

# STAR WARS

## 3-06: Crash Landing

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 GUERRILLA 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...

## **CRASH LANDING**

SEARCHING FOR EVIDENCE OF ALIEN ACTIVITY A REBEL SHIP CARRYING JAYSICA AND TOBIS IS SHOT DOWN. JOINED BY AN UNEXPECTED ALLY, THEY MUST TRY AND SURVIVE LONG ENOUGH TO BE RESCUED...

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# 1.

"So what's all this about then captain?" Tharun Verser asked as he looked around the briefing chamber they had just entered.

"Don't ask me." Mace Grayle, captain of the freighter *Silver Hawk* replied, "I just work here."

Behind then a brunette woman looked at some of the other individuals that were already sat in the room.

"Oh look," she said with a sneer, "its your new best friend Captain Tarl." And she nodded towards a man in the uniform of an Alliance fighter pilot.

"We're hardly friends Kara." Mace replied as he spotted Kara's old squadron leader, "The Alliance sent him to help steal the fighters, that's all. Now let's get sat down."

As he looked around and spotted that Captain Jarad Tarl was not the only fighter squadron leader present, Mace could count six of them and all of the other rebel personnel sat around the room were members of either field operations teams such as his own or the crews of scout ships. Ten crews in total by his estimate.

"I still say he's a jerk." Kara muttered.

"Well you did hit him." A shorter woman towards the back of the group commented.

"Twice." Tharun added, "Right Tobis?" and he looked at the last member of the group.

"Huh?" Tobis replied, not having been paying attention, "I, err."

"Yeah, we know you were too busy watching Jaysica." Kara said, smiling at the shorter woman.

"What?" Tobis said, a startled look appearing on his face, "I wasn't, err that is I – err."

"There are seats here, look." Mace said, ignoring the conversation going on amongst the other rebels of the unit he was informally commanding and he sat down.

"Jaysica you can sit here." Tobis said as he left a gap between himself and Mace and pointed to it.

"That's fine I'll sit at the other end." Jaysica replied and she walked past, not noticing Tobis' face fall.

"Bad luck lad." Tharun muttered to him.

"Well I'll sit there." Kara said and she sat in the empty seat and wrapped an arm around Tobis, "See, I'll be your friend." And then she leant over and kissed him on the cheek."

Tharun grinned as a look of concern appeared on Tobis' face.

"I think you're in there lad." He said, just loud enough for Kara to hear and then flinched as she reached around Tobis and punched his arm.

"Fellow beings," a gruff voice called out from the centre of the room and all the various conversations that had been going on suddenly stopped as every rebel present turned to look at the speaker. The speaker was not human; instead she was a member of the amphibious mon calamari species wearing the uniform of an Alliance admiral. Behind her stood several other lower ranking mon calamari plus several officers of other species, "you have been gathered here today to hear how we intend to evaluate the threat posed to us by the rakata." The admiral went on. The alien rakata species had built an empire in the days before the founding of the Old Republic on the backs of enslaving other species. Recently a group of them had been discovered lurking in the nebula that bordered the sector and the local Alliance high command had promptly begun studying how to deal with this potential new threat, "So far our only encounter with these aliens has been within this arm of the nebula," and the admiral pointed to a large holographic display that showed the star systems within the local region plus the edge of the nebula. Where the nebula came closest to the sector it consisted of two enormous columns hundreds of light years tall that were stellar nurseries where new stars were slowly formed. There were also star systems scattered between these columns in an area of space known as the Spire Worlds. Lightly settled, most of the Alliance's facilities could be found here, "It is our intention to despatch a force into this arm and conduct a search. Colonel Ergard will now explain how this is to work." And the admiral pointed to a tall, bald man who was one of those standing behind her.

"Thank you Admiral Aphanar." The colonel replied as he stepped up to the display and adjusted it, "This is the world where Major Larcus' unit encountered the rakata." He explained and there was a general murmuring and shuffling of feet. Major Vorn Larcus had been the commanding officer of the unit assigned to the *Silver Hawk* until he had apparently deserted, leaving Mace in command instead, "So we will begin by despatching a battlegroup here consisting of one cruiser and three frigates." There was a sudden intake of breath around the room now. Four capital ships was a considerable force by any measure, able to rain death on a world at the whim of its leader, "From here we will spread out and search nearby systems for any signs of a rakata presence. Six groups will be despatched, each one consisting of two transports and a squadron of fighters for protection."

Mace did some quick mental arithmetic and determined that the numbers did not add up. There were six fighter squadron leaders here, who presumably would be acting as escorts to the surveying transports, but only ten crews for the transports themselves. Colonel Ergard operated a scout ship which would bring the total to eleven, but that still left them short by one ship. Mace raised his hand.

"Teacher's pet." Kara muttered.

"Yes captain?" Colonel Ergard said.

"Well isn't there someone missing sir?" Mace asked, "I assume you're taking out your own ship to lead this mission, but that still only gives us eleven from the crews you've gathered here against six fighter squadrons. What ship will be number twelve?"

A smile appeared on Colonel Ergard's face.

"I so glad you asked that captain." He replied, "Yes, we are short of a ship and crew so I've requisitioned one from our reserves. It's a YT-1300 and since your ship is of that class I thought that your engineer could be used to pilot it. He'll need a second of course. Can you recommend anyone?"

"How about Specialist Horbid?" Kara called out and she stared at Jaysica, smiling.

On the hangar deck of the space station that served as the rebel headquarters in the sector Mace and Tobis stared open mouthed at the YT-1300 that had been made available. The rebellion had few ships available to it and those it did have were generally worked as hard as possible. For one to be left in reserve was unusual, but in the case of this ship it was easy to see why.

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

"Now, now." Mace replied, "Is that any way to talk about your first official command?"

"I've got a really bad feeling about this." Tobis added.

Behind them a rebel starship technician approached.

"The *Lucky Card*'s not much to look at I know." He said, "But she'll fly. In space at any rate. I wouldn't recommend carrying out any atmospheric entries."

"What the hell's been done to this thing?" Mace asked as he walked up to the ship and reached out to touch its hull.

"Careful," the tech said, "I've just taped that bit back on."

"Taped?" Tobis suddenly exclaimed.

"Tape does wonders." The tech said, "She'll hold together."

"What about her flight systems?" Mace asked.

"Oh they're all there." The tech said, "It's just the secondary stuff that's missing."

"Missing?" Tobis asked.

"Yeah, well I've been using her for parts." The tech explained, "Nothing that would take her out of service, that would be against regulations after all. But if I need a new door or a refresher unit or laser cannon then rather than wait for one to be obtained I just take it from her. Oh and one other thing, do try not crash her, there aren't any escape pods." And the technician wandered away.

"You're going in that thing?" a female voice called out, "You're braver than I thought." And both Mace and Tobis looked around to see an hapan woman now standing behind them, looking at the ship. The hapan were a near human species, noted for their wealth and good looks and this woman was no different. Inra Vayne was the captain of the *Beauty Queen*, a YT-2400 freighter that was significantly more modern than many of the other such ships available to the rebellion and she was not one to let any of the other captains forget it.

"Well you see Inra," Mace replied, smirking at her, "Tobis here," and he put an arm around his engineer, "is such a good engineer that he can keep anything flying. You should try getting someone like him one day." Inra frowned. She had poached her engineer Sen Verid from another Alliance vessel much to its captain's annoyance and although he was highly competent, Mace knew that Inra would be horrified if she ever found out about some of the short cuts he took when working on the *Beauty Queen*.

