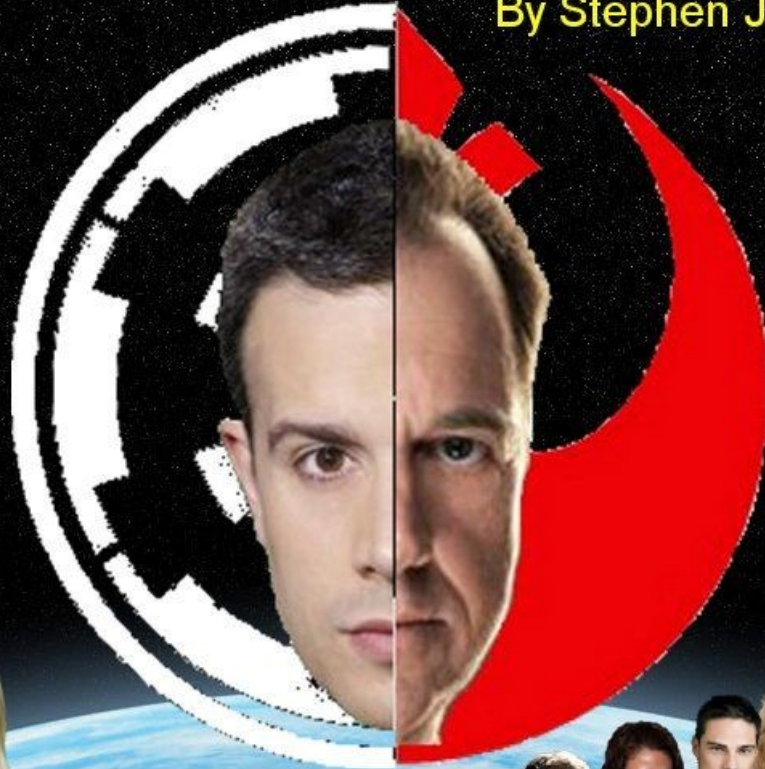


STAR WARS

2-02: Hero's Rescue

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...

HERO'S RESCUE

THE RESCUE MISSION IS UNDERWAY. BUT NOW THE REBELS FACE A RACE AGAINST TIME AS THE HEAD OF IMPERIAL INTELLIGENCE TRAVELS TO ALLAISTRA TO TAKE CUSTODY OF VORN LARCUS III HERSELF. BUT DO THE REBELS HAVE AN ALLY IN AN UNSUSPECTED PLACE...

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

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1.

The three people in the shuttle's cockpit all wore Imperial uniforms, but not one of them had ever earned the right to wear one. In fact they spent their lives fighting against the Empire as part of the rebel Alliance. "Captain I think we're coming up on the base now." The youngest of the three said as she studied the navigation console.

"Thanks Krissa. I can see it now." The woman in the pilot's seat replied. As she spoke the only man among the three, a computer expert named Geran Pay looked out of the cockpit window for himself.

"Yeah that's the place." He said, "I'll go let the others know." And got up from his chair and left the cockpit. Six more rebels, four men and two women sat in the rear section of the shuttle, resting themselves on the crates containing the cargo that it was scheduled to deliver.

Three of the six were part of a rebel field unit that had been disbanded when its leader had been believed killed and the remaining personnel reassigned. The former mercenary Tharun Verser had been put to use training other rebels as combat troop, Kara Bilstran, the unit's medic had simply been transferred to the medical ward at the rebellion's main base in the sector and finally Jaysica Horbid had been reassigned to menial duties because no one else wanted her around them.

Captain Mace Grayle and Tobis Dorfus were the crew of the light freighter the *Silver Hawk*. That ship had been assigned as the transport vessel for the disbanded rebel unit and they had felt the loss of its leader as much as the other team members.

The final rebel, Colonel Harris Ergard, had only worked with the unit once, although he had known their lost leader. As a result he had volunteered to accompany them on this unauthorised rescue mission when word reached them that Major Vorn Larcus III was not as previously believed dead, but instead being held prisoner by the Empire. He had even recruited Geran for it. The two women in the cockpit had joined in because of the relationship that existed between Mace and Mallia.

"I take it we're almost there." The colonel said when he saw Geran.

"That's right colonel," he replied, "I thought you and Captain Grayle might like to be in the cockpit for the final approach."

The two officers got up and followed Geran.

"Hello Mace darling," the pilot said when the three men entered the cockpit, "I told you I'd get us there."

"I never doubted you Mallia." Mace replied and he kissed her cheek.

"Would you mind not distracting our pilot?" Geran said.

"Yeah Mace," Mallia said, "I might do something like this." And she jerked the control column just as Geran was sitting down, causing him to overbalance and land on the floor with a 'thump.' At the same time there was a scream from the cargo bay.

"Hey!" Jaysica called out, "You made me spill my drink!"

"Yeah all over me!" Kara added.

"Sorry!" Mallia called back.

"If you could get us there without incapacitating any of us it would be appreciated captain." Colonel Ergard said. Then he looked at Geran who was pulling himself into his chair, "Okay lieutenant," he said to the slicer, "let's see if your plan is still working."

"Geran activated the ship's communication system and called the Imperial base's flight control centre.

"Flight nine to control, requesting permission to land." He said calmly.

After a brief delay the control tower responded.

"You may approach flight nine. You are cleared for landing at platform three." Then the controller adopted a more relaxed tone before he added, "And be careful Ken, we've got a bigwig from sector command snooping around." Then the channel went silent.

"That was close." Mace said, "It sounded like the controller knows the crew, or at least one of them."

"Then we need to get clear of the shuttle as fast as we can." Colonel Ergard said, "If that controller turns up looking for his friends we're in trouble."

"Yes, well we've got to land first." Mallia said, "So go grab hold of something while I take us in."

Mace and Colonel Ergard did as Mallia suggested and returned to the rear compartment.

"Look at this." Kara said, pointing to a large stain on her jacket, "Jaysica tipped juice all over me."

"We don't have time for this now Kara." Mace said, "We're about to land. Everyone needs to hold onto something, they may be a bit of a bump."

"Why?" the other, considerably shorter woman asked as the other rebels gripped hold of the straps holding the crates in place, "There's never much of a bump when you land the *Silver Hawk*."

"Maybe not Jaysica." Mace said, "But that's because the *Silver Hawk* doesn't carry anywhere near this much cargo."

"How much difference can that possibly make?" Jaysica