

# STAR WARS

## 3-01: The Way Home (Part 1)

By Stephen J Dutton



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...

## **THE WAY HOME (PART 1)**

STRANDED ON A REMOTE PLANET GARM AND VAY CAN ONLY HOPE FOR RESCUE.  
HOWEVER, WHEN HELP ARRIVES IT IS NOT FROM WHO THEY WERE HOPING FOR...

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<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.htm>

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# 1.

What had once been the labour camp of a mysterious alien species and their followers was now a smouldering ruin. Garm Larcus, agent of the Imperial Security Bureau, looked around and surveyed the ruins. None of the occupants had survived the inferno he had caused, that much was clear. But in the process of destroying the camp he had also destroyed the transport ship that was the only way off this uncharted world.

"Vay, we need to see if we can find anything useful." He said to his companion, a young blonde-haired woman in a tight fitting bodyglove.

"Don't worry Garm." Vay replied as she approached him, "I've done survival courses, I know what to do."

"Good." Garm replied, "Because the ISB doesn't focus much on this sort of thing."

"You know," Vay said, standing immediately beside Garm and placing a hand on his shoulder, "when two people are stranded in a cold climate the best way to keep warm is—"

"Light a fire." Garm interrupted.

"I wasn't going to say that."

"I know. But we're lighting a fire."

There was enough unburned material scattered about for Garm to gather up for a fire while Vay searched the wreckage for anything else that may be of use. But when she returned with an armful of chair cushions Garm was puzzled.

"There's a reason those things didn't burn." He said, "They're all treated with flame retardant."

"I know that." Vay replied as she set them down beside the fire, "I just thought it would be nice if we didn't have to lie on the ground while we slept."

"That's actually a good idea." Garm said, "Now how about you light this up?" and he backed away from the neat pile of wood he made inside a small ring of stones.

Smiling Vay drew her lightsaber and held it close to the pile before igniting it. The characteristic 'snap-hiss' of the weapon activating was joined by a soft 'whoosh' as the blade set light to the wood.

Garm took one of the cushions from the pile and sat down on it. Vay followed suit, placing her cushion right beside Garm's and leaning her head on his shoulder.

"So do you have a plan?" she asked.

"For tonight no." Garm said, looking up into the darkening sky.

"Then what about tomorrow?"

"We need to find food and water for a start. Then..." and he trailed off.

"Then what?"

"We still need to find out who these aliens were or what they were doing here." Garm said, "You don't just kidnap people and bring them across parsecs of space just to mutilate them and march them up and down all day."

"You want to continue with the investigation?" Vay asked, "While we're stuck here with no way home?"

"I do." Garm said, "So starting tomorrow I'm going to try and find out where those aliens were taking their slaves to."

"I'll say one thing for it," Major Vorn Larcus III said as he winced and put the glass back down, "this place is consistent."

"Then perhaps its time to change our meeting place." His companion, Captain Mace Grayle of the freighter *Silver Hawk* replied as he forced down a mouthful of his own drink.

The pair were waiting for a contact to meet them. Lord Couran Desh had chosen to go into retirement when the Empire's influence grew on the world of Estran, but having never spoken out publicly against the new regime he still had contacts within the government and fed what information came his way to Vorn who had instead defected to the Rebel Alliance.

"This place was Couran's idea." Vorn said, "I'm not sure if it means something to him or if it's just his idea of a joke."

"A joke?" a voice came from nearby and a hooded figure sat down at the table with the two rebels, "My boy you should know I never joke about fine liquor."

"Now I know you're joking." Mace said.

"Quite so." Lord Desh replied and he took a sip of his own drink, the look on his face obscured by his hood.

"So what do you have for us this time?" Vorn asked.

Lord Desh slid a mem-stik across the table.

"The usual." He said, "Its local government stuff mainly, but Gregor was at dinner with Lord Torr and I last week."

'Gregor' was Gregor Horatian, the sector moff and anything to do with him was of interest to the rebellion. "There's something else." Lord Desh added reluctantly, "Something personal." "You think someone knows about our meetings?" Mace asked. "No." Lord Desh said, "Vorn, it's about Garm."

Jennay Larcus struggled with the keys to her front door as she tried to keep hold of the bag of groceries and open the door at the same time. Just as the door began to swing open her young daughter Cayla pushed past her and ran inside.

"Cayla wait while I turn off the alarm." Jennay called out.

"But I want ice cream!" the girl replied, heading directly for the kitchen. Jennay just had enough time to realise that the burglar alarm had not begun to sound as the front door opened when Cayla let out another shout, "Grandpa! Mommy grandpa's here!"

"Dad?" Jennay called out as she followed her daughter to the kitchen, "I wasn't expecting you to-" and she stopped mid-sentence when she reached the kitchen door and saw that it was not her father sat at the table with Jennay hugging him - it was Vorn Larcus, "Cayla go to your room." She said sternly.

"But mommy-"

"But nothing." Jennay interrupted, "Go to your room."

"Yes, do as your mother says Cayla." Vorn said to his granddaughter, "We have grown up things to discuss." The young girl kissed Vorn on the cheek and then dashed from the room and her footsteps echoed as she ran up the stairs.

"And no running inside!" Vorn shouted, smiling. Then he looked at Jennay, "Ah to be young." He said.

Jennay glared at him.

"I have a blaster." She said.

Still smiling, Vorn reached down to the chair beside his own and when his hand reappeared it was holding a long barrelled pistol by its barrel.

"Garm keeps it locked away when he's not got hold of it himself." Vorn said, setting the weapon down on the table, "He learnt that from me, I used to do the same. I know a young lady who was able to get me into the cabinet. She got me past your alarm as well."

"One of the friends you made when you ran off and joined the rebellion?" Jennay said, "Do you have any idea what you put us through?"

"What have they told you about him?" Vorn said, ignoring the question, "The ISB I mean."

"They're not even looking for him." Jennay said, taking a seat opposite Vorn, "They did look briefly, but they've just given up."

"Why?"

"They're saying he just ran off. With her." Jennay said, frowning as she said the word 'her'.

"You mean Vay." Vorn said.

"That's the one." Jennay replied, "I've seen how she looks at him, but I just can't believe he'd leave me for her. The ISB say they found his wedding ring in his desk drawer, but he always left it there when he went on an assignment to keep it safe."

"Can you tell me what he was looking into when he disappeared?" Vorn asked.

Jennay shook her head.

"The ISB wouldn't tell me. All I know is that his speeder was found about sixty kilometres outside Estran City, hidden in woodland. Towards the coast."

Vorn nodded.

"I should be able to check that out for myself." He said.

"You're going to try and find him then?" Jennay asked.

"Of course. He's still my son."

"But what if you do find him? Aren't you on different sides in this war?"

"Ah." Vorn said, "Yes we are. Jennay, its likely that if my team finds out where he is we won't be able to bring him home. He'll be interned in a POW camp on an Alliance world."

"So I won't see him again either way will I?"

"We can work something out." Vorn replied, "You and Cayla can be relocated too. We often take the relatives of Alliance personnel beyond the reach of the Empire. I'm sure we can make arrangements to do the same for you both. But it won't be easy. Even the Alliance settlements on these planets are basic, the POW camps are worse."

"But I'd be with Garm, yes?"

"Yes you would."

"Then I'll do it." Jennay said and then she paused, "Thank you Vorn." She added, "Thanks for believing that he didn't just run off with another woman. I know he wouldn't. Not now."

