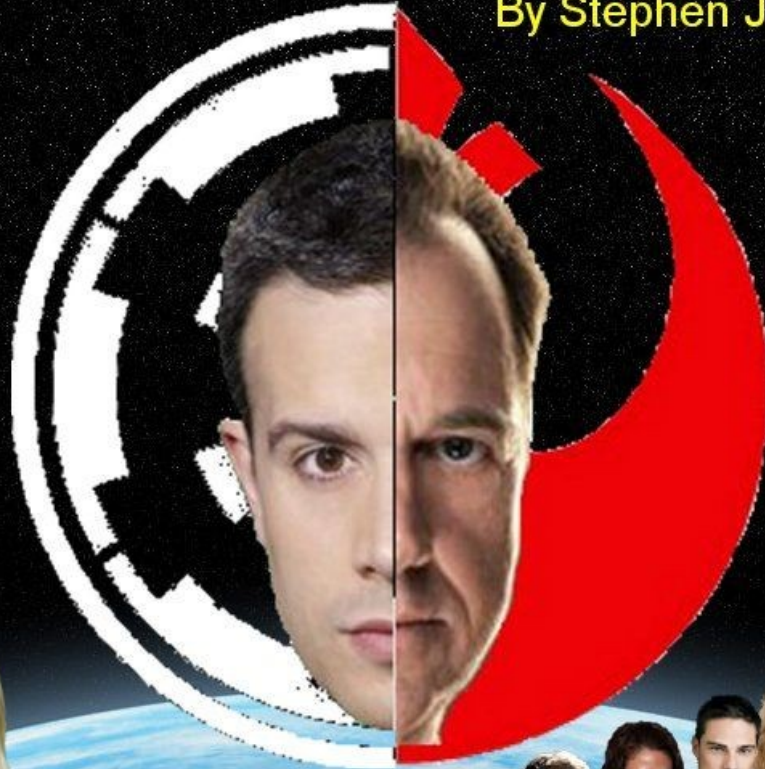


# STAR WARS

3-11: Duet

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...

## DUET

WHILE ONE IS HUNTING FOR STOLEN EXPLOSIVES AND THE OTHER HUNTING THE PEOPLE TRACKING HER FRIENDS, KARA BILSTRAN AND VAY UDRA UNEXPECTEDLY COME FACE TO FACE. ALL OF A SUDDEN NO ONE IS SAFE...

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

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# 1.

Vay Udra woke up and rolled over as the first rays of sunlight came in through the bedroom window. Garm was still lay beside her sleeping after they had spent the night together. She reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder and his eyes flickered open.

*Guilt.*

Vay was surprised at his reaction as he looked her in the eyes. His wife Jennay had been dead for only a few months and the strange presence in the force that had been communicating with Vay had warned her against trying to get too close to him too fast, but Vay had thought she knew better. All it had taken was a slight push at the right moment to get him to share her bed for the night.

Before either of them could speak there was a short hissing sound, the sound of the front door to her apartment opening. Both Garm and Vay were startled by this sound, followed by sudden rapid footfalls and they both looked around for their weapons. But these had been left in the living room the night before. They both looked towards the door just in time to see a pair of stormtroopers appear.

"Don't move!" one of them barked as they both took aim at the pair.

"Don't worry." Garm replied as he raised his hands where the stormtroopers could see them, "Neither of us is going anywhere."

There were more footfalls, lighter than those of the stormtroopers this time and the soldiers at the door parted to allow a tall white haired man in an Imperial uniform to enter.

"Good morning Vay, Agent Larcus." He said as he looked at them sternly, "I take it you both slept well?"

This was Moff Gregor Horatian, the highest-ranking Imperial official in the sector. Vay had been secretly assigned to his staff by the Empire's central government and it was falsely assumed by many that she was in reality his mistress. The moff accepted these rumours to conceal Vay's real role and as part of the deception his name was used for the expensive residence and vehicle placed at her disposal.

Another stormtrooper appeared behind the moff. This one had his weapon holstered and was holding Garm's Imperial Security Bureau uniform. Moff Horatian took the clothing from the stormtrooper and hurled it at Garm.

"Get dressed and get out." He said, snarling. Then he looked directly at Vay as she clutched bed sheets over her, "And I'll speak to you in the lounge." He added before striding out of the bedroom, followed by the stormtroopers.

When Garm entered the lounge wearing his uniform he saw Moff Horatian sitting in the exact spot he had been in the night before when Vay had invited him to stay.

"I believe this is yours?" the moff said, holding up a datapad that showed an image of Garm and Jennay on their wedding day. He tossed the datapad to Garm and then looked at one of his guards, "Escort Agent Larcus to his speeder and return his weapon." He ordered.

"Yes sir." The stormtrooper replied and he held out his hand to indicate that Garm should go first.

It was just as Garm left the apartment that Vay appeared in a short robe.

"So to what do I owe this little visit Gregor?" she asked, making her way to the kitchen and turning on the caf maker.

"Ibram contacted me." Moff Horatian replied as he eyed Vay, "He told me about you and Garm spending the night together."

Vay turned and looked at the moff.

"How did he know?" she asked.

"He didn't say and I didn't ask. After all I know the sort of methods Inquisitors and others like you have at your disposal. What exactly do you think you're playing at Vay?"

"Am I not allowed to have a private life?"

"Its hardly private if that Inquisitor knows about it. I wouldn't be surprised if he signalled Coruscant before he contacted me. You know what others say about us. We've specifically avoided doing anything to dispute those rumours and yet here you are carrying on with Garm Larcus."

"Are you telling me to stop?" Vay asked.

"I'm telling you to be discrete." Moff Horatian replied, "I came here because I thought it would add a bit more credibility to the rumours. After all what's more convincing than a jealous boyfriend throwing his rival out at gunpoint? Now hurry up and get ready. Inquisitor Kellensen isn't the only person who thinks it's a good idea to wake me up at an early hour. Apparently Director Helios wants a meeting of all the senior branch chiefs."

"So was she worth it?"

Garm looked up from his desk towards his office door. A middle-aged man who wore a uniform like his was standing there. This was Corvin Helios, the director of the ISB for the sector. He stepped inside the office and shut the door behind him.

"The blonde. Was she worth it?"

"How-" Garm began.

"It's all over the place." Director Helios said, "You and the moff's bit on the side spent the night together and he caught you. You realise that this will mean Moff Horatian is unlikely to want to keep you as his personal trouble shooter."

Garm sighed. He knew the truth about Vay's relationship with the moff, just as he knew about her abilities, but he could not share that information with his service chief.

"I'll watch my back." He said, glancing down at the image of his late wife on his desk.

"You'd better. Because I'm not sure if I can protect you. Now get your stuff, I've called a meeting that may just help save your career by reminding the moff how talented you are."

Moff Horatian had been correct when he told Vay that Director Helios was gathering together all of the Empire's senior personnel in the sector. When she entered the meeting chamber at the moff's side Vay saw that it already contained Fleet Admiral Praus Vretan of the Imperial Navy, General Julius Dern of the Imperial Army, Rodge Larrs of the Committee for the preservation of the New Order and Gayal Tharr of Imperial intelligence. Worryingly for Vay Inquisitor Kellensen was also present, sitting beside Gayal Tharr. Director Helios was actually the last of the senior personnel to arrive, accompanied by Garm. Vay smiled at him and was about to wave when she spotted Admiral Vretan and General Dern looking first at her then at each other and smiling. The inquisitor meanwhile just glared directly at Vay.

"Thank you all for coming." Director Helios said as he set down his datapad on the ring shaped table that dominated the room and he tapped at the console set into the table. Instantly an hologram appeared in the centre of the room. The image showed an installation constructed from a pair of asteroids connected together by a metal framework, "This is the shadow port that Agent Larcus was able to locate and seize with the Navy's help." He explained, "Now as I'm sure you're all aware that a pirate vessel operating out of this facility carried out an attack on the transport ship *Glorious Conveyor* belonging to Kurrad Industries and seized almost four hundred tonnes of baradium. Now unfortunately although the facility was taken and over a dozen raiding ships either present at the time or arriving later to be challenged by the navy were destroyed, no signs of the baradium were found."

Several of those present shifted uncomfortably in their seats. Baradium was the highly unstable material used in thermal detonators and other powerful explosives. The amount stolen was enough to devastate a large portion of Estran City.

"However, we did manage to find this." Director Helios went on and he pressed a button that triggered a change in the image to one of a freighter, "According to what was discovered in the port records this vessel left shortly before the navy could strike. However, though it was not present at the time of the raid its transponder signature was recorded by the base sensors."

Admiral Vretan leant forwards.

"If you hand those over then I'll have ever ship in the sector watching for it." He said.

"Unfortunately there is no need for that admiral." Director Helios replied, "The transport was spotted just under two hours ago by a customs ship."

"Where?" Moff Horatian asked.

