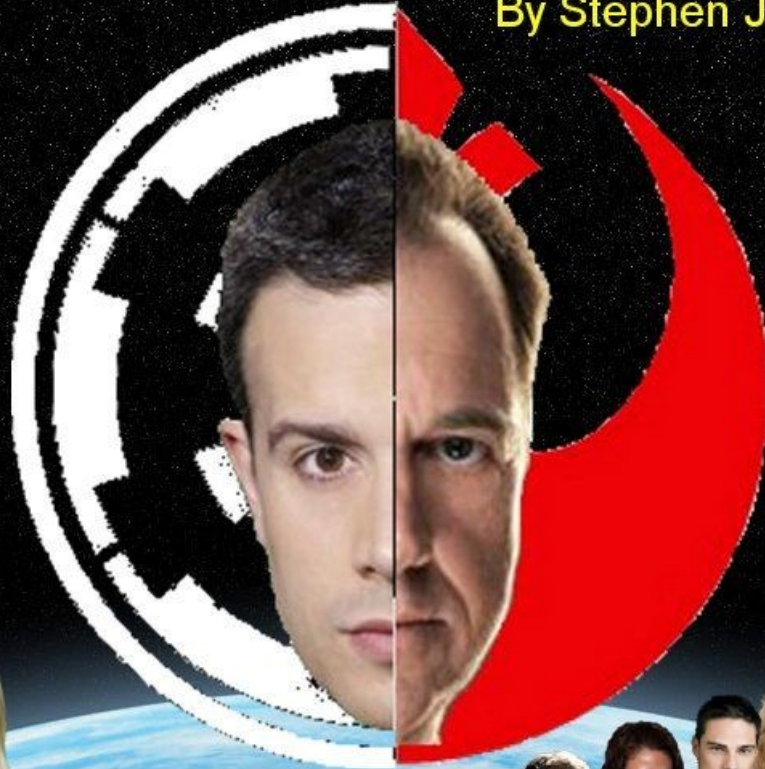


STAR WARS

3-02: The Way Home (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...

THE WAY HOME (PART 2)

HAVING LOCATED NOT ONLY VORN'S SON GARM BUT ALSO A MASSIVE TRADE FEDERATION VESSEL BURIED BENEATH THE SURFACE OF THE REMOTE WORLD IN THE NEBULA, THE OCCUPANTS OF THE *SILVER HAWK* NOW FIND THEMSELVES FACING AN ALIEN MENACE THAT WANTS THE SHIP FOR THEMSELVES...

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

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1.

Little light was able to penetrate the interior of the old Trade Federation droid control ship through the tiny topside hatch so the chemical light stick that had been dropped in the centre instead lit the compartment. This tiny single light source cast enough light to illuminate the benches forming a partial ring beneath the hatchway in the ceiling, but the multiple corridors and staircase leading from the chamber remained in darkness.

There were two people in the chamber, the others in the party having gone deeper into the ship to try and determine why a group of slavers seemed so intent on excavating it from where it had been buried since at least the end of the Clone Wars. Neither of the two young women wanted to be there. One of them, Jaysica Horbid was annoyed at having been left behind by her fellow rebels and she paced up and down incessantly. "This is so unfair!" she exclaimed, "I'm an expert with security systems. I should have been taken with the major and Kara should have been left here to keep an eye on you." And she waved towards the second young woman who was sat on one of the benches.

This was Vay Udra, an Imperial agent that the rebels knew to have some ability in manipulating the force. Upon her capture two of the rebels had wrapped her in tape, completely immobilising her and gagged her with a lump of foam forced into her mouth. Needless to say that she was very angry at her situation. She had been kept bound for more than half a day now and was in significant discomfort.

"And it's bad enough without the smell you're giving off." Jaysica went on with her rant, noting the aroma being given off since with no other options open to her Vay had been forced to soil herself, adding further to her discomfort.

They're coming.

The voice in Vay's head delivered the warning without notice. The voice had begun communicating with her only recently and so far Vay had no idea what it represented, all she knew was that came from within the force itself and was generally critical of her actions. Now though it seemed to be trying to protect her. Vay focused on the force, letting it flow through her. She could sense Jaysica's anger and somewhat further away she could sense four other human presences, the three other rebels and the far more familiar presence of her partner Garm Larcus. She reached out even further, extending the area she was able to perceive well beyond the confines of the ship and there she found a cluster of life forms heading towards her. These were not the relatively primitive animals that she and Garm had hunted for food since becoming stranded on this unknown world, but were instead fully sentient beings. But there was something unusual about these beings; clearly non-human their presence in the force was just a shadow, not as strong as it should have been. It was as if they had been separated from the universe's energy field by some means unknown to Vay. She had felt this before though, when she and Garm had first arrived on this planet they had discovered a slave labour camp run by aliens who all possessed similar shadowy presences in the force. Now it seemed that more of the aliens had arrived to investigate what had happened to their base here.

The aliens were approaching fast; they undoubtedly had some sort of vehicle and Vay did not want to be discovered by them as helpless as she currently was. She let out a grunt, and glared at Jaysica, hoping that she would be able to get her to remove the foam from her mouth.

"What?" Jaysica asked.

Vay tried spitting out the foam, she had made several unsuccessful attempts before but if she could at least get Jaysica to realise what she was trying to do then maybe the rebel would realise that she needed to talk to her. Of course given more time and training Vay would be able to influence Jaysica through the force by thought alone. But right now she lacked the strength and skill for that.

"Oh no you don't!" Jaysica snapped and she rushed towards Vay and pushed the foam deeper in her mouth to make sure that it was not about to come loose. Vay reacted by closing her mouth, biting down on Jaysica's fingers.

"Ow!" Jaysica cried out, withdrawing her hand and shaking it, "You bit me!"

Concentrating hard, Vay lifted herself from the bench she had been sat on and into a standing position and grunted again, trying to push the foam with her tongue.

"Sit back down." Jaysica said to her and the rebel stepped forwards.

The aliens were close now, Vay could sense them just outside the hatch and she knew that they would be coming through it at any moment. She glanced down at the light stick and gave it a gentle shove through the force, propelling it across the floor and down the stairway that the others had gone down earlier.

Jaysica halted and, suspecting that Vay was planning to attack her she reached for her blaster. Making use of the force again, Vay hurled herself towards Jaysica. Unprepared for this sudden assault by the supposedly immobile Imperial agent Jaysica squealed as Vay slammed into her and the blaster fell from her grip. Jaysica toppled backwards and both women rolled across the floor towards the staircase. Continuing to roll as they

reached the stairs they both cried out in alarm, Vay's cries muffled as they fell and tumbled over one another. Reaching a turn in the staircase Vay stopped only as she struck the bulkhead and then had the wind knocked from her as Jaysica rolled into her. Jaysica lay still, pinning Vay against the wall. However, Vay could still sense the rebel in the force so she knew that she had survived the fall. Then a sound attracted Vay's attention as the first of the mysterious aliens dropped through the hatch.

"Captain Grayle! Sergeant Verser! Please do slow down, Harvey and I are unable to keep up with either of you."

Despite the protests of the protocol droid, the two rebels continued to move as quickly as they could across the broken terrain.

"Just follow as fast as you can Jeeves." Mace Grayle yelled without turning around, "We've got to reach the others as quickly as we can."

"Oh my Harvey," Jeeves said to the R5 astromech droid that was rolling along side him, "it seems that we are to be left behind on a world infested with hostile aliens."

Mace Grayle and Tharun Verser had observed a group of alien troops investigating the ruins of a burnt out slave labour camp. Recognising them as members of the ancient rakata species the two rebels were now hurrying to warn their comrades of the danger posed by the aliens.

Tharun ground to a sudden halt at the top of a hill where the rebels had halted once before when they wanted to observe the ground where efforts had been made to dig up the starship that most of them were now inside.

"Down!" he snapped and the former mercenary took cover and aimed his heavy blaster rifle towards the area of dug up ground on the far side of the hill.

"What is it?" Mace asked as he crept forwards, staying low and drawing his sidearm.