Vorn frowned.

"What do you mean 'not now'?"

In the lounge of the *Silver Hawk* the rebels under Vorn's command had assembled along with Captain Grayle and his engineer Tobis Dorfus.

"So what's going on boss?" a tall dark haired woman asked. This was Kara Bilstran, a former fighter pilot who served as the unit's field medic.

"Garm's gone missing." Vorn replied, "I want to go and find him."

"Your son?" the other woman present asked, this one smaller than Kara.

"No Jaysica," Kara said, "some random guy called Garm."

The final member of Vorn's team raised his hand.

"Yes sergeant?" Vorn said.

"When did it become our job to go looking for members of the ISB?" he asked.

"Tharun," Jaysica said, "it's his son."

"Tharun does have a point major." Mace commented.

"Aren't the ISB looking for him?" Tobis asked.

Vorn shook his head.

"They seem to think he may have just run off with Vay Udra." He said.

"The nice little blonde?" Tharun asked, smiling, "Are we sure he didn't?"

"Of course he didn't." Vorn replied sharply, "I raised my children properly."

The other rebels looked at one another.

"Err boss," Kara said, "one of your kids is a spoiled little princess and the other's a fascist G-man."

"Maybe there's another one we haven't met." Tharun said.

Vorn frowned.

"Look," he said, "Garm's my son and I'm going looking for him. Now can I count on you for help or not?"

"Sure boss, I'm in." Kara said.

"What the hell," Tharun added, "I'm with you too."

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Mace said, "but you can count on me. Tobis too, right?" and he looked at his engineer who just nodded.

"Looks like you've got us all major." Tharun said.

"I didn't say anything." Jaysica said.

"Nobody cares what you have to say." Kara said to her, pulling a face at the same time.

"It's a long walk back to sector headquarters if you're not joining us." Mace pointed out.

"I was going to say yes anyway." Jaysica said.

"Sure you were." Kara said as she got up and went to get herself a drink.

"But I was." Jaysica protested as the other rebels walked away. Only Tobis remained, smiling awkwardly at her.

Heading to the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit Mace and Vorn studied a map of the area where Garm's landspeeder had been found.

"Well there's only one settlement within ten kilometres of there Mace." Vorn said, "Seems like a good place to start."

Mace nodded.

"I agree major." Mace replied, "But the problem is what to do when we get there."

"What do you mean?" Vorn asked.

"Well look at the place. The local airstrip is nothing but a beacon in a field. I doubt there'll be speeders to hire there and it's quite a walk to where Garm's was found. We can't fly the *Silver Hawk* to that spot or people will start asking questions."

"Then we won't fly there at all." Vorn said, "We'll fly to Estran City and hire a speeder there."

"We better make it a large one." Mace replied, "I don't want to go out there without being armed and we'll need to keep our blasters out of sight."

## 2.

Mace brought the speeder to a halt outside a run down cantina named the Laughing Hutt Inn.

"Great captain." Kara exclaimed, "I could murder a drink."

"We're not here to enjoy ourselves." Vorn said, "We're here to see if anyone's seen Garm."

"Well I'm going inside for a drink." Kara said, "This mission's off the books so I can do as I like."

"Got any money?" Mace asked and Kara's face fell.

"Boss," she said slowly, "can I borrow ten credits? I'll pay you back. Honest." And she smiled at Vorn.

"One drink each," Vorn said, "and its on me." And he pulled a banknote from his pocket.

Tharun snatched the banknote and went inside the cantina, Kara rushing in close behind him.

Following the other rebels into the cantina Mace and Vorn looked around. The cantina was dimly lit and all around them locals stared at the rebels.

"I don't like this place." Jaysica whispered, "These people don't look very friendly."

"But they have beer." Tharun replied and he walked up to the bar, "Six beers." He said to the barman who did not reply as he turned around and began to prepare the drinks.

When the barman turned back around Vorn stepped up to him.

"Excuse me," he said, "but we're looking for someone. Can you help us?"

The barman looked around as the cantina's patrons now glared at him.

"Lots of outsiders coming by looking for someone or something recently." The barman replied.

"I just want to know if you've seen this man." Vorn said and he held out his datapad, an image of Garm on its screen, though not in uniform.

The barman looked at the datapad.

"He the cop?" he asked.

"ISB." Vorn said, "But you have seen him then?"

"Yeah, well he and his girlfriend didn't stay long."

"Girlfriend?" Kara commented and she stared at Vorn.

"Some blonde. They left with Thracken."

"Who's that?" Vorn asked.

"Thracken Grammel? He's some old guy that owns a ship. Spends his time poking about the nebula and his money on drink. Always going about lights in the sky. That's why your guy and the young lady were here. You should have seen the look on Thracken's face when he thought someone was actually taking him seriously. Both of them left with him."

"So where can we find this Thracken then?" Mace asked, looking around the cantina.

"A pathfinder?" Mace exclaimed as the rebels stood at the edge of the landing field and looked towards the only vessel present.

"It's a piece of junk." Jaysica said.

"It looks older than you boss." Kara added, grinning.

"Oh thanks." Vorn replied. Then he looked around at the other rebels and added, "Wait here while I go talk to him."

"Oh I'm in no hurry to go near that." Kara said, "I feel I need a tetanus shot just looking at it."

Vorn began to pick his way across the field, avoiding the worst of the muddy patches scattered all around.

"Stay where you are!" a voice suddenly called out from the direction of the pathfinder-class ship and a man significantly older than Vorn appeared from behind the ship wielding a blaster carbine.

Vorn halted and raised his arms. Meanwhile back near the speeder the other rebels reacted by reaching for their own weapons, particularly Tharun. The former mercenary brought his own heavy rifle up to his shoulder and took aim at the man.

"Drop the blaster old man." He called out as he moved forwards, making sure to keep Vorn out of his line of fire.

"Tharun no." Vorn called out, glancing towards him. Then he looked back towards the other man, "Are you Thracken?" he asked.

"Who are you?"

"My name's Vorn. Vorn Larcus."

"Should that name mean anything to me?"

"I'm Garm's father."

"Who?"

"Garm Larcus. The ISB agent that came to speak with you."

"Oh." Thracken said, and his look of concern changed to one of sadness, "They're gone." He said, lowering his blaster, "Both of them. They were taken away like all the others."

"Taken where?" Vorn asked.

"Come inside." Thracken said, "You need to see."

The interior of the pathfinder was cramped. The vessel was designed for a maximum of four occupants, so when Thracken indicated that all six rebels should accompany him inside there was very little room to move about.

"I have it here somewhere." Thracken said as he began to pull crude rolled up charts from shelves and toss them over his shoulder, "Ah, here it is." He said excitedly and he turned around and unrolled the chart on the table around which everyone stood. The chart resembled a simple map of the sector with the common hyperspace routes between systems connecting the star systems. But where most such charts would show only the inhabited region of space this one extended into the area occupied by the neighbouring nebula. Here the map was marked with crude hand drawn lines and points where Thracken had modified it.

"They come from in here." He announced, moving his hand across the nebula on the chart, "But they aren't staying in there. They come here too. I've seen them. They took your son and the young lady with him."

"Who are they?" Kara asked.

"I don't know, but I've seen their ships. I have pictures here somewhere."

"Never mind that for now, where did they take my son?" Vorn said.

Thracken looked at Vorn without speaking.

"He doesn't know." Tharun said.

"This is a waste of time." Kara said.