"That's the bad news I'm afraid." Director Helios said, looking at each person in the room, "It's here on Estran."

Mace Grayle, captain of the light freighter *Silver Hawk* walked across the hangar deck of the space station that served as the headquarters for the rebel alliance in the sector, heading for his vessel. At the base of the access ramp to the YT-1300 class vessel he found a woman sat waiting for him.

"Kara?" he asked, "What are you doing here?"

"I thought I'd come with you." Kara replied as she got to her feet, "I told Tobis he could stay here with the klutz. They both seemed pretty happy about it."

Mace sighed.

"Look Kara I need my engineer on this run, you know the sensor's are playing up. Can't you go and bug Tharun or the major instead?"

Kara snorted in reply.

"Major nerf-herder's still conferring with the brass about what to do about those terrorists who scammed them and Tharun's off somewhere with little miss nerf-herder junior."

Mace shook his head as he walked up the ramp with Kara accompanying him.

"You're going to have to get this sorted you know. Major Larcus isn't going to stand for it forever."

"I don't care." Kara said, "He's the one that ran off without telling us then came running back when he needed our help."

"Well I need Tobis's help." Mace replied as he made his way to the cockpit, Kara still beside him, "So you're just going to have to go and tell him he can't have the day off."

"Look captain, Tobis has hooked Harvey into the sensors. That little droid will record everything that goes on and then he can figure out what needs fixing when we get back. Why force him to sit and watch the droid all the way to Estran and back?"

"Okay then, you can come. But there are two conditions."

"Go on."

"Will you do what you're told?"

"I will. What's two?"

"Will you sort things out with the major when we get back?"

"Hell no. But you've got to admit one of two isn't bad for me."

## 2.

Most of the calls coming into the ISB offices right now were being diverted unless they were related to the freighter that had transported the baradium. Agents were rushing about comparing and exchanging information as they desperately hunted for leads on the location of the dangerous explosive material. Every so often officials from other services would arrive to either offer information they had come across or ask for updates as their own investigations stalled. Like most of his fellow agents, Garm had left his office door open and it was the sound of it dropping shut that made him look up from his computer.

"Vay, I don't have time to talk right now." He said, seeing her standing across the office.

"Actually I'm here to help you." She said and she rushed over to him and squeezed between him and began to access his computer.

"What are you looking for?" he asked.

"Where that freighter touched down." She replied, "Look, no starport on the planet has any record of a ship of that class touching down or lifting off again for at least a month." And she pointed at a scrolling list of landing records.

"I know that." Garm replied, "That's what caught the attention of the customs ship in the first place. The ship's exit trajectory suggested that it wasn't coming from a registered starport. But nothing that big was spotted anywhere over land."

"Exactly, over land." Vay said, "The ship never actually landed. It just came in over the ocean where sensor coverage is patchy and hovered while the baradium was transferred to an aquatic vessel. A submersible probably, to keep out of sight of satellite surveillance."

"That's a good idea." Garm said, "But they aren't likely to be keeping it on a submersible for ever. Baradium makes crews nervous so they'd still have to bring it ashore somewhere."

"I know," Vay said, "and I think I know where."

Garm just looked at her.

"Look." Vay said and she pointed at the computer display.

"Vay that's an Imperial Intelligence report." Garm exclaimed when he saw the heading of the data file now on his screen, "Did you just slice into their network?"

"It's not slicing when you have the password." She said as Garm leant closer to the screen. Standing right beside him, Vay put an arm around his shoulder and smiled as he did not try to move it away, "The Great Western Desert." She said, "It covers almost half a continent and is officially uninhabited."

"Officially?" Garm repeated and Vay nodded.

"Intelligence thinks that there are several mobile gangs of outlaws out there."

"The ISB thinks the same." Garm said, "But they're just small time players. They couldn't afford enough baradium for a single thermal detonator, let alone four hundred tonnes of the stuff."

Vay shook her head.

"They've been organised." She said and she pointed to a section of the intelligence report, "Short bursts of com traffic have been detected there for pretty much as long as there have been people on Estran, but just recently they stopped being quite so random and started following fixed frequencies."

"So the various separate groups are working together now." Garm said.

"Exactly." Vay said, "So if we can locate this new leader then maybe we can find out where he's got the baradium stashed."

Garm smiled, something Vay had not noticed him do much recently. Then he looked at her directly.

"You took a risk showing me this. What do you expect in return for this?" he asked.

Vay paused.

"I think Ibram's got my apartment bugged. I want you to help me clear it."

The *Silver Hawk* dropped out of hyperspace exactly as Mace planned, with the world of Estran clearly visible through the canopy.

"I take it you're landing in the usual place?" Kara said from the seat beside Mace's.

"Yeah." Mace replied, "I mean we could set down pretty much anywhere this time around. Even though you're on the Empire's watch lists I doubt you rank high enough for any starport customs to notice."

"Another advantage to not having most wanted major nerf-herder about." Kara interrupted, but Mace ignored her.

"But the normal place is close to where I want to be." He went on, "Though I don't know if you want to come along. You now how Odras can be."

"A creep." Kara said, "I'll wait with the ship."

Mace directed the ship towards the surface of Estran, keeping a careful eye on the orbiting naval and customs vessels. Though the *Silver Hawk* and its captain were legitimately registered with the Empire he was keen to avoid any Imperial entanglements.

Then a chirping sound came from the intercom.

"See what Harvey wants would you?" Mace said without taking his eyes off the space outside and Kara looked down to where the ship's computer had translated the electronic language spoken by Tobis' astromech droid into basic and displayed on a screen.

Kara frowned.

"He says that we just broadcast a signal." She said.

Mace looked at her, puzzled.

"No we didn't." he said to her.

"Look, that's what he's saying." Kara replied, pointing to the screen.

Mace brought the *Silver Hawk* to a halt and looked at the display. Sure enough the droid was reporting that he had picked up a short broadcast emanating from the *Silver Hawk* shortly after dropping out of hyperspace.

"Harvey can you tell me more?" Mace asked the droid and there was another burst of chirps and whistles that the computer translated.

"An irregular burst of sub atomic particles from the hyperdrive?" Kara said as she read Harvey's response, "What the hell does that mean?"

"It mean's someone's been tracking the ship." Mace replied, snarling, "I'll bet every time we've been dropping out of hyperspace we've been sending out a signal that tells anyone in the system that we're there."

Kara looked at Mace.

"What about HQ?" she asked, "If we've been sending a signal each time we get there-"

"Oh don't worry about that." Mace said, "The signal will be limited to the speed of light. It would take years to reach the nearest star system. But there could be someone in this system watching us now." Then he turned to the intercom again, "Harvey, can you duplicate that signal and get us a connection trace?"

"The Great Western Desert?" Director Helios said as he looked at the report from Garm's datapad, "Where did you get this?"

"My source wishes to remain confidential." Garm replied.

"I take it you think that just flying over there won't help."

"No sir. Just landing a team there will send them to ground. We need to infiltrate someone into the outlaws which means getting to them through whatever channels they normally use."

"This someone would be you I take it?" Director Helios asked.

"Perhaps. Though I've got someone else in mind as well."

"The blonde?"

Director Helios turned to his computer.

"Here." He said, turning the display so that Garm could see, "This individual runs a shipping company that keeps turning a profit even though we haven't been able to get visual confirmation of all the shipments he says he makes. Given his company operates quite near the Western Desert its quite possible he's running illicit cargoes there. I suggest you start with him."

"Sounds good to me sir." Garm said as Director Helios copied the file on the suspected smuggler and then handed him the datapad back again.

Odras Balve smiled when he saw Mace and Kara enter the cantina he used as a front for his operations.

"Mace my good friend." He said, "So good to see you again."

"Me or my money?" Mace responded. Mace owed the crime lord a great deal of money that he had little hope of paying off, "Or perhaps my lady friend?" he then added. Odras had offered him a deal to wipe out his debt by selling him the female rebels carried aboard the *Silver Hawk*, but Mace had always rejected it.

Odras shrugged and held out his hands.

"Can you blame me for trying to earn a living?" he asked.

"Yes." Kara said, snarling. Then she looked at Mace, "Let's just get on with this." She said.

"So how can I help you?" Odras said to Mace and the rebel held out a datapad.

"Someone's been tracking my ship." He said.

Odras's jaw dropped.

"Hey, I haven't-"

"I know its not you." Mace replied, "But I don't think it's the Empire either, so I could do with knowing who it is."

Odras took the datapad.

"A connection trace?" he said and Mace nodded.

"Somewhere in the Great Western Desert." He said, "But I didn't think there was anyone out there with that sort of capability."

Odras sighed.

"There wasn't." he said with a frown, "Not until those chuff-sucking Black Sun scum moved in and started making their presence felt. They've unified most of the groups there now."

"So who's in charge?" Kara asked, "And more importantly how do we find them? The desert's a big place, I've seen it from space."