"Speeders," Tharun said, "two of them. Parked just beside the hatch into the ship."

"Small enough to have been carried by that shuttle?" Mace asked.

"Definitely." Tharun said, "I'd say they can carry four people each. Whoa, hang on. There's one of them down there now. Looks like a sentry."

"So there's up to seven armed aliens inside the ship now?" Mace said.

"Looks that way." Tharun replied.

"Then I say we move in closer and try to make contact with the major. That makes six of us against seven of them and hopefully we'll have them caught between us." Mace said, "All we have to do is deal with that guard."

"Got that in hand." Tharun said, lining his weapon up on the alien. He took his time in aiming, so when he fired a single bolt it struck the rakata guard in the chest and he crumpled in a heap with a massive smoking wound where the blaster bolt had punched through his body armour, "He's down." Tharun said with a grin, "No alarms."

"Well done sergeant, now let's move in."

The two rebels stood up and rushed down the hill towards the speeders. Mace ran to the two vehicles themselves and looked inside while Tharun instead ran to the body of the sentry and kicked the weapon that had dropped beside it away, just in case the sentry's armour had blocked the blaster bolt and he was just playing dead.

"Clear." Tharun said as he confirmed that the rakata was dead.

"There's nothing in here." Mace replied and he pulled out his comlink and rushed towards the hole where the hatchway to the starship was located, "Major Larcus, can you read me?" he signalled.

There was a burst of static followed by a somewhat distorted voice.

"Go ahead Mace." The voice said.

"Major, you've got armed rakata in the ship. We think they're ones who were running that camp your son destroyed."

Deep within the buried starship Major Vorn Larcus took out his comlink.

"Go ahead Mace." He said as he and the other three people accompanying him came to a halt.

"Major," Mace's voice said, barely audible due to the disruption caused by the vessel's superstructure, "you've got armed rakata in the ship."

"Did he just say rakata?" Kara, the only woman in the group said.

"Rakata?" this came from Garm Larcus, Vorn's son. Unlike the other members of the group he had a somewhat dishevelled appearance, a result of being stranded on this remote world for several weeks. Given his position with the Imperial Security Bureau his wrists were bound in front of him with a set of binders, "Like in those stories you told me and Lyssa as kids?"

"Well if you lot will give me chance I'll ask." Vorn said and then he lifted the comlink back to his, "Captain, your signal was distorted. Did you just say there were rakata in the ship?"

"Affirmative major." Mace replied, "Up to seven. We're just outside the hatch. We've dealt with one of them."

The final group member stared at Vorn, his eyes wide open. This was Tobis Dorfus, Mace Grayle's engineer. "Jaysica's there!" he exclaimed and he began to run back the way they had come. "Tobis wait!" Vorn shouted and he looked at Kara, "We can't let him rush into them alone, get after him." "You'll be okay with Junior?" she asked as she drew her blaster. "I'll be fine." He replied and Kara set off after Tobis. "Vay's there too." Garm said, glaring at Vorn, "And thanks to you she's totally helpless. If she get's hurt-" Ignoring his son, Vorn instead went back to his comlink. "Captain, what's happened in the hatchway chamber? We left Jaysica there guarding Vay."

On the surface Tharun advanced towards the hole where the hatchway was located and peered down inside. "Nothing." He said and he pulled out a light stick. After activating it he dropped it down into the darkness, then looked back at Mace and shook his head.

"No movement." Mace said into his comlink, then he added, "We're going inside."

Tharun went first. He quickly stuck his head through the hatch to see if any of the rakata were waiting for him. Then when he was certain that the coast was clear he jumped down, followed soon after by Mace.

"No sign of either of them." Mace said as the pair looked all around them.

"No signs of a struggle either." Tharun said, "Whatever happened to them, they weren't badly hurt."

"But that Vay couldn't have run off and can you really see Jaysica having picked her up and carried her?"

"The little lady?" Tharun replied, "No chance."

Suddenly they were interrupted by the sound of footfalls echoing down one of the corridors that led from the hatchway chamber.

"Cover!" Mace snapped and both rebels pressed themselves into the recesses in the bulkheads and aimed their weapons towards the approaching footsteps.

"Jaysica!" Tobis yelled as he entered the area illuminated by the light stick and he looked around frantically.

"Tobis!" Mace responded, stepping from his hiding place.

"Captain, where's Jaysica?" Tobis asked, still looking around and trying to determine where she had gone.

"Don't worry lad." Tharun said as he emerged from his own place of concealment, "There's nothing to suggest the little lady's hurt."

"But where is she?"

Behind Tobis Kara suddenly appeared, breathing heavily.

"You can really run when you're girlfriend's in trouble." She said to Tobis as she tried to catch her breath and she looked around, "Where are the klutz and stinky anyway?"

"We don't know." Tobis exclaimed.

"Shush." Tharun said.

"Calm down Tobis." Mace said, "I'm sure-"

"Shush." Tharun repeated, then he added, "Sir."

"What's wrong?" Kara asked.

"Don't you hear that?" Tharun asked.

The rebels stood in silence and listened.

"I don't hear anything." Kara said.

"Well you won't if you keep shooting your mouth off." Mace said.

"There." Tharun said and holding his rifle at the ready he made his way towards the staircase at the far side of the chamber.

Following behind Tharun the other rebels suddenly heard what he had. The sound seemed to be a cry for help, but was faint and muffled. As he came to the top of the stairs Tharun took his glowrod from his webbing and pointing it down the stairs.

"Well, well." He said with a smile, "Look what we have here."

Joining Tharun at the top of the stairs the other rebels looked down and saw Vay pinned against the wall by the unconscious Jaysica, desperately trying to either wriggle out from under her or make enough noise to attract help.

"Go see if she's alright." Mace said to Kara.

"Oh that's just typical." Kara said as she descended the stairs, "The klutz falls down the stairs and I have to go find out how badly hurt she is." Then she looked back at Tobis, "Come on Tobis, you can at least give me a hand. She's your girlfriend."

"She's not my girlfriend." Tobis muttered as he followed her.

Reaching where Jaysica and Vay had come to a stop Tobis rolled Jaysica towards him and cradled her in his arms while Vay grunted something.

"Ahh, how romantic." Kara said, prompting a frown from Tobis.

"Is she alright?" Tobis asked, "There's a bruise on her head."

"So she hit nothing vital then." Kara said, "Yes Tobis, your girlfriend will be just fine." Then she turned to look at Vay, "What the hell is she on about though?" she asked as Vay continued to produce muffled sounds.

"Find out." Mace said from the top of the stairs, "We've got you covered in case she tries anything." Kara pulled the foam from Vay's mouth.

"Well?" she asked.

"The aliens." Vay said, gasping, "They're here."

"We know." Mace said, looking down at Vay, "One dead up top, up to seven in here with us and up to about forty or so elsewhere."

"Get me out of this." Vay said and she wriggled inside the tape shell that enveloped her. In an instant Tharun brought his rifle up to his shoulder and pointed at Vay.

"It's alright." Kara said, "If that's her trying to influence us then I think we're safe."

"I should shoot her anyway." Tharun said, glancing at Mace briefly, "You know that captain."

"What's the story with Jaysica?" Mace asked.

"Oh she'll be fine." Kara said, "The little klutz has done far worse to herself. In fact I've done far worse to her. It's probably best if we just leave someone to keep an eye on her and wait for her to wake up naturally."

"So a shot wouldn't help?" Mace then asked.

"It would help her wake up," Kara said as she stood up, "but it won't do anything for me."

"I'll stay." Tobis said.

"Somehow lad," Tharun called out, "I don't think any of us thought you wouldn't."

"Hey!" Vay suddenly yelled, "If you want my help you're going to have to untie me. Remember?"

"Yeah." Kara said, "But here's the thing stinky, we don't want your help." And she rammed the sponge back into Vay's mouth. Then Kara looked at Tobis, "Keep your blaster handy." She said to him, "Don't be afraid to use it on either of those two if they give you any trouble." And then she headed back up the stairs.