"Maybe not." Mace responded and he looked at Tharun, "Tharun, do you remember when we were waiting for the *Ocean Queen*?"

Tharun smiled. The *Ocean Queen* was a vessel that the group had hijacked for the rebellion. As part of the plan Mace and Tharun lay in wait close to the nebula aboard the *Silver Hawk* while the others infiltrated the ship itself.

"We saw a ship heading into the nebula." The former mercenary said.

"Yes!" Thracken sudden yelled and Jaysica jumped, "You've seen them too!" he added excitedly as he rushed towards Tharun and grabbed his arms.

"Friendly guy when he's not pointing blasters at people isn't he?" Kara commented as Tharun separated himself from the old man.

"This is wonderful!" Thracken said, looking at each of the rebels in turn, "I've tried for so long to convince people that what I've seen is real. Now you can help me."

"Ah." Mace said, looking at Vorn.

"That may be difficult." Vorn said to Thracken, "We're not on very good terms with the authorities.

Thracken's face fell.

"But your son." He said, "He's in the ISB. You said so."

"Yes, but we're not." Kara said.

"Look," Vorn said, "the Empire may not like us but we have powerful friends. Maybe we can convince them. But we'll need to know where to look."

Thracken remained silent.

"He doesn't know." Kara said, "After all that he doesn't know."

"I see their ships all the time." Thracken said, "They travel into and out of the nebula and all through the spire worlds. That's where I saw them first, but now I've seen them here too. That was when they took your son with the other captives."

"Others?" Mace asked and Thracken nodded.

"Humans. Slaves I think. They loaded them onto a questor-class vessel."

This caught the attention of the rebels.

"A questor? The captain wasn't a trandoshan by any chance was he?" Vorn asked.

"Yes. Yes, a trandoshan. You've seen the ship then?"

"If not then its one hell of a co-incidence." Tharun said.

"What are you all talking about?" Jaysica asked.

"Oh shut up." Kara said, "You were frozen in carbonite at the time, it doesn't concern you."

"It does if someone's going to cart me off to be a slave." Jaysica replied.

"Trust me Jaysica, no-one who's ever met you outside of a block of carbonite is ever going to want to enslave you." Kara said.

Ignoring this exchange, Vorn focused on Thracken.

"Can we take some of those charts?" he asked, "I think we'll need them."

"Of course." Thracken replied and he scooped up the chart and began to roll it up.

"We're going after that slaver aren't we?" Tharun asked.

"He took my son." Vorn said, "Of course we're going after him."

"You know headquarters wants you back ASAP. Apparently Shyla Nerin has a job for you."

Jacen Karn, the rebel procurement agent in the shadow port of Onell the Hutt said when Vorn's team walked into the store he ran as a cover.

"They know we're here?" Tobis asked.

"No," Jacen replied, "but Shyla was complaining about your absence when I spoke to her yesterday."

"Don't worry." Vorn said, "I can handle her."

"You do that often major?" Tharun commented, with a smile that disappeared when Vorn glared at him.

"So what brings you here anyway?" Jacen asked, "Need some spares?"

"Not this time." Mace replied.

"We're looking for that trandoshan slaver." Vorn said.

Jacen slumped down in a worn looking chair and brought a hand up to his forehead.

"I can't help you with this." He said, "If Onell the Hutt thinks I'm disrupting—"

"I'm not asking you to help us deal with him." Vorn said, "We just need your help finding him."

"And in not telling HQ we're here." Mace added.

"That I can do." Jacen replied to Mace, then he looked back at Vorn, "But I'm not doing anything that could get me kicked out of this place. My work here is too important."

"You don't need to do anything." Vorn reassure Jacen, "In fact I'm hoping to avoid all contact with the trandoshan himself."

"You are?" Jacen said.

"We are?" Kara added, "How's that supposed to work boss?"

"Yeah, I can't beat answers out of someone unless they're in arms' reach." Tharun said.

"Uh, I don't think we're supposed to do that anyway." Tobis said quietly, prompting sharp looks from both Mace and Tharun.

"Does anyone honestly think we can physically threaten a trandoshan?" Vorn asked, casting his gaze over the other rebels.

"He's got a point there." Jacen said, "But if you're planning on pulling his scales off until he talks, then what's your master plan?"

"Easy." Vorn replied, "We only need to know where he took Garm, so we break into his ship and steal his nav computer. We get a full record of everywhere he's been and he's stranded here until he can find a replacement."

Jacen smiled.

"So as well as getting what you want, the Alliance gets a lead on slaving operations throughout the sector."

Jacen said, nodding in approval.

"Plus if you can delay him getting a replacement nav computer we can keep him boxed up here even longer." Mace added.

"I think I can arrange that." Jacen said, "I'll start buying up nav computer spares. I'll get onto Jek as well."

"The fence?" Kara commented.

"Yeah." Jacen replied, "He hates slavers as well. In fact that wookiee outlaw tech Travakka may even be willing to get in on this. He'll be able to make use of the parts and given his species' history with the trandoshan slavers I reckon he'd jump at the chance to make life miserable for one."

"So how do we find this trandoshan's ship?" Jaysica asked, "Its not like those guys who met us when we landed asked for any registration documents."

"No." Jacen replied, "But given that we know exactly what our being is buying we can stake out slave auctions and watch for him arriving at any of them."

"Plus the docking bays." Tobis added, "There aren't that many ZH-25 questors around."

"That'll need a lot of manpower." Tharun said, "There are bays scattered all over this place."

"Not to mention the ships that land outside the limits of the shadow port itself." Kara added.

"He'll land inside." Mace said, "He won't want to risk transporting slaves further than necessary. Too many security problems."

"Even so," Vorn said, "we'll need to search the docking bays anyway if we're going to find his ship. Following him back to it will just mean having to fight him for the nav computer rather than breaking into an empty ship."

"Which brings us back to the question of manpower." Tharun said, "There are seven of us. Perhaps nine if those two friends of Jacen are willing to help."

"A dozen if you include the droids." Jaysica said.

"You want to risk letting Penny out alone?" Vorn asked, "I don't know about you, but I'm keeping Jeeves safe inside the ship."

"Oh yeah." Jaysica replied.



"Of course the general dishonesty around here could be put to work for us." Mace said.

"How so?" Vorn asked him.

"Easy. We bribe someone on Onell's staff. Throw them a couple of hundred credits to let us know when the trandoshan turns up."

Lae Chen stared across the table at Vorn.

"I know who you are, you realise that?" the man said to the rebel.

"Yes, you've mentioned it before."

"So why should I believe that you have business with a slaver? Onell employs me to make sure things run smoothly, not to arrange blaster duels in the streets."

"Help us and we'll be able to avoid just that." Vorn replied and he held out the roll of banknotes, "Two hundred credits. All Imperial, so you can spend it anywhere. Now all we want to know is when the trandoshan lands. It's his ship we're interested in, not him. At least not yet anyway."

Lae Chen reached out and took the money.

"I will tell you what I hear." He said, "But if you cause trouble then you will answer to Onell. Your friends as well." Then he got up and walked away.

"So are we on?" Tharun asked as he stepped from the shadows. Just in case Lae Chen had reacted poorly and summoned assistance Vorn had made sure he had backup of his own.

"We're on." Vorn replied, "Now we just need to wait for the trandoshan to rear his scaly head."