"Stang!" the shout came from Kara as she, Jaysica and Tharun arrived on the hangar deck, "Does this thing run on batteries or do we need to wind it up?"

Now Inra smirked.

"Goodbye Mace." She said as she walked away.

"Is this really our ship?" Jaysica asked nervously.

"Yes, this is it." Mace replied.

"But, but it's, well it's-" Jaysica stammered.

"A pile of poodoo?" Tharun suggested.

"Exactly." Jaysica said and she reached up to touch the hull.

"I wouldn't-" Mace began, but before he could warn her off a loose panel fell away and clattered to the deck. Mace looked at Tobis, "Do you want to grab some more tape off the *Silver Hawk* before you leave?" Just in case?" and Tobis nodded.

Kara leant close to Tharun.

"Alone with the klutz on that thing? Tobis is going to die isn't he?" she said softly.

"It looks that way." Tharun answered, "Perhaps we should say our goodbyes now."

"Nah." Kara said.

From the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk* Mace and Tharun looked out at the *Lucky Card* as it dropped out of hyperspace a few seconds after they did. Further ahead of the two YT-1300s were the twelve X-wing fighters of Captain Tarl's squadron that had been assigned to protect them while they searched this system.

"Well I think Tobis survived." Kara's voice said over the intercom. She was sat in the *Silver Hawk's* turret, ready to protect the ship without having to rely on her old commanding officer.

"Still alive over there lad?" Tharun signalled, "How about the little lady? Kara wants to know if she's broken anything important yet."

"I'm fine." Tobis responded, the signal distorted even at this close range, "We're all fine."

"Cut the chatter." Captain Tarl's voice butted in, "Now I want you to—"

"I'm in charge of this survey captain." Mace interrupted, "Now I'm going to take the *Silver Hawk* out towards the fifth planet. It's a gas giant and anyone wanted to hide anything, there's plenty of room in its subsystem to do that. Tobis?"

"Yes captain?"

"Take the *Lucky Card* towards the second planet. My sensors say it has a type one atmosphere. We'll meet back up here in two days. Understood?"

"Yes captain." Tobis replied and the *Lucky Card* began to peel away.

"Captain Tarl?" Mace then broadcast.

"Yes Captain Grayle?"

"Both ships will need protection. Split your ships however you wish."

"Bet he follows Tobis." Kara said over the intercom, "He'll not want to hang around where you can boss him about."

"We'll see." Mace said.

"Captain Grayle." Captain Tarl's voice said, "I'll be taking aurek flight to follow the *Lucky Card*. Besh and cresh flights will go with you. I think you're more at risk around that gas giant." And four of the X-wings began to fly after Tobis' ship, easily overtaking the rundown vessel.

"Told you." Kara said, "He'll not stay where he's not the big boss man. I'll bet he's still smarting over having to follow your orders when you stole those fighters Mace."

## 2.

The cockpit of the *Lucky Card* had only one proper seat remaining, the others having been removed at various times to replace damaged ones on other vessels. So now in place of the co-pilot's seat a simple plastic garden chair had been stuck to the floor with tape and in this chair Jaysica sat with her arms folded and a look of annoyance on her face.

"This is so boring." She said, "All we're doing is looking out of the window at a big blue ball. There's hardly any land."

Tobis did not reply to this. He was doing much more than looking at the planet the filled much of the view outside the cockpit, he was also paying attention to the *Lucky Card's* flight systems and the sensors that were running continuous scans of the planet's surface. Jaysica was supposed to be helping him of course, but he would never point that out to her.

"*Lucky Card* this is Captain Tarl."

The four fighters of Captain Tarl's flight had been maintaining position above the *Lucky Card* from where they would not get in the way of the ship's scans of the surface and also had a better view of the horizon.

"Go ahead captain." Jaysica responded, her hand darting to the communications system before Tobis could reach it.

"There's something on our scopes near the horizon ahead. It keeps appearing and then disappearing again. Its like something keeps taking a quick look at us then hiding again. Do you see it too?"

Jaysica looked at Tobis.

"Well I haven't seen anything." She said, stating the obvious since she had not looked at the sensors even once since their arrival, "Have you?"

"Ahh." Tobis said, then he just shook his head.

"We've seen nothing." Jaysica signalled to Captain Tarl.

"Okay then, I'm sending someone to check it out." Captain Tarl said and then the channel caught his signal to the rest of aurek flight, "Blue Four advance."

"Roger Blue Leader."

The engines of one of the X-wings promptly flared as the ship accelerated from the slow pace they had been keeping to match that of the *Lucky Card* as it moved ahead and it soon disappeared behind the horizon.

The other four rebel ships waited for Blue Four to either reappear over the horizon in front of them or from behind after circling the entire planet at high speed. But after five nerve-wracking minutes there was still no sign of the fighter or any word from its pilot.

"Blue Four come in." Captain Tarl called out over his communications, "Blue Four report. Does anyone have eyes on Blue Four?"

"Negative Blue Leader." One of the other pilots replied.

Then as the group of ships continued to round the planet they saw the unmistakable shape of an X-wing as its remains sank into the atmosphere and began to burn up.

"Lock S-foils in attack position!" Captain Tarl yelled, "Stabilise rear deflectors and watch for enemy fighters."

A vessel suddenly emerged from over the horizon, heading directly for the rebel ships. Bigger than the X-wings, but smaller than the *Lucky Card* the vessel had an aerodynamic shape and sported two turrets in dorsal and ventral mounts.

"Pinnacle!" one of the X-wing pilots called out as he identified the vessel. A pinnacle was generally considered to be a support craft and though it was not intended as a front line fighter it had some capability in this respect.

"Accelerate to attack speed." Captain Tarl ordered and the three remaining fighters moved in on the approaching vessel.

"Tobis what are we going to do?" Jaysica asked as she watched the fighters pulling rapidly away from them.

"Err." Tobis said, "There's not much we can do. We don't have any guns."

Then, just as bright red flashes of weapons fire began to appear in the space between the X-wings and the pinnacle the *Lucky Card's* sensors detected something else behind them.

"It's a trap!" Jaysica exclaimed as she saw the ship appear as if from nowhere.

"Captain Tarl," Tobis broadcast, "we're picking up a new group of signals. They look like enemy fighters."

In his cockpit Captain Tarl looked back towards the *Lucky Card* and behind the freighter he saw the engine flares of several ships closing in. They were moving slowly for starfighters and he strained to make them out.

"Fourdee can you identify those ships?" Captain Tarl said to the astromech droid mounted towards the rear of his ship. The droid whistled and on a screen in his cockpit Captain Tarl saw a schematic derived from his ship's sensor data that appeared to show a vessel with the fuselage of a Y-wing mated to a pair of TIE fighter wing assemblies, "Uglies." He said to himself. The term 'ugly' was one applied to all such hybrid fighters

manufactured in black market workshops from parts left over from vessel that had been scrapped. No true military would field such ships, not even the Rebel Alliance with its chronic shortage of ships. Only pirates and other criminals ever used them, "Blue Two stay on the pinnace. Blue Three follow me, we're going after the fighters." And the two X-wings peeled off towards the improvised fighters.

But before the X-wings could reach their new targets the *Lucky Card* came in range of their nose mounted laser cannons and they opened fire.

"Tobis do something!" Jaysica screamed as alarms sounded in the cockpit and warning lights illuminated almost every panel.

