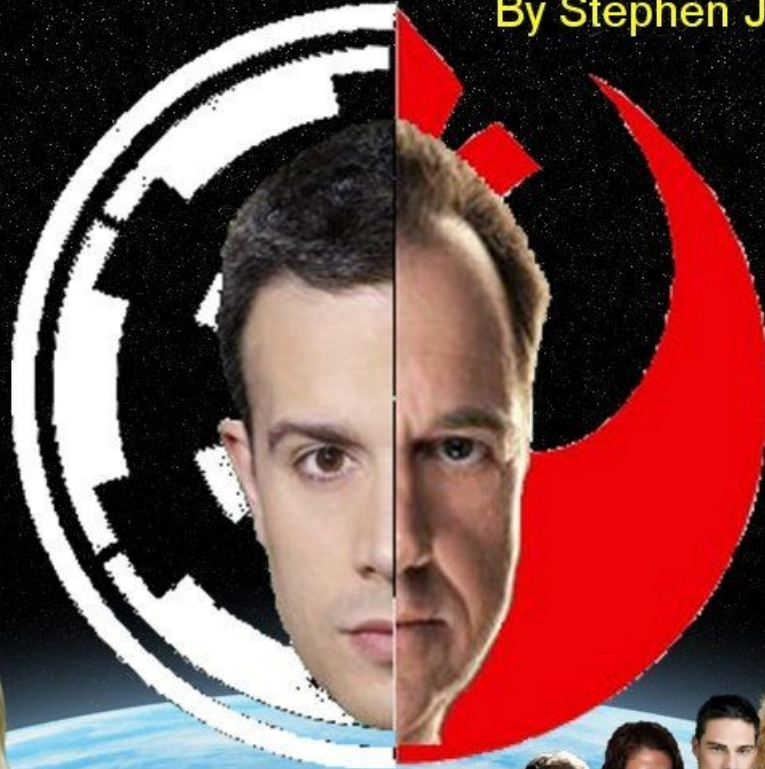


# STAR WARS

## 6-01: Mutual Enemies (Part 2)

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...

## MUTUAL ENEMIES (PART 2)

LURED TO AN ABANDONED SETTLEMENT ON THE REMOTE WORLD OF BYTAN, THE OCCUPANTS OF THE *SILVER HAWK* ARE BEING HUNTED BY NOT ONLY BY VORN'S OWN SON ISB AGENT GARM LARCUS BUT ALSO A PAIR OF OUTLAWS WHO ALSO HAVE A PERSONAL GRUDGE AGAINST THEM. TO MAKE MATTERS WORSE ONE OF THEIR NUMBER IS BURIED ALIVE WITH A DEADLY FOE...

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

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# 1.

Alerted by the sound of the building collapsing, the squad of stormtroopers turned about came rushing back to see what had happened.

"Agent Udra, can you read me?" the squad leader signalled, attempting to raise ISB Agent Vay Udra with his comlink. She had been inside the long abandoned building when it had caved in, along with two of his squad and a single rebel prisoner. Now however it seemed that she was buried beneath several tonnes of rubble.

"Sir! Over there!" one of his squad snapped, aiming his blaster down the street to where a lone figure was crouched behind the corner of a building. Clearly human and male, the figure was aiming a blaster rifle towards the stormtroopers and at the moment the squad turned to face him he opened fire. The short burst of energy blasts blew one of the stormtroopers off his feet but the rest of the squad reacted swiftly, each one firing short bursts from their own rifles while the trooper armed with a heavier repeating blaster dropped to his knees to stabilise the weapon better before he opened fire.

Just as this happened though the man ducked behind the building, disappearing from sight entirely.

"After him." the stormtrooper squad leader ordered and the Imperial soldiers began to run after him.

"Damn it Kenit you nerf herder. What the kriff were you playing at taking on a squad of stormtroopers?"

Keena Vayal signalled to him via her comlink. Watching from the roof of another empty building, Keena was an unlicensed bounty hunter and had hired the mercenary Kenit Durvall to help her apprehend a group of rebels that both had a grudge against. Unfortunately a platoon of Imperial troops had arrived at the remote deserted settlement that she had successfully lured to the rebels to, apparently searching for her and although she knew that the agents in charge of this force also had bounties on their heads to certain people she had not planned on just her and Kenit taking the entire platoon on directly.

"Drawing them away." He responded.

"They weren't anywhere that was a threat to us." Keena said, "Look, just lose them and meet me back at the hangar. I want to talk to our two guests."

Major Vorn Larcus moved as quickly through the maze of underground passageways and chambers as he could. There was at least as much of the settlement located underground as was above it and it was just as abandoned as the surface.

"Major slow down." A taller man that was the only one of the four rebels in Vorn's group to be wearing military style clothing and body armour.

"We have to get back to Kara." Vorn replied.

"Tharun's right major." The third rebel told him. This was Mace Grayle, the captain of the light freighter that Vorn's unit was assigned to, the *Silver Hawk*. He was also the adoptive father of the final member of the group, a girl called Cass who despite her youth carried a short carbine, "We know there are Imperial troops about and that mercenary as well. We need to be cautious if we're going to avoid blundering into an ambush. Plus the droids can't keep up." And he looked back to where an R5 astromech droid and small box-like mouse droid were following behind the rebels.

Vorn halted and frowned.

"Okay then." He replied before turning to Tharun, "Sergeant Verser, perhaps you should take the lead."

"Yes sir." Tharun replied, nodding. Then he lifted his heavy blaster rifle to his shoulder and began to move forwards, pointing the weapon down each side passage that he passed.

"Dad." Cass said to Mace quietly.

"What is it?" Mace replied.

"Is the major okay?" Cass asked and Mace sighed.

"I don't think we'll know until we get back to the camp." He said, "If anything's happened to Kara or the baby I don't think he'll forgive himself."

"Exit." Tharun said as he saw the floor of the passageway slope upwards until it broke the surface, "Stay back." And he crept towards the opening. Seeing no signs of life outside the tunnel Tharun waved the other rebels forwards.

"Harvey and Penny should stay here under cover." Vorn said as he darted out into the open and looked around, "We'll be able to move faster without them."

"Sounds good." Tharun agreed.

"Stay here you two." Mace told the droids and the astromech chirped. Then Tharun took another look around before breaking into a run.

He ran as far as the nearest corner and then stopped to check around the corner. Then he continued, running as far as the next corner and repeating this until he saw the building where the rebels had made their camp directly ahead of him. Or rather what was left of it.

"Sergeant, what's wrong?" Vorn asked when he saw Tharun gasp and he ran forwards, standing just behind the mercenary and looking at the pile of rubble that had been a building the last time he saw it, "Kara." He gasped and he dropped to his knees, "Kara!"

"What's-" Cass began as she rushed forwards but she stopped when she too saw the ruined building.

"Oh Kara." Vorn said again, shaking his head.

"Major we can't stay here." Tharun said, "There are tracks over there that can only come from-"

"I can't leave, I have to help her." Vorn said, pushing himself back to his feet and starting to walk towards the rubble.

"Vorn!" Mace snapped, rushing forwards and grabbing hold of him, "There's nothing you can do. We don't have the gear we need to dig through that. Besides - Besides, you know as well as I do that she's already-" and then he stopped as Vorn just gazed at him.