### 3.

After three days there was still no word of the trandoshan. However, Jacen had set his plan in motion for denying their target a replacement nav computer and that part of the overall scheme at least had gone better than hoped for. Both Jek Deray and Travakka had agreed to help, joining Jacen in purchasing every nav computer they could find. As other traders noticed this buying pattern they began to suspect that there was about to be a massive call for such devices and they began to hide their stock in anticipation of future demand. Those few still for sale were now being offered for heavily inflated prices. The rebels were discussing the effectiveness of their plan in Jacen's store when the door opened and Lae Chen entered, accompanied by a squad of Onell's guards.

"The Great Onell is disturbed gentlebeings." The hutt's chief enforcer announced as he walked across the store, "There have been unusual purchases made in the few days and it seems that you are at the centre of them. I do hope you are not up to anything."

"Hey Lae Chen," Jacen replied loud enough for all of the guards to hear, "since when has the hutt been against people making a profit."

"Oh he isn't." Lae Chen replied, running a hand over a stack of nav computers, "So long as he still gets his cut." Then he stared directly at Jacen and pointed a finger at him, "That's what I told Jek, that's what I told the wookie, that's what I'm telling you now and if necessary I'll tell your reptilian friend in docking bay twelve."

"We don't have any reptilian- Ow!" Jaysica began before Kara elbowed her in the ribs, smiling at Lae Chen as she did it.

"Don't worry." Vorn said, "We'll let our friend know of your employer's concerns. But thank you for bringing them to our attention."

Lae Chen frowned before turning around and leaving the store, his troops following him.

"So bay twelve then?" Mace said.

"Bay twelve." Vorn repeated.

"Just one thing boss," Kara said, "where the hell is bay twelve?" and the rebels all turned and looked at Jacen.

"I'll draw you a map." He said.

"Thanks." Vorn replied, "For everything."

"Yeah well my involvement ends now." Jacen said, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Ustrussk watched as his men hooked the wheeled cage up to the lightweight vehicle they had hired for the duration of their stay here.

"Isss thiss your bessst?" he asked the twi'lek who had supplied the vehicle.

"No. But its what your men paid for. You want bigger and better then pay me more."

Ustrussk hissed angrily. In his years as a slaver he had most often dealt with twi'leks as a commodity to be traded, now this one was acting as if they were equals. The twi'lek just smiled as he walked away, heading towards his much better quality landspeeder. Despite Ustrussk's complaint, he knew that the wheeled vehicle would be good enough for his purposes. It only had to tow the cage to the slave auction and then back here again. If the force was with him then they would be away by daybreak.

"We're ready sir!" a sullustan called out to from the vehicle, waving at Ustrussk.

Taking one last look around Ustrussk calmly walked over the vehicle and got aboard and then the driver sped off. All the while the slavers were completely unaware that they were being watched.

The docking bay, like nearly all of the shadow port was below ground level, though still open to the sky. This provided natural protection to it from the sandstorms that wracked this planet. However, it also meant that the bay could be easily observed if someone was willing to brave the storms and climb up to the surface. Or even the six people lay at the rim around the docking bay's walls.

"It looks clear major." Tharun said, his voice muffled slightly by the cloth mask he like the others wore along with a set of goggles to protect their faces.

"Right then," Vorn said from behind his mask, "Let's-"

"Wait!" Tharun snapped suddenly and he held up a clenched fist, "Guards."

Sure enough, a pair of figures wandered into view, blaster cradled in their arms. The pair halted beside the ship, apparently talking to one another.

"It only takes one to raise an alarm." Kara said.

"Over to you I think captain." Vorn said, looking at Mace, "We need this done quickly."

Mace nodded; smiling behind his own mask from over his shoulder he unslung a bulky weapon with a flared barrel. As he got to his feet Tharun rose to a kneeling position and unrolled a length of syntherope.

"Just slide captain." Tharun told Mace as he wrapped the line through Mace's belt, "I've got you at this end."

Mace nodded and took hold of the syntherope in one gloved hand while keeping hold of the deck clearing blaster in the other. Standing at the edge of the docking bay he leant backwards and then jumped, gripping the syntherope just enough to slow his descent.

The guards heard Mace land and turned towards him. But before either could call out the smuggler had aimed his weapon and fired at them. The bright blue energy pulse expanded out from the barrel, enveloping everything within a cone-shaped area. Both guards were caught in the blast and fell to the ground, their nervous systems overloaded. Mace then returned the bulky weapon to his shoulder and drew his sidearm as behind him the other rebels followed him into the docking bay.

Jaysica ran towards the ship, halting when she was beneath the sealed access ramp.

"I can't reach." She said as she tried to reach up to the control panel set into the hull above her.

"Tobis, help me with her." Vorn said as he looked around for any signs that there were any more guards in the docking bay and the pair rushed to Jaysica's aid. Lifting her off the ground, they held her aloft long enough to inspect the panel.

"Its locked." She said, "But I suppose I could hotwire it."

"Do it." Vorn said, "Quickly."

They continued to hold Jaysica off the ground as she pried open the control panel and began to short various wires together.

"How long is this going to take?" Kara asked.

"I'd like to see you do this any quicker." Jaysica replied. Then there was a flash and Jaysica squealed. Kara just shook her head, but almost immediately there was a hiss of releasing pressure and the ramp lowered before them.

"Jaysica, Tobis, with me." Vorn ordered, "Everyone else wait here."

The three rebels rushed up the ramp and turned towards the cockpit.

"Shouldn't you be outside?" a voice called out from ahead of them, "The boss wants this place kept secure." And a chair visible through the cockpit hatch turned around to reveal a man sitting there. From their position beneath the ship the rebels and this man had been unable to see one another, "Stang!" he exclaimed as he reached for the blaster at his hip. But Vorn was quicker and he aimed and fired his compact holdout pistol while the man's weapon was still in its holster. The energy bolt hit him squarely in the chest and the man rolled sideways from the chair, dead.

"Grab the computer!" Vorn shouted at Tobis and the engineer ran to the cockpit, jumping over the body near the doorway.

He crouched down beside the flight console and looked beneath it.

"I see it." He said, "But its fixed in place from the inside."

"Go help him Jaysica." Vorn ordered, "There's no need to be neat."

Rather than carefully remove the control panel Tobis held his blaster against its edge and fired, shearing off the side of the panel.

"Pull." He said to Jaysica and between them they ripped up the console to expose the electronics below, many of which had been fried. Tobis fired a second blast into the panel's insides and severed the metal harness that held the nav computer in place. Then he simply ripped the device out of it, "Got it major." He said, holding up the nav computer.

"Good." Vorn said, "Now let's get back to our own ship and take a look at that thing."

The first thing the rebels did when they returned to the Silver Hawk was lift off. Leaving two stunned and one dead slaver behind them, they did not want to be caught on the ground if Ustrussk came after them. Without his nav computer it would be sometime before he could leave the system. Unless of course he was able to make the necessary calculations to pilot a ship through hyperspace in his head.

Only after the stars had blurred into the shining vortex of hyperspace did Mace and Vorn leave the cockpit and head for the workshop where Tobis had connected the stolen nav computer to his R5 astromech droid, Harvey. Just in case the data was encrypted Vorn's protocol droid, Jeeves was there also top act as a translator.

"So what have we got Tobis?" Mace asked.

"Lots captain." Tobis replied, pointing to a scrolling list of jump co-ordinates being fed by Harvey to a nearby display.