The ship shook under the weight of enemy fire and behind Jaysica and Tobis the cockpit door suddenly dropped shut.

"What's happening?" Jaysica yelled.

"The hull's breached." Tobis replied, "We're venting atmosphere." Then the ship shuddered again and the lights flickered, "We're going in." he said as the planet now filled the view from the cockpit.

The *Lucky Card* hit the atmosphere hard and shook and groaned as parts of its poorly maintained hull began to break off under the friction of atmospheric entry. Jaysica squealed as she gripped the arms of her seat and when Tobis looked around he noticed that the tape holding it in place was starting to come loose. Though Jaysica was small and light for an adult her weight was still causing the chair to loosen and if it came free then it would fly around the cockpit at random.

"Come here!" Tobis suddenly exclaimed as he released his harness, "Sit in my lap."

"What?" Jaysica exclaimed, staring back at Tobis.

"You're not secure." Tobis replied, "We'll have to share this seat."

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Jaysica said as she got up and moved to where Tobis sat. As soon as she sat down on top of him Tobis reached around her, extending the straps of the emergency harness as far as they would go and then tightening them around Jaysica, pressing her body into his.

Outside the cockpit the dull brown clouds that blocked their view suddenly gave way to reveal a wide ocean that they were rushing towards at a dangerous speed. Looking around Jaysica as she screamed Tobis grabbed hold of the *Lucky Card's* control column and pulled back on it as hard as he could, trying desperately to coax what little power remained into the ship's repulsorlift engine that had by now cut in to replace the ion drive used in space. But the repulsorlifts were in no better condition than the ion drive and though Tobis was still able to pull the *Lucky Card's* nose up the engines would not provide enough lift to keep the ship aloft.

Ahead of the ship Tobis saw a thin strip of land on the horizon and tried to figure out whether or not the ship would reach it before finally dropping out of the sky. Of course, hitting land would bring a whole other set of problems, but at least drowning would not be one of them.

"Tobis do something!" Jaysica screamed, "I don't want to die!" but then the *Lucky Card* hit the surface of the ocean just short of land and flipped over.

Blue Three exploded. The Y-TIE fighters were crude and individually ineffective, but en masse the X-wings were simply being overwhelmed. Blue Two had already been destroyed, caught in the crossfire between the pinnace and a flight of fighters so now Captain Tarl was on his own.

"Blue squadron respond!" he yelled, even though the extra volume did not matter when it came to using his fighter's communications, "*Silver Hawk!* Can anyone hear me?" but all that he received in return was static, "I can see that they're jamming us!" he snapped as the astromech droid chirped. Then it let out an electronic squeal as it was hit and exploded. Captain Tarl's fighter lurched suddenly as one of its wings was blasted free along the engine mounted at its root.

"Well this is it." He said to himself, "I'm going in."

Tobis' eyes fluttered open, but his view was obscured by a mass of blonde hair and he smelt the familiar scent of Jaysica's perfumed soap. For a moment he forgot what had happened and he smiled, but then remembered and looked around. Only the pale light being given off by the few indicators still active on the flight console illuminated the cockpit and the canopy appeared to be buried. He immediately realised that he and Jaysica were upside down, still strapped into the pilot's seat of the now inverted *Lucky Card*. Looking up he saw the plastic co-pilot's chair now lying sideways on what had been the ceiling.

There was a groan from in front of him as Jaysica began to gain consciousness, followed by a scream as she too realised that they were upside down.

"Jaysica don't!" Tobis exclaimed as she reached for the harness release.

"What? Why? Oh yeah, we'll fall."

"Exactly."

"One question."

"Go on."

"What's that sound?"

Tobis listened and he heard a sound that was both out of place and yet also very familiar. It was the sound of running water. As soon as he realised this his eyes widened.

"We've landed in the ocean!" he said suddenly, "The ship's filling with water." Then he reached for the harness release, "Get ready he said and then he undid it.

They landed in a heap on what used to be the ceiling and as they untangled themselves Tobis head for the door and placed his hands against it.

"Give me a hand with this." he said as he struggled to pull it open. Jaysica rushed to his side and between them they were able to open the door by hand, pulling it lower until there was enough room for them to crawl through. The corridor beyond was pitch black and Tobis fumbled in his pocket for anything to light their way.

"Here." Jaysica said as she realised what he was doing and she handed him a long narrow foil pack.

"Thanks." Tobis replied and he opened the pack. Inside was a narrow plastic tube that held two chemicals that when mixed together would give off enough light to see by. He activated the light stick and hooked it onto his overalls before looked through the gap and saw that outside the cockpit, the corridor was already filling with water, "It looks about knee deep I think." He said and then he clambered through the gap. Sure enough the water came up to his knees. Turning around he helped Jaysica through the gap and holding her by the hand led her through the darkened ship.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Err. The cargo hold." Tobis replied.

"What for?"

"All our things are there. Plus I think I saw a crate of survival gear. We'll need that."

There was only one other doorway between them and the main hold and fortunately the door itself was one of those removed as a replacement for another ship. Inside the hold various crates and boxes were floating round in the rising water. Tobis quickly located the two bags filled with his and Jaysica's personal possessions and sure enough there was a crate that was crudely marked 'SURVIVAL GEAR' floating around also.

"Okay so now what?" Jaysica asked and Tobis looked up at what used to be the floor, or more specifically at the cargo hatch set into it, "Oh no." Jaysica said.

"It's the only way." Tobis replied as he pulled the crate of survival equipment under the hatch, "When the hatch opens the water above us will come flooding in and the air inside will shoot up to surface, carrying us along with it."

"But what about the pressure difference?"

"Exhale. Completely empty your lungs. Now get ready." And Tobis reached up to where the controls were for the cargo hatch, hoping that the mechanism was operational and had power. He began to breathe deeply, making sure that with each breath he cleared his lungs of air.

"Wait Tobis, I don't think I can do this." Jaysica said.

"Yes you can." Tobis replied between breaths.

"No I- akk!" Jaysica doubled over in pain as Tobis suddenly punched her in the stomach, forcing the breath from her and at the same time he hit the hatch release.

Sure enough, as the water came flooding in Jaysica and Tobis were carried upwards by a mixture of their natural buoyancy and their momentum as the water level inside the ship rose rapidly.

Tobis gasped as he broke the surface and looked around for Jaysica and he spotted her nearby also trying to suck air back into her lungs. He swam towards her and wrapped an arm around her then after looking around again he began to swim towards the shore that was thankfully close by.

"Get off me!" Jaysica screamed as Tobis dragged her onto the beach, "You hit me! You hit me!" and she swung her fists at him. Tobis tumbled backwards and landed roughly in the sand. Then stared at Jaysica as she lay on the beach, clutching at her stomach and sobbing.

"Wait here." He said as he looked back out to see and saw the crate of survival equipment now bobbing about on the waves. He waded back into the water before swimming the rest of the way to the crate and then swam back towards Jaysica, dragging it behind him.



### 3.

Modern survival kits typically contained lightweight reflective foil blankets that provided excellent insulation for minimal weight. But like most of the other non-essentials aboard the *Lucky Card*, the emergency supplies had been removed before the ship left headquarters and the basic kit that had been hurriedly put together to replace these instead contained two woven blankets that were thicker and heavier. However, as Jaysica and Tobis sat shivering while their clothing dried by the fire they had built on the beach near to the tree line the blankets did at least help to keep them warmer.