"We need to find alternate shelter." Tharun said, "Those stormtroopers are still out there and so is Kenit Durvall. Don't forget we still need to find out what happened to Jaysica and Tobis."

"Yes. Yes of course. We have to help Jaysica and Tobis." Vorn said uncertainly, "Tharun, if you wouldn't mind leading the way back to the droids."

"Twenty metres." One of the stormtroopers under the command of Agent Garm Larcus, "Dead ahead."

A member of the Imperial Security Bureau, Garm had come to this place in the middle of nowhere in search of his rebel father, informed of his presence by a bounty hunter on the trail of Keena Vayal. Soon after arriving Garm's force had detected a subspace beacon sending out a repeating signal and he had taken half the stormtrooper platoon to investigate while his partner in more ways than one Vay Udra and Marshas Decken the bounty hunter who had summoned them here tracked the rebels themselves with the rest of the stormtroopers.

The stormtroopers began to spread out, alert for any signs of rebel activity. The most likely explanation was that there was some sort of rebel outpost here, which meant that there could be more rebels close by.

Drawing his blaster Garm inspected the nearby buildings. None of them showed any signs of habitation but he knew that the Rebel Alliance was well experienced in concealing its installations. The stormtrooper with the scanner paused as he studied the device closely and then he pointed to a two storey building directly ahead, "It's in there sir." He said and Garm nodded. There was nothing about this building that looked any different from the neighbouring ones and it possessed no obvious antennas. Therefore, whatever system had been set up to transmit the subspace signal must have been entirely internal.

"Stand by." Garm replied, "I'll take a squad in." and he waved to a nearby squad leader, indicating that he should advance.

Without a word in reply the stormtrooper dashed forwards, the rest of his squad advancing with him. Half of the squad positioned itself around the doorway while the rest stayed back in case it was a trap. Two of those nearest the door holstered their weapons and then took hold of the door before pushing it upwards and rolling back out of the way. But there was no blaster fire from inside the building and the stormtroopers began to enter in pairs. Garm also ran forwards at this point, joining one of the pairs of stormtroopers as they entered. However, Garm was not wearing a helmet with built in light amplifying optics like the stormtroopers were and so he was forced to activate a glow rod so he could see his surroundings properly.

It was obvious immediately that whatever this place was it not a rebel base. What furniture there was had been broken long ago and a layer of the sand that seemed to get everywhere in the settlement covered everything.

"Over there sir." One of the stormtroopers called out and Garm looked around to see a compact subspace transmitter placed in the far corner of the room, the only thing not covered in sand. Cautiously Garm approached the transmitter. As far as he could tell it was a commercial model, resembling the emergency units fitted to some more upmarket starship escape pods. The only starship that had come down around the settlement as far as Garm knew was the vessel that had brought his father and his group of fellow rebels and Garm knew that both of that ship's escape pods were in place. It seemed that someone had deliberately removed the transmitter from an escape pod and simply abandoned it here. But what Garm could not figure out was why someone would do that.

Holding his glow rod close to the transmitter's casing he looked for any clues, hoping that whoever had left it here would have also left behind a message to explain why. He saw nothing however, except for an improvised control system that featured a single obvious switch to turn it off and on. Garm reached out for the switch.

"It's a trap!" a nearby stormtrooper yelled just as Garm flicked the switch and the armoured soldier dived into him, pushing him away from the transmitter just as there was a sudden 'Pop!' followed by a fizz as a dark cloud began to expand from behind the transmitter.

"Bothan stun spores." The stormtrooper squad leader said as Garm began coughing and retching, overcome by the spores as they began to irritate his nasal passages and throat, "Get him out of here." The squad leader added and two of his men hooked their arms under Garm's and lifted him back to his feet before dragging him out into the open air, out of reach of the cloud.

"Sir. Sir can you hear me?" one of them asked, looking Garm in the face as he continued to struggle for breath. Still coughing, Garm nodded.

"Yes." He croaked, "I'll need water."

One of the stormtroopers handed him a canteen and Garm took a deep gulp, sloshing the water around his mouth before spitting it out onto the ground to clear away any spores that may remain in his mouth. Then he leant back as the same stormtrooper opened up a medpac and extracted eyewash so that spores could be rinsed out of his eyes as well, "Damn good job those helmets of yours are sealed." He said as the stormtrooper squirted eyewash into his eyes.

"Yes sir." The stormtrooper replied.

"Agent Larcus!" Garm heard a familiar voice call out and he blinked as he tried to focus on the man approaching at the head of another squad of stormtroopers, "Agent Larcus, are you alright?"

"I'll be just fine Marshas." Garm answered, "Fortunately there's no history of allergies to bothan stun spores in my family."

"What happened?" Marshas asked.

"The subspace transmitter is in that building over there." Garm told him, pointing back to the building he had just been carried from where the stormtroopers were still busy securing it, "I shut it of and all of a sudden I was breathing in these damned spores."

Marshas frowned.

"That's odd." He said,

"Why?" Garm asked in reply.

"Well if it's a rebel beacon then it would have rebels who set the trap wouldn't it?" Marshas said and Garm nodded.

"I suppose so." He said.

"Well surely rebels would be expecting the possibility of stormtroopers to be the ones to discover their transmitter wouldn't they?" Marshas said, "Which makes setting a trap using something that wouldn't effect them pretty pointless."

"Stang, you're right." Garm exclaimed, "I can't believe I didn't think of that. That trap wasn't set by rebels, it was set for them."

"Keena Vayal." Marshas said, "Looks like she's hunting your father as well."

"What about you?" Garm asked, "Did you find any trace of her or my father's group?" and Marshas nodded.

"I ran into your father and some of his friends underground. But they brought the ceiling down to block our way and give the time to escape. By the time we'd found a way around they were long gone."

"Well we better figure out where." Garm said, "Them and Keena Vayal."

## 2.

Keena made it back to the large underground chamber where she had concealed her scout ship before Kenit and when he appeared she strode up to him.

"Well here I am." He said, "Now let's get-" and all of a sudden he was cut off when Keena punched him in the face and he staggered backwards. Instinctively he raised his rifle and aimed it at Keena as she turned and walked away.

"Go ahead." She said, "Shoot me. Good luck in getting out of here without the access codes to my ship though."

Kenit scowled.

"What the kriff was that for?" he said as he lowered his weapon.

"What's it for?" Keena yelled as she spun around, "I brought you in on this job thinking that you'd have my back. So far you've cost us the difference between bringing in Kara Bilstran and Vay Udra alive rather than dead and risked leading the Empire back here. I take it that you did make sure you'd lost them before coming here?"

"Of course I did. I led them down underground and lost them in five minutes. Then I took a circular route to get here. The Estranian Defence Force believes in training its soldiers well."

"And yet you still managed to kill two of our targets." Keena said, "Now I suggest you just keep your mouth shut and let me do the talking." And she walked towards a heavy looking door leading from the chamber they were in.

In the smaller chamber on the far side of the door Tobis Dorfus, the engineer of the *Silver Hawk* was studying the ceiling closely. There was sand piled in one corner of the room despite there being no obvious openings to the surface. Behind him his fellow rebel and girlfriend Jaysica Horbid watched nervously.

"What if there isn't a way out Tobis?" she asked, "What if we're still here when that guy comes back. I remember what he did to Tharun we he captured him. I don't want to"

"Oh, err, I think I've found something." Tobis interrupted.