"From what I hear Black Sun brought in some twi'lek called Nil Carana." Odras said, "He lives on a sail barge out there."

"A sail barge. Great." Mace said, "We could search for weeks and not find it with the *Hawk's* sensors playing up the way they are." Then he looked at Kara and said, "It would be really nice if Tobis were here to fix them wouldn't it?"

"Can you guide us to him?" Kara asked, looking at Odras.

"No." Odras said, "If I knew where he was I'd be trying to kill him myself. But I can guide you to the guy that takes certain cargoes to him. Though I doubt you'll like dealing with him."

"We don't like dealing with you." Kara commented.

"Who is this guy?" Mace asked.

"A rodian by the name of Gravado." Odras said, "He's a slaver and the word is that Nil Carana is making regular buys from him. Specifically human females." And he glanced at Kara.

"A twi'lek buying slaves?" Mace said.

"Yeah, I know. Apparently he sees it as some sort of revenge for human slavers taking his people while the Empire encourages it."

"Okay then," Mace said, "so how do we find this rodian then?"

Garm had dispensed with his ISB uniform. Here in the more run down sections of the port district far from Estran City it would stand out even more than usual. He still had his Imperial-issue blaster holstered on his hip however; there were enough weapons on display that it blended in perfectly. On the other hand Vay still wore the black bodyglove she normally did. Though it's skin-tight fit still attracted the attention of many human males towards her it did not mark her out as an Imperial agent.

"So who are we looking for?" Vay asked.

"Some rodian." Garm asked, "Typical low life alien scum. The ISB suspects him of running cargoes to the desert."

In this place there was a much higher proportion of non-humans than the more upmarket regions of the planet. Discriminated against by Imperial authorities many of them ended up in lower paid jobs or as part of the galactic underworld. The docks here were where the two mixed together freely and workers took whatever was offered to them, no matter whether or not the work was legal.

They found their target as he was negotiating with an elderly human female who had a pair of hulking blue-skinned houk bodyguards. Behind her were an assortment of much younger human females all chained together.

"He's buying slaves." Garm said in disgust as he and Vay watched from a safe distance.

*It better be slaves. It could be worse.*

The voice in Vay's head made another of its sudden reappearances and Vay frowned as she tried to decipher the meaning of the statement.

"What's wrong?" Garm asked when he saw the look on Vay's face.

"Are we certain he's buying them as slaves?" Vay asked as the rodian and one of the old human's guards exchanged money. Then the chains binding several of the younger human females were detached from the rest and connected together in a line.

"Well why else would he be buying them?" Garm responded.

*Some species consider the flesh of sentient beings to be a delicacy.*

"What about food?" Vay asked and Garm looked back at the chained women.

"It looks like he's had the pretty ones picked out." He said, "I doubt he'd be so picky if they're about to be eaten by something." Then he watched as the rodian's own guards took charge of their employer's living purchases, "All aliens." Garm noted, "Doesn't look like I'll be getting close to him disguised as one of them. Though we may be able to switch you for one of the captives."

"Aw, thanks Garm." Vay replied, smiling and a look of confusion appeared on his face.

"You think being swapped with a slave is a good thing?" he asked her.

"No, but you just told me you think I'm pretty." She replied, "You said it yourself, the rodian picked out the pretty ones."

"Yes I suppose I did, didn't I?" Garm said as he turned his attention back towards the rodian. Vay noticed that he had made no attempt to dismiss the remark and she smiled.



### 3.

From their place along the shoreline Kara and Mace watched as the short column of transport vehicles filed through the gates of Gravado's compound.

"Looks like a new batch of slaves." Mace said, keeping his voice low even though there was no one else around to hear.

"Well that fence doesn't look too sound." Kara said as she turned her attention to the perimeter of the compound and she pointed to where a gap between two low buildings was blocked by a chain link barrier, "I'm pretty sure that we could cut through it easily."

"Sounds like a plan." Mace said, "And according to the local data feeds the tide won't be high enough for him to be putting to sea in any serious ocean going transport."

"Then we've got a plan for getting in and the time to execute it in." Kara said, "Now all we need is to watch what they do with those slaves."

The transport carrying the newly purchased slaves pulled up outside one of the battered looking buildings located near the private dock and the two rebels watched as the hooded captives were unloaded and taken inside. Shortly after Gravado and all but one of his underlings reappeared and then walked across the compound to a building that looked to be in a much better state of repair than the one that seemed to be used as a slave holding pen.

"Okay go." Mace said and, keeping low he and Kara rushed along the edge of the water towards the gap between the two buildings. Halting by the fence Mace drew his blaster and kept watch as Kara took her knife from its scabbard and then detached the scabbard itself from her belt and connected the knife blade to it to form a wire cutter. She then worked quickly, cutting through the wire fence until there was a tear long enough for her to squeeze through.

"You know," Mace whispered as he followed her through the fence, tugging at his clothing to free it where it got caught on the wire, "you could have remembered I'm not a skinny little girly like you."

Kara ignored him, returning her knife to her belt and drawing her own blaster. If Gravado or any of his thugs appeared she did not like the idea of facing them armed with just a knife.

"Okay I'm through." Mace said and the two rebels began to creep slowly towards the building they had witnessed the slaves being taken inside.

They halted again when they reached a dirt-covered window and slowly lifted their heads up just high enough to look through. Inside they saw a collection of cages hanging from the ceiling, about a metre along each edge and in every cage was a bound and hooded human female.

"I don't see the guard." Mace said.

"Over there." Kara replied and she pointed to where an open internal doorway led into a side room located by the doorway that Gravado and his gang had used when taking the slaves inside, "Looks like he's sat by the main door." Just about visible was a humanoid figure sat by a simple table.

"Right, then. Let's get inside." Mace whispered as he began to feel around the edge of the window, looking for a way to open it. Kara drew her knife again and, finding where the frame met the window jabbed the tip of the blade in to form a gap. Rotating the blade, she widened the gap just enough for Mace to get his fingers in and he slowly slid the window upwards.

With the window open they could hear what was going on inside. The slaves were almost silent in their cages, with just the occasional muffled groan coming from them. Meanwhile it sounded as if the guard was watching some sort of comedy entertainment on a video player. Mace held the window open for Kara and then she covered him as he followed her inside and lowered the window shut again, taking care not to alert the guard to their presence. Then with his blaster in his hand Mace moved towards the guard, keeping his weapon trained on him as he did so and as he got closer he was able to make out that he was a member of the green-skinned nikto species. Mace flicked the selector of his weapon to 'Stun' and while the guard still had his back to him fired a single shot. The blue energy pulse hit the guard between the shoulders and he slumped forwards across the table. Smiling, Mace waved Kara towards him.

They sat the guard upright again, setting his portable video player down on the table in front of him. They hoped that when he recovered from the stun blast he would assume that he had just fallen asleep in the chair. Then they took the set of keys that was hooked onto his belt and returned to the other room.

"It would be nicer if we could just release them all." Kara whispered.

"I know." Mace replied, "But then that rodian would know something was up. Just find one that looks like you for now and we'll worry about the rest later."

They found a longhaired brunette woman, whose hair protruded from beneath her hood, in one of the cages and Mace unlocked it. Hearing the sound of the cage opening the woman let out a muffled cry and wriggled.

"Shush." Kara hissed as she ripped the hood free of the woman, while Mace just put a finger to his lips. With the hood removed the two rebels saw that the captives had also been gagged to keep them quiet and Kara reached out to remove it, "We're here to free you." She whispered, "Well sort of anyway. Just keep quiet and we'll have you out of here in no time."

"Who are you?" the woman asked quietly as Mace fumbled with the set of keys, looking for the ones that would undo the binders around the woman's wrists and ankles.

"That doesn't matter." Mace replied, finding the correct key, "Just swap clothes with my friend here."

Confused, the woman nevertheless did as she was told and before too long Kara was wearing the drab, simple clothing of a slave. Mace applied the binders to her arms and legs and then helped her into the cage. "You know what you're doing?" he asked and Kara nodded.

"I find a transmitter and set up a beacon. Then you and a bunch of Odras' goons will come in and take care of the Black Sun goons so we don't need to worry about them tracking us and Odras gets rid of his competition."

"Exactly." Mace replied and then he gagged Kara and pulled the hood over her head. Then he gently closed the cage door and locked it before turning to the woman they had just freed, "Okay, I'll just return these keys and then I'll get you out of here." He said to her.

"I think there's movement down near the water." Garm said. He and Vay had followed the rodiar and his gang back to their compound, but had been unable to see inside from the street.

"Could be a patrol." Vay suggested.

"Yeah, well they didn't come out of the main gate, so maybe there's a side door. Let's go take a look."

Moving around the edge of the compound perimeter, Garm and Vay soon came to the gap in the fence cut by Kara.

"Not much of a side door," Vay said as she squeezed through, "but it'll do."

"Speak for yourself." Garm replied as he followed her, "It's tiny." Then when they were both through the gap in the fence he added, "So now where?" and he looked at Vay, smiling.