Meanwhile, Mace took out his comlink and activated the device.

"Major?" he said into it.

"Go ahead." Vorn's voice replied, the signal distorted again.

"Kara and Tobis have reached us and we've found Jaysica. She'll be fine when she wakes up. No sign of any more rakata though."

"What happened?" Vorn asked.

"Oh nothing really," Mace replied, "it seems she and your son's lady friend took a bit of tumble."

"What's happened to Vay?" Garm's voice suddenly called out through the comlink.

"Tell junior that stinky's just fine too." Kara said, "In fact she said she's never been so happy." And there was a sudden grunt from Vay.

"Well we're almost at the bridge now," Vorn said, "and if there are more rakata about then they're somewhere else."

"Major this ship's almost seven hundreds metres in diameter." Tharun said, "That's a lot of place's to be hiding."

"But they didn't come here to hide." Mace said, "They're looking for something. So all we need to do is figure out what."

"What else is there on this ship apart from the bridge?" Kara asked, "I mean its drives and weapons are useless while its buried."

"The computer." Tobis called out, "All of the flight data may be up on the bridge, but it all gets backed up to the main computer core. Plus there's all of the other data the ship had in there too."

"So where's the computer core lad?" Tharun asked.

"In the main sphere." Tobis replied, "Above the reactors."

"Got it." Mace replied, "Tharun, you're on point." Then he walked over to where the light stick was still glowing and picked it up, "Here you go Tobis," he said as he tossed it down the stairs, "save the power in your glowrod."

"Is there anything I need to do for Jaysica?" Tobis said to Kara.

"Well if you believe the fairy stories then she'll wake up if you kiss her." Kara replied.

"Only works if he's a jedi knight." Tharun commented.

"Yeah, well she's supposed to be a beautiful princess too." Kara said, "And she fails that on two counts."

"Shut up and get moving." Mace said.

Tobis gazed up the stairs as the other rebels walked away, the sound of their footsteps becoming ever quieter. Then he looked down at the still unconscious Jaysica and stroked her hair. For a moment he considered kissing her, but then he remembered Vay and looked towards the tightly bound Imperial agent. She just scowled at him.

2.

"Another open door." Vorn said as he and Garm finally reached the bridge, "The force must be with us today." "Not really." Garm replied, "If the ship's commander ordered an evacuation then all of the doors would be opened. You were in the navy, you should know that. Oh, but wait I forgot. You decided to betray your oath didn't you? So what's disregarding shipboard procedure compared to that?"

"My oath was to the Republic." Vorn replied, "Not the Empire."

"You served the Empire quite happily for over a decade." Garm said, "While it suited you."

Vorn shook his head.

"I was in the Estranian Parliament, not the Imperial Senate."

"But you had ambitions, didn't you? Mom told me that you considered a run against Lady Sharva. Is that why she despises you? And me too because of it?"

"Lady Sharva despises anyone that isn't Lady Sharva." Vorn said, "Now how about you just keep quiet and let me see if the crew left anything useful in here?"

"Hello? I say is there anyone down there?"

Tobis looked up the stairs as he heard Jeeves calling through the hatchway.

"Jeeves!" he shouted and after carefully setting Jaysica's head down on the deck he scooped up the light stick and ran up the stairs, "Jeeves," he called out again as he looked up at the protocol droid, "do you have Harvey and Penny with you?"

"Why master Dorfus, Harvey is right behind me. But given that master Verser has Penny in his backpack I am unaware of exactly-"

"That's not important." Tobis interrupted, "Get down here the pair of you."

"But master Dorfus, how?"

"Just jump." Tobis replied, "It's only a couple of metres, not enough to do serious damage."

"Oh I don't know about that master – Wait! Harvey no!"

The astromech droid let out a squawk as it rolled forwards and collided with Jeeves, knocking him down through the hatchway. Tobis jumped back sharply as the droid unexpectedly came tumbling towards him. Then, just as Jeeves was starting to stand up, Harvey came tumbling through as well and knocked the protocol droid flat once more.

Tobis lifted his astromech droid the right way up.

"Really Harvey!" Jeeves said, "That was quite uncalled for."

Harvey responded with an abrupt sound.

"How rude." Jeeves said.

"Harvey," Tobis said, ignoring Jeeves, "there's a computer port over here. See if you can get anything."

Harvey followed Tobis to a panel on the wall where a standard computer access port was located. The droid extended a probe and connected to the port. After a few moments it let out a series of chirps.

"Harvey says that without main power his ability to access the ship's systems is limited to those in this sector only. Additionally, he can only access those systems that he can power from his own reserves."

"I know that." Tobis said, "But I just need him to keep an eye on what other systems are being powered up."

Harvey beeped again.

"That he says he can do master Dorfus." Jeeves said.

Without light sources such as glowrods or chemical light sticks, the corridors of the buried ship were pitch black. But if the trio of rebels making their way towards the computer core had used any of these devices they would immediately give away their own location to anyone nearby.

The solution was for them to split up. Tharun moved ahead of Kara and Mace who made use of single glowrod to light their way. The former mercenary was sufficiently far in front of the others that he was not illuminated by the glowrod, but enough light still reached him for the light amplification properties of his rifle scope to be able to give him a picture of what lay directly ahead.

"Clear." Tharun said as he looked down another corridor. Then he waited as Kara and Mace advanced behind him and then he set off ahead of them again.

It was while Kara and Mace were waiting for his call at a junction not far from the computer core that Tharun instead came running back towards them.

"They're right up ahead captain." He said, "I counted four."

"Still leaves three unaccounted for." Kara added.

"Yes thank you," Mace said, "I can count."

"So what's the plan?" Tharun asked.

"We take them out." Mace said and he set his glowrod down on the deck, "That should give you enough light to reach the rakata right?" he asked and Tharun nodded, "Right, then we'll just let you lead us." The rebels formed a line with Tharun in the lead and placed their hands on the shoulder of the person in front. Then Tharun began to advance again, his rifle at the ready.

You're wasting your time.

Vay struggled despite the warning of the voice in her head.

Calm down. Anger will not help you.

Vay grunted, frustrated that she was being held captive and that the mysterious presence in the force that had been communicating with her seemed to think that it was a good thing.

Then there was another sound and Jaysica groaned. Vay looked at Jaysica and saw that the rebel was starting to stir. Knowing that she could not call out loud enough to attract Tobis' attention Vay instead banged her heels against the deck plate beneath her, creating a banging sound that carried up the stairs.

Tobis suddenly appeared at the top of the stairs and looked down. When he saw Jaysica moving he came rushing down the stairs and crouched beside her.

"Jaysica, can you hear me?" he said, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Jaysica's eyes fluttered open.

"Tobis?" she said, "What's going on?" Then she remembered what happened before the fall, "That witch bit me!" she exclaimed and sat up suddenly. But she moved too quickly for Tobis to react and their heads bashed against one another, forcing them both to move back, rubbing their foreheads.

"Ow." Jaysica groaned, "That really hurt."

"Don't worry." Tobis replied, "It was just an accident."

Jaysica got back to her feet, moving more slowly this time and she saw Vay sat against the bulkhead.

"I'll teach you to bite me!" she snapped and she stepped towards Vay with her fists clenched.

"Wait!" Tobis said, wrapping his arms around Jaysica to hold her back, "The major doesn't want her to be harmed."

"The nerf-herder bit me!"

Before Tobis could respond to this there was a sudden high-pitched whistle from up the stairs.

"Master Dorfus sir!" Jeeves called out, "Harvey says that the main reactors have just been brought on line!"

Closing on the computer core the rebels heard alien voices echoing down the corridor as the rakata worked unaware that they had been discovered. The light from their glowrods provided enough illumination for the rebels to advance safely towards them without using their own light sources.

"On three." Mace whispered.

"What on three?" Kara whispered back.

"We rush them." Tharun said, "Right captain?"

"Right. Providing you can nail two of them Kara and I just have one each to deal with."