They sat on opposite sides of the fire. Tobis occasionally glancing at Jaysica while she in turn purposely avoided looking anywhere near him. The fire cracked and Jaysica shuffled closer.

"Be careful." Tobis said.

"Oh shut up!" Jaysica snapped, "You hit me. I mean Kara and Tharun may make fun of me, but they never try and beat me up just because I won't do what they say. And don't think I didn't notice you looking at me when I was undressing."

"But I—" Tobis began.

"I said shut up!" Jaysica shouted and she waved her hand at him. But as she extended her arm the blanket caught on the flames of their fire and started to burn. Jaysica squealed, throwing the blanket off and the fire flared up as it landed in the flames. She looked in horror at the burning blanket, and then she sat back in just her underwear and shivered.

Tobis got up and walked around the fire, sitting down beside Jaysica and he wrapped both an arm and the blanket around her.

"You hit me." She said again, more softly this time.

"I – I needed to get the air out of your lungs." Tobis replied, "I couldn't think of any other way. I'm sorry, I just couldn't let you die."

Jaysica thought for a moment and for a moment a puzzled look appeared on her face.

"You're always trying to help me aren't you?" She said, "And when the others are teasing me you never join in. Why?"

"I, err, well." Tobis stammered.

"Tobis do you like me? I mean really like me?"

Tobis just stared at her. Jaysica smiled and then suddenly kissed him.

"That was for saving me." She said as he stared at her open mouthed, "And this is because you like me and I think I like you too."

"Oh stang!" Captain Tarl exclaimed as he saw the trees nearing him. His ejector seat had functioned perfectly, propelling him from the cockpit of his stricken starfighter after it had successfully entered the atmosphere and now he was floating downward beneath the canopy of his parachute.

He crashed into the jungle canopy and broke through before coming to a sudden halt as the chute became caught in the branches above him.

"Stang!" he said again. Fortunately he had come to a stop only about two metres above the ground. He struck the harness release on his chest and dropped the rest of the way to the ground, rolling as he landed. He drew his blaster and looked around, searching for any sign that he was being hunted by whoever had launched the fighters. Once he was satisfied that he was alone here he returned the weapon to its holster and began to scale the tree where his parachute had become caught. He doubted that he would have much use for the parachute now, but it was standard procedure to gather it up rather than leave it to be found by an enemy and thus reveal his position. He dragged the chute from between the branches, gathering up the fabric and forcing it back into the pack. The way in which he was putting it back in would not enable it to be used again without first being repacked properly but it would at least allow him to carry it with him easily. When he was done he looked around over the trees, using the height to his advantage. Off in the distance he could see a plume of smoke and he knew that it was the wreckage of his fighter. Then he spotted more smoke, this was a much smaller plume and was coming from the coast. Captain Tarl smiled as he climbed down the tree and then he set off towards the second smoke plume.

The sun had long since set when Captain Tarl made it to the coast and he used the faint glow of the fire to direct him along the beach towards it, his blaster in his hand. He stayed close to the trees, ready to duck back into the undergrowth and hide should it become necessary. But as he got closer to the fire he realised that there was no danger.

He saw the clothes strung up beside the fire to dry and the dark shape of Jaysica and Tobis lying asleep under their blanket nearby. Without bothering to call out from a distance Captain Tarl strode up to the fire and sat down on the opposite side to where the other rebels lay.

"You really should keep a blaster handy you know." He then called out as he held out his palms to warm them on the fire.

Jaysica shrieked and retreated beneath the blanket.

"Oh, err, I. Captain Tarl sir." Tobis said holding the blanket over himself and Jaysica.

"Doesn't Mace teach you stand at attention and salute an officer?" Captain Tarl asked, glaring at Tobis.

"Err." Tobis said, staring back.

"Do we have to?" Jaysica asked, peering out from behind the blanket.

It was then that Captain Tarl noticed that the items of outer clothing hung up to dry were not the only discarded garments nearby, both Jaysica's and Tobis' underwear was lying between them and the fire. Captain Tarl smiled, "Perhaps I should give you two a few minutes." He said.

"So this is the extent of our gear then?" Captain Tarl said the next morning as he looked at the assembled equipment taken from the crate as well as the personal equipment of the trio of rebels, including a more modern if limited survival kit that had come from his fighter.

"The parachute may come in useful." Tobis pointed out, "We can use it like a tent and the cords as rope."

"Yes and maybe you can build us a rope ladder back to headquarters." Captain Tarl replied, snarling.

"Tobis was only trying to help." Jaysica said, wrapping her arm around Tobis'.

"Well as much as I'd just love to stay here and bear witness to your blossoming romance I'd sooner find a way off this rock. Now we need to find a way of signalling the rest of my squadron so that the *Silver Hawk* can come and get us."

"I bet Kara blames me for all this." Jaysica commented, "She always does when something gets broken. It's not even always me that does it either."

Captain Tarl stared at her with a blank look.

"The first thing," he said after a pause, "is to get off this beach. We're too exposed. We need to find a location we can defend until help arrives. Ideally somewhere that let us see approaching vessels."

"But if we get off the beach how will the *Silver Hawk* know to look for us here?"

"We'll leave signals." Captain Tarl replied, "The enemy already knows we're on the planet so they'll come looking. We set up something that the *Silver Hawk* will recognise and be attracted to but that won't give away our exact location. Then we wait and make our presence known when the ship arrives to pick us up. Now let's get this stuff packed up and get moving. I think I spotted some caves not far from here, we should check them out."

With as much equipment loaded into the crate as possible it was up to Tobis and Captain Tarl to carry it through the jungle while Jaysica strolled along side them.

"This pack is really heavy." She complained, her backpack having been filled with everything from Tobis' pack since he was helping with the crate.

"You don't say." Captain Tarl commented as he strained under the shared weight of the crate, "How about we swap?"

Jaysica shook her head.

"Then shut up." Captain Tarl said, "Unless you want me to lighten the load of this crate by taking out some of the tape and using the entire thing to seal your mouth shut for good."

"You know you're a lot like Kara." Jaysica commented.

"Right!" Captain Tarl snapped and he let go of the handhold on the crate, letting his side drop to the ground.

He turned around and grabbed hold of Jaysica, pointing a finger at her. But before he could speak there was the sound of repulsorlift engines and a pinnacle like the one that had attacked them in space flew overhead. Immediately everyone reached for their blasters, despite them being only pistols and looked skywards.

"This way!" Captain Tarl exclaimed and he began to run through the jungle.

"What about the crate?" Tobis asked.

"Forget it for now. We just need to get to shelter."

The caves that Captain Tarl had passed by on his way to the beach were only a short distance away, located near a waterfall that fed into a large pool. The rock face was about ten metres tall and extended above the treetops but it was clearly too steep to climb without ropes. However it appeared that if they could reach the top it would offer the rebels an excellent vantage point.

"We'll need the equipment from the crate." Tobis said as he looked up at the top of the rock face.

"Well of course we will." Captain Tarl replied, "But first I'd like to make sure that whoever shot us down isn't about to spring an ambush on us." And he approached a nearby tree. The tree was not as tall as the rock face but it still offered a raised location from which to look out across the terrain.

The pinnacle was not the only vessel in the air and Captain Tarl caught sight of a pair of the improvised Y-TIE fighters also circling.

"I think they're definitely looking for us." He said as he climbed back down the tree, "Now we need to go get the rest of our stuff." Then he looked at Jaysica, "You stay here and keep out of sight." he told her, "Let us know if anyone else shows up. You've got a comlink right?" and Jaysica nodded.