Vay smiled back and then concentrated.

*Fear.*

Not surprisingly, the slaves purchased by Gravado were afraid and Vay could sense this fear.

"This way." She said softly and she headed towards the captives. They soon reached the battered looking building where Vay had sensed the slaves, but unlike the rebels who had come before them the two Imperial agents made their way around the building until they came to the door, "I think there's a guard." Vay whispered.

"Let's find out. Be ready to run." Garm replied and he tapped lightly on the door. There was no reply and just to be sure Garm knocked again, only louder this time. Once again there was no reply and Garm opened the door, "Keep quiet." He whispered to Vay, "The lazy nerf herder's asleep on the job."

Vay grinned and as they crept past the guard she held out her hand and using the force she plucked the keys from the guard's belt. The pair then made their way into the adjoining room.

*Save them.*

Vay frowned at the voice's instruction. She had not come here to free slaves and the handful of captives held in the cages was nothing compared to the potential casualties that the stolen baradium could cause.

One of the nearby slaves suddenly made a sound. It was just a muffled grunt, but it alerted the two Imperial agents to the potential for the slaves to wake the guard and discover them. Garm slid his pistol from its holster and set it to 'Stun'.

"Watch the guard." He whispered and Vay looked back at the sleeping nikto. From behind her she heard the sound of the blaster discharging as one after another Garm rendered each of the slaves unconscious.

Returning the weapon to his holster Garm then walked up to the nearest cage where strands of blonde hair could be seen hanging down from beneath the hood, "Looks like we've found your double." He then said to Vay.

It did not take long to undress the incapacitated slave and for Vay to swap her bodyglove for the slave's clothes and she climbed into the cage.

"Are you sure about this?" Garm suddenly asked as he locked Vay into the binders.

"Do you have a better idea?" she replied.

"No. But I've got a bad feeling about this." He said.

"Hey, it's me."

"That's what I'm worried about." Garm muttered and he tied the gag around Vay's head.

*Fear.*

Vay sensed the feeling just as Garm put the hood over her head. At first she thought that one of the slaves was recovering from the stun effect sooner than expected, but then she realised that it was coming from Garm. For a moment she wondered what Garm was afraid of before it dawned on her that he was not afraid of something, but for something. He was afraid for her safety.

Garm paused to look around, making sure that the guard was still asleep. Then he removed his jacket and wrapped it around the stunned slave lying on the floor in front of him. After scooping up Vay's clothing he picked up the woman and began to carry her from the building. He halted by the door and looked back at Vay in the cage.

"Take care." He said softly.

Kara was jarred awake when the cage lurched suddenly. She could feel the cage in motion and heard alien voices all around her. Then she heard the sound of the cage being opened and someone grabbed her legs just long enough to undo the binders around her ankles. Next she was pulled roughly from the cage and dragged away.

A gruff sounding voice then called out in basic.

"New arrivals this is your new home, the sail barge of the great Nil Carana. The rules are simple, do as you are told or you will be punished. Severely. You will now be separated into pairs and given new clothing to wear. You have ten minutes to change."

At that point the hood was pulled from Kara's head and she looked around at the newly arrived slaves, only to find herself looking straight at Vay.

The pair glared at one another, neither sure of how the other had come to be there.

"It seems you know each other." The gruff-sounding guard leader said when he noticed them staring at each other, "Well in that case I will be kind and house you together." And he nodded at the guards holding the pair. The slaves were separated into pairs and each pair taken to a tiny room empty except for a narrow bed.

"This is your living space." One of the guards said as the binders were removed from Kara and Vay, "Now get changed." And the guards turned and left, drawing the curtain that was the only thing blocking the doorway behind them.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Vay asked as she pulled the gag from her mouth.

"I'm not exactly pleased to see you either stinky." Kara responded as she too removed her own gag.

"Stop calling me that!" Vay snapped.

"Or what? Are you going to set junior on me?" Kara said and she looked around as if trying to find someone.

"I don't need Garm. So just don't get in my way and I won't have to hurt you." Vay replied as she looked around also, but unlike Kara she actually was looking for something, "Where are the clothes we're supposed to put on?" she asked.

"I think those are them." Kara said and she walked over the bed and picked up some of the objects lay there, "I'm guessing its some sort of bikini."

Vay frowned.

"It's made of metal." She said.

"I know." Kara replied as she held up one of the items she took to be the top half of a bikini and held it in front of her chest, "One each. Take your pick stinky."

Vay snarled as she took one of the bizarre outfits.

"Listen," she hissed as they both began to undress, "so long as you don't get in my way you won't get hurt. But try and stop me and you'll be the one who gets hurt."

"I'd like to see you try." Kara muttered.

As Kara had suggested the clothing provided were revealing two-piece outfits comprising of formed metal that fitted around the two women's chests and waists, with the only conventional fabric being the flowing lengths attached to the front and back of the bottom halves.

"I want to make one thing clear." Vay said as she finished changing and picked up her discarded clothing from the floor, "The only reason I'm not giving you the beating of your life right now is because I don't want to blow my cover."

*This woman could be a useful ally.*

"Oh keep quiet!" Vay snapped in response to the voice in her head.

"Firstly," Kara said, "I didn't say anything to you and secondly neither of us under much cover right now stinky."

"I told you not to call me that. So just shut up and accept the fact that you're not getting your hands on the baradium."

Kara stared at Vay, confused.

"Baradium? What baradium stinky?"

Vay also frowned in confusion.

"I thought you were here to grab the stolen baradium for the rebellion." She said.

"No. Someone was tracking our ship and I'm here to put a stop to it. But now you've told me about it, I think I'll be taking the baradium too. Cheers stinky."

"Stop calling me that!" Vay yelled and she waved a hand towards Kara who was suddenly forced to grab hold of the two halves of her outfit as the clasps holding it in place popped open.

"Oh that does it." Kara snarled as she fixed her clothing back in place, "Its on dinko." And she dived at Vay.

## 4.

Standing on the upper deck of his personal sail barge Nil Carana held up a hand to shield the one eye he still had the use of from the bright desert sunlight. The vehicle that was his home was one of the largest of its type at over sixty metres in length and was more than twice the size of the light freighter that now approached. The YT-2400 was bringing a pair of messengers from his masters in Black Sun and he was keen to impress them. As the starship touched down on the landing platform set into the upper deck of the sail barge Nil looked at the weequay guard standing beside him.

"Go and greet our guests." He said, "Take them my regards and invite them aboard. I will meet them in my lounge." Then he looked back at the starship as its access ramp lowered and a sullustan accompanied by a yellow-skinned near human borneck with several prominent cybernetic replacements disembarked.

He waited just long enough to see the guard walk out across the deck to greet his guests and then headed inside the sail barge, making his way directly to the luxuriously decorated lounge where he spent most of his days. The two slave women lay on his couch parted to allow Nil to sit between them and then moved closer again so that he was able to wrap an arm around each while they stroked his lekku head tails. When his guests were escorted in a few moments later Nil Carana was in a relaxed mood.

"Ah, Mister Sall." He called out to the sullustan as he took a seat, "Do come in and make yourself at home. Can I offer you anything? A beverage? Food? Or perhaps you would prefer the company of one of my companions?" and he nodded at one of the slaves. The woman got up and walked over where the sullustan was sat and was about to sit beside him when he waved her away.

"I have no interest in your species." He said sternly, "Go and demonstrate your talents to my companion instead." And he looked at the borneck who stood behind him. Then he looked at Nil, "Tell me about the baradium." He said.

Nil smiled.

"Ah yes." He said, "My contacts obtained it at a very reasonable price. I've had it shipped here and we can arrange the transfer at your convenience. Though from the look of your ship you'll have to make more than one trip."

"Are you insane?" Sliet Sall snapped, "I'm not transporting that stuff on my ship." And then he relaxed slightly, "No, our superior will arrange for it to be shipped safely to where it is needed most. But what I want to know is where is it right now?"

Nil was about to answer when there was a commotion from the far side of the lounge and Nil and his guests looked around to see several guards dragging both Kara and Vay into the room, a single set of binders locking them together wrist to wrist.

"Take your hands off me you damned dirty snivvian!" Vay exclaimed as the ape-like alien shoved dragged her through the doorway.

"What is the meaning of this?" Nil demanded, leaping to his feet.

"They were fighting sir." One of the guards said as the others pushed the pair to the floor.

"Fighting?" Nil repeated.

"Yes sir. They spoke of baradium also."

"They know about the baradium?" Nil exclaimed, "But how?"

"Look at that one." The borneck said, pointing at Kara, "I know her."

"Yes Derl." Sliet said as he stood up and looked at her for himself. Then he turned to Nil and in a raised voice, "She's a spy!"

"A spy? But how?" Nil said, shocked.

"She's a member of the Alliance Mister Carana." Derl said, "I know that for a fact. We beat it out of her." And he grinned as he thought of the time he and Sliet had tortured Kara to find out who she was working for.