"Indeed sirs." Jeeves added, "It would seem that the owner of this computer never took the precaution of encrypting it or otherwise acting to prevent unauthorised access.

"Well I bet he never thought that anyone would rip it out of his ship." Vorn said, "But have you found anything useful?"

"I think so." Tobis answered and he selected a particular set of numbers, "These are a series of short jumps he made a few weeks back." He said, "All from one point in deep space to another."

"Like he's avoiding obstacles." Mace said and Vorn nodded in agreement.

"The sort of obstacles you'd find inside a nebula." He said.

"Well there are about a dozen of them." Tobis went on, "They go to this point here and then we get the same list of co-ordinates again but in reverse until here where they diverge from the other pattern."

"The return journey." Vorn said, "He just didn't go all the way back to Estran."

"Can we connect this to our nav computer?" Mace asked, "There's no hazardous code in there is there?" Harvey let out a burst of short bleeps and whistles.

"Why Harvey says that there is no need to risk connecting this device to the *Silver Hawk* Captain Grayle."

Jeeves translated, "He can store a single jump's worth of data at a time and safely upload it to our ship's nav computer. Then he can copy the next set of data while we make the jump."

"Sounds good to me." Mace said.

"Me too." Vorn agreed, "But I think we should have Kara in the turret just in case. We know where we're going now, but we don't know who or what's going to be waiting for us at the other end."

The planet floating in space ahead of the *Silver Hawk* did not look welcoming. On the outer edge of the so-called 'life-zone', that region around a star where temperatures were within the range to allow the Type-I atmosphere that most carbon-based life forms required to exist it was cold and barren. Only a few patches of blue or green near to the equator gave any indication of life.

"That's interesting." Mace said as he studied the sensor readouts.

"What?" Vorn asked, "All I see are rocks and sand."

"Here." Mace said, tapping the display and the image shifted to zoom in on the area he had been looking at, "I'd say there was something there wouldn't you?"

"Was' being the operative word." Vorn said, "That settlement's been burned to the ground."

"Yes, but recently." Mace said, "It's had time to cool, but the desert hasn't covered it yet. One good sandstorm and the whole thing will disappear."

"Well then captain," Vorn said, "take us down. Close, but not too close. Land casually."

Garm scanned the horizon with Vay's macrobinoculars. The device's energy cell was starting to run low and he had to keep its operation confined to the bare minimum of functions. Though every day the aliens running the camp had marched hundreds of slaves out and back in again there were few tracks, the ground in the direction they went was far too hard for that. However, here and there the workforce and their guards had left other signs of their passing that Garm and Vay had found in their search. These trails had led to locations that showed signs of having been dug up in the recent past. But at each location there had been no indication of what the aliens had been searching for and so the two Imperial agents had continued with their search.

"Any luck?" Vay's voice called out from behind him.

"None." Garm said, shutting off the macrobinoculars, "If they came this way they didn't leave any signs."

There was a sound like distant thunder from far overhead and both of them looked upwards just in time to see the white exhaust trail of a vessel passing through the upper each of the atmosphere.

"Who do you think that is?" Vay asked.

"I don't know who they are." Garm said, "But I don't think they're the aliens from the camp."

"Why not?"

"Easy. They're heading in a different direction."

"So what do you think they want?" Vay asked.

*They're here for you.* The voice in her head told her.

## 4.

"You know boss," Kara began as she joined him at the bottom of the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp, "If you and Mace were going to set us down so far away from that camp we could at least have brought a speeder with us."

"Do you have a speeder?" Vorn asked, "Because I lost mine along with my house when the Empire paid a visit."

"So we're walking?" Kara asked.

"We're walking." Vorn replied.

"Oh come on." Tharun said as he strode down the ramp with Jaysica close behind him, "A good walk will do us all good." Then he looked at Vorn, "The captain and Tobis will be here in a moment. They're just securing the ship."

"I thought the droids were going to look after the ship." Jaysica said.

"They are." Vorn told her, "But it never hurts to install a lockout in the systems. Just in case."

"All done." Mace's voice sounded as he and Tobis appeared at the top of the ramp.

"So no-one's going to be stealing the ship then?" Kara asked.

"No, Tobis has taken care of that." Mace replied.

"Err, it was easy." Tobis said, "I just ran the flight controls through Harvey. The *Silver Hawk* won't be able to take off without him plugged in."

"Its quite a clever set up." Mace said, "In an emergency the droids can still come and get us."

"Well if everybody's ready I'll take point." Tharun said and he set off in the direction of the burned out ruins they had detected from orbit.

Garm tipped sand onto the remains of their fire to make sure it was fully extinguished.

"Any signs of movement?" he asked Vay who was stood just outside the cave that they had turned into their camp.

"None." She replied. Vay was not using her macrobinoculars, but Garm still had faith in her ability to spot anyone approaching.

"Well they won't be spotting our fire now." Garm said as he stood up. Then he drew his blaster and checked its power cell. The weapon was not his issued sidearm that had been stolen by the slavers when he was ambushed on Estran. Instead it was a short carbine taken from one of the humans that had worked with the mysterious aliens who had operated the camp. Unfortunately he had only the one power cell for it and that was barely half charged. Vay had a blaster also, but it was a holdout model with limited capacity. Their best weapon it seemed was her lightsaber.

"So how do you want to handle this?" Vay asked.

Garm thought for a while. They had no idea how many beings they faced or even who they were. They needed more information.

"We should try and locate their landing site." He said eventually, "If we can take their ship then at least we've got a way off this rock."

"It'll be dark in an hour or so." Vay said, "If we leave now we'll just end up blundering about in the dark."

Garm nodded.

"We'll wait for tomorrow then." He said, "Then we'll leave at first light."

"Anything sergeant?" Vorn asked as Tharun studied the landscape ahead.

"No sir." Tharun replied, "I thought I spotted a smoke trail earlier, but it's gone now."

"Where from?" Vorn asked.

"That direction." Tharun replied, pointing in the general direction they were headed in anyway.

"Could it just be from that settlement?" Jaysica asked.

"I doubt it." Tharun said, "The settlement we saw from orbit was destroyed weeks ago. There wouldn't still be smoke coming from that."

"Yeah weeks ago." Kara said, "At about the time Junior vanished eh boss?"

"Well someone's been here not so long ago." Mace said as he walked out from behind a cluster of boulders and he held out a brightly coloured food wrapper.

"This writing's in aurebesh." Vorn said, referring to the galaxy's standard alphabet as he looked at the wrapper.

"So here's the proof that someone's been here from our civilisation and not too long ago." Mace said.

"Sergeant, do you have a fix on where you think you saw that smoke?" Vorn asked, looking around.

"Yes sir."

"Then let's get moving and everyone keep an eye out for trouble."

Unable to sleep Garm stood up and wandered to the mouth of the cave. He had been trapped here with Vay for weeks now and at long last a way back to his family had presented itself. He paced up and down, rubbing his hands together to keep them warm now that there was no fire to provide heat. Then he heard something. It sounded almost like a muffled cry and the sound of falling stones. He looked back into the cave and although it was too dark inside for him to see clearly he knew that Vay was still inside and probably still sound asleep.

He lowered a hand to his hip where the blaster was holstered and withdrew it. Another sound from beside him made Garm spin around, but as he began to bring his carbine into a firing position a rifle butt was slammed into his face and the darkness became total.

"Clear." Tharun said softly.

"No thanks to the Klutz." Kara added as the others approached the cave.