When Captain Tarl and Tobis returned the first thing they did was set up a rope to allow them to climb the rocks and they both climbed up to the top. The crate of supplies provided for the *Lucky Card* as an emergency kit included a rather old looking set of macrobinoculars that provided a somewhat grainy picture and Captain Tarl used them to observe the spacecraft overhead.

"So how come your girlfriend's not joining us?" he said to Tobis as he watched the pinnacle as it hovered over a cluster of rocks just off shore.

"Oh she's not my-" Tobis began instinctively before he remembered that technically now she was his girlfriend, "No." he said, "She doesn't like heights. Kara says that's why she's so short."

Captain Tarl lowered the macrobinoculars.

"What? So do those two not exactly get on?" he asked.

"Err." Tobis replied, thinking that he may have said too much, "They are friends in a way." He offered and Captain Tarl smiled.

"Never mind, we can't get on with everybody." He muttered, "None of us would be here if we did."

Then he spotted the pinnacle descend and lower its landing gear.

"They're coming." He said, "Whoever they are."

"What's happening up there?" Jaysica called out from below.

"The pinnacle has set down." Tobis shouted back.

"So are we going to try and steal it then?" Jaysica asked and both Captain Tarl and Tobis looked at one another.

"That's actually not a bad idea." Captain Tarl said.

"But it can't get us out of the system." Tobis said, "It doesn't have a hyperdrive."

"No, but it has communications. Or it should. Plus even if that ship's no good it may lead us to one that we can use."

## 4.

The rebels left most of their equipment in the cave and took just what they thought they would need to storm the pinnacle.

"We could be dealing with up to ten or twelve crew." Captain Tarl said, "Though if they've sent people to search for us then that'll be lower."

"So we actually need to hope we're being hunted?" Jaysica said.

"Yes that's right. That's why we're taking a route to the beach that we haven't followed before."

"I think there's something moving ahead." Tobis said suddenly and the rebels halted, trying to see through the undergrowth beside the trail they were following.

"Could be whatever made this trail." Captain Tarl commented, "Take cover." And they all moved off the trail and into the vegetation for concealment.

Along the tracks came four figures and the rebels at last got a clear look at their enemies. The aliens had tall hairless heads with eyes that jutted out from either side like a mon calamari. Captain Tarl had never seen aliens such as this before, but both Jaysica and Tobis had.

Rakata.

Jaysica lifted her compact holdout blaster and was just taking aim when Captain Tarl placed his hand over hers.

"Wait." He whispered, "If they go straight by we won't have to fight them."

Sure enough they went past, continuing along the trail. But before they got out of sight the alien at the front of the group ground to a halt and raised his fist, signalling for the others to also stop.

"Tracks." The lead rakata said, glancing around into the jungle.

"They lead back along the trail." Another said as he looked back the way they had come.

"We passed no-one. They must have gone into the jungle. We should double back."

"Looks like something's spooked them." Captain Tarl muttered.

"Err, they're coming back this way." Tobis added quietly.

"Get ready." Captain Tarl said, "Fire on my command only."

The rakata came back along the trail towards the rebels, now focusing on the footprints in the ground.

"These are difficult to follow. Our own tracks are on top of them." One of them commented.

"Difficult is not impossible. Would you rather we returned empty handed?" another replied, then he noticed a change in the tracks, "They stop here." He said.

"No." another pointed out, "They lead off into the undergrowth. This is where they left the trail."

"Now!" Captain Tarl shouted and at the same time he fired a shot from his pistol that slammed into the chest of the nearest rakata, killing him instantly. At the same time both Jaysica and Tobis opened fire. Jaysica's small weapon was of little use at this range, but Tobis carried a full sized sidearm like Captain Tarl and between the two of them all four rakata were soon lying dead without having been able to fire off a single shot in return.

Cautiously Captain Tarl got to his feet and walked towards the rakata, keeping his weapon trained on them just in case any were still alive.

"So these are the legendary rakata." He said, "They don't look like much to me."

"At least their equipment will come in useful." Jaysica said as she picked up a blaster carbine from one of them.

"That's odd." Captain Tarl said.

"What is?" Jaysica asked.

"Well all their advanced gear is like ours. You'd think that they'd have their own stuff."

"The other group we encountered were the same." Tobis said, "They seemed to have taken everything from us."

"Well we can try and figure out why that is later." Captain Tarl said, "For now let's get these bodies out of sight and take what we need from them. Then we can be on our way."

The pinnacle was landed on the beach not far from where Jaysica and Tobis had come ashore. The rebels stayed within the jungle as they slowly crept towards the vessel and watched for any signs of the rakata. Only one of the aliens showed himself as he walked around below the vessel, a long barrelled blaster rifle held in his arms.

"Could he be the only one?" Jaysica asked.

"I doubt it." Captain Tarl replied, "Now I want you two to try and get closer. I'll take out the guard from here and then you rush the ship from another direction. If there are any more of them down there they should be focused on me. Any questions?"

Both Jaysica and Tobis shook their heads.

"Then go."

Jaysica and Tobis began to pick their way along through the jungle, keeping the vessel on the beach in sight at all times. The rakata guard seemed oblivious to their presence as they moved around behind him.

Until Jaysica stood on a branch that snapped loudly.

Spinning around the guard raised his weapon and peered into the jungle.

"Can't even kriffing walk thirty metres." Captain Tarl hissed and he opened fire.

The burst of energy bolts cut down the guard, though as he fell fired off a single shot from his own weapon that blasted a branch from a tree and sent it crashing to the ground.

Jaysica and Tobis burst from the jungle and ran across the sand towards the pinnace, but as they closed with it Captain Tarl saw movement in the cockpit as the pilot reacted to the commotion outside and there was the sound of a repulsorlift engine starting up.

"They're taking off!" Jaysica yelled as the ladder that led down from the pinnace began to slide upwards. He dropped the carbine he had taken from one of the dead rakata patrol and leapt upwards, grabbing hold of the lower rung of the ladder. Hearing an alien voice Tobis looked upwards to see one of the rakata looking back down at him. He pulled himself up the ladder until he managed to get a foot on the bottom rung and then he reached for the blaster holstered at his waist and drew it. Looking up again Tobis saw no sign of the rakata and he just let the ladder carry him upwards as it retracted.

The rakata lunged at him as soon as he was pulled inside the pinnace and his pistol was sent flying across the room to land in the corner. Yelling something in its own language the rakata grappled with Tobis and the both rolled around on the floor until the alien was able to break Tobis' grip. The rakata got back to its feet and reached to a nearby bulkhead where a fire extinguisher was clipped and he pulled free, holding it above his head with both hands. But before the rakata could bring it down on Tobis the engineer kicked out with both feet, striking the rakata in the stomach. The alien reacted in the way Tobis had hoped, dropping the fire extinguisher and doubling over in pain and allowing Tobis to deliver another kick that struck the rakata's head and knocked him backwards through the hatchway in the floor that was still open.

Looking around, Tobis spotted his blaster and dashed towards it to pick it up. Then he headed forwards along the narrow compartment and towards the hatch at the end. With his blaster held ready he slammed his hand down on the hatch control and watched as it slid open. Beyond the hatchway Tobis saw the pinnace's cramped cockpit with a pair of empty gunnery positions right in front of him and the pilot in front of them.