"So the rebels are here for my baradium are they?" Nil said as she approached Kara and Vay, looking them up and down, "And they're desperate enough to try sneaking you two in disguised as slaves. What was the plan? Get yourself brought before me and hope to get close enough to kill me before you were recognised? Well I'm glad to say that you've been found out. But tell me how you knew about the baradium."

"Your guards talk too much." Kara said, "We overheard them and we were arguing about whether to try and steal it or carry out our original mission."

"Original mission? What is that then?" Nil asked.

Kara and Vay looked at one another and then Vay spoke.

"We came to free your slaves." She said with a smile, "These outfits are a clear violation of their rights. They're depraved."

Now it was Nil that smiled.

"Bring all the slaves here." He said to the snivvian guard who nodded and rushed from the room. Then he looked at the two slaves present and pointed to a corner, "Go wait over there." He ordered and the two women did as they were told. Nil then returned to his seat and waited until the snivvian returned with the rest of his slave women, all clad in the same style of outfit as Kara and Vay and they gathered in the corner, "As you can see," Nil said as he waved one of his guards closer to him, "I have many slaves." He then took the blaster rifle from his guard and stood up, "And I can easily find more." He added and he grinned as he took aim.

Stop him!

The voice in Vay's head urged her to act, but it was Kara that reacted first.

"No!" she yelled and she reached out towards Nil, even though he was well out of reach and her jaw dropped as Nil fired the rifle. It was only at the last moment that the slaves realised what was about to happen and they barely had time to scream before he gunned them all down.

"And now," he said slowly as he handed the gun back to the guard and turned towards Kara and Vay, "there is the question of what to do with you."

"This is all your fault, you know that stinky?" Kara said as they walked across the desert sands.

"Stop calling me that." Vay snapped, "And how is any of this my fault?"

"Its not my fault." Kara replied, "So it must be yours." And she raised her hand to wipe her brow. However, it was the hand that was bound to Vay and as she pulled at the other woman's arm she tugged back, "Cut it out stinky!" Kara said, tugging back.

"Be quiet!" one of the guards snapped.

"Oh no." Kara said sarcastically, "Now I'm in trouble." Then she looked at Vay and said, "See stinky, things would be just fine without you."

The guard shoved Kara and she stumbled, dragging Vay down with her.

"What the hell's going on here anyway?" Kara said as she got back to her feet, "If that head tailed murderer wanted us dead he could have just shot us too."

"Just keep moving." The guard replied, "You'll find out eventually." And as he smiled Vay caught the briefest of thoughts from him.

*Eaten alive.*

Kara noted the distance to the guard standing in front of her and smiled. Then she swung her free arm, forming her hand into a fist and punched him. Being tied to Vay, Kara's movement was somewhat limited and the blow was awkward. However, it was still enough to knock the guard backwards and cause him to drop his weapon that Kara reached down to pick up. But just as she had the weapon in her grasp there was a brief blue flash and then everything went black.

The guards looked down at Vay as she was pulled back to the ground when Kara was knocked out by the stun blast.

"This will do." The leader said to his men, "Get digging."

"The baradium is here." Nil said to Sliet as they studied a map of the nearest section of coast and he placed a finger on the map where it showed a cluster of inland bodies of water, "This particular lake is connected to the ocean by a subsurface tunnel large enough to permit my submersible to move along it. I have found it useful for offloading cargoes where the authorities do not expect anything to be happening."

"Very good." Sliet replied, "I take it that I will be able to inspect the cargo and inform Mister Treego of its condition?"

"Of course. We will be there in a little under an hour. I will have the vessel brought to the surface for you to inspect and you can contact our superior then."

"What about the rebels?" Sliet asked.

"What about them? My men have taken care of them, they will not threaten us further."

"Then they are dead?"

"Not yet. At least I hope not." If you want we can take a look when you're done checking out the submersible. We may even get there in time for them to beg us to finish them off quickly."

Kara blinked as the bright desert sun shone into her eyes as she opened them. At first she assumed she was laying on the sand but then she realised that everything was the right way up which meant she could not be lying down at all. Furthermore she could not move her arms or legs.

"Oh kriff." She said as she realised that rather than being on the sand she was buried in it up to her neck.

"Awake I see."

Kara heard Vay's voice from beside her and she turned her head to see that the Imperial agent's head protruding from the sand next to her. Like Kara she had been buried up to her neck.

"Mind telling me what's going on?" Kara asked.

"Well it would seem that those alien goons buried us up to our necks and have left us to die."

"Oh that's just great. Are we just supposed to wait here while we die of dehydration? Have you any idea how long that'll take?"

"Longer than we've got." Vay said, "They didn't leave us to die of thirst."

"Then what? Come on stinky, share."

Vay frowned.

"We've been left to die and you're still being a nerf herder?" she said.

"Oh come on, just tell me."

"Estran's not your home planet is it?" Vay asked.

"Nope. What's that got to do with it?"

"Because if it was you'd know about the lesser sand eels."

"Lesser sand eels? I know about those, the Alliance taught us about them in basic survival."

"Then they should have told you how they burrow through the sand and –"

"Yes I know. They're about a centimetre long, burrow in the sand up to about a metre deep and eat carrion. They eat carrion because they can't move very quickly. Providing you don't do something stupid like sleep on the sand they won't be able to get to you. Even then you'd wake up when you felt the bite and move away."

"Yes, but supposing you couldn't? Say someone had just buried you up to your neck in the sand and you couldn't move at all? What then?"

*Fear.*

*Panic.*

Kara said nothing, but Vay felt her reaction as she realised what the Black Sun operatives had in mind for them.

Looking at Vay, Kara watched as she looked ahead and closed her eyes.

"What? So you're just going to shut your eyes and hope things work out then are you?" she asked.

"No. Actually I'm working on escaping. I started while you were still out cold and I have to say that it was much easier then."

"Escape? How?"

Vay sighed and opened her eyes.

"The reason you can't move is because of all the sand packed around you." She explained, "But when they were putting the sound in the hole around me I was able to use the force to keep a gap around my free arm."

"Free arm?"

"Yeah, we're still tied together, they couldn't bothered taking off the binders. Anyway since I've got a gap around my arm I can still move it. So since they left I've been working my hand back up to the surface, then I should be able to dig myself free. You too since we're tied together."

"Gee thanks." Kara said, "So how long is this going to take?"

The sand right in front of Vay moved and her fingers suddenly broke the surface.

"Oh not long." She said as she pushed her hand upwards.

Moving her hand to push aside the sand, Vay was able to get her entire arm free and she began to push more sand away from her. Then she reached as far out in front of her as she could, dug her fingers into the sand and slowly began to drag herself up out of the hole. However, since her left arm was still bound to Kara's right one she was still unable to get very far and so instead she began to scrap away at the sand surrounding the rebel and dig her free as well. Then she suddenly stopped.

"Hey what's going on?" Kara asked, "Why did you stop?"

"There are conditions to me digging you out." Vay replied, "Alternatively I can just try and rip your arm out of its socket."

"Conditions? Like what?"

"Like you stop calling me stinky."

"Sure." Kara said.

*Deception.*

Vay could tell Kara was lying, but she preferred to let it pass.

"Plus I want you to answer a question."

"Is that it? Just answer a question?"

"Yes and I'll know if you're lying. Like you just lied to me now."

"Ask the question." Kara said, frowning.

"You told Garm you were sleeping with his father. Are you?"

Kara snorted.

"Is that it? Junior needs to know if his father and me are an item? Well you can tell him no, nothing is further from my mind right now."

Vay concentrated on Kara's feelings.

*Anger.*

Vay then smiled and continued digging, satisfied that she sensed no deception.

## 5.

The sail barge came to a halt at the top of a slope. Sliet and his cyborg bodyguard Derl both joined Nil on the observation deck to look down at where a massive lake sat at the bottom of the dip in the terrain.

"I don't see anything." Sliet said.

"Of course not." Nil replied, "The submersible is in the tunnel between here and the coast. I never have it approach the lake just in case someone else detects it. Don't worry, I've sent the command that will bring it to us and –ah, look." Nil pointed across the water as a dark shape appeared from the depths and then broke the surface, "You see, just as I promised."

Derl snorted.

"Do you want me to check it out Mister Sall?" he asked.

"Of course I do." Sliet replied, "I'm not going into that thing if it's full of baradium."

"Keep us here." Nil called out to his crew, "But have a pair of bikes prepared so our guest can inspect the cargo."

"A pair?" Derl commented.

"You'll need someone to open the hatch." Nil told him.

Unlike the sail barge, which was a luxury model, the speeder bikes were old and battered. But Derl had seen far worse and he was happy so long as they worked, which they did. Accompanied by one of Nil's guards on the other bike he rode across the water to where the top deck of the submersible floated.

"I take it there are no crew?" he asked as he parked his speeder bike on the deck.

