Vorn called out, "the pod's this way." And he pointed in the opposite direction.

Still at the front of the pursuit group, Tharun raise his fist to indicate that they should halt before he crouched down. Colonel Ergard and Mace followed his example and crouched either side of him.

"See something sergeant?" Colonel Ergard asked while Tharun studied the ground ahead through his riflescope. Now that they were not worried about electromagnetic emissions tipping off the probe droid, Colonel Ergard pulled his macrobinoculars from his backpack and lifted them to his eyes.

"It's nothing in particular sir," Tharun replied, "but this ground is ideal for an ambush."

Colonel Ergard looked at the terrain for himself. It was not wooded but was instead marked by numerous large boulders scattered around it, most of which were easily large enough for the probe droid to conceal itself behind. Tharun was right, this was a good spot for it to ambush them.

"We need to keep going." Colonel Ergard said, "So we'll advance individually as far as the ridge line over there. One moves forwards while the other two cover him. We'll keep a spacing of about five to ten metres. I'll go first." And he sprinted towards one of the boulders.

The probe droid watched as the three rebels ran from the jungle, one at a time.

It had considered concealing itself among the boulders but the calculated risks of encountering all three of its pursuers at point blank range was considered too high. So instead it had veered off course when it reached the tree line and was now watching the rebels move ahead of it.

The droid locked onto them with its sensors and waited for them to get half way to the ridge that was the horizon before it moved in behind them and began to follow them instead.

Mace was the first to reach the ridge and he lay on the ground and aimed his blaster over it to the open ground it overlooked. Then he looked over his shoulder and waved the other two rebels on.

"There's no sign of it." He called out to them and they ran to him.

"This isn't right." Tharun said, "Even if its decided to ignore us and race back to the pod it should be in view from here."

"So where is it?" Mace asked.

Before anyone could answer him there was the sound of blaster fire from behind them and one of the nearby boulders shattered as it was hit.

"Behind us!" Colonel Ergard shouted as he spun around and fired his carbine on automatic, spraying energy bolts towards the probe droid as it darted between the rocks. Tharun and Mace joined him, also firing their weapons on automatic as they attempted to hit the probe droid as it rapidly disappeared and then reappeared behind the boulders.

Another volley of return fire from the probe droid caused the rebels to cease-fire as they dived for cover behind the boulders themselves. Mace used the opportunity to eject the powerpack from his carbine and slam in a fresh one. As he felt it lock in place he heard the distinctive sound of a repulsorlift motor from the other side of the boulder he was leaning against.

"It's here!" he yelled and he leapt up and fired his weapon without aiming.

The probe droid was right on the other side of the boulder, but it could not get out of the way quick enough to avoid Mace's attack. One of the blaster bolts slammed into the probe droid's own blaster mount and tore the weapon away from it.

The droid processed this information as quickly as it could. It was facing three armed opponents and it now lacked its own ranged weapon. Fighting was no longer an option so instead the droid opted to flee. It diverted as much power as it could to its repulsorlift system and laid in a course for the hyperspace pod, jinking from side to side to make itself harder to hit.

The three rebels all fired at the fleeing droid, but as it got further away its evasive flight pattern kept it free from harm. The rebels ceased firing and began to run after it for a short while until Colonel Ergard halted. "Stop!" he shouted out as he gasped for breath, "We'll never catch it now, it's too far ahead. We better let Major Larcus know that it's heading for the pod at top speed."

The crashed hyperspace pod was in sight when the signal reached Vorn.

"How long do we have?" he asked.

"Not long," Colonel Ergard responded, "that thing's moving pretty damn fast and it was flying above tree level."

"We'll be ready for it." Vorn said and he put his comlink away before turning to Jaysica, "Get the charge ready." he said, "Because we're about to have company."

Jaysica nodded and unpacked the explosives from her backpack. She pulled the damp detonators from them before she combined the explosives themselves into a single large charge, then she opened the packet for her last detonator and inserted it into the block of explosive.

"It's ready major," she said, "I just need to put it into the pod and then we can trigger it with a comlink signal on channel six."