The rakata pilot looked around as Tobis made his way towards him and fired from point blank range. The ship lurched as the pilot slumped across the controls and Tobis had to drop his blaster in order to take hold of the control column and bring the ship under control before it ploughed back into the ground. Dragging the body of the rakata from the pilot's seat Tobis took his place and then brought the pinnace back into land on the beach. Leaving the engines running he then ran back into the rear compartment and lowered the ladder. "Come on!" he shouted as he leant down through the hatch, "The ship's ours!"

Jaysica just sat back and watched as Tobis and Captain Tarl familiarised themselves with the pinnace's instrument panels.

"It all looks standard," Tobis said, "and it handles more like a shuttle than a starfighter."

"So can you fly it? Properly I mean, not just setting it down in the sand?" Captain Tarl asked.

"Of course he can." Jaysica said, "Mace often lets him fly the *Silver Hawk*."

"That's Captain Grayle to you." Captain Tarl said, glaring at Jaysica.

"Why? Its not like he's here to hear me."

"Really?" Captain Tarl asked, "So how do you refer to me behind me back?"

Jaysica paused.

"Well Kara calls you-" she began.

"There's no long range comms." Tobis said, interrupting Jaysica before she got herself into even more trouble.

"So were stuck with a conventional transmission then?" Captain Tarl asked.

"How long will that take to reach the *Silver Hawk*?" Jaysica asked.

"At current planetary alignment about six hours." Tobis replied, "Assuming they're not in eclipse and can't pick up the signal anyway."

"So why don't we just fly there ourselves?" Jaysica asked.

"Because without a hyperdrive to make a micro jump that would take us almost a day at full burn." Captain Tarl said, "And the rakata would probably be sending ships after us. We can outrun those uglies they used, but if they've anything faster we've not seen then we'll just get shot right out of the sky."

"I don't think they got off a signal." Tobis said as he studied the pinnacle's communications system more closely.

"So the rakata still don't know we've got their ship?" Jaysica asked.

"Now that's interesting." Captain Tarl then said, scratching his head, "It opens up a few opportunities."

"Like what?" Jaysica asked.

"Well for starters we know that there are a maximum of four more rakata on this island."

"How?" Jaysica asked and Tobis winced.

"Can't you add?" Captain Tarl replied, "This cockpit has three seats and there's seating for eight more in the back if you include the two at the control station for the cutting torch built into the underside of the hull."

"There were four in the patrol we ambushed." Tobis said, "It makes sense that they'd split their troops into two equal sized units."

"Whatever," Captain Tarl said, "so we know that the number of rakata we're left facing is a number small enough for us to deal with. Especially now that we control their ship."

"We can just pick them off when they return." Tobis suggested.

"Exactly." Captain Tarl said, "We hide the bodies outside and use the ship's guns to deal with the surviving rakata."

"But then what?" Jaysica asked, "What about all of the others?"

"Well we haven't seen any of those fighters around for a while," Captain Tarl explained, "so I'm guessing they've gone back to their base to refuel. Which may also mean that their other ships are on the ground as well."

"We can ambush them too." Tobis said as he realised what Captain Tarl was getting at.

"But we don't know where they are." Jaysica said.

"It's in the navigation records." Tobis said, "I can pull the data in a couple of hours I reckon."

"But there were dozens of those fighters." Jaysica then said.

"I know." Captain Tarl replied, "We need to time this carefully. We send the message we planned to the others, but as well as telling them where we are, we give them a specific time to come here. Then we time our attack to match that time."

"But what if they don't get the signal?" Jaysica asked.

"Err, it is taking a chance sir." Tobis agreed.

"Look, there are two flights of fighters with the *Silver Hawk*." Captain Tarl said, "The odds are that at least one of them will pick up the signal."

"Will they?" Jaysica asked Tobis.

"Ahh. Err. Well." He said.

"Look," Captain Tarl interrupted, "what else can we do?"

"He does have a point." Tobis said softly to Jaysica.

"Then we're agreed." Captain Tarl said, "We'll send the signal and launch our attack to coincide with the others' arrival. Tobis can fly the ship and I'll man the weapons."

"What shall I do?" Jaysica asked.

"Stay out of the way and don't break anything." Captain Tarl told her.

"What about the second turret?" Jaysica asked, "Couldn't I operate that?"

"Do you know how?"

"No. But—"

"Then we'll link the guns together and I'll run them both. You can just sit there and watch. Then we can all go home and you two can copy your sergeant and get married."

Jaysica and Tobis both stared at Captain Tarl.

"Oh, err, but Sergeant Verser isn't married." Tobis said, looking back and forth between Jaysica and Captain Tarl.

"Oh yes he is." Captain Tarl replied with a wide grin on his face, "I can't believe he didn't tell his close friends all about it. Especially given who he married."

## 5.

The signal was sent as planned. The three rebels had no idea whether the signal would actually reach the fifth planet, it was possible that the rakata were still jamming all signals off world but they just had to hope that it would get through. Then, six hours later and with no sign of the supposed four remaining rakata Tobis powered up the pinnacle's engines and lifted off.

The ship's navigational database contained the course that it had flown to get to the island and all Tobis had to do was follow this back to its base. There was no navigational beacon to follow, the rakata desire to remain hidden even here in the nebula apparently preventing them from setting up a continuous broadcast.

"Can you still find the base Tobis?" Jaysica asked from the spare gunner's position.

"Err. Yes. In fact the lack of a beacon is a good sign."

"How come?"

"Because if they don't want to risk a navigational beacon then they probably won't still be jamming communications." Captain Tarl said.

"So the others will get our signal then?" she said excitedly.

"*Silver Hawk* this is Blue Nine."

Mace leant forwards and yawned at the same time. Their search of the subsystem of the gas giant and its moons had revealed no trace of the rakata and he like all of the others was bored.

Though at least I can get up and walk around unlike those guys in the fighters. He thought to himself.

"Blue Nine go ahead." Mace replied.

"Captain I've just picked up a signal from Captain Tarl. I think you should hear it."

"Okay, let's hear what he has to say for himself now." Mace said.

"This is Captain Jarad Tarl," the message began, "we have encountered rakata forces on the second planet. *Lucky Card* and all X-wings destroyed. Myself, Specialist Horbid and Engineer Dorfus have seized an enemy vessel but it lacks hyperdrive. We will be mounting an attack on the enemy base at nineteen forty hours. Support is needed urgently."

"That's it captain." The pilot of Blue Nine said, "What do you want to do?"

"You heard Captain Tarl. We've got to be at the second planet in fifteen minutes, start plotting the jump. I need to send a message of my own."

"You're flying too low." Captain Tarl said as he glanced up from the gunnery panel to the flight console.

"Huh?" Tobis replied, frowning as he doubled checked his instruments, "Err, I'm trying to stay under any sensors they have."

"That's good isn't it?" Jaysica asked.

"Not if they just happen to look up and see us flying in suspiciously low. Fly casual."

"Err, right. Casual." Tobis said and he pulled up.

The rakata base came into view. It was a simple cleared patch of jungle on another island with a handful of simple structures built around its outer edge. As expected there were numerous examples of the improvised Y-TIE fighters parked in two neat rows as rakata technicians worked on them. In addition two more penances could be seen.

"So we wouldn't have been able to outrun them after all." Jaysica said.

"Yeah, well let's do something about that." Captain Tarl said, "Mister Dorfus, take us in over them."

Without speaking Tobis angled the pinnacle down, aiming it at the other similar craft parked below. As the ship descended Captain Tarl lined up the linked laser cannons and as soon as he saw the first pinnacle dead centre of his targeting array he opened fire.