"No." the guard replied, "they stayed aboard just long enough to transfer the baradium from the freighter and then bring it here. Mister Carana's had it operated by remote since then."

"Is that safe?"

The guard shrugged.

"Safe enough I suppose. The droid brain can handle the slow moving water in the tunnel better than ocean currents." And then the guard knelt down and entered a code into the keypad set beside the hatch. The hatch opened with a hiss and the guard looked back up at Derl, "After you." He said with a grin.

Derl looked down into the submersible and waited while the lights flickered into life before he climbed down the ladder. As soon as he passed through the hatch he felt the temperature drop, a result of the vehicle having spent so long under water and a he shivered briefly. The ladder brought him down into a compact control room with three seats for a crew. Behind him the guard came down the ladder and pointed to a hatch at the end of the room.

"The hold's that way." He said.

Derl walked through the hatch and followed the corridor on the other side to a room that he guessed was afar larger than the control room, but it was difficult to tell while it was packed from floor to ceiling with canisters all marked 'DANGER- BARADIUM. HIGLY VOLATILE.'

He tapped one of the canisters just to be sure that it was full.

"Careful!" the guard exclaimed from behind him and Derl snarled.

"You can't trigger this stuff just with a little tap." He said.

"No, but that tap makes one of the ones at the top fall you could."

Derl realised that the guard was right, but said nothing. Instead he just walked between the stacks of canisters and tried to calculate how much explosive material there was in this one room.

"Let's get one thing straight." Vay said as she and Kara walked through the desert. Though she had been able to dig them out of the sand, neither of them had come up with a way of removing the binders that joined them together so for now at least it seemed that they were working as a team, "I'm tolerating your presence, but I'm not letting you escape with the baradium."

"Hey look stinky–"

"Stop calling me that."

"All I came here to do is take care of that Nil Carana guy. If only for the crime against fashion that is what we're wearing. Everything else is secondary to me stinky."

Vay suddenly halted and Kara felt her arm tug as she reached the limits of the binders.

"What now stinky?" she asked.

"I said stop calling me that." Vay replied as she started walking again.

"I need to call you something."

"Or you could just keep quiet for two minutes."

"You just love rules and regulations don't you? First I can't call you stinky and now I'm not supposed to talk at all."

"You know," Vay said, "when I get back to Estran City I'm going to go to the quartermasters' office and draw out a muzzle. Then the next time we meet I'm going to shut you up properly."

Kara snorted.

"Many have tried." She said, "Now how about you tell me how far we've got to keep walking?"

"I don't know exactly." Vay replied, "But I sensed them heading in this direction so we better just keep going."

"Xizor Transport Systems. How may I direct your call?"

"I need to speak with Mister Treego." Sliet said, "It's Sliet Sall."

"Of course Mister Sall, I'll put you through now."

The floating image of the receptionist was replaced by the spinning logo of Xizor Transport Systems, the galaxy-spanning company that was the main front organisation for Black Sun. Then moments later that was in turn replaced with the image of a well-dressed rodian.

"What do you want Sliet?" Treego asked.

"Sire, I am with Nil Carana on his sail barge and I can confirm that he has in his possession almost four hundred tonnes of baradium."

"Excellent." Treego replied.

"There is one more thing though sire."

"Go on."

"The rebels know of the baradium. They sent a pair of spies to obtain it."

The short spines on Treego's head twitched.

"Dispose of them." He hissed.

"Already done." Nil said, interrupting the conversation, "I have inventive ways of dealing with those who dare to cross me."

"As do I Mister Carana." Treego replied, "So you better hope that your cargo is as Sliet describes it, or I will be sure to see to it that you are the one Prince Xizor's spy tells him was to blame."

Nil gulped.

"Shall I wait here for a transport to bring you the baradium sire?" Sliet asked.

"No. I have need of your ship. Return to Estran City immediately. Treego out." And the hologram suddenly faded to leave only empty space.

"A shame." Nil said, looking at Sliet, "Now you won't get to see those rebels begging as their eyes are eaten out of their sockets by sand eels."

Even in the fading light the shape of the sail barge stood out on the horizon and both Kara and Vay kept low as they approached it. As they got closer they noticed that what little light remained was reflecting off something just over a ridge.

"Oh thank goodness – water." Kara exclaimed as they saw the lake and she was about to rush down to it when Vay tugged her back, "Ow! What did you do that for?"

"There's someone down there." Vay whispered, "Look." And she pointed to the shore of the lake where a figure could be seen sat with his back to them, "Now come with me."

"Like I have a choice stinky."

They crept down the slope towards the lake, watching not only the individual by the lakeside but also the sail barge itself for any sign that they had been spotted. But as far as they could tell there was no-one watching.

"Now watch." Vay whispered as they got closer to the guard and she reached out and focused her mind on him. Or rather she focused on the length of chain he had around his neck.

*Knowledge or defence, never attack.*

The stern warning from the voice in her head did not dissuade Vay and she used the Force to take hold of the chain and twisted it, tightening it around the guard's neck. He fell backwards, kicking his legs wildly and clutching at his throat and trying desperately to stop it tightening any further.

Concentrating harder, Vay dragged the struggling guard across the sand towards them and Kara scooped up a fist-sized rock from the ground nearby. As soon as the guard came within reach Kara brought the rock down on his head and he suddenly lay still, blood flowing from the wound and sinking into the sand.

"At least the sand eels won't go hungry after all." She commented.

Vay reached down and pulled a canteen from the guard's belt.

"It feels about half full." She said, "Better than nothing." And she drank deeply before handing it to Kara for her to finish the contents off. As Kara drank Vay went through the guard's other belongings, "No blaster and no keys to these binders." She said, "Just a whole load of nothing."

"At least he had water." Kara replied, gasping after drinking too quickly, "But I could do with some more."

"Looks like there's plenty down there." Vay said, waving at the lake and after checking once more to make certain that they had not been seen the pair made their way down the slope, crouched by the lakeside and scooped up handfuls of water that they lifted to their mouths.

Immediately they spat the water out.



"Kriff! Salt water!" Kara exclaimed, "Ooh well, at least I can use it to wet my face." And she took a deep breath, closed her eyes and dunked her head into the water. Briefly she opened her eyes while her face was still beneath the surface and they widened when she saw what was down there, "Stang!" she said as she brought her head back up, "There's a sub down there stinky."

Vay stuck her own head beneath the surface of the water and looked for herself. Sure enough without the disturbance caused by the surface of the lake she could make out the submersible settled on the lakebed. "The baradium was taken from the freighter that brought to this planet on a submersible." She said, "It must be down there still."

"Fine, but how do we get at it?"

A puzzled look appeared on Vay's face.

"How come you're so interested in helping me all of a sudden?" she asked and Kara sighed.

"Look," she replied, "these guys are Black Sun right?"

"If you say so. The ISB didn't have anything on them."

"Well they are. So if they are able to shift all that baradium then it could end up anywhere that they go and I don't like the idea of what uses they could put it to. So for now at least I'm on your side stinky."

Vay frowned and then looked up at the sail barge.

"I've got a feeling that what we're both after is up there." She said.

"Somehow I knew you were going to say that."

The sail barge was floating about three metres off the ground and though Vay felt that she would normally be able to leap up and then scale the side to reach an opening, the fact that right now she was bound to Kara made this an option that was out of the question. However, amongst the rigging of the sails there were several cables hanging between different masts.

"I think I can rip one of those loose." She said quietly, "Do you think you can climb up one with me?"

Kara looked up. In the poor light her senses were not as acute as Vay's and she could barely make out any details at all.

"I might be able to tell you if I could see." She replied and Vay just shook her head.

"How have you lot stayed free so long?" Vay said and she held up her free arm, clenched her fist and pulled it back down. The movements were merely a means of giving form to her thoughts and as Vay was reaching out her arm she was also reaching through the force and taking hold of one of the dangling cables. The masts on top of the sail barge rotated as Vay tugged at the cable and a cross beam swung out over the side of the vehicle before one end of the cable finally broke loose and came tumbling down its side.

Vay took hold of the cable and pulled at it, testing its strength as best she could.

"Well it seems pretty solid." She said, "Now we just have to climb up it."

Kara frowned and raised the hand that was bound to Vay.

"Easier said than done." She replied, "Isn't there some way of pulling us up there instead?"

Vay looked back up at the barge's sails and rigging and her attention was drawn to the beam now protruding over the side of the barge. The cable dangling down was connected to the end of this and it occurred to Vay that if it were to spin back over the deck of the sail barge then it would drag the cable at least part of the way back up.

"Perhaps." She said, "But you'll need to hold on tight."

"To what? You or the line?"

"Err, both."

Vay took hold of the cable in both hands, forcing Kara to lift her bound arm up and do the same while she wrapped her free arm around Vay's waist.

"You know," Kara said slowly, "given how we're dressed there are some guys I know who would pay to watch this."