"Sounds good to me." Tharun said and he slipped off his backpack and leant it up against the bulkhead beside him, "Don't let me forget that." He said, "Jaysica's mouse droid is inside it."

Kara smiled.

"Oh no." Mace said when he saw her face, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"No, you'll like this." Kara said, "Why don't we send Penny in first? Then maybe we can get the rakata to chase after her and ambush them when they come running out here."

"That's officer level thinking." Mace said.

"No need to be rude to her sir." Tharun commented.

Kara punched his arm.

"I was an officer too remember?" she said.

"Yeah, but you got court-martialled for punching Captain Tarl. Remember?"

"I was still an officer."

"If we've quite finished?" Mace interrupted and he reached down for Tharun's backpack and removed the box-shaped mouse droid from inside. He activated the droid and set it down. Immediately the droid rolled back and forth, "Penny," Mace whispered, crouching down beside the droid, "Listen to me and keep quiet." The droid halted, "Now there are rakata in that room down there," Mace explained, pointing, "and we need you to try and lure them out here."

"Without getting shot in the process." Tharun added.

"Of course not." Mace said, "Now off you go." And he waved down the corridor.

Penny obediently rolled towards the sound of the rakata voices and into the chamber they occupied. The pitch of the voices suddenly changed to louder and more abrupt calls and there was a sharp electronic squeal before Penny came rushing back into the corridor, a pair of rakata following behind.

Tharun was ready for them and opened fire with a burst from his rifle. The Blastech A-280 he carried was one of the galaxy's most heavy hitting small arms and the first rakata stood no chance as the entire burst

slammed into his chest. The armoured vest he wore proved useless against the powerful energy bolts and the alien fell dead without a sound, smoke emanating from his wounds. The second alien just had time to call out a warning in his own language before a barrage of shots from Kara and Mace's pistols sent him sprawling across the deck as well.

Tharun rushed to the doorway and risked a quick glance inside. He was met with a flurry of blaster bolts and he pulled his head back behind the bulkhead.

"Still two left captain." He called out, no longer attempting to keep his voice low, "And they're ready for us."

"Time for one of those then I think." Mace replied and he tapped a finger against the three grenades strapped to Tharun's webbing.

Tharun smiled.

"I'll use smoke." He said, "No need to wreck everything else."

"Masks on." Mace said and all three rebels took out the breath masks they carried and pulled them over their faces. Then Tharun pulled a grenade marked with a thick red band from his chest, removed the pin and then let the lever fly off.

"Three. Two. One!"

He hurled the grenade around the side of the bulkhead and into the chamber. There was a momentary pause during which the rakata could be heard calling out something in alarm before there was a dull 'whumph' and a cloud of thick red smoke began billowing out into the corridor.

"Go!" Tharun yelled, his shout distorted slightly by his mask and he spun around and dashed into the smoke-filled room. Both Kara and Mace followed him, watching for any signs of movement through the cloud.

Kara heard a coughing and saw a dark shape in front of her. Knowing that her fellow rebels were both positioned to her left she aimed her blaster pistol at the shape and fired, an alien scream indicating that she had hit her target.

The final rakata attempted to use Kara's shot against her, directing his aim for what he took to be the origin of the blaster bolt. But the smoke now choking his lungs and getting into his eyes affected his aim and his own shot sailed past Kara without hitting her. On the other hand, in firing his blaster the rakata gave away his position and both Mace and Tharun opened fire. With his rifle set to automatic, Tharun laid down a barrage of fire that practically cut the rakata in two and another brief alien scream indicated his demise.

"Okay everyone out." Mace called out, "We need to give the smoke chance to clear."

"That could take ages." Kara said as she nevertheless headed for the door.

"You got somewhere to be?" Tharun asked and Kara shrugged.

In the corridor outside the rebels removed their masks.

"There's still up to three we haven't accounted for yet." Tharun said.

"So where else could they have gone?" Kara asked.

"The bridge." Mace said, "The major wants the flight recorder, maybe they do too."

"And if he's busy watching his son then he can't be watching out for himself." Tharun said, "We need to go help him."

"Wait." Mace said as Kara turned to leave, "I'll go. You two stay here. We can't take the chance that the other rakata won't come back."

3.

"Say that again Tobis," Vorn said, "your signal is very weak."

"I said the ship's reactors are back online sir." Tobis repeated over the comlink.

A puzzled look appeared on Vorn's face.

"So they did land the ship deliberately." Garm said, listening in on the conversation, "The crew shut down the reactors while they still had fuel."

"Which means that at least some of the rakata are with the reactor." Vorn said and he lifted the comlink back to his mouth, "Tobis can you let Mace know? He needs to get down to the reactor."

"I've already tried sir." Tobis replied, "There's too much interference from the superstructure."

Vorn looked around at the consoles of the bridge.

"I'll see what I can do from here." He said and he put his comlink away.

Vorn then walked back towards the main door from the bridge and moved the beam from his glowrod over the bulkhead either side.

"What are you doing?" Garm asked.

"Why son, have you never heard of a light switch?" Vorn said as he found the simple panel he was looking for and with a flip of his wrist he activated the bridge lights, "That's better." He added as he put away the glowrod, "Now I can see what I'm doing properly."

Suddenly Vorn felt something the impact as Garm barged into him, followed by a clatter as both the lightweight rifle he carried and the holdout blaster holstered under his shoulder dropped to the floor. Garm kicked and sent the rifle sliding away then he lunged to where the handgun had fallen, scooping it up in his bound hands.

"Don't move!" he snapped, aiming the weapon at his father.

Vorn slowly straightened up and raised his hands.

"So now what son?" he asked, "Are you planning on shooting me again? There's no stun setting on that gun. Then again, the was one on the last gun you used against me but you didn't bother using it."

"Keep quiet!" Garm snapped, "Now toss me the keys to these binders and stay back."

Slowly Vorn reached into his pocket and took out the keys before tossing them towards Garm where they landed at his feet.

"Good." Garm said as he crouched down and retrieved them. Then as he released the lock on the binders he went on, "Now I'm going to unlock these and then you're going to tell your friends by the hatch to let Vay go."

"Actually I don't think that's going to happen at all." Vorn said, lowering his hands.

"Really? Because from where I'm standing it looks like I'm the one with the blaster."

Then Garm's eyes widened as he felt the muzzle of a weapon being pressed to the back of his head.

"This," Mace said slowly, "is a DL forty-four. Its one of the most powerful blaster pistols in the galaxy. If it has one failing it's the ammunition capacity of only twenty-five shots. Now I have been using it and I'm sure you're wondering if I fired all twenty-five, or maybe just twenty-four. So tell me, do you think the force is with you nerf-herder? Well do you?"

Garm dropped the holdout blaster and lifted his hands.

"Behind your back." Mace said, grabbing Garm's wrists one at a time and positioning them behind him. Then he sealed the binders again.

"We found four rakata in the computer core major." Mace then said as he picked up Vorn's weapon and returned it to him. Then he noticed that the bridge lights were active, "Hey, how come the lights are working all of a sudden?"

"Keep moving junior." Kara said as she shoved Garm forwards and he tripped over beneath the hatch leading to the surface, landing at Vay's feet now that she was once again sat on one of the benches.

"Oh mistress Bilstran!" Jeeves exclaimed, "I'm so glad to see you are unharmed. But where are the others?"

"They've gone to check out the main reactor." She replied, "The boss sent me back here so they didn't have to watch junior all the time. Oh and he wanted me to return this to you." And she held out Tharun's backpack that now held Penny once more.

"So we're just supposed to wait here?" Jaysica asked, snatching the backpack from Kara's grasp.

"That's the plan." Kara said, "We just need to make sure that no more rakata turn up." Then she drew her knife, "Oh and the boss wanted us two to deal with stinky."

"No!" Garm called out and a look of fear appeared on Vay's face.

"Oh don't be such babies." Kara said as she reached into her bag with her free hand, "this is just for the tape. Look We took this from one of the dead rakata and she pulled out a tunic and another set of binders, "Now

the boss wasn't particular on this," she went on, "but I think he intended for Jaysica and I to take her off somewhere private to clean and change. Though if Tobis here wants to watch I'm fine with that too." Tobis averted his gaze.