The laser blasts from the two co-ordinated heavy guns sliced through the first pinnacle about half way along its fuselage and bisected it moments before it exploded. Tobis pulled up and as he did so the continuing stream of fire travelled across the gap between the two landed pinnaces and strafed the second vessel also, turning it into another pile of burning wreckage.

The rakata on the ground reacted quickly, with pilots emerging from the structures and rushing towards the rows of fighters. They had taken the sensible precaution of keeping a pair of the vessels manned and even as Tobis banked the stolen pinnacle around for a second run over the base these shot into the air.

"What should I do?" Tobis asked as he saw the pair of fighters zoom past them through the cockpit canopy.

"Give me another run at the base." Captain Tarl replied, "I want to try and knock out as many of those other ships as I can while they're still on the ground."

"Shouldn't we just try and run?" Jaysica asked as Tobis banked the pinnacle back towards the base, "Aren't we faster than them?"

"Yes, but those two fighter they've already launched will shoot us down before we make it to clear space." Captain Tarl replied, then as he lined up on a Y-TIE that was just beginning to rise from the ground he muttered, "Gotcha." And blasted it apart.

Captain Tarl had hoped to be able to make a second full pass over the base and destroy as many of the Y-TIEs as he could, but the two already in the air swung around and came rushing in behind the pinnacle and Tobis banked suddenly as he realised that they were lining themselves up for a shot.

"Stang!" Captain Tarl exclaimed as he shots went wide, blasting apart not more fighters but instead demolishing one of the lightweight structures and cutting a groove through the jungle.

"I can't shake them." Tobis said.

"I'm on them." Captain Tarl replied, spinning the turrets around to face behind the pinnacle.

The fighters broke off as he fired, the volley passing harmlessly between them. But although his firing spoiled the two fighters' attack run, the rakata on the ground were able to make the most of the breathing space given to them and more of the Y-TIEs began to rise into the air.

"There's too many of them!" Jaysica cried out as she saw the host of new contacts on the screen in front of her. Though the pinnacle's two turrets had both been rigged to fire under Captain Tarl's control the displays on the second gunnery panel were still active.

"Tobis new plan." Captain Tarl said, "Get us the kriff out of here. Just leave me enough juice to run one of the guns and angle our shields aft. Put everything else into the engines."

"Yes captain." Tobis replied and he pulled back on the control column, sending the pinnacle rocketing skywards.

But just as the pinnacle began a near vertical climb one of the first rakata fighters to have launched fired a burst from its nose-mounted cannons that just clipped its wing. Piercing the shield, the shot tore off half of the wing and the cockpit was filled with the sound of alarms as the ship was thrown into a spin.

"Can you get her under control?" Captain Tarl demanded as Jaysica just clutched the arms of her seat and screamed.

"I don't want to die!"

"We're losing power." Tobis said, "I think I can get the ship down, but we'll never make it into space."

"Do it then." Captain Tarl ordered, "Land the ship."

"Err. Well, actually it won't be so much a landing. More of a –"

"Crash." Jaysica finished.

The pinnacle hit the ground near to where the other two identical vessels had been parked prior to their destruction. The ventral turret was ripped off as the ship skidded across the ground, tearing up the crudely prepared surface. Inside the cockpit, only their safety harnesses prevented the three rebels from being thrown about and seriously injured. As it was the impact dazed all three badly and for almost a minute after the ship came to a halt they just sat there while they tried to regain their senses.

"Jaysica! Jaysica are you alright?" Tobis called out as he was the first to release his harness and rushed to check on the young woman who just groaned.

"Are we there yet?" she mumbled.

"Yes, yes we're on the ground." Tobis replied as he released her harness and pulled her from the chair. There was a 'click' from behind him and Tobis looked round to see Captain Tarl releasing himself from his seat and getting up.

"Come on." He said as he headed for the exit, "We need to get out of here just in case this ship explodes."

"I don't want to explode." Jaysica said, confused.

Captain Tarl led the way into the rear compartment. The main hatch was set into the floor and useless given that the ship had crashed rather than made a normal landing, but there was an emergency hatch set into the ceiling also and Captain Tarl reached up and took hold of the large red handle set into it with both hands.

"Stand clear." he said loudly and he pulled the handle and ducked back. There was a brief delay and then a sudden explosion as the hatch was blown clear and then Captain Tarl scrambled through the gap.

"Help me with her." Tobis said as he carried Jaysica to the hatch and Captain Tarl reached back down to pull her out of the pinnacle.

"Hurry." He said, "The engines are on fire. I don't think we've got much time."

Supporting Jaysica between them Tobis and Captain Tarl ran from the burning pinnacle heading for the nearest cover, which in this case was a crater blasted in the ground by their first strafing run. Once inside the hole they looked across the landing field and saw a group of heavily armed rakata approaching their position. Captain Tarl drew his blaster.

"Get ready." He said and Tobis drew his own weapon.

Then just as one of the Y-TIE fighters flew overhead it exploded in a brilliant ball of flame.

6.

"Scratch one Blue Five."



"This Blue Eight, I've got a lock, firing. Torpedo away. It's a hit!"

"I'm on the leader, switching to guns."

From the pilot's seat of the *Silver Hawk* Mace listened as the remaining X-wings of Blue Squadron engaged the rakata fighters and smiled as he saw the alien ships being shot out of the sky, at least one of them simply coming apart in mid turn as its pilot attempted to push the crudely assembled airframe beyond what it could take in his effort to disengage from the X-wing on his tail.

He brought the *Silver Hawk* in low over the base and looked for any signs of the rebels on the ground. He had seen their pinnacle shot down on his sensors, but until he saw their bodies he would assume that they were all still alive and in need of help. He spotted a group of rakata moving towards the edge of the base and looking in that direction he then caught sight of the three rebels taking shelter in a crater.

"Kara. Tharun." Mace said, activating the intercom, "I see them on the eastern edge of the landing zone. I think one of them's hurt."

"Copy that captain." Tharun's voice responded, "Ramp lowering."

Mace brought the *Silver Hawk* to a halt, hovering just above the ground. This was a risky manoeuvre; if he went too low then the base of the ramp would strike the ground whereas if he was too high then Kara and Tharun risked injury when they jumped down. He did not feel the difference in weight as the other two rebels jumped down from the ramp, but Mace spotted them through the cockpit canopy as they ran forwards across the landing field and he lifted the ship away from the ground again.

Kara just ran straight for the crater, though she had her blaster in her hand. Tharun on the other hand fired at the approaching rakata with his heavy rifle. Set to automatic, he fired short bursts in their general direction to slow down their advance rather than attempt to pick out any particular alien to shoot. When they reached the crater's edge they both leapt in.

"What happened?" Kara asked as she knelt by Jaysica and gave her a brief look over.

"I think she hit her head when we crashed." Tobis replied.

"So nothing vital then." Kara replied as she produced a first aid kit from her bag and prepared a shot for Jaysica. After administering the shot she looked at Tobis and said, "Give me a hand with her."

"Kara?" Jaysica mumbled, barely understandable and she smiled, "When I get married you can come." And she glanced at Tharun, "He can't though. He didn't invite me to his wedding after all."

"She's delirious." Tharun said as he reloaded his rifle.

"Of course she is. That's pretty normal for her." Kara said, "Now come on Tobis, help me pick up your girlfriend." Immediately Tobis went to help Kara.