Vay glanced back at her and then looked upwards, focusing on the beam. At first nothing happened, but then it suddenly spun back across the deck of the sail barge and the cable was pulled upwards. Kara gasped as the two women were lifted up off the ground by the rising cable until they struck the side of the sail barge hull and Vay's concentration was broken.

"Okay now what?" Kara asked.

"We climb." Vay replied.

By placing their feet against the hull of the sail barge and gripping the cable both Kara and Vay were able to carefully scale the sloped side of the massive vehicle and they were soon pulling themselves up onto the deck.

"No guards." Vay said as she looked around.

"Yeah, well I'm guessing they weren't expecting trouble." Kara said, "That guy we killed by the water must have just been out for a stroll or something."

"We need to figure out how to get that sub to the surface." Vay said, "There must be some sort of control room somewhere that will do it."

"Why bring it to the surface?" Kara asked.

"Because I can't take the risk that that twi'lek will send it away or someone else will turn up to claim it. If we bring the sub to the surface then we can destroy it with this barge's blaster cannon." And she nodded in the direction of a bulky weapon set into the sail barge's deck.

Kara's eyes widened.

"You're kriffing kidding me." She hissed, "You're going to blow up a sub full of baradium. Do you know what that'll do?"

"Make a very big bang." Vay replied, "Probably taking this sail barge with it."

"No probably about it. From this distance the last people to see us will be looking out of the window on their sky hook."

"Then we need to move this thing further away. Now I think I can drive it, but I'd need your help. Do you think you can do it?"

"Look stinky, the vehicle I can't drive hasn't been invented yet."

"And stop calling me stinky!"

"Who's out there?"

Both Kara and Vay froze when the voice called out through the darkness and they took cover behind a barrel as a heavysset figure wandered closer. As he got nearer they saw that he had a blaster in his hand.

"Come out from behind there." He said, "I can see you." And Kara and Vay slowly got to their feet, their hands raised, "How the hell did you two get back on board?" the guard demanded as Vay recognised him as the leader of the group that had buried them in the sand.

"Well I forgot my bikini polish." Kara said, "Have you seen it? This thing rusts if I don't take proper care of it."

And in the brief moment that the guard's attention was focused on Kara, Vay kicked the barrel they had been hiding behind over and using the force propelled it towards him. Before he could even cry out the guard was struck by the barrel and knocked over the side of the sail barge. The sound of him bouncing down the hull echoed back up through the darkness.

"Well there goes his blaster." Vay said.

"Probably the key to these binders too." Kara added.

"Well at least he left the door open." Vay said, indicating the open doorway through which light was spilling out onto the deck, "Now let's go see if we can find the controls to this thing."

## 6.

Nil was beginning to regret killing all his slaves. It was not remorse for the deaths of innocent people since he hated all humans with a passion, but it was simply because he was now bored and had none of his females to use for entertainment. Then he heard something. First there was muffled shouting that seemed to be coming from the upper deck of his sail barge and then a clattering as something heavy fell down the side. He picked up a comlink and activated it.

"Dreng, what's happening?" he said, knowing that Dreng would be the nearest of his guards to the upper deck. But there was no reply and it suddenly occurred to him that what had just fallen over the side of the sail barge was Dreng. Snarling he cast the comlink aside and took hold of the blaster pistol he kept beside his bed. Then he rushed out into the corridor and grabbed hold of the first of his men that he encountered, "Sound the alarm!" he snapped, "The rebels are attacking!"

Theorising that the controls to the sail barge would be located somewhere near to the prow, Kara and Vay made their way carefully and quietly towards the front of the vehicle. As they progressed they heard the sound of alien voices.

"Huttese." Vay said, referring to the language of the hutts that was commonly spoken by many species.

"Do you speak it?" Kara asked.

"Not really, but I can recognise it when I hear it spoken. From their tone I'd say that they've figured out we're here."

"Oh that's just great. Now they're hunting for us."

"Don't worry. We can hear their footsteps and I can sense when they're getting close. On the other hand they can't hear us moving about. Providing you can keep your mouth shut of course."

"Then lead the way stinky." Kara hissed.

They soon found a compact room that featured a pair of seats in front of a console filled with displays and assorted switches. Furthermore, a narrow viewport mounted above the console looked out ahead of the sail barge.

"Well I guess this is it." Vay said as she sat in one of the chairs and she began to inspect the controls, "What do you think?" she asked Kara who was still standing behind her.

"Well it would be easier if I could sit down too." Kara replied, shaking her bound arm so that Vay realised she was sat so that Kara could not sit beside her.

"Oh right." Vay said and she swapped chairs.

Kara took the other seat and inspected the controls for herself.

"I see flight controls but that's about it." She said, "No communications gear or link to the cannon."

"The gun is probably operated directly." Vay said, "But we need to find whatever mechanism will summon the submersible."

"At least we can move this thing further away from the water. We'll have to gain altitude to keep the lake in the cannon's line of fire though." And Kara reached out to start the engines.

"No wait!" Vay exclaimed, "If you start the engines they'll know we're here. We need to bring the sub to the surface first."

"Stang." Kara said, "I can't believe I almost did that. So where do you think the sub comms will be?"

"I don't know, but we better find them before those guards find us."

"Dreng is dead Mister Carana." A guard told Nil, "His body was thrown over the side."

"What about the intruders?" Nil asked.

"No signs of them yet sir. We've checked the rear sections and are moving forwards. They won't escape."

Vay waved her wrist and the lead guard looked down a side passage.

"What was that?" he said to the others behind him, "Follow me while we check it out." And rather than continuing towards Kara and Vay.

"Neat trick." Kara whispered to her.

"Yeah," Vay replied, "should give us just enough time to slip past their line provided you can keep quiet for twenty seconds."

Moving quickly the pair then darted down the passageway, throwing a quick glance down the side passage to ensure that the guard patrol was still moving away from them.

"There's no-one aboard sir." The guard reported to Nil over the comlink, "We've swept the entire vessel."

"Then look again!" he snapped, "Someone killed Dreng and I want them found." And then he shut off the comlink. It was as he was returning the device to his pocket that Nil heard movement from the passageway outside his private chamber. It was not the heavy echoing 'clump' of boots on the deck plates but rather a quieter slapping sound as if someone was walking about barefoot. He smiled and drew his blaster before creeping towards the open doorway, planning to leap out and surprise whoever was out there.

"Lookout!" Vay called out as she sensed his approach at the last moment and pulling Kara down with her she dived to the deck just as Nil burst out of his chamber. She reached out with the Force and tried to pull the blaster from his grip. However, Nil felt the sudden tug and tightened his grip, accidentally discharging the weapon and sending an energy bolt down the passageway.

"Get him!" Kara yelled as soon as she recovered from the surprise of being pulled down by Vay and both women dived forwards, slamming into Nil and hurling him backwards to where his head smashed into the doorframe behind him. Nil let out a surprised grunt, dropped his blaster and collapsed. The blaster began to slide away, but using the Force once more Vay pulled it back and picked it up.

"Get him?" she said to Kara, "That was your smart idea?"

"Well it worked didn't it stinky?"

Vay held up the blaster.

"Don't call me that." She said sternly and then she looked down at the unconscious Nil and a smile appeared on her face, "Let's get him inside," she said, "I think he's just what we need."

When Nil came to he noticed was that it was dark and there was an odd taste in his mouth. The taste seemed to be coming from something stuffed into it and he tried to remove it only to find that he could not move at all.

"Looks like he's awake." Kara said as Nil let out a grunt of surprise and she pulled the pillowcase from over his head. Nil then found himself looking up at both Kara and Vay who were kneeling either side of him on the bed they had tied him to. Kara lifted up the hand that was bound to Vay, dragging the Imperial agent's hand upwards also, "Do you have keys?" she said, looking Nil in the face but he just glared at her.

Vay reached out with her free hand and grabbed hold of one of Nil's head tails and dug her nails into the flesh as hard as she could.

"My friend asked if you had the keys." She said and as Nil screamed into his gag from the pain he shook his head, "That's better." Vay said and she released her grip.

"Err, just one thing." Kara said, looking at Vay.

"What now?"

"Well we're not friends. We hate each other."

"Good point." Vay replied with a smile and she turned back to Nil. "I withdraw my previous comment and disassociate myself from the individual your subordinates saw fit to tie me to." Then looking back at Kara she added, "Is that good enough for you?"

"Yes. Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now can we please finish torturing this creep?"

"Officially I'm not allowed to torture people. Its against Alliance rules." Kara said.

"Officially I'm supposed to arrest you. It's the Empire's rules." Vay replied.

"Then I say kriff the rules for once and let's see what this creep can tell us." Kara said and both women looked back at Nil, "Tug on three." Kara added and both of them reached out and took hold of one of Nil's head tails with their free hands, "One. Two."