"Good," Vorn said, "go set it and I'll keep watch from here."

Jaysica ran towards the hyperspace pod just as there was a humming from overhead and the probe droid descended out of the sky.

"Jaysica! Get down!" Vorn shouted as the droid swooped over her.

Jaysica dived to the ground and narrowly avoided being struck by the appendages that dangled from beneath the probe droid. Meanwhile Vorn reached into his jacket and drew his own blaster. The weapon was small and relatively low powered, but it was all he had. He aimed at the probe droid as it headed towards the hyperspace pod itself and fired a shot at it. The bolt struck the droid and it shuddered, but the attack was not strong enough to penetrate the droid's shielding and armour plating.

However, it did cause the droid to reassess the situation. It was coming under fire again and could not shoot back. If it merely attempted to connect with the hyperspace pod and its long-range communication system then there was a high probability that it would be destroyed before it successfully made contact with its mother ship. Therefore the only choice was to engage its enemies in close combat.

The droid turned on the spot and rushed back towards Vorn as he fired at it twice more, again hitting it but inflicting nothing more than cosmetic damage. The droid lashed out at him with one of its appendages and he was sent flying backwards.

"Major!" Jaysica screamed.

"I'm fine." he shouted back as he took aim at the probe droid again, "Just get the charge to the pod."

Jaysica ran as Vorn fired again, this time a lucky shot blew off one of the probe droid's appendages. The droid continued to focus on Vorn, jabbing at him as he rolled back and forth beneath it. Ignored by the droid, Jaysica made it to the edge of the crater that held the hyperspace pod and tossed the explosive down into it. She drew her own blaster and pointed it at the probe droid just as it knocked Vorn's blaster out of his grip.

Her aim was good, but her weapon had no more power than Vorn's and the shot bounced harmlessly off the droid's armoured body. Distracted by this attack the probe droid broke off its attack on Vorn and headed towards her.

Jaysica fired twice more and then ran directly away from Vorn and the pod.

"Channel six!" she shouted out and Vorn understood. He pulled his comlink from his jacket and reset it to transmit on preset channel six. The he watched the probe droid as it chased after Jaysica. As soon as it was over the crater and the hyperspace pod that it contained he pressed his comlink's transmit switch and triggered the charge.

The blast consumed the hyperspace pod entirely, and channelled by the crater it sent a blast of flame and shrapnel straight up into the air just as the probe droid was above it. The blast sent the droid spinning out of control, while fragments of the hyperspace pod ripped most of its appendages from it before it slammed into the ground. The droid tried to get airborne again, but its repulsorlift system was now completely destroyed and it did not have any functional appendages with which to lift itself up onto and walk on. What sensors it had left told the droid that the two humans here were now approaching it. With its hyperspace pod destroyed there was no way for it to contact its mother ship, so now there was only one part of it's programming that remained open to it. It must not allow its technology to fall into enemy hands.

There was a flash and a small explosion as the probe droid triggered its internal self-destruct system and both Jaysica and Vorn flinched.

"Is that it?" Jaysica asked, looking at Vorn, "Are we safe now?"

"It looks that way." Vorn said as he and Jaysica stared at the burning remains of the probe droid.

Fleet Admiral Praus Vretan stared from the windows of his star destroyer as the lieutenant approached him.

"Yes? What is it?" the admiral asked.

"Data in from the probe droids we launched sir." The lieutenant replied.

"Anything interesting?"

"Nothing specific sir. But one of the droids did fail to report in at all."

"That's nothing unusual lieutenant." Admiral Vretan replied, "The spire worlds are exceptionally difficult to steer a course through. It was probably forced out of hyperspace in the nebula and destroyed. We needn't concern ourselves with it."

"Should we launch another probe droid then sir?" the lieutenant asked, "She was keen to gather as much data as possible on that area."

"I don't care what she wants lieutenant. Those droids are a Navy resource, not hers. No, we won't send another probe droid just to lose it as well. Set a course for Estran, we're heading home."