"Really?" Jaysica replied, her tone switching to one of excitement, "Oh Tobis you are wonderful!" and she rushed to hug him.

"Ah. Err, well, I'm not sure that it will do us any good." He said, "I, well I'd need something narrow and strong to slide into the gap to even try and widen it."

Just then there was the sound of the door being unlocked and the two rebels turned around, expecting Kenit to stride in at any moment, perhaps with another of their group as his prisoner. But instead it was Keena Vayal who entered first and she clearly was not a prisoner.

"You?" Jaysica said, "You're the one he was talking to on his comlink."

"Yes, that's right." Keena replied with a smile, "He's working with me."

Then a slight smile appeared on Jaysica's face.

"So how long did it take you to get loose after we left you tied up in your underwear?" she asked and Keena scowled briefly.

"I could ask you the same." She responded.

"Huh?" Kenit commented, glancing at Keena.

"Oh she's trying to make me feel uncomfortable by reminding me how when I tried to capture Vorn Larcus she and Kara left me and an associate of my employer tied together in our underwear. It was their revenge for me leaving them in a similar situation." Keena explained and Kenit grinned.

"Now I bet that's a sight to see." He said.

"Don't even think about it." Keena told him.

"What about her?" Kenit asked and he back to advance on Jaysica.

"Leave her alone!" Tobis yelled suddenly hurling himself at Kenit.

The mercenary reacted quickly, knocking Tobis to the floor with a single blow from the back of his hand. Then as Tobis landed on the floor Kenit kicked him in the stomach and Tobis gasped as the air was forced from his lungs.

"Kenit! Cut it out!" Keena shouted and Kenit scowled as he stepped away from Tobis, "So are you going to help me find your precious Major Larcus?" she then added, turning towards Jaysica. But the young rebel woman just shook her head, "Kenit, grab her." Keena said and Kenit reached out and grabbed hold of Jaysica by the throat, pulling her upwards just enough to make breathing difficult but not impossible. Then Keena produced a comlink and a datapad. Connecting the two devices together she held them towards Jaysica, "Now ask your major for help." She said.

Gasping for breath Jaysica shook her head as much as Kenit's grip on her would allow and Kenit tightened his grip.

"Well if you're not going to help me then I don't suppose there's any reason to keep you alive." Keena said. Then she smiled, "Though I suppose I could just let Kenit enjoy himself with you before he kills you." And Kenit leant forwards and ran his tongue up the side of Jaysica's face. Then he slackened his grip on Jaysica's neck.

"No!" Jaysica screamed and then she cried out, "Major! Please help me!"

"Let her go." Keena told Kenit and he released his grip entirely, letting Jaysica drop to the floor as she gasped for breath and sobbed, "We've got all we need I think." Keena said as she examined the recording she had just made, "Now let's go and see who's listening." And she and Kenit turned around and walked out of the cell, closing and locking the door behind them.

As soon as he heard the lock sealing Tobis looked at Jaysica and reached out a hand to rest it on her back. "J-Jaysica." He croaked.

"Oh Tobis." Jaysica responded, sliding to his side and embracing him, "I'm so sorry I couldn't – Wait, what's that?" and she looked down to where Tobis was clutching something close to his stomach, "Is that a knife?"

"I – I took it from Kenit when I tried to tackle him." Tobis replied, "I think we can use it to escape. Help me up." Slowly the two rebels rose to their feet and using one another for support they returned to the corner where Tobis had found the narrow gap in the ceiling.

### *Pain.*

Vay flinched as she felt the sudden tremor in the Force at the same time as she heard the cry of pain. The sensation came from Kara Larcus, the much younger wife of Vorn as she sat on the opposite side of the basement they had been trapped in by the collapse of the building above them. Kara's arms were bound behind her, but it was neither the binders nor any injury she had suffered that was the cause of the pain. Instead it was a contraction. Kara was in labour.

*She needs your help Vay. Her and the child.*

The message came to Vay from the Force. She had learned that it was the spirit of a long dead ancestor of hers, a jedi named Lara Udra who had lived around four thousand years earlier. Now it seemed that this ghost was hoping to get Vay to embrace the values of the near extinct jedi over those of the society that had defeated them.

"Shut up." Vay hissed and Kara scowled at her.

"How about you try giving birth while tied up and seeing how quiet you can stay." Kara responded and Vay realised that she had heard the response that was intended for Lara. The problem with having a voice in her head was that replying to it often caused confusion, "Oh come on!" Kara then yelled and she bent her arms so that the binders could be seen by Vay, "Just take these off. Are you really afraid that I'll overpower you and run off?"

*You can't deny that she's got a point there.*

Vay frowned; it annoyed her when Lara pointed out the obvious. Then she sighed and produced the key to the binders Kara wore. She walked over to Kara and pulled her forwards to gain better access to the binders. Kara smiled as she felt them release from around her wrists and as she took her arms out from behind her she rubbed her wrists. Then her eyes widened and she screamed, clutching her stomach.

### *Pain.*

### *Fear.*

Vay stared at her.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"This baby's coming." Kara replied, "Soon."

"Oh I've got a really bad feeling about this." Vay muttered.

"Dad, what should we do?" Cass asked Mace while watching Vorn. After heading back to collect Harvey and Penny the rebels searched for somewhere close by where they could set up another camp and as soon as they had located another suitable location Vorn had slumped down in a corner, dropping his rifle onto the sand covered floor and then cradling his head in his hands.

"I think we shouldn't do anything right now." Mace replied and he turned to Tharun who was still standing just inside the doorway as he surveyed the surrounding area through his macrobinoculars, "Tharun, perhaps you should talk to him." Mace said quietly.

"Me?" Tharun asked, "Why me?"

"Because you're his son-in-law." Mace pointed out, "You got drunk and married Lyssa and with that comes certain responsibilities."

Tharun sighed.

"The things I do for love." He muttered, "And under the influence of beer." And then he walked over to where Vorn was sitting and sat down beside him.

"I think we should take a look around outside while they talk." Mace said to Cass, "Bring your blaster." The new camp was located in an upper storey of a two level building and outside the door there was a large balcony from which it was possible to observe a large area. The drawback was that it was also possible for anyone standing on this to be seen from a considerable distance away so Mace crouched down behind the safety barrier that ran around it and rested his rifle on top of the barrier. Unlike Cass short-barrelled blaster carbine Mace's rifle was a sporting weapon, designed for hunters to be able to bring down fairly large animals at a range beyond that which most military weapons were capable of. To assist in this long range shooting the rifle came complete with a built in optical sight that Mace now used to search the surrounding area.

"See anything?" Cass asked as she crouched beside him.

"Nothing." Mace replied, "Wherever everybody is they're-" and he suddenly paused as he caught sight of a figure in white armour, "Wait, I've got movement. Looks like stormtroopers near the old camp."

"I want to see." Cass said and she tried using the scope fitted to her own carbine, grunting when it proved inadequate.

"Go get Tharun and the major." Mace said.

"Are you sure that's a good idea?" Cass replied, "The major's pretty upset."

"Well he needs to see this." Mace told her, "So his mourning is going to have to wait a while."

"Okay. I just hope you know what you're doing." Cass said and she headed back inside.

Tharun and Vorn were still sat beside one another on the far side of the room when Cass entered and Tharun looked towards her.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Dad's spotted stormtroopers." Cass answered, "They're near the - err."