"Yeah, thought so." Kara said as she advanced on Vay and with two quick strokes of her knife she cut through the tape binding her legs. Then she recoiled, "Wow!" she exclaimed, "What an amazing new smell you've discovered."

All around the main reactor the lights were on, so it was easy for the rebels to move in close. Looking down from an overhead walkway they saw a trio of rakata positioned around one of the consoles.

"One each." Tharun commented, "Easy."

"Indeed sergeant." Vorn said before he held out his hand, "You're sidearm please sergeant." He said.

"What do you need this for major?" Tharun asked, un-holstering his pistol and handing it to Vorn.

"More hitting power than his own." Mace said.

"Actually I'm more interested in the stun setting." Vorn replied.

"My deck sweeper can handle stun." Mace said.

"Not from this range captain." Tharun reminded him.

"Exactly." Vorn said, "I don't want to put us in harm's way any more than needed. So I'll fire on them with Tharun's pistol. Then, as soon as the first one drops I want you two to finish off the others. Understood?"

Both Mace and Tharun nodded and took aim towards the rakata, unsure of which of the three would be left standing when Vorn was done.

The first shot missed by an a narrow margin, but it caused the rakata to whirl around to face their attackers and Vorn's second shot struck one of them dead centre of his chest. Before the incapacitated alien could even hit the deck both Mace and Tharun opened fire on the remaining two. They kept their aim high to avoid hitting the sensitive reactor controls so both of the rakata were hit in their heads, dying without a sound from either.

"Good work." Vorn said, "Now do you still have that other set of binders?"

Tharun held up another pair of binders taken from the first group of rakata.

"Okay then," Vorn went on, "now lets go down there and grab our prisoner. Then maybe he can tell us what they're doing here."

"How exactly do you intend on doing that?" Mace asked, "I've not heard one of these things speak in basic yet."

"No," Vorn replied, "but fortunately for us you two brought along our translator."

The rakata remained unconscious the entire way as Mace and Tharun dragged it back to where the others were waiting. Vorn on the other hand carried some of the equipment the aliens had possessed.

"Well we got another one." Tharun said as he and Mace let the rakata drop, "How are the first two?" and he looked towards Garm and Vay. The two Imperial agents were both lay face down on the deck with their hands bound behind their backs, Vay's mouth still bulging from the foam inside it.

"Oh they're being good little bad guys." Kara replied, "Though I think junior would have liked to watch stinky changing. Now what's with that one?"

"I want know why they're here." Vorn said, "What is it about this ship that interests them? Its not like it can be salvaged without a major operation." Then he tossed the bag containing the rakatas' belongings towards Tobis, "See what you can make of that." He said.

"Err. Ahh." Tobis said as he began to rummage through the bag.

"What is it lad?" Tharun said, "Come on, speak up."

"Well," Tobis replied, "Its just all of this stuff is ours."

"I don't remember losing any of it." Tharun said.

"No. That's not what I mean. Look at all these things; every single one of them was made either in the Empire or the Republic before it. This datapad is even marked 'Product of Allastra'."

"So they're concealing their own tech." Jaysica said, "They don't want us to recognise any of it."

"They don't need to." Garm said suddenly, straining to look up at Jaysica, "This is their ground. Why not use their own tech here?"

"He's right." Mace said, "Even the ship they landed in is a Republic design."

"Then that must be what they're after." Vorn said, "They're here to scavenge technology."

"But you said this ship couldn't be salvaged boss." Kara pointed out.

"No," Vorn admitted, "but there are all sorts of machines here that could be stripped out and used."

"Workshops." Tobis said, "They could use the machinery to manufacture their own devices."

Heads then turned as the stunned rakata groaned.

"Looks like our boy's coming around." Tharun said, aiming his weapon at the alien.

"Jeeves." Vorn called out, "I need you to translate for us."

"But Major Larcus sir," the droid protested, "the rakata language is unknown."

"Just listen to what he has to say." Vorn said, "I'm sure you'll figure something out."

"Wake up!" Tharun yelled and he used his foot to roll the rakata over.

The alien's eyes opened and stared up at Tharun and then it said something abrupt to him as it pulled at the binders restraining it.

"Well?" Mace said to Jeeves.

"I'm not entirely certain sir. But certain elements of that outburst were similar to words found in several ancient human and duros languages."

"Two species enslaved by the rakata's empire." Vorn said, "Go on."

"Well the grammar is reminiscent of the taung language, but that's all I could get from such a short outburst."

"Perhaps we're looking at this the wrong way." Tharun said, "Maybe it understands us just fine." Then he slung his rifle over his shoulder, reached down and dragged the alien to his feet, "Why are you here?" he demanded, shoving the rakata back against the nearest bulkhead.

The rakata uttered another short sentence and the expression on its face turned into something approximating a human frown.

"I will tell you nothing." Jeeves said, "Or words to that effect. Though they were quite vulgar in my opinion."

"So it does understand us." Vorn said, "So it should understand me when I tell it that I'm not letting them get their hands on this ship."

"What are you planning boss?" Kara asked.

"Easy," Vorn answered, "we're going to blow it up."

The rakata hissed at him.

"Oh don't worry." Vorn said, "You'll be coming with us. I'm sure the boys in intelligence will be able to get all the answers they need."

The rakata roared and butted Tharun in the face. The man staggered back, clutching at his nose.

"Hurts, doesn't it?" Garm muttered.

Then as the rebels all reached for their weapons the still bound rakata charged towards the individual he took to be the weakest, Jaysica. Then young woman screamed in alarm as the alien closed in on her, but she was still able to draw her holdout blaster from her waist and had just about brought it up between them when the rakata slammed into her.

There was the sound of a shot as the blaster discharged and both Jaysica and the alien toppled over, landing in a heap on the deck.

"Jaysica!" Tobis cried out, rushing to her aid.

"I'm fine." Jaysica replied from beneath the rakata as she tried to push it off her. The alien however, lay completely still and when Tobis pulled it off Jaysica he revealed a large burn mark where the blaster bolt had struck the centre of its torso.

"Well there goes our prisoner." Mace said.

"Two out three isn't bad captain." Kara commented, nodding towards Garm and Vay.

"Right then," Vorn said, "this doesn't change the plan. Mace, you and Kara take Harvey back to the ship and then bring it here. We'll rig this ship to blow and get out here."

"What about the other rakata?" Tharun asked.

"What about them?" Vorn replied, "So long as they don't come here bothering us they shouldn't be a problem."

"What about these two boss?" Kara asked, pointing to Garm and Vay.

"The plan's still the same." Vorn said, "They're coming with us."

"How exactly?" Mace asked, "How do we secure them?"

"Easy." Vorn replied, "We just lock them in an escape pod. No one has to go in there with them until we get back to headquarters. Then they can be shipped off to a POW camp."

4.

"They are overdue section leader."

At first the other rakata said nothing, instead just surveying the surrounding area through his macrobinoculars. But then he lowered the device and turned to face his subordinate.

"What of your task here?" he asked.

"There were no survivors. Neither among our own people or the alien workers."

"You have tried contacting the other team?"

"I have, but there has been no response. One of them should have remained with the vehicles. Do you want me to put together a second unit?"

"No. We have no more ground transport and it would take too long to walk."

"Then what?"

"Gather the troops. We will take the shuttle to the dig site and investigate. All of us."

Tharun eyed Garm and Vay closely. Neither of them had caused any trouble so far, but he did not put it past either of them to try something. Especially in the light of Garm's failed escape attempt.

Through the open hatchway above them came the sound of a starship's repulsorlift engines and Tharun stood up and walked to beneath the hatch.

"Looks like our ride's here." He said.

The kappa-class shuttle set down and as soon as the first side ramp dropped the rakata troops began to disembark.

"There is just one vehicle. Where is the other?" the section leader called out as he saw that one of the speeders was missing.