"It wasn't my fault." Jaysica protested, then clamped a hand over her own mouth as the others glared at her to keep her voice low, "The ground just gave way." She then whispered.

"Well wait here." Kara said, "I'm going to check out inside. I'll call out if I need help."

Vay opened her eyes as she was shaken awake. The first thing she noticed was that it was still dark and a quick glance at the face of the chronometer sat on the rock beside her told her that it was in the early hours of the morning.

"Garm what do you want?" she asked as she rolled over. Then she saw that it was Kara looking down at her. "Junior's outside taking a nap." Kara said as Vay's eyes widened in surprise.

*Just do as she says.*

Immediately Vay reached for her lightsaber. But as she extended her arm Kara saw what she was doing and brought her foot down on the weapon just as Vay's hand began to wrap around it.

"Stay still!" Kara yelled, aiming her blaster at Vay's head.

There were footfalls from behind her and Kara glanced over her shoulder just long enough to see Jaysica, Tharun and Vorn approaching with their weapons drawn and their glow rods now active.

"Hey boss, look who I found. The blonde one Tharun likes." And she smiled.

"What have you done with Garm?" Vay asked, cradling her injured hand.

"Don't worry," Vorn said, "Mace and Tobis are taking care of him."

"What about her?" Kara asked, looking down at Vay.

Vorn looked at Jaysica.

"Got some tape in that pack?" he asked.

"Of course." Jaysica replied, "I always carry some."

"Comes in handy when she breaks stuff." Kara commented and Tharun suppressed a smile.

Vorn took the reel of tape that Jaysica produced and held it out towards Kara.

"I'm heading back to see how my son's doing. You and Tharun secure her. And remember who you're dealing with, keep a careful eye on her."

As Vorn and Jaysica returned to the mouth of the cave he found Garm now back on his feet, sniffing as blood still streamed from his nose.

"We found some binders in that pile of stuff over there." Mace said as Tobis locked the restraints around Garm's wrists, "Should keep him out of trouble."

"You'll never get away with this." Garm said, glaring at Vorn.

"Really?" Mace asked, "Got the five hundred and first legion in that cave do you?"

"No just that Vay character." Vorn said, "Kara and Tharun are taking care of her."

"So you did run off with her after all." Mace said, grinning at Garm as he just scowled back. Garm sniffed and then spat a thick glob of blood at Mace's feet.

"May I have a moment with my son?" Vorn said.

"Sure major." Mace replied, "We'll go take a quick look around."

Vorn nodded and waited as the others wandered off, then he looked at Garm who was now glaring at him.

"Jennay's been worried about you." Vorn said.

"And I suppose that's not going to change is it father?" Garm replied, "Unless you're planning to just take me back to Estran to get on with my life."

"Of course I'm not taking you back to do the Empire's dirty work." Vorn told his son, "But I think I can arrange for Jennay and Cayla to be evacuated."

"To stay with Lyssa?"

"Perhaps, or perhaps with you. I think we both know she's going to want to be close to you."

"So she told you then?"

"Yes. Congratulations."

"Boss!" Kara called out from within the cave and Vorn jumped.

"Oh what now?" Vorn said to himself as he turned around, "What is it?" he then shouted into the cave.

"We've tied her up." Kara replied, "Good and secure like you said. But we've run out of tape to gag her."

A puzzled look appeared on Vorn's face and followed by Garm he wandered back into the cave.

"But that was a full reel." He said, "You can't possibly have – Oh."

There, illuminated by Kara and Tharun's glow rods Vorn saw that the pair had taken his instructions to secure Vay literally and the young woman was now wrapped entirely in tape, with only her head protruding.

"See, nothing left." Kara said, holding up the now empty reel.

"How's she supposed to walk like that?" Vorn asked.

"Walk?" Kara replied, "You mean we're taking the little witch with us?"

"Kara's got a point major." Tharun added, "Best to just leave her here."

"That'd kill her." Garm protested.

"I'm fine with that." Kara said.

"Me too." Tharun added, drawing his knife from its scabbard, "I can make it quick."

"I'm not going to beg for my life." Vay said as the blade was held to her throat.

"A pity." Kara said, "Because I don't see any reason for us to take you with us."

*You saved them.*

"I saved your lives." Vay said, "On Allastra."

Tharun and Kara both looked at Vorn who along with Garm just stared at Vay with puzzled looks on their faces.

"When your people rescued you from the base on Allastra the defence crews had a missile lock on your vessel." Vay went on, "I told them to hold their fire. I made them hold their fire."

"Why?" Tharun asked. But Vay just looked towards Garm.

"Tharun put the knife away." Vorn ordered, "She's coming with us. Use some of the stuffing from one of those cushions to keep her quiet. She'll just need to be carried, that's all. We'll take their gear as well. Intel may be able to get something from it."

*See. In saving them you saved yourself.*

"I can't watch for an ambush if I'm carrying her." Tharun said.

"And I can't carry her all the way back to the ship." Kara added, "She's far too heavy."

"I'll do it." Garm said and when everyone turned to look at him he repeated his comment, "I'll carry her. As far as I have to."

Vay then let out a yelp that was muffled as Kara shoved a large chunk of foam ripped from inside one of the cushions into her mouth.

"There you go." Kara said, patting the portion of the foam that stuck out between Vay's teeth, "That should stop you tricking Jaysica into letting you go."

"Why do you say Jaysica?" Tharun asked.

"Who else would it be?" Kara asked him in return.

"Point taken." Tharun replied.

"How the hell do you lot keep from getting caught?" Garm muttered as he shook his head in disgust.

## 5.

They set out at daybreak, with Tharun and Mace taking the lead while the other rebels stayed behind Garm to keep a watchful eye on him as he carried Vay over his shoulder. Slowed by the weight of Vay, Garm could not keep up with the two rebels in front of him and so a gap soon opened up between them. Taking advantage of this, Mace and Tharun would periodically stop to rest while the others caught up with them. But after several stops, just as the sun was reaching its highest point in the sky they found Mace and Tharun both in cover at the top of a hill and looking through their macrobinoculars.

"Get back!" Mace snapped, waving the other rebels back as they approached. Immediately the rebels halted. Kara reached out and grabbed hold of Garm, pulling him down as well but causing him to drop Vay.

"Are you okay?" Garm asked as he crawled towards her.

"Shush!" Mace hissed, then he added, "Major, you better come take a look at this."

Keeping low Vorn moved forwards and crouched behind the same rock that Mace was using for cover and took out his own macrobinoculars.

"What's going on?" he asked softly.

"I'm not sure." Mace replied, "But we spotted it as we were walking up here."

"How did we miss this on the way here?" Vorn asked.

"It was dark." Tharun answered, "We could have walked within twenty metres and not seen that."

"That much digging must have taken weeks. Months even." Mace said.

Garm took note of this and without warning he too dashed forwards, leaving Vay lying on the ground.

"Hey get back here!" Jaysica snapped and she looked at Kara before adding, "He can't do that can he?"

"He just did." Kara replied, "So I suppose you'll have to carry his girlfriend."

"Me?" Jaysica said in alarm, "But she's starting to smell."

"Well back in the cave Tharun and I both called not it." Kara said and then she looked at Tobis, "Say Tobis, how about you give Jaysica a hand with Stinky? Take an end each."

Tobis just frowned.

Ahead of them Garm crouched behind his father and Mace.

"Did you say digging?" he asked.