"Three!" Vay finished and they both pulled on Nil's head tails, dragging them in separate directions. Nil screamed again and they let go, "Now how do we get that sub to the surface?" Vay asked and she pulled the gag from his mouth.

"Go ahead and kill me you human scum!" he yelled at them, "I'll tell you nothing."

"Oh, we're not planning on killing you." Kara said, "Even though you did try to kill us. But you may want to consider that after we've ripped off those lekku head tails of yours we'll have to find something else to remove and I've just the appendage in mind."

"You wouldn't dare." Nil hissed, snarling.

"This is getting us nowhere." Vay said and she took hold of his jaw, angling his face so that she could look directly into his eyes, "Tell us how to bring the sub to the surface." She said, projecting the command through the Force as well as speaking it out loud, "Tell me now."

"One deck down." Nil replied, drooling, "Port side."

Vay then stuffed the gaga back into his mouth.

"Okay let's go." she said and she began to slide off the bed.

"Hang on a moment." Kara said, holding her back, "There's something else we need to do. I think I saw salve quarters a couple of doors down."

"Oh that's nasty." Vay said as she picked up the thoughts upper most in Kara's mind, "Let's do it."

It was pure chance that the guard looked out of a window overlooking the lake and spotted the submersible on the surface of the lake. Well aware that Nil Carana would not order it surfaced while he believed them to be under attack he knew that it must have instead been the intruders and, along with the rest of his group he rushed to the communications centre from where the submersible was controlled only to find all of the equipment smashed. Immediately he took hold of his comlink and activated it.

"Mister Carana, they've surfaced the submersible." Then after waiting for a reply he added, "Mister Carana can you hear me?" again there was no reply and he looked towards the other guards, "Quickly! Mister Carana needs us!" he snapped and the guards rushed through the passageways of the sail barge until they reached Nil's private chamber, only to find the door slightly ajar. Rushing inside the guards all came to a sudden halt as they discovered their superior gagged and tied spread eagled to his bed wearing one of his slave's bikinis.

"They're after the baradium!" Nil yelled as the gag was taken from his mouth, "Get after them! And get me some clothes!"

Slipping past the guards Kara and Vay made their way back to the sail barge's control room. Finding it still empty they went inside and shut and locked the door behind them.

"Right let's get this thing moving." Kara said and she took hold of the control column in her free hand.

The entire sail barge shook as the repulsorlift engines were switched from the standby mode that kept it hovering above the ground to the active mode and began to move forwards gently.

"Well I guess everyone now knows where we are." Vay said, glancing back at the locked door behind them.

"So what's the blast radius of that baradium then?" Kara asked.

"Big. I think we're best getting out to the maximum range of the gun if we can."

"Ah, that may be a problem."

"How so?"

"The sub's in the lake and the lake's at the bottom of a hole right?"

"Right. So?"

"So the blaster cannon's a direct fire weapon so we need to keep the sub in view at all times if we're going to shoot at it. This thing isn't an airspeeder you know, its repulsorlifts aren't designed to lift it more than ten or twenty metres off the ground."

Suddenly there was a hammering on the door.

"Never mind." Vay said, "Looks like this is as far as we're getting." and she plucked the blaster from where she had set it down on the console. Aiming at the viewport she fired, shifted her aim along and fired again to blow out the entire thing, "Can you lock the controls?" she asked Kara, who nodded and flicked several switches.

"It's done." She said, pulling her hands away from the controls before Vay shot them.

"Lets' move!" Vay snapped and the pair clambered over the console and through the destroyed viewport just as there was the sound of another blaster shot and the door was blown open.

Outside the forward surface of the sail barge was only a shallow slope and Kara and Vay were able to scabble up towards the upper deck despite having no climbing equipment and still being tied together. From below them they could hear the shouts of the guards who had broken open the door and Vay pointed the blaster back towards the smashed viewport and fired twice to dissuade anyone from sticking their head out. They made their way onto the upper deck and rushed towards the nearby blaster cannon.

"How do we turn it?" Vay snapped as she studied the controls.

"Lever here." Kara replied and she grabbed hold of a large lever that caused the weapon to rotate towards the lake behind them. Vay looked down the sight and just as Nil Carana burst onto the deck at the head of a group of guards she fired.

The single shot slammed into the submersible and there was an immediate explosion. The shot had not ignited the baradium, but it did set fire to the submersible itself.

"Oh not good." Kara said as she looked at the burning underwater vehicle, "How long till that reaches the baradium?"

"Long enough for us to escape if we take those." Vay replied and she pointed to the pair of speeder bikes parked at the edge of the deck.

A blaster bolt sailed past them and they took cover behind the cannon.

"Problem is getting there of course." Vay said.

"Leave that to me." Kara said and she grabbed hold of the lever that rotated the cannon again, turning it to face towards the approaching guards.

Seeing the powerful weapon turning towards them, Nil and his troops dived aside and as soon as Kara and Vay saw that the Black Sun troops were not aiming weapons at them they made a dash for the speeder bikes.

"Give me that blaster!" Kara snapped as they reached the vehicles.

"What for?"

"We've got to get out of these binders don't we? Well I may have a way."

"Shooting them won't work." Vay replied, "Not if you want to keep your hand anyway."

"I just need the power pack. Now give it to me." Kara said and Vay held out the weapon. Kara took it and ejected the power cell from its grip, "Now watch." she said. Kara then held the power cell so that its contacts stuck out from her hand. She then pressed these against the binders around her wrist. There was a brief blue flash of light as the contacts were shorted out against the metal of the binders and Kara flinched as she felt the jolt herself. However, the discharge overpowered the magnetic field that held the binders shut and the half around Kara's wrist sprung open.

"See." She said.

"Why didn't you do that earlier?" Vay asked.

Kara simply pushed the power cell back into the blaster and handed it to Vay.

"Try it." She said.

Vay took the weapon and pointed it at the first guard she saw, but when she pulled the trigger nothing happened.

"I couldn't be certain that the binders would open." Kara said, "But I was certain that it would ruin the power pack and I thought we may still need it. Now are we getting out of here or not?"

## 7.

As Nil got back to his feet he heard the sound of the speeder bikes starting up and he looked around just in time to see Kara and Vay riding off into the distance.

"The cannon!" he shouted, "Shoot them down!"

Along with his guards Nil rushed towards the cannon and they began to turn it towards the fleeing speeder bikes. But just as the gunner lined up to take a shot the fire on the submersible reached the baradium stored in its hold.

The water around the submersible was boiled away as the baradium ignited and the blast wave made the ground shake so violently that even the three repulsorlift vehicles felt it through the anti-gravity fields that kept them aloft. The blast threw the sand from the slope around the lake in all directions, followed by the expanding fireball that flowed over the deck of the sail barge and Nil Carana and all of his men cried out briefly as the flesh was burnt from their bodies.

"Down there!" Kara yelled over the sound of her speeder bike and the explosion behind them and she steered the vehicle downwards to behind a sand dune. As soon as the bike touched down she rolled off and lay on the ground, her hands over her head. Vay was only moments behind her and just as the Imperial agent also took cover a sheet of flame shot above their heads.

Then there was silence and both Kara and Vay lifted their heads from the ground. Then they got to their feet and walked back up the dune until they could see the burning wreck that had been Nil Carana's sail barge.

"Well it looks like your baradium's been taken care of." Kara said.

"And I doubt they'll be tracking you again." Vay replied.

"So what now stinky?" Kara asked, looking at Vay.

"Good question. But stop calling me stinky."

Kara turned around and walked back to her speeder bike.

"You know the next time we meet I'm probably going to try and kill you." She said without looking back at Vay.

"Likewise." Vay said and she watched as Kara rode away.

Odras sat down beside Mace at the bottom of the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp. All around them waited armed men in the employ of the crime boss.

"It's been two days." Odras said.

"I know." Mace replied.

"I hate to say it but if there's been no signal and-"

"I said I know." Mace said.

Suddenly there was the sound of a repulsorlift engine and a speeder bike darted into the docking bay with Kara riding it. She brought the vehicle to a stop and dismounted, walking towards the *Silver Hawk*.

"Kara!" Mace exclaimed, getting to his feet and smiling at her, "That's a new look for you isn't it?" he then commented, looking at the metal bikini she still wore.

"She wears it well though." Odras said.

"Kriff off Balve." Kara said as she strode between the pair and walked up the ramp.

Mace looked at Odras and smiled.

"Looks like we're done." He said.

Garm sat in his hotel room waiting for a signal from Vay. In orbit a shuttle full of stormtroopers was waiting for the word from him to launch an attack to support her, but he had heard nothing since he left her in the slave cage. Then there was a knock at the door and Garm got up to answer it. He opened the door and his jaw dropped when he saw Vay.

"Vay what the hell are you wearing?" he asked as she walked inside the room.

"Don't ask." She replied, "All I'm willing to say is that the clasps seem to have rusted when I crossed the ocean, so you'll need to find some cutters to help me get it off."

Then they both smiled and she embraced him.