"Look sir! Tracks." One of his troops called out, pointing to a set of footprints that came from the empty terrain around the parked speeder. However, there were no corresponding tracks leading away.

"We are not the first to come here." The section leader announced, "First unit enter the vessel and be ready to encounter resistance."

When he heard the first of the alien voices Tharun knew that Kara and Mace had not returned with the *Silver Hawk*. Keeping his rifle trained on the hatch he dashed towards the two prisoners he had been left in charge of.

"Get up!" he hissed, reaching down to pull first Garm and then Vay to their feet.

"Now what?" Garm asked after he was lifted to his feet.

"Head that way." Tharun said, waving in the direction that the other rebels had taken to get to the reactor core, "But stay where I can see you."

A line was suddenly dropped through the hatchway and an armoured rakata trooper came sliding down it.

"Move!" Tharun yelled as he brought his rifle to his shoulder and fired a short burst into the alien, causing him to fall from the line and plummet to the deck, "Quickly!" Tharun added as he turned and began to run, shoving his prisoners forwards. There was a brief clatter as a fist sized metal cylinder was dropped through the hatch following orders barked in the alien language and a few seconds later, just as Tharun, Garm and Vay got clear the concussion grenade detonated, "I said move!" Tharun repeated as the sound of the blast echoed down the corridor after them.

"How can we be in these?" Garm asked, lifted his arms as far as the binders would allow.

"I can leave you behind if you'd rather." Tharun suggested and both Garm and Vay picked up their pace.

"That should do it major." Jaysica said, getting to her feet, "This charge will sever the coolant and venting lines completely. Even if someone did find what we'd done they couldn't fix it in time."

"Good." Vorn replied and he looked at Tobis, "What about the reactor itself?" he asked.

"Oh. Err. I've overridden the fuel valves major. The system will keep pumping fuel into the reactor regardless of how much energy is being output."

"So what are we looking at here?" Vorn asked.

"Well," Tobis said, scratching his head, "you have to realise that this wasn't intended to be a bomb major."

"How big will the blast be Tobis?"

"Well, err, roughly I'd say about six hundred megatons. The blast radius should be about a thousand kilometres."

Jaysica's jaw dropped.

"I say master Dorfus." Jeeves exclaimed, "That does seem a trifle excessive."

"I asked you to just destroy the ship Tobis." Vorn said, "Taking the continent with it isn't necessary."
"I know sir, but we're dealing with nearly a full fuel load. The feedback from the detonation will carry the reaction into the fuel tanks and trigger an catastrophic reaction there as well."
"Well its not like we were going to be coming back here anyway is it?" Jaysica said.
"A good job too." Vorn said, "Seeing how it doesn't look like there's going to be a 'here' to come back to anyway." Then he looked at Jaysica, "Do it." He said and the rebels backed away from the charge she had set.

Jaysica took out her comlink and used it to send a simple pulse to the wireless detonator she had fitted to her charge. The charge was small, just enough to rupture the control lines beneath them and render them useless, and there was only a brief flash and a sound like a balloon bursting as it went off.

"Now you Tobis." Vorn said and the young engineer walked o the nearest console and made an adjustment. "Its done major. The fuel is being fed into the reactor at its maximum rate. Without all of the ship's primary systems running the pressure will build up rapidly."

"Right then, stand back." Vorn said and as Tobis stepped back from the console Vorn fired a single blaster bolt into it, "Now no-one can undo it." He added.

Just then Garm and Vay burst into the reactor control room, with Tharun close behind them.

"Major!" Tharun called out, "The rakata are here. We're cut off from the hatch so don't set the ship to blow just yet!"

Vorn winced.

"You couldn't have got here thirty seconds ago could you?" he said.

"Why?" Tharun asked and Tobis pointed to the display that showed the reactor core's pressure building steadily, "Oh." He added, "Well how long to shut it down?"

"About three hours." Jaysica said, "If we can find the parts straight away."

"And how long until it blows?" Garm asked.

"Oh. Err. Ahh. About two." Tobis said.

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Vorn said.

"Then we have to fight our way back to the hatch." Jaysica said.

Tharun shook his head.

"No can do little lady." There's about thirty plus rakata between it and us.

"Escape pods." Vorn said.

"Huh?" Tharun asked.

"Well the ship was on the ground when it evacuated right?" Vorn said.

"That's what it looks like." Tobis said, "I've seen no signs of crash damage at all."

"So all of the escape pods should be in place." Vorn said.

"I don't know how things are done in the rebellion, "Garm commented, "but in the Empire escape pods aren't designed for use underground."

"Exactly." Vorn said, "So if we try and launch one then the engines on it will just explode right?" and he looked at Tobis who nodded furiously, "Just like what we've done here only on a smaller scale. So if we pick an escape pod that's near to the top of the ship where there's just a few metres of dirt on top of it then it may just blast a crater to the surface." And Vorn smiled.

"We've still got to get around the rakata major." Tharun said.

"Around is easier than through." Vorn said, "Now Tobis, can you suggest an escape pod we should use?"

The neimoidians who ran the Trade Federation had made excellent provision for the higher-ranking crewmembers to abandon ship should it become necessary and an entire bay of large escape pods was located just a few decks beneath the main control centre. This was deeper than Vorn would have liked, but Tobis assured him that the engines of these larger than typical escape pods would release more than enough energy upon detonation to clear a route to the surface.

Unfortunately as they had begun to move down through the ship the rakata had left a unit of troops here on guard.

"We could always try using Penny as a distraction." Tharun suggested.

"No!" Jaysica exclaimed, "She'll get hurt."

"She didn't when we did it before." Tharun replied.

"Before? What do you mean before?"

"Never mind that now." Vorn said as he peered around the corner to where the group of rakata soldiers stood beside the escape pods, "We need to figure out a way of dealing with them."

Vay let out a short series of grunts.

"What did she just say?" Jaysica asked.

"Probably something along the lines of if you didn't have her tied up she could do it." Garm said and Vay nodded in agreement.

"Don't do it major." Tharun said.

"Don't worry." Vorn replied, "I've got enough to worry about with those rakata down here without adding her to the mix."

"Too far for a grenade." Tharun said, "Same goes for you little holdout piece major. And even on full auto my blaster can't deal with them all at once."

"It looks like they all have rifles or carbines too." Vorn said as he took another look, "So they've no reason to come any closer. So we need to find a way of getting the grenade to them."

"Can't be done without a launcher." Tharun said.

"Then we need a launcher." Vorn said and he looked at Tobis, "Tobis, could you knock something up? It doesn't have to be fancy, just something that will propel about half a kilogram for sixty or seventy metres. Vay grunted again.

"Fine." Vorn said, "Lets see what you have to say that's so important." And he plucked the sponge from her mouth.

"I can get it there." She said.

"How?" Jaysica asked.

"How do you think?" Vay asked and she threw a glance at Tharun, "If he throws it then I can give it the boost it needs to reach those aliens."

"And why should we trust you?" Tharun asked.

"Because I don't fancy the idea of them cutting the tongue from my head or your little science project in the reactor core incinerating me along with a large part of this planet."

"She does have a point there major." Tharun said reluctantly.

"Fine." Vorn replied, "But don't for one minute think I'm lightening our guard on you." And he pushed the sponge back into her mouth, "Sergeant Verser, your grenade please." He added.

Tharun smiled.

"I take it I throw it as soon as I pull the pin. Yes?" he said to Vay who nodded in response, "Okay then, here we go. Fire in the hole." And he plucked the fragmentation grenade from his webbing, removed the pin and hurled it around the corner towards the rakata.

At the same time Vay peered around Tharun and concentrated on the compact explosive device and used the force to impart a push on it just as it began to fall. The grenade suddenly bobbed upwards, bounced off the ceiling and picked up speed. Hearing the sharp sound of the grenade bouncing the rakata all turned to face it. The first of them spotted the explosive just as it finally dropped to the floor and continued to roll towards them.

"Grenade!" he yelled in his own language, but before any of the rakata could react the grenade detonated, sending shrapnel in all directions.