"Come on kid. Spit it out." Tharun told her.

"Well they're near the old camp." Cass said and in an instant Vorn looked up.

"Let me see." He said before he stormed out of the room onto the balcony, "Where are they?" he said to Mace as he knelt beside him and lifted his own macrobinoculars to his eyes.

"Left, about thirty degrees. Three hundred to three hundred and fifty metres. I count seven." Mace replied.

"Eight." Vorn corrected him, "Or at least there were."

"Where's the eighth?" Mace asked.

"Look by the rubble." Vorn said, "I didn't see it from the street but there's a body right beside it. A stormtrooper. The others must be returning to collect it. Now's our chance to take them out."

"Take them out?" Mace responded in surprise, "Major they outnumber us."

"By less than two to one." Vorn pointed out, "And we have the advantage of surprise."

"And only two weapons that can shoot that far." Tharun added as he observed the stormtroopers for himself.

"Mace, Tharun, you two will remain here while I take Cass and get closer." Vorn said, "When we reach the end of the street you open fire on them. That'll be our signal to engage with automatic fire from close range."

Mace frowned and set down his rifle.

"Major, may I have a word?" he said as he got to his feet.

"Go ahead." Vorn replied.

"In private." Mace responded as he pulled Vorn back inside the building.

"Alright, what's bothering you?" Vorn began but Mace interrupted him.

"Are you insane?" he hissed, "You are not taking my daughter down there."

"Are you disobeying an order captain?"

"I'm advising you of a flaw in your plan." Mace replied, "I've done it before, but on those occasions you weren't so full of grief that you weren't thinking straight."

"We need to deal with those stormtroopers eventually," Vorn said sternly, "and ambushing them from two different places seems like a good idea to me."

"Not when you're taking an eighteen year old girl to the front lines while I don't think you're focused on what we're doing here." Mace said.

"So you are going to disobey me?" Vorn asked and Mace scowled.

"No. I'll go along with your plan, but with one change." He said and he reached out and snatched Vorn's blaster rifle from him. It was a standard military issue weapon, about the same size as the carbine Cass was armed with but bulkier because of the more advanced focusing system that allowed it to operate better at relatively longer ranges, "You stay here with Tharun and I'll go with Cass. I know I can take care of her." And he turned around and headed back to the balcony, "Come on Cass, we're going to get closer to those stormtroopers." He added.

"But I thought Major Larcus was-" Cass began.

"Your father seems to think that it would be better if we exchanged roles." Vorn interrupted as he stepped onto the balcony as well.

"We'll have to risk turning our comlinks back on to stay in touch." Mace said as he pulled his comlink from his belt and turned it on. The rebels had shut down their communications devices to avoid any signals being



picked up by the equipment being used by the stormtroopers to track the subspace beacon, but now that they were about to engage them directly that seemed of lesser importance. The stormtroopers would be well aware of where they were.

"Please help me!"

The sudden cry that came from the comlink as soon as Mace activated it was undoubtedly in Jaysica's voice, but she sounded as if she was in pain. The four rebels gathered on the balcony looked at one another in alarm.

"Jaysica it's Mace, where are you?" Mace responded.

"Major! Please help me!" Jaysica's voice repeated.

"That sounded the same." Tharun commented, "Exactly the same."

"It's a trap." Vorn said, "We knew that Kenit had captured Jaysica and Tobis and now he's trying to use them to lure us in."

"So what are we going to do?" Cass asked.

"Go and get them of course." Vorn replied.

"So we're not taking on the stormtroopers then?" Mace asked.

"Mace, I've already lost my wife and son today. I'm not about to add two dear friends to that if I can help it."

"But didn't you say it was a trap?" Cass asked.

"Yes." Vorn replied, "And we're going to walk right into it."

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Cass muttered.

Then Vorn looked at the two droids.

"We'll need them." He added, "Particularly Harvey. We can use his sensors to follow Jaysica's signal to its source."

### 3.

"Water." Kara gasped, "I need water."

Vay looked around and saw a battered canteen on the floor near the base of the collapsed stairs and using the Force she summoned it to her grasp and then shook it. Hearing something inside slosh about she then tossed it to Kara who caught it and began to drink deeply.

"Better?" Vay asked and Kara nodded, "Good, because that's about the limit of my midwife skills." Vay added.

"What? Didn't they teach you how to deliver a baby at evil witch school?" Kara responded and Vay frowned. *That's a fair assessment of your training actually.*

Vay's frown deepened.

"Oh lighten up." Kara exclaimed before she felt another contraction.

*Pain.*

Vay flinched and Kara grinned.

"Hey I just realised," she said, "you feel these contractions as well don't you? This kid's causing you as much grief as it is me."

"I sense when you're in pain. But I don't feel the pain itself." Vay corrected her.

"Well so long as it annoys you. That's all that matters to me." Kara said.

"Are you certain?" Garm asked the stormtrooper holding the scanner.

"Yes sir." The stormtrooper replied, "A repeating transmission on a standard comlink frequency. I'm trying to lock in on it now."

Garm looked at Marshas.

"The rebels know we're here. My father's not dumb enough to set up a signal like that when he knows that it'd be detected." He said to the bounty hunter.

"So either it's Keena Vayal or it is your father and he's planning something."

"A trap?" Garm said, "Yes that would fit with my father's methods. I better check with Vay." And he took out his comlink, "Vay can you read me?" he signalled but there was no response, "Vay are you there?" he repeated but again the channel was silent. So instead he switched to the stormtrooper platoon's frequency and signalled the leader of the squad that she had taken with her when tracking the rebels, "Squad leader trill herf xesh one one three eight do you read me?"

"Reading you Agent Larcus." The stormtrooper replied.

"What is your status sergeant?" Garm asked, "I can't reach Vay."

"We located a rebel camp and apprehended one of the rebels sir." The stormtrooper said, "She remained with the prisoner and two of my men while I took the rest to hunt for the other rebels but the building has collapsed. Another rebel engaged my squad when we tried to investigate initially but we lost him. We're almost back there now to try and locate Agent Udra."

Garm frowned.

"She won't be there." He told the stormtrooper, "The rebels obviously returned and overpowered her then blew the building to cover their tracks. Get after her. Locate the rebels and then check in." and then Garm shut off the comlink.

"You're not going to help?" Marshas asked.

"No." Garm replied, shaking his head, "They won't harm Vay. All that squad has to do is locate where she's being held and then we can plan a rescue operation."

"You're assuming that it's the rebels who have her." Marshas pointed out, "Your sergeant only said that his squad was engaged by a rebel. He didn't identify who it was though. What if it was Keena or whoever it is she's got working with her? She's abducted Vay before so she must be worth something to someone."

Garm hesitated as he considered this. From what he had learned of Keena Vayal he knew that she was not squeamish about harming someone to gain an advantage. But he was not the one here who knew her best. Marshas was.

"Go find that squad." Garm told the bounty hunter, "You know Keena better than me so you ought to have more luck tracking her and figuring out what she's up to. But it's Vay I want you to concentrate on finding. Signal me when you've located her and I'll bring the rest of the platoon to meet you."

"What will you be doing in the mean time?" Marshas asked.

"Tracking that signal." Garm replied, "Even if it is a trap then someone has to be there to spring it."

Unlike the metal sheeting that made up the walls and ceiling of the improvised cell that Jaysica and Tobis were being held in, the blade of the knife was in good condition and by forcing it into the narrow gap in the

ceiling and then twisting it he was able to widen the gap. However, with each twist of the blade more sand was able to slide into the cell and both of the captive rebels found themselves coughing as they suddenly inhaled some of the fine grains that spread out.

"How long is this going to take?" Jaysica asked, looking back around at the cell door nervously.

"Err, well, I'm not sure." Tobis replied, pausing in his work to look at Jaysica instead of up at his work.

"What are you trying to do anyway?" Jaysica asked, realising that she had no idea how widening the gap to what would still be just a few centimetres was going to help.

"Ah – Well, err I'm hoping that if I can get my fingers into the gap then I can pull a section of ceiling away and we can just climb out of here."

Jaysica frowned.

"Is it really going to be that simple?" she asked.

"Err, I hope so." Tobis replied and then he looked up again and continued to work on the gap with the stolen knife. He kept on using the blade to force the gap in the ceiling wider until he had widened it for a length of about a metre. Then tucking the knife into his belt he reached up and pushed his fingers into the gap that sand was now pouring through. He tried to take hold of the ceiling plate but the rough edges cut him and he winced as he withdrew his hands.

"Are you okay?" Jaysica asked Tobis and he nodded as he undid his overalls and rolled them down to his waist. Then he removed his shirt and ripped it in two. Wrapping the two halves around his hands he then attempted to take hold of the ceiling panel for a second time.

With the protection afforded by the cloth around his fingers Tobis was now able to maintain his grip and slowly he lifted himself off the floor, applying all of his weight to the ceiling panel instead.

The speed of the rebels' advance was limited by the speed that Harvey was able to maintain. The wheels mounted in his feet could gain only limited traction against the sandy street and each time they advanced they had to wait for him to catch up.

"Couldn't we use the sensors in the *Silver Hawk* instead?" Cass suggested and Harvey let out a sudden rude sounding noise.

"Not with the metal content in these buildings." Mace replied, "We'd be getting reflections off them all and we'd never trace the signal."

"Besides," Tharun added, "we're still not sure that the ship's safe to be inside. For all we know it could drop through that hole the landing gear's in at any moment."

Behind the rebels Harvey rolled forwards again, passing by a junction and coming to a sudden halt in the middle of it. Then he began to let out a string of excited electronic chirps and bleeps.

"Little guy's found something." Tharun said.

"No he hasn't." Mace said, "Look down there." And he pointed down the street that seemed to have attracted Harvey's attention. There at the end was the pile of twisted metal that had been their initial camp, "He just hasn't seen that yet."

Vorn scowled when he saw this.

"We know about that Harvey." He said as he continued to walk in the same direction the group had been heading, "But we don't have time to deal with it now. Unless you're telling us that Jaysica's message is coming from down there now then we need to keep going this way."

Harvey's head spun to face Vorn and the droid let out a single forlorn tone.

"Come on Harvey." Cass added, waving the droid towards her. Harvey took one last look at the ruined building, let out another low tone and then set off along the street after Vorn again.

Though the going remained slow Harvey was able to lead the rebels to a dense cluster of buildings that were all interconnected by a network of walkways and staircases that gave the impression of a large metal web wrapped around them. Whatever purpose either the buildings or the walkways had once served was now just as much of a mystery as everything else that had happened before the settlement was abandoned. Now it was just another collection of empty rooms to be navigated and any one of them could be the centre of the trap that had been laid for them.

Vorn activated his comlink again, leaving it on a constant receive mode.

"Major help me!" Jaysica's voice called out and Cass shuddered.

"That gives me the creeps." She said.

"Hey kid, don't worry about it." Tharun said, "The little lady will be just fine. You'll see. She's actually pretty tough when it comes down to it."

"Actually that is true." Mace added, nodding slowly.

"Never mind that now." Vorn said, "I need Penny."

"I've got her right here." Cass replied pulling the mouse droid out of her backpack.

"Good." Vorn said as he connected his comlink to his datapad and adjusted the frequency setting until the datapad display showed an image of what was in front of Penny, the picture being transmitted from a concealed compact holo camera that Jaysica had added to her droid. Since mouse droids were an almost

universal feature of Imperial facilities and starships the tiny droid made an ideal covert surveillance unit, able to move about inside them without anyone paying any attention even when they saw it. Of course, there was no reason that it had to be an Imperial facility that Penny was used to explore.

"Go on inside Penny." Vorn told the droid, "We need to find out if Jaysica and Tobis are being held in there. But be careful, the man we think has them is dangerous. He wouldn't hesitate to shoot you."

Penny beeped once and a brief message indicating her compliance appeared on Vorn's datapad. Then the mouse droid began to head for the building cluster while the rebels remained just out of sight. As with Harvey, the ground proved unsuitable for the droid to move over quickly but it was still not long before it vanished from sight as it passed through a doorway that had probably been left open when the settlement was abandoned.

Mace crouched beside Vorn as he studied the image being fed back from Penny's camera, but all it showed was one empty room after another.

*Not long now.*

Vay frowned, not getting the meaning of Lara's latest message. But then Kara gasped and suddenly grabbed at the couch she was sat on.

*Pain.*

"The baby's coming soon isn't it?" Vay said, getting up and approaching Kara.

"You think?" Kara replied, glaring at her angrily, "Look, I'm going to need help. I need to know what's going on down there."

"Huh? You mean me?" Vay asked.

"No!" Kara yelled, "I mean the team of medics you keep in that rubber dominatrix suit I bet you're wearing under the fascist G-man outfit. What happened anyway?"

"Well as you've already pointed out I don't know anything about child birth." Vay pointed out.

"Jeeves." Kara gasped.

"Jeeves?" Vay repeated and Kara waved to where a golden coloured protocol droid was sat immobile and silent nearby, its eyes dull.

"Just turn him on." Kara said, "I switched him off because he was annoying me. But he'll be able to help me." Then a moment later she added, "I hope."

Vay walked over to the inactive droid and reached behind its head, feeling for the main power switch. As soon as she pressed it the droid's eyes lit up and it began to speak.

"-condition." It said unexpectedly. Then as Jeeves saw that Vay was now right in front of it and that Kara was sat with her feet up on the couch and no longer wearing her trousers the droid realised that it had spent some time shut down, "Lieutenant Larcus!" it exclaimed, "What happened to me? And why is she here?" and the droid looked at Vay.

"I shut you down." Kara replied, "And she's just here to remind us what a witch she is. Now get over here and help me. The baby's on its way."

"You are in labour? But it was not due for some time. How long was I inactive for?"

"Not long but the building collapsed. We're trapped down here and I need you to help me." Kara told the droid.

"But it's against my programming to impersonate a medical professional." Jeeves replied.

"I'll tell you what to look for." Kara said, "Now just get your shiny metal ass over here." Then she screamed again.

*Pain.*

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Jeeves said, advancing towards Kara.

Meanwhile Kara turned towards Vay and glared at her again.

"I still think you're just playing dress up in that uniform." She said, "I bet you were playing bad ISB agent or something with Junior and the binders were meant for him."

## 4.

"Smart." Keena said from one of the upper rooms in the cluster of buildings, "They aren't coming in. They've sent a droid in instead."

"Not coming in?" Kent responded, "So how the kriff do we get our bounty if they don't come in? There's no bounty on droids."

"Oh they'll come in eventually." Keena said, "We just need to give them some encouragement, that's all."

"What sort of encouragement?" Kenit asked, "The two we captured are locked up back at the ship."

"Yes and I'm sure that the rebels know that their friends aren't here. They know this is a trap and they've come looking for us. So if we want them to come inside then we need to show them what they want to see." Kenit frowned.

"So I go let that droid see me then?" he said, "You expect Tharun Verser to come in here when he knows what he can expect if he falls into my hands?"

"If you'd control that lust for revenge for one moment then you'd realise that the droid doesn't need to get a good look at either of us." Keena explained, "It only needs to see this." And she held up her datapad that still had a comlink attached to it. Only this time the comlink was not hers. This belonged to Jaysica and had been taken from her after her capture. Keena used it because she knew that it would be set to broadcast on the frequency used by the other rebels.

"Ah, I get it." Kenit said, "They see that and assume that wherever it is is where we're planning to spring our trap. Then they approach to try and catch us out and—"

"And find that we're actually positioned to ambush them along the route they are really using." Keena interrupted.

"Then give me that thing." Kenit said, reaching out for the datapad, "I'll go and—" but then he suddenly stopped as he caught sight of something outside, "Oh this is going to make things more complicated." He said and Keena looked around to see Garm approaching with a force of stormtroopers from down a street where they were out of sight of Vorn and his much smaller rebel group.

"Or maybe we can make this work for us." Keena suggested, "I'm sure that agent Larcus would rather take his father in alive and Vorn wouldn't want to kill his own son. So if the two groups do meet then they'd try to capture one another instead of kill them. The we just have to engage the victors."

Vorn watched the feed from Penny's camera closely as the droid continued to make its way through the abandoned buildings. Inside them the number of closed doors that the mouse droid could not open limited how far it could explore, but by exiting onto the network of exterior walkways it was able move much further and faster than it otherwise could.

"Major! Incoming!" Tharun suddenly hissed and he turned, aiming his weapon towards a side street that also led to the building cluster that the rebels had traced the comlink signal to.

Sure enough the sound of armoured figures marching could be heard from that direction, growing louder as they advanced.

"Looks like the major's son is here." Tharun commented as Garm came into view.

"Everyone back!" Mace snapped as he realised that the rebels' current position left them badly exposed and the group darted back around the nearest corner. Tharun peered back around it briefly to try and assess the size of the force they were facing; taking note of the number of bright red shoulder pauldrons he could see.

"I make it three squads." He said as he pulled back around the corner, "Plus Garm."

"Any sign of Vay?" Vorn asked, "She's normally hanging around with him as well."

"None." Tharun replied, shaking his head, "But if there's a full platoon here then maybe she's off with the last squad."

"And that other guy we saw." Mace added, "Unless he's out there as well?"

"No captain, just the major's son and whole load of the boys in white."

"Who outnumber us ten to one." Mace said.

"Eight." Cass corrected him, "There are four us and thirty one of them if the squads are up to strength. See? I've read up on stormtrooper organisation. So four against thirty one is closer to eight to one odds rather than ten."

"Firstly I wasn't counting you." Mace replied, "If there's trouble I'd rather you stayed out of it. We're talking about a major engagement here, not just taking out the odd sentry. Secondly never tell me about odds."

"What do you reckon brought them here?" Tharun asked.

"Probably the same signal as we followed." Vorn replied.

"Well I'd say that they're going to find out where it's coming from before us unless we do something about it major." Tharun said as he took another quick glance around the corner and saw the stormtroopers spreading out around the buildings.

"We still have Penny inside." Vorn pointed out, "But we'll have to draw as many of them off as we can." And then he leant round the corner for a quick look as well, confirming to him that not only was there a significant force of stormtroopers present but also that his son was accompanying them, "Okay here's how we'll do it." Vorn said, "Mace and Tharun will fall back and find somewhere from where they can engage that platoon. As soon as they start to return fire you are to withdraw, making certain that they not only know you are withdrawing but also which way you are going. Initially at least. I want you to draw off whatever force my son sends after you, not get caught by them. Garm will probably send a single squad to deal with you, so that leaves two for me and Cass to worry about."

Mace frowned.

"Major, you're not seriously suggesting that the pair of you engage those troops are you?" he asked.

"Of course not." Vorn replied, "Look, we know that this is some sort of trap set by the guy we saw in that transmission from Penny."

"The one who seems to bear me a grudge." Tharun commented.

"Exactly." Vorn said, "Now I think that it could be beneficial if we could lure those stormtroopers into that trap instead."

"Using you and Cass as bait?" Mace asked.

"No. The signal is the bait, just as it is for us. But we have Penny to try and cause whatever disturbances are necessary to get the stormtroopers to fall into the trap instead. Then either they'll be taken out or they may at least suffer losses which will make them easier for us to deal with later."

"A lot of unknowns in that plan." Mace commented.

"Yes I realise that." Vorn replied, "But frankly I can't think of anything better. I'm open to suggestions if anyone can."

There were no responses.

"We better get going." Mace said after a few seconds, "We can't give them time to get inside."

"Okay Cass, you and Harvey come with me." Vorn added, "We'll hide in that building over there. We should be able to keep an eye on those stormtroopers from there."

"They aren't attacking." Kenit said with a snarl as he and Keena watched from near the top of one of the buildings in the cluster.

"Of course they aren't." Keena replied, "They're rebels. They'll try to whittle down the numbers of the stormtroopers by means other than attacking directly. But trust me, all we have to do is wait and maybe lend a helping hand to whichever side suits our purpose at the time."

"Hang on," Kenit said, when he noticed Mace and Tharun running down a street and heading away from them "the rebels are leaving. They're splitting up."

"Oh this just gets better and better." Keena said as she looked for herself, "They're going to draw off some of the stormtroopers. See? I told you this would work. By the time the rebels and Imperial forces are done with one another the survivors will be scattered and easy prey."

"Easy prey and easy money." Kenit responded with a grin.

## 5.

The three squads of stormtroopers Garm had under his command were easily enough to surround the cluster of buildings and carry out an inspection from outside before they moved in. Garm's plan was to leave one squad outside and lead the other two in while they tracked the source of the transmission that was still being repeated. The stormtrooper with the scanner was stood closer to the buildings while two of his squad mates crouched close by with their weapons held at the ready to cover him.

"Sir, I've isolated the source of the signal." The stormtrooper called out to Garm.

"Good." Garm replied, "Show me." And he strode towards the stormtrooper just as a blaster bolt struck the soldier in the back and punched right through him, emerging through his armoured chest plate before destroying the scanner and blasting a small crater in the ground a few metres in front of him.

Startled, Garm drew his blaster and spun around to face in the direction that the shot had come from and was just in time to see another stormtrooper struck by blaster fire. The shot that hit this one was not as powerful as the first but it was still strong enough to take the man off his feet and send him sprawling across the sand.

"There they are! Blast them!" another stormtrooper shouted, firing towards a building that had two figures positioned on its roof firing at the Imperial force. However, before the stormtrooper could open fire he became the third victim of the snipers as another powerful shot tore his arm off at the shoulder.

"Down!" Garm ordered as he dived for the ground. He then holstered his blaster and crawled towards the stormtrooper who had been equipped with the scanner and from the large holster on his hip he took the dead soldier's rifle and unfolded its stock. Turning back towards the rebels as another blast bolt flew over his head and struck another stormtrooper he saw that they were heading for the edge of the roof and as he watched they began to climb down the wall.

"Sergeant!" Garm shouted at the nearest of the stormtrooper squad leaders, "Take your men and go after them. I don't want them springing any more ambushes on us."

"Yes sir." The squad leader replied and he waved to his men as he got to his feet. At the moment however Tharun turned around once more and fired another shot at the stormtroopers, striking one of them just as he was getting up. That left only seven men in the squad being sent after the two rebels, but Garm still believed that one squad would be enough.

Then he turned his attention back to the cluster of buildings ahead. He still wanted to be able to leave a squad of stormtroopers outside to prevent anyone entering or leaving without his knowledge, but that meant that he would have only a single squad to support him when he went inside. For a moment Garm considered waiting for either the troops he had just sent in pursuit of the two rebels returning or summoning the squad that Marshas was leading in the search for Vay. The problem was that both of those were important assignments and he did not want to draw troops away from either or delay securing the building. Therefore as he got back to his feet he prepared himself to continue with his plan with what he had instead.

"Wow. Did you see that?" Cass said softly as she watched from the safety of the nearby building, "Dad and Tharun took down five of them."

Vorn smiled.

"Yes, it was very impressive." He replied, "Of course there are still too many of them left for us to take on head to head. But a few more engagements like that we'll have a much better chance." Then he looked back down at the datapad to check on Penny's progress. The tiny droid had by this time made its way to an external walkway near the top of one of the buildings and ahead of it was an open doorway, "Try in there Penny." He instructed and the droid signalled its compliance as it rolled into the building and Vorn saw exactly what he was looking for. Capturing the image on his datapad he hurriedly ordered Penny to withdraw, "Get back Penny." He ordered, "You need to get out of there before you're seen."

Penny chirped in reply and Vorn watched the droid roll back out of the walkway and head back towards the ground, "Okay hold it there." Vorn told Penny, "I still need you in the building, but you need to find somewhere to hide. I'll let you know what to do next." Then he switched from the live feed from Penny's camera to the image he had just stored.

The set up that he could see was almost identical to what he was holding in his hands right now. Someone had taken a comlink that he guessed belonged to either Jaysica or Tobis and connected it up to a datapad. The datapad stored the recorded message of Jaysica pleading for help while the comlink then transmitted the plea on the rebels' frequency over and over again. The issue as far as Vorn could tell was that it was such an obvious trap and yet as far as he could see there were no booby traps set up to catch whoever was first into the room. Of course Penny could have been too small to trigger any such traps, but there ought to

have been some signs of them.

"It's a trap." He said to himself.

"Yeah, isn't that the idea?" Cass asked in response and only then did Vorn realise that he had spoken out loud.

"No, that's not what I mean." He replied, "Look, the man that set up that transmitter failed to protect it in any way."

"So what?" Cass said.

"So that means he isn't expecting us or anyone else to try and head up there to shut it down." Vorn explained, "He's expecting us to go somewhere else."

"But why?"

Vorn shrugged.

"My guess would be so that he can then ambush us wherever we do end up. My guess is that if we study that building properly then there'll be an obvious spot to attack anyone finding that transmitter from. Then when we try and launch an attack on that position we'll be ambushed from somewhere else." Vorn explained, "We need to come up with something else to do instead."

"Like find out where they'd really be attacking from?" Cass suggested.

"Perhaps." Vorn replied, "But right now I'm thinking that if we actually go to that transmitter then we'll get hold of that datapad and who knows what sort of information could be inside it."

"And that guy won't be expecting us to be there so it's completely unguarded." Cass added with a smile.

"There is one slight problem of course." Vorn said, lowering the datapad and looking out of the window, "We still need to get past them." And he stared at the stormtroopers Garm had left surrounding the building.

The ceiling had shifted slightly since Tobis first put his weight on it but he knew now that it was going to be a somewhat drawn out process of waiting for it to bend enough to create a gap that he and Jaysica could climb through.

"You know if both of us hung up there then we be done in half the time." Jaysica suggested.

"Oh, err, I 'm sure that's a very good idea." Tobis replied, aware that putting too much weight on the ceiling panel could rip it free in a manner that produced a significant amount of noise. His plan was to bend it just enough rather than risk alerting their captors by tearing the panel from the ceiling.

But Jaysica was already removing her jacket and wrapping the sleeves around her hands for protection from the sharp edges she knew the panel possessed.

"It'll be just fine. You'll see." Jaysica said as she stood beside Tobis and looked up at the edge of the panel.

"Err, no. I think you'd better-" Tobis began but it was too late and Jaysica jumped up, successfully grabbing onto the edge of the ceiling panel with her hands and in an instant her full weight was applied to it.

Weight that proved too much for the ceiling to bear.

There was a brief creaking sound as the ceiling panel struggled to remain in place.

"There," Jaysica said when she heard the sound, "I told you it would-" and then there was a tearing sound as the metal panel was ripped free just as Tobis had feared and it came crashing down to the floor, bringing with it Jaysica, Tobis and all of the sand that it had been supporting.

Jaysica squealed as she fell, turning to a loud cough as she swallowed a significant amount of the sand now pouring in through the hole. Meanwhile Tobis just gasped as the ceiling panel landed on top of him before he averted his face in time to avoid the sand that would otherwise flow into his eyes and mouth. Then he dragged himself out from under the dislodged ceiling panel and looked towards the cell door, drawing the stolen knife and waiting for either of their captors to come rushing into the cell to investigate the commotion.

"No one's out there." He muttered when the door remained shut and he looked upwards. Sand was still pouring in through the hole but now daylight was also pouring into the cell and Tobis smiled. Then he turned towards Jaysica and kissed her, "We can get out." He said.

Tobis went first, Jaysica helped him climb up through the hole into the street above and then he reached back down for her, dragging her out of the hole before they both looked around and tried to get their bearings. The drawback was that after their capture Kenit had brought them back to his hideout by an entirely underground route and in the time that Jaysica and Tobis had spent on the surface before then they had not come this way at all. The result was that although they were now both free of their cell, they were also both hopelessly lost.

"Err, I think we should try and find the ship." Tobis said.

"Do you think the others will be there?" Jaysica asked in reply.

"Well, ah, I don't know. Perhaps. But from there we can at least signal them to let them know that we've escaped and warn them about Keena and Kenit." Tobis said.

"And what about the risk of the ship just falling into a big hole in the ground? We never did find out how bad the situation was." Jaysica pointed out, referring to the fact that when the Silver Hawk had landed one of its landing struts and fallen through the roof of an underground structure, leaving it unstable. Jaysica and Tobis



had been despatched to investigate how safe the ship was but had been ambushed before they could find out.

"Well, err, if the ship hasn't fallen into the hole yet then it should be alright providing we don't try and start the engines and if it has then it shouldn't be able to fall any further." Tobis said, "I hope."

Jaysica frowned.

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

"Well, err, it's the only idea I've got." He replied and then he looked around, "Now which way should we try first?"

Mace and Tharun had to balance remaining far enough ahead of the stormtroopers with making sure that they did not give up the chase and turn back.

"Any plan on where we should be heading captain?" Tharun asked as he paused briefly to turn and fire two rapid shots at the stormtroopers. He did not worry about aiming, although shooting one or more of the stormtroopers would be a bonus for now it was not necessary. Indeed, killing too many could compel the others to withdraw.

"For now we just keep moving." Mace replied, "Hopefully the major will let us know when we can stop running."

## 6.

As far as Vorn could tell there were only eight stormtroopers remaining outside the cluster of buildings. The squad leader was easy to recognise thanks to his bright red shoulder pauldron, but it was much harder to tell the difference between the other members of his squad. Their armour and most of their equipment was identical, one carried a light repeating blaster but the rest were all armed with standard blaster rifles like the one Vorn himself carried. Instead Cass and Vorn had tried looking for other features to differentiate the stormtroopers from one another. Unfortunately the only method they could come up with was to look at the way sand had stuck to their equipment in different ways and it was this that had given Vorn his number. It seemed quite flimsy reasoning to him but it was all that either of them had.

"They can keep the entire perimeter in view at the same time." Cass commented as she watched how some of the stormtroopers remained in one place while the others patrolled in a circle. Then an idea struck her, "What about trying to get in underground?" she suggested, "I mean we know there are tunnels all over this place. Maybe some of them will lead into there."

Vorn shook his head.

"It's possible, but we just don't know enough about what's underground. There could be tunnels leading into any of those buildings, but we don't know where they begin. On the other hand Kenit may have picked that place because it can only be approached from above ground."

"So we need to find some way of just walking past all those stormtroopers then?" Cass said.

"Pretty much." Vorn replied and then he smiled.

"What? What have you seen?" Cass asked him.

"A way in." he said and he pointed to where the stormtroopers had lined up the bodies of their fallen comrades in a row.

"We're going to disguise ourselves as stormtroopers?" Cass said.

"Well I am." Vorn told her.

"But what about me?"

"Aren't you a little short for a stormtrooper?" Vorn said.

"Yes but how do I get inside?"

"As my prisoner of course." Vorn told her.

The bodies of the stormtroopers had been lined up beside one of the neighbouring buildings, arranged so that one lay along the wall and the rest were laid out parallel to this. The lightweight sleeping bags that they carried in their backpacks had been used as body bags rather than just leaving them lying out in the open. They had been positioned where none of the stationary stormtroopers could see them and the patrols would only see the bodies further from the building clearly as they walked past. Vorn's plan was to gain access to the building the bodies were beside and have Harvey slice a hole in the wall behind them. Then drag the two closest inside and strip them of everything useful. Then the bodies would be returned to their bags and replaced just in case anyone decided to make a closer inspection.

Locating the building was simple. Vorn and Cass, along with Harvey simply skirted around the area watched by the stormtroopers until they found the correct building and slipped inside unseen through the first opening they came to. From there they made their way to the wall by the bodies and stood back as Harvey rolled forwards.

The droid studied the panels that made up the wall, identifying where each one was attached to the adjacent ones. Each was roughly half a metre square and to cut through one completely would have made enough noise to bring the entire squad of stormtroopers running in the rebels' direction. However, rather than being welded together the panels were instead just bolted at their corners. The fasteners used had had their head sheared off after the building had been assembled, leaving only a blank face that prevented anyone with a simple hand tool from undoing them. But amongst the tools Harvey possessed was a drill that the droid used to remove what remained of the bolt heads on the inside of the wall. With these gone Cass and Vorn could just slide the panel inwards and reach outside to drag the closest body through the hole.

"Put it over here." Vorn said as they pulled the body bag through the hole, "Then we'll get the second one."

"Why do we need two?" Cass asked.

"Because they've all got great big holes in them thanks to Tharun and that rifle of his." Vorn replied, "By getting two sets of armour we can mix and match the different plates to make a full undamaged set. I hope." After the second body was dragged inside the two rebels replaced the panel and began the process of stripping the bodies. As well as removing their armour and the bodygloves beneath them Vorn took their weapons, handing one of the rifles to Cass.

"Take this." He said, "We'll hide it in my pack when we're moving past the stormtroopers."

"What about my carbine?" Cass asked.

"Leave it here with Harvey and the other gear we aren't taking in with us. We can pick it up later but this rifle is better than your carbine."

Cass just nodded as she took the weapon and then continued to remove equipment from the bodies. Meanwhile Vorn stood up, holding one of the bodygloves.

"I'll be right back. I need to change." He said and he left the room to undress. When he returned Cass smirked as she saw him wearing just a bodyglove with a large hole in the chest. As he turned around she saw that there was a matching hole in the back, identifying which stormtrooper it had belonged to.

"Isn't that a bit drafty?" she asked and Vorn frowned.

"You'll be getting as bad as Kara if you-" he began and then he sudden stopped and his face fell.

"I'm sorry." Cass said suddenly, getting and rushing to embrace Vorn, "I didn't mean to-"

"No that's alright." Vorn interrupted, pushing her away, "Now just help me get a set of this armour together and I can grieve when we're all away from here."

*Pain.*

Kara screamed again.

"Stang!" she shouted, "I should be in a medical unit being pumped full of drugs. Not stuck in this poodoo hole with only a droid and a witch for company. I'll never forgive the boss for bringing me here."

"But Lieutenant Larcus Miss," Jeeves replied, "It was you that left headquarters to meet with us. Major Larcus had nothing to do with-"

*Rage.*

Kara screamed once more and this time she lashed out with a foot, kicking Jeeves squarely in the chest and sending him toppling backwards.

*She needs you. Help her.*

Vay ignored Lara.

*What? Can't you even offer her more water?*

Vay took a deep breath and held up a canteen.

"How about another drink?" she asked and Kara nodded.

"Thanks." She gasped and Vay walked towards her with the canteen.

Kara was just taking a drink from it when she dropped it and screamed again.

*Pain.*

This time Vay screamed as well, not from sharing the pain of the contraction but instead because Kara had instinctively reached out and grasped her hand, squeezing it so tightly that Vay considered the possibility that some of the bones in it would be broken.

"See?" Kara said, leaning closely towards Vay and staring at her directly in her eyes, "Now you feel the pain when I do."

Vay tried to release Kara's grip, but the rebel woman held her too tightly.

"I need my hand back." Vay said sternly.

"No. Stay." Kara replied.

"What?"

"Stay right there. I just need someone to be beside me." Kara said.

"Don't be ridiculous." Vay replied, "Besides, how bad can it be?"

Kara squeezed Vay's hand again and she yelped.

"That's not even close." Kara told her, "Now either stay put or get that lightsaber out and hack off my hand, because I'm not letting go of you."

Vay's free hand began to move for her lightsaber.

*Don't do it Vay. You couldn't possibly be so cruel.*

Vay relaxed, her hand returning to her side.

"Fine, I'll stay here." She told Kara, "But don't count on me for any words of comfort."

Meanwhile Jeeves had got back to his feet and returned to the end of the couch.

"Well really." He said, "I am only trying to do what you have requested."

"I said nothing about contradicting me." Kara snapped back at him, "Now just tell me how far along I am."

"Well you must understand that my knowledge on the matter is rather limited Lieutenant Larcus." Jeeves replied.

*Anger.*

"Damn it Jeeves! Just give me an answer." Kara yelled.

"I believe you are well into the active labour stage Lieutenant. Your child will be born very soon." The droid said.

*Pain.*

Kara let out another scream and subconsciously she squeezed Vay's hand again, causing her to cry out as well.