"Okay sergeant," Captain Tarl said as he looked at the pair now supporting Jaysica, "Can you give us some cover?"

"I think I can manage that." Tharun replied with a smile and he pulled a grenade from his webbing and removed the pin. Then he tossed it towards the rakata.

The grenade burst open and a billowing cloud of thick white smoke appeared, expanding to block the rakata's view of the rebels.

"Okay captain, we're set for pick up." Tharun said into his comlink, "We've laid white smoke."

"Copy that. White smoke. On my way."

The rebels ran from the crater under cover of the smoke. Tharun fired into the cloud, using random bursts to dissuade the rakata from trying to run through it. The air was filled with the noise of powerful repulsorlift engines as the Alliance X-wings continued to do battle with the rakata Y-TIEs. Over that sound however, was the sound of the *Silver Hawk's* engines as it descended from the sky above, its access ramp still in the lowered position. The rebels dashed for the ramp and pulled themselves aboard even as the thrust from the *Silver Hawk* began to blow away the smoke protecting them from the rakata.

Tharun closed the ramp behind them and activated the intercom.

"Captain, we're in." he said, "Punch it."

The *Silver Hawk* rocked as Mace put as much power into the engines as he could, piloting the ship towards space. Behind the *Silver Hawk* the Alliance fighters also began to disengage from the dwindling number of rakata ships and they too headed upwards.

"This Blue Six, I have new contacts closing from over the horizon. They're big."

Four ships approached the Alliance vessels; each of them was over a hundred metres long and bristled with laser cannon emplacements. Even alone one of these ships had enough firepower to take on all of the Alliance vessels, so with four such ships the rakata had a definite advantage.

"Etti Lighters!" Mace exclaimed even though there was no one else in the cockpit to hear him, "Where the hell did they get those from?"

The Etti Lighter was in fact a modified freighter; modified with weapons and tractor beams so numerous planetary governments as well as the Corporate Sector Authority could use them as patrol ships. However, despite being heavily armed their engines remained the relatively slow drive units that they had begun with.

Mace activated the *Silver Hawk's* communications.

"Blue Squadron," he broadcast, "try and hold them off. I'll signal when we're clear and you can break off."  
"Copy that *Silver Hawk*." One of the fighter pilots replied and the X-wings peeled off to engage the rakata ships.

As soon as the X-wings turned the rakata began to fire. Three of them set up a pattern of fire to keep the nimble fighters at bay while the fourth just accelerated forwards, keeping pace with the *Silver Hawk*.

"What's our status?" Captain Tarl asked as he rushed into the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit.

"You're guys are doing their best, but those ships are going to be tough to beat." Mace replied.

There was a flash of light ahead of the *Silver Hawk*, easily visible through the cockpit canopy.

"Stang!" Captain Tarl exclaimed, "Are we in range of their guns already?"

"That wasn't a laser blast." Mace replied, "That was a ship dropping out of hyperspace."

"There are more of them?"

Mace smiled.

"I don't think so. Look."

There was another flash and then more of them as ships continued to drop from hyperspace just outside the planet's gravity well. The newly arrived ships moved towards the *Silver Hawk* and in just a short space of time the largest of them came into view clearly and revealed it to be a mon calamari cruiser.

"Concentrate all fire on those warships." Rear Admiral Aphanar's voice ordered over the communications network. Like the modified freighters being used by the rakata, the mon calamari cruiser had been converted from a commercial vessel. But unlike them the much more massive cruiser had enough power to mount the turbolasers needed to turn it into a true capital ship. The admiral's cruiser, along with its supporting frigates opened fire, sending salvos of turbolaser fire at the rakata ships. Each rebel capital ship focused on a single rakata vessel and their shields held up under the barrage for long enough for them to attempt to break off. But the heavier barrage from the cruiser swiftly overcame the defences of its target and the modified freighter became a burning wreck, slowly falling back towards the atmosphere of the planet below and leaving the cruiser free to direct its fire at the other ships one at a time.

Mace and Captain Tarl both watched the battle on the *Silver Hawk's* instruments as their ship sped away from the planet. As soon as they were clear of the gravity well Mace reached to activate the hyperdrive and the last thing they saw of the battle was Rear Admiral Aphanar's ship settling into a low orbit to bombard the planet below as the remains of the rakata ships burnt up.

Captain Tarl walked into the office of Kyle Varner and sat down, a large smile on his face.

"You're in a good mood." Kyle said.

"Of course I am." Captain Tarl replied and he handed a small slip of folded flimsiplast to Kyle, "For the promotion list." He said.

"How much are they paying us?" Kyle asked as he unfolded the flimsi.

"Nothing. This one's on the house."

"Is this a joke?" Kyle asked after reading what Captain Tarl had just handed him.

"Yes actually it is." Captain Tarl replied, "But not on you."

"Oh come on, this isn't funny." Tharun said as he packed away his equipment after cleaning it.

As soon as the *Silver Hawk* had arrived back at Alliance sector headquarters Jaysica had recovered enough to repeat what Captain Tarl had told her and Tobis about Tharun's marriage to Lyssa Larcus, Vorn's daughter.

"Oh yes it is." Kara replied from the hatchway, "If it wasn't you'd have told us all."

"Look," Tharun said as he turned to face Kara, "Lyssa and I thought that the paperwork wouldn't go through. We didn't even have a proper witness, just her droid Emsee. But for some reason command went and passed it, so now we're married."

"So what did they say when you went to get it annulled then?" Kara asked.

"Well, ahh, that is—"

Kara placed her hands to her mouth.

"Stang!" she exclaimed, "You haven't have you?"

"Mail call!" Mace suddenly called out from the lounge and Tharun pushed past Kara and went into the lounge.

"Any love letters from Missus Verser?" Kara asked.

"Its still not funny." Tharun said.

"Oh yes it is." Kara said.

"Actually there's just one for Jaysica." Mace said, holding out an envelope as Jaysica and Tobis entered the room.

"Ooh, for me." Jaysica said and she immediately opened the envelope and looked at its contents, "Oh my Gods." She said, her jaw dropping.

"What is it little lady?" Tharun asked.

"Is this real?" Jaysica asked, handing the letter back to Mace for him to read.

"Let's see." Mace said and he looked at what was written in it and his jaw dropped also.

"What does it say?" Kara asked, "Come on, don't hog it."

"Can I?" Mace asked, looking at Jaysica who nodded excitedly.

"Okay here goes." Mace said and he began to read aloud from the letter, "Jaysica Horbid, This letter is to confirm that as of oh six hundred hours this morning you have been promoted to the rank of corporal in the armed forces of the Alliance to Restore the Republic." And Mace handed the letter back to Jaysica.

"Oh Tobis isn't this wonderful!" she exclaimed, "I've been promoted!" and she threw her arms around him.

"Oh, err. Yes, its wonderful." he replied in surprise.

"Hang on," Tharun said as a thought occurred to him, "if she's now a corporal then that means that—"

"She outranks Kara." Mace said, grinning.

"No!" Kara yelled and she rushed over to Jaysica and snatched the letter from her, reading it for herself, "No!" she yelled again, "It can't be true."

"I guess the major must have put in the paperwork to have you promoted before he left." Mace said.

"Oh that's just great." Kara said, rereading the letter to see if she could see anything amiss, "He leaves me with you losers and now he does this." Then she noticed both Mace and Tharun smiling, "This isn't funny." She said.

"Oh yes it is." Tharun replied.