Tharun and Vay had both ducked back just before the grenade went off and when the sound of the detonation reached them Tharun whirled back around the corner, his rifle held at his shoulder. Through his scope he saw that all but three of the rakata had been either killed or otherwise incapacitated by the explosion and he open fire, sending a sustained burst of energy bolts down the corridor towards the survivors.

He then ran down the corridor, keeping his rifle trained on the bodies of the rakata just in case any of them were merely playing dead. He heard a sound from one of the aliens he had fired on, but when he looked more closely he saw that the noise was coming from a comlink he clutched in his hand. Though Tharun could not understand the language being spoken he could recognise its significance.

"We're going to have company!" He yelled at the others.

5.

The first rakata to appear came rushing down the corridor oblivious to the danger and it was only when Tharun opened fire that they dived for cover. He had no need to kill any of the oncoming aliens; he had only to hold them back while Tobis overrode the safety devices in an escape pod to permit its launch while the ship was buried.

"I could use a hand here major." Tharun said, switching from automatic to semi-auto to conserve ammunition. "Jaysica watch them." Vorn said, waving at his son and Vay. Then he dashed towards Tharun and knelt down on the opposite side of the corridor, pressing himself up against the bulkhead to make himself less of a target, "This thing may not punch through their armour." He added as he unslung his lightweight carbine and took aim. He squeezed off a single shot and the bolt struck a rakata in the chest. The alien soldier fell to the deck, screaming but still alive. Behind him another two of the aliens grabbed hold of their fallen comrade and dragged him out of sight.

"That's good enough for me." Tharun said as he sent another rakata sprawling across the deck.

"Tobis how long?" Vorn called out.

"Err, not long now." Tobis replied, "I've overridden the safety and can launch the pod at any time."

"Then do it lad!" Tharun called out.

"I can't. When it explodes the blast will take out this entire bay. I need to set up a delay."

"Oh great." Tharun said, "Another damn countdown." Then he added, "You will make sure it's less than the one for the reactors won't you lad?"

Tobis did not reply, instead he continued to work at the escape pod hatch, desperately trying to rig up something that would launch the pod after a short delay.

"I can't do it." He called out, "I don't have what I need."

"Then find another way." Vorn replied, "And do it quickly."

A blaster bolt from the rakata narrowly missed Vorn, the heat from its passing making him duck and press his hand to his head to ensure that he had not taken a hit. The bolt instead slammed into the bulkhead just behind him and blew a hole in it. Sparks flew as the electronics behind the wall were smashed and Tobis glanced at the damage to see flames around the cabling.

"That's it!" he exclaimed.

"What is?" Tharun asked, swapping a fresh power cell for the depleted one in his rifle.

"I need wire." Tobis said, "Lots of it."

"Wire?" Vorn asked, "What for?"

"Oh, well if I can't delay the launch then I can just trigger it when we're out of the way. So I need wire to run a lead back there."

"Then for the force's sake go get some lad!" Tharun yelled.

"Jeeves help him!" Vorn added.

"Oh but Major Larcus, I'm an interpreter not an electrician."

"Help him or supply them from your own body." Tharun snapped.

"Well there's no need to be like that." The droid replied.

Tobis drew his blaster pistol and fired upwards into the ceiling above his head, leaping backwards as he blasted loose a panel that clattered to the deck at his feet. He looked into the hole and saw clusters of different coloured wires that his gunfire had cut through and took note of the direction in which it ran. Then he rushed across the compartment and repeated this, shooting his weapon into the ceiling until a portion of it was dislodged to reveal the mass of wires above it that had been cut through by the repeated blaster fire.

"Jeeves I need a hand to get up there." He said.

"Of course master Dorfus, I'm glad to be of assistance. But as a means of support I doubt that I'll be entirely stable."

The protocol droid cupped its hands together and Tobis used the step created to lift himself up high enough to be able to reach the hole in the ceiling, steadying himself by grasping the edge of the hole as he poked his head through. He grabbed a pair of the severed cables that looked to come from the other direction of the other hole and began to pull on them, letting them fall through the hole and pile up on the deck below him. Only when the other end of the cables reached him did he jump back to the deck himself. Then he grabbed hold of one end of each of the cables and ran back towards the escape pod with them. Crouching down by the escape pod control panel he began to splice these into the system, twisting bared ends of the wires to the wiring of the launch control.

"Got it!" he exclaimed, "Get clear!" and he got his feet and ran across the chamber, scooping up the far ends of the wires as he ran.

"Those rakata may suspect something if they see us get up and run major." Tharun said.

"Got a smoke grenade there?" Vorn asked.

"Last one." Tharun replied and he primed the last of his grenades and tossed towards the rakata. As soon as the grenade burst open and a cloud of thick whiter smoke filled the corridor Tharun called out, "Now!" Tobis had already run from the escape pod launch bay and taken up a position just beyond another hatchway, Jeeves standing further behind him. With a little help from Jaysica to get them to their feet Garm and Vay were now also heading in that direction. So that left only Tharun and Vorn to get to safety and the pair were soon dashing through the hatchway.

"Somebody get ready to shut the hatch." Tobis said, "As soon as I give the word."

Not quite through the hatchway yet, Vorn threw himself sideways and came to halt beside the panel.

"Ready." He said, his hand hovering over he control.

Beyond the hatch they could all hear the sound of raised rakata voices as the aliens came charging through the smoke.

"Now!" Tobis yelled, touching the two ends of the wires together.

Vorn slammed his hand down on the hatch control and as it dropped shut there was a roaring as the rigged escape pod attempted to blast its way clear of the ship.

The rakata soldiers came through the cloud expecting to find the rebels waiting for them, so when they found the bay to empty they looked around in confusion and were just in time to see the hatchway dropping shut. Then their attention was caught by the sound of the escape pod's engines firing. But before they could react to this, the hatchway to the escape was blown inwards and the entire bay filled with flame.

"What the hell was that?" Mace said to himself as he saw a fireball rising into the sky from the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk*.

"Hey captain!" Kara's voice called out over the intercom from her position in the ship's turret, "Did you just see that?"

"Clear as day." Mace replied.

"That wasn't the Trade Federation ship was it?"

"I doubt it. The blast from that would be far larger. But just make sure you're ready for trouble."

"I always am captain."

"That's only because you're normally the cause of it."

"What was that? Because it sounded like something that could get an officer punched in the face."

"I said nothing. Just keep your eyes open."

Just as planned the exploding escape pod had blasted a crater that led all the way to the surface and the rebels ran up its sides as fast they could, with Jaysica and Vorn assisting their prisoners.

"Back!" Tharun snapped as he reached the rim of the crater first and then slid back. He then levelled his rifle over the rim and let off two shots, "Rakata." He said, "Five of them. Must be some sort of rearguard." Then he ducked beneath the rim of the crater as a stream of blaster shots streaked overhead, "And they seem to have a repeating blaster."

"So that's it?" Jaysica said, "We get all the way here and then we get shot?"

"Personally I'm not at all surprised." Garm said, "Rebel schemes are always enacted out of desperation."

"Oh shut up son!" Vorn snapped, "Now we're not dead yet and I don't think we're going to be dying any time soon either."

"Why would you say that?" Garm asked.

"Listen." Vorn said and he grinned as the sound of repulsorlifts filled the air.

Suddenly the familiar saucer shaped hull of a YT-1300 freighter flew overhead. The rebels and their prisoners watched at the ship pulled up, the blaster fire from the rakata soldiers now being directed skywards. The *Silver Hawk* pivoted in mid air as Mace turned around and as it made another pass he had inverted the ship so that Kara had a clear field of fire at the ground.

"Down!" Tharun yelled and everyone in the carter ducked as a stream of laser fire erupted from the *Silver Hawk's* gun. Rather than try and direct the heavy weapon at the tiny cluster of aliens and their tripod-mounted weapon, Kara had instead aimed at the far more tempting target of the kappa-class shuttle.

Grounded and with it's shields down, the vessel was defenceless against Kara's volley and it burst open in an explosion that consumed the rakata beside it.