"A lot of it." Vorn replied and he handed his macrobinoculars to Garm.

Though his wrists were still bound, Garm was able to hold the macrobinoculars to his eyes and zoom in on the large area of disturbed ground on the far side of the hill.

"This is it." He said, "This is where they were digging."

"Who are 'they'?" Vorn asked.

"Aliens." Garm replied, "The sort of scum even your low life traitor friends won't mix with."

"Thanks." Tharun commented.

"They ran the slave camp." Garm explained, "I'm not familiar with the species, but they resembled mon calamari somewhat. I knew they were taking their slaves somewhere to work, but I didn't know where or exactly what for."

"Well I think it would a big coincidence if this wasn't what they were after." Mace said.

"We need to take a closer look." Garm said.

"Who's we?" Tharun asked.

"He's right." Vorn said, smiling at Garm, "I want to know as much about those slavers as possible. It'll help us deal with them more permanently."

"Don't worry." Garm said, "They're dealt with. Vay and I dealt with them."

"I still want to get a closer look." Vorn said.

"I'm coming too." Garm said, "Unless you're planning on shooting me to keep me here."

"Your call major." Tharun said, switching the selector on his heavy rifle to 'stun'.

"He can come." Vorn said, placing a hand on the rifle barrel and pushing it aside, "Jaysica and Kara can stay here to keep an eye on Vay, but I want you two and Tobis with me."

"I heard that boss." Kara called out, "How come we get stuck with Stinky?"

"Because I'm in charge and you're not." Vorn replied, "Now let's get moving. Sergeant Verser, you're on point."

Tharun nodded, returned his macrobinoculars to one of the many pockets on his webbing and then leapt over the rock he was behind and began to head down the hill.

"This is so unfair." Jaysica said as she and Kara watched the others disappear over the top of the hill. Then she looked around at Vay who was sat behind them, staring back at them, "Its all her fault. Why does she look so angry anyway? We're the ones walking. She's getting carried by the major's son."



"I think being tied up since the middle of the night may have something to do with it." Kara suggested. Then a smile appeared on her face, "Although," she then said slowly, "she has been here for weeks with any of life's little essentials."

"Essentials? Like what?" Jaysica asked as Kara turned towards her.

Kara reached into her bag and rummaged about through the medical supplies she carried until she found what she wanted. From the compact bag she produced she took out a bright red lipstick and briefly applied some to her own lips.

"Come on Jaysica." She said, "Every girl needs a makeover now and again."

The excavation at the bottom of the hill covered a large area but was still relatively shallow, unsurprising given that although a large number of slave workers had been involved there was no sign of any modern digging equipment having been used.

Here and there pieces of metal broke the surface where the ground had been disturbed. These were not random pieces of wreckage; apart from being buried in the ground they seemed to be part of a much larger structure that was structurally sound.

Tobis stood beside one of the piece of metal, a tapered pole that stuck straight upwards.

"It's definitely an antenna." He said, "One designed for broadcasting over a wide area."

"Subspace?" Vorn asked.

"No." Tobis replied, shaking his head, "It could reach another planet or even another star system I think, but the signal would take a long time to get there."

"Ever seen one like this before lad?" Tharun asked.

"Err, no." Tobis answered, scratching his head.

"What about you mister Empire man?" Tharun then asked, looking at Garm.

"I'm not an engineer." He replied.

"I think I have." Vorn said suddenly as he stared at the antenna, "During the war."

"The Clone Wars?" Garm said.

"You know of another one he fought in?" Mace responded.

"So this is Confederate tech?" Tharun said and Vorn nodded.

"Trade Federation to be exact." He said, "I think it's part of a battle droid control system."

"So we're on top of an old Confederation base then?" Garm said, "The one that escaped Republic detection for the entire war."

"Whoa!" Tharun exclaimed and he pulled his rifle from his shoulder and looked around, "I don't want to be standing on top of a fortress full of battle droids. Those things kill you."

"Actually I don't think this is a base." Vorn said, "I saw things like this in naval engagements. I think that we're standing on top of a droid control ship."

Vay just glared at Kara, her cheeks bulging outwards from the foam still packed inside her mouth. Suddenly she looked away and let out several short angry grunts and when Jaysica and Kara turned to look in the same direction they saw that the others had returned.

"What the hell have you done to her?" Garm yelled when he saw Vay's face, caked in a layer of makeup far too thick.

"Yes what have you been doing?" Vorn added, his expression indicating that he did not approve.

"We were just trying to be friendly boss." Kara replied, doing her best to sound innocent, "So we shared some of our makeup with her. That stuff's hard to come by."

"You've got an entire crateful of the stuff on the ship." Mace said, "Every time you have to infiltrate somewhere you steal some more from stores."

"You didn't mind so much when we were getting stuff for you to give to Mallia." Kara replied and Mace remained silent.

"We even braided her hair." Jaysica added, grabbing hold of one of the randomly braided clumps of hair and waving it about.

"Yeah, she's got great hair too." Kara said, "Or at least she would have if she'd been able to wash it sometime in the last few weeks. She's even a natural blonde. Look." And Kara took hold of a single strand of hair and plucked it out, prompting a muffled cry from Vay.

"Kara stop it!" Vorn shouted, "Now we've found something that may be important so we're delaying our departure. We're going to have something to eat and then we're going to check it out more closely. We'll need the droids though, so I'm sending Mace and Tharun to get them. The rest of you will come with me to make a start."

"What about her?" Kara asked, looking at Vay.

"She comes too." Vorn said, "Garm can carry her again."

"She needs to eat too." Garm said, "Unless you're planning on starving her."

"Here." Tharun said, taking a pair of ration bars from his webbing, "One for you and one for your girlfriend. You can feed her."

"But no funny business." Kara said, "If I think she's trying to put the whammy on someone while her gag's removed I'll shoot her."

Garm sat down beside Vay and set down the ration bars between them. Then he reached out and pulled the foam from her mouth.

"Be careful where you put that." Kara commented as she sat next to Vorn and began to open a ration bar of her own, "It's got to go back in after."

"Is that really necessary?" Garm asked.

"Yes." Kara replied and Garm rested the foam in Vay's lap.

## 6.

"You know captain, "Tharun said as they walked back to the *Silver Hawk*, "that little blonde witch is going to be trouble."

"Uh-huh." Mace said.

"I mean short of keeping her permanently bound and gagged how are we supposed to get her back to the Alliance? Even if we do how are they supposed to hold her? All it takes is one message sent out to any other force users the Empire's got on hand to bring them all down on us."

"So what do you suggest sergeant?" Mace asked.

"Well I still think we should just kill her. Kara agrees. I know she does."

"The major's already ruled that out." Mace said.

"That's just because of his son. But if we're not going to kill her I think we should give serious thought to leaving her here. The Alliance can send another ship to get her if they want, one better suited to transporting a prisoner like her."

"You may have a point there." Mace agreed, "But I don't see the major going for it."

"Then its up to us to convince him isn't it? The *Silver Hawk's* your ship after all. Don't you have the final say over who gets to ride aboard?"

Mace stopped and looked Tharun in the face.

"We'll see what he's got to say." He said, "If he's got some great idea for moving her then so be it. But if not..." and as he trailed off he turned around once more and continued walking.

Scraping at the bottom of one of the other holes revealed a small hatchway that had obviously been sealed for all the time that the ship had been buried here.

"Can you open it?" Vorn asked Tobis.

"Uh." He replied as he studied the hatch, "I'm not sure."