The *Silver Hawk* zoomed up into the sky again and Mace righted the ship before bringing it low over he crater. As it hovered overhead the access ramp was lowered to reveal Kara standing there with a wide grin on her face.

"Hey! Who wants a lift of this rock?"

6.

Kara pulled the harness tight, pressing Garm back into his seat.

"Okay Junior," she said, "you and stinky should be just fine here until we get back to base."

"You'll never get away with this you rebel scum." Garm replied.

"Oh really?" Kara asked, "Well there's something else I think I should tell you." And she leant in close to Garm so that her lips were positioned beside his ear and she whispered.

Anger.

Vay felt it clearly. Whatever Kara had just said to Garm had enraged him and as she stood up he twisted in his seat, scowling at her and trying to get free.

"Bye bye junior." Kara said, blowing him a kiss, "And bye bye stinky." She added before making her way from the escape pod.

There was a hiss as the two halves of the escape pod door sealed. Garm twisted in his seat again, trying to break free of the harness. Then he glanced at Vay who was looking back at him.

"Lean closer." Garm said and a puzzled look appeared on Vay's face, "Look, just lean closer." He said again and he leant towards Vay as far as the seat harness would allow.

Vay did as Garm said and leant closer to Garm, their heads almost touching. Garm opened his mouth and then bit down on the portion of Vay's foam gag that stuck out. Realising what he was attempting, Vay slowly pulled back her head as Garm did the same and the foam came away.

"Thanks." Vay said, licking her lips and trying to generate enough saliva to get rid of the taste left behind in her mouth, "So what do we do now?"

Garm looked through the viewport in front of them just as the starfield vanished as the ship entered hyperspace.

"I think we just have to sit and wait." He said.

"Well junior and stinky are secure." Kara said as she entered the lounge area of the *Silver Hawk* to find Jaysica, Tharun and Tobis sat at the table, "Though I don't think either of them appreciate the accommodation."

"That's hardly surprising." Tharun replied, sipping at a hot drink.

"Is there more of that?" Kara asked, pointing to the mug he held.

"In the pot." Tharun replied and Kara went to pour a drink for herself.

"Well we've made the jump." Mace said, entering the lounge with Vorn and he too went to pour himself a drink.

"Garm and Vay secure then?" Vorn asked as he sat down.

"Good and tight boss." Kara said, "But I don't think junior likes me."

"But you're oh so likeable." Mace said as he took a mug in his hand.

"I know." Kara said, "Go figure."

"What did you say to him Kara?" Mace asked.

"Oh nothing really." Kara replied with a smile and as she lifted her mug to her lips she casually added, "I just told him I was sleeping with the boss."

Tharun spluttered and coughed as he accidentally inhaled some of his drink instead of swallowing it properly. At the same time Mace let out a yell as he took his attention from the hot drink he was pouring into the mug and spilt the liquid over his hand.

"Kara that's disgusting." Jaysica said as the others just stared at both Kara and Vorn.

"Oh thanks." Vorn said looking at Jaysica. Then he turned his attention to Kara, "Why on Coruscant would you say that to him?"

Kara shrugged.

"To annoy him." She said, "Do I need another reason?"

The *Silver Hawk* made the journey back out of the nebula in the same way as it had entered, short hops through hyperspace interrupted by brief stopovers in real space to avoid obstacles.

Mace and Vorn were the only ones in the cockpit as the ship completed its final jump and instead of the brightly coloured gas cloud, the viewport was instead filled with the blackness of space interrupted only by the pinpricks of light cast by distant stars.

"At last." Vorn said.

"Uh-oh." Mace said, looking at the sensor display and he frantically began to shut down the *Silver Hawk's* systems.

"What?" Vorn asked.

"Star destroyer." Mace replied.

From her position on the bridge of the Venator-class star destroyer *Falchion* Captain Louisa Yay could see both empty space and the nebula, depending on how she turned her head. Hers was not the only navy ship in the area. The *Ferocious* and *Firebrand* were out there somewhere, but at approximately eighteen light minutes distance they were well beyond visual range. But now it seemed that another vessel had just made an appearance.

"Come on comscan!" she snapped, "I'm waiting."

"I'm sorry captain." the comscan operator replied, "I'm certain I saw something dropping out of hyperspace, but now—"

"If it's out there, find it." Captain Yay said, turning briefly to glare menacingly at the comscan operator and then looking back out of the massive viewport at the front of the bridge. It was bad enough that Imperial navy politics had dumped her on this out-dated vessel, Captain Yay thought to herself, but the less than impressive quality of so many of her crew just served to compound the situation.

"I wonder what happened to the lights." Garm said as the interior of the escape pod went dark.

Frustration.

Anger.

Vay felt the ripple in the force from a great distance.

"We're not alone." She said, "There's another ship out there."

"The aliens?" Garm suggested.

Vay closed her eyes and concentrated, reaching out for the minds of the other ship's crew.

"No." she replied as she opened her eyes and smiled, "Humans. Lots of them. Garm, its one of ours."

"Great." Garm said, "But how are we supposed to get a message to them?"

Vay looked around.

"What about that?" she said, looking at the centre of the console in front of them. It was the location of a large red button, protected by a glass cover. Even without the label stencilled neatly beneath the button it would have been obvious that it was the control to manually launch the escape pod.

"Can you do it?" Garm asked, leaning back in his chair.

"I can if you'll shut up and let me concentrate." Vay replied and she focused her mind on the button.

As Garm watched the button dropped beneath the cover, without the glass being disturbed in the slightest and all of a sudden both Garm and Vay were pressed into the thick padding of their seats.

"Are we hit?" Vorn asked as he felt the ship shudder.

"No." Mace replied as he looked at the few readouts that were still active, "But we're picking up a distress signal from right on top of us. No wait, it's getting further away. Oh stang, we just launched an escape pod."

"Boss what's happening? Are we getting shot at?" Kara called out as she rushed into the cockpit.

"Kara," Vorn replied sternly, looking round at her, "did you remember to deactivate the launch mechanism of the escape pod you locked my son and Vay in?"

"Not personally. I had Tobis pull the control line to the ship's computer." She replied.

"What about the manual control?" Mace asked as he too stared at her.

"Oops." Kara said.

Mace once again began to frantically flip switches to bring the *Silver Hawk's* systems back on line.

"Multiple contacts captain!" the comscan operator called out, "One looks like an escape pod."

"Sound action stations." Captain Yay announced, "Shields front. Batteries hold. Pilots to their fighters but do not launch. Helm lay in an intercept course, full burn. Comscan update the rest of the line." And as she felt the *Falchion* accelerate, Louisa Yay allowed herself a smile.

"Captain!" the comscan operator called out, "I have the *Ferocious* incoming and the *Firebrand* is not far behind."

There was flash visible from inside the *Silver Hawk* as a second venator-class ship dropped out of hyperspace.

"Incoming fighters from that new ship major." Mace said as the single sensor contact turned into many.

"Kara go get on the turret." Vorn ordered, then he looked at Mace, "Keep an eye for another venator. If it's a standard attack line there'll be at least three ships."

Sure enough a third ship promptly dropped out of hyperspace, the three warships forming a cordon all around the *Silver Hawk*.

"Where's that escape pod?" Vorn said as he looked at the sensor display.

"Too far major." Mace replied, "And getting closer to that first star destroyer all the time. The fighters will be on us before we can reach it."

Vorn stared out of the viewport.

“Punch it.” He said and as Mace activated the hyperdrive the stars outside became a blur.

“Garm!” Jennay rushed to meet her husband as he stepped from the speeder and the pair embraced, “Oh thank the gods. I was starting to think I’d never see you again.”

“Its alright,” he replied, “I’m home now.” And he bent down to kiss Jennay on the lips.

“You’re father was here.” Jennay said when they separated.

“I know.” Garm said, “Its because of him that I’m back.” Then he paused before adding, “He said you told him. Is it true?” and he placed a hand on Jennay’s stomach.

She smiled and nodded.

“It’s a boy.”