"What about you?" Vorn asked, looking at Jaysica.

"Bet she can break it." Kara said.

"What?" Jaysica said, suddenly turning her head towards Kara.

"Nothing." Kara replied, "Just commenting that I have every faith in your ability to get that thing open."

"Well get out of my way and let me see." Jaysica said and she jumped down into the hole. She crouched down on top of the hatch and looked at the access panel, "There's no power." she said.

"Well of course not." Garm commented, "This thing's been buried for the best part of two decades at least."

"The reactors on a ship like this would keep going for centuries if you weren't using the drives Junior." Kara said.

"Only if it's the entire ship." Vorn said, "The central section could be detached for a controlled landing, but they weren't intended for long duration operations. About three years tops. Generally they landed at starports where they could draw power from a local grid. Maybe this ship didn't crash here. The Confederacy landed it deliberately."

Meanwhile in the hole Jaysica had opened up the access panel and disconnected its power leads. From her pocket she then slipped a spare blaster power cell and began to strip the insulation from the wires.

"Ah, Jaysica," Tobis said, "shouldn't you-"

"Be quiet." Jaysica said, "I don't disturb you when you're working do I?"

"Yes Tobis, let her get on with her job." Kara added, smiling.

"But she's sitting right on top of-" Tobis began, but he was interrupted by a scream as Jaysica touched the ends of the wires to the contacts on the power cell and the hatch slid open. The hatch that had been the only thing supporting her.

The others all leant over the hole as Jaysica vanished into the hole below.

"Are you okay?" Vorn called out.

"Yes, because it would be such a shame if she was hurt." Kara muttered.

"Aren't you the medic here?" Garm asked, "You'd have to help her."

Kara's eyes widened.

"Jaysica are you okay?" she shouted.

"I hit my head." Jaysica called out from down the hole.

"Oh thank the force." Kara said, "Nothing serious."

"Not funny." Vorn said sternly, "Go see if she's alright."

"Hang on a moment." Jaysica yelled and in the darkness she felt through her backpack for one of the chemical glow sticks she routinely carried. Bending the plastic tube until she heard it snap she shook it to

produce a green glow that filled the compartment she had ended up in. Then she took a quick look around at her surroundings and gave out a sudden shrill scream.

Without pause for thought, Tobis drew his blaster and leapt into the hole. He barely missed landing on Jaysica, but found himself looking straight into the face of what he at first took to be a battle droid in the poor light. But as he aimed his blaster he realised that it was in fact the heavily decayed remains of a long dead neimoidian.

"Tobis what's happening down there?" Vorn called out from above.

"Ah, err, nothing sir." Tobis replied as he put his blaster away, "Jaysica was just startled that's all."

"Oh great." Kara said to Vorn, "Do we have search this entire thing with her jumping at shadows?"

"It looks that way." Vorn replied. Then he turned to look in Garm's direction, "Okay son, let's get your young lady friend down there and then we'll follow."

"I'm terribly sorry sirs," Jeeves said as he struggled to keep up with Mace and Tharun, "but I'm designed for protocol, not crossing deserts." Behind him Harvey let out a rude sounding noise, "Oh be quiet!" Jeeves snapped, "The reason we don't hear Penny complaining is that she is deactivated and inside Sergeant Verser's backpack."

There was a dull rumbling from overhead and Jeeves looked upwards.

"Oh dear." He said, "Now it appears we shall be rained on. I'm not sure which is worse, sand or rain."

"That wasn't thunder." Tharun said.

"No it wasn't." Mace agreed and he pulled out his macrobinoculars and used them to look skywards.

"But if it wasn't thunder when what it?" Jeeves asked.

"A sonic boom." Tharun told the droid, "The sort made by a ship entering the atmosphere."

"Got it." Mace said, "Looks like it's heading for that burnt out settlement."

Tharun produced his own macrobinoculars and looked for himself.

"Uh-oh." He said, "Does that look like to you what it looks like to me?"

"You mean a kappa-class shuttle?" Mace said, "The sort the Empire uses to land platoons of troops?"

"Exactly."

"Yes it does." Mace said, "I think we better check this out."

"But sirs!" Jeeves exclaimed, "What about Major Larcus? Isn't he expecting us?"

"Yes he is." Mace said, "But he's not expecting a whole bunch of stormtroopers to turn up. So if they're going to be heading his way I think we should try and warn him."

"Then shouldn't you tell him by comlink?" Jeeves asked.

"Sure." Tharun said, "We could also just fire off a flare and tell those Imperial troops exactly where we are.

Now shut up and follow us."

They moved as quickly as they could and Mace and Tharun allowed the droids to fall behind, though never so far that they were out of sight. They finally stopped when they reached a ridge that overlooked the remains of the labour camp and once again Mace and Tharun took out their macrobinoculars.

"I don't see anyone down there." Mace said as he focused on the shuttle.

The vessel was definitely a kappa-class ship of the type preferred by the Empire, though it lacked any sort of visible markings on the wings folding vertically beside it. In fact there were no markings of any sort anywhere on its hull.

"I don't see any idents on the hull." Tharun said, "Could be a covert operations unit."

"Excuse me sergeant," Jeeves said, "but it is my understanding that kappa-class vessels are also in widespread civilian service. Perhaps this is one of those vessels."

"They'd still have identification marks on the hull." Mace said, "Whoever's down there doesn't want their ship being traced." Then Mace lowered his macrobinoculars and looked around at the two droids behind them,

"We need to get closer." He said, "You two wait right here."

"Of course sir." Jeeves replied. Then both Mace and Tharun darted over the ridge and headed down towards the shuttle, doing their best to remain out of sight of anyone in the ship.

Like all ships of its class the shuttle featured a pair of large doors towards the rear, one on each side. Both of these doors were open and as Mace and Tharun moved closer they saw that the cargo area within was empty.

"This could be a problem." Tharun commented, "We've nothing to match the walkers those things can carry."

"Well maybe they weren't carrying any." Mace said, "It could be speeder bikes or grav sleds. Hell, even if they do have walkers they could still be the open topped versions. Your rifle can deal with them."

There was a sudden movement from within the ruins and both Mace and Tharun dived for the nearest hiding place and remained still as they watched a group of armoured figures picking their way through the camp.

"Those aren't stormtroopers." Tharun said.

"No." Mace agreed, "They're not even army troops. Not unless the Empire's changed its recruiting policy to allow non-humans to sign up."

"Say captain," Tharun said as he watched the aliens, "would you say that the way those aliens have their eyes set into the sides of their heads was reminiscent of mon calamari?"

"I would." Mace replied, "But they're not mon calcs. No mon cal would want to come here anyway, far too dry."

"I know, but they match the description that the major's son gave of the aliens that ran this place."

"Yes they do. So it looks like Garm didn't deal with all of them after all. I'm guessing they're here to find out what happened to their friends."

"But who are they?" Tharun asked.

Mace stared at the aliens, trying to build up an image of what they would look like without their armour.

"Oh no." he said, "I've got a really bad feeling about this."

"What? Who are they?"

"Don't you remember that university team we met in the Spire Worlds?" Mace asked, "The ancient city they were so interested in."

"The one that those mercenaries didn't want us anywhere near? Including one who blamed me for killing all his friends?"

"That's the one. Well I saw carvings there that looked just like those aliens.

"But captain, that means that they're-"

"Yes. They're rakata and there aren't supposed to be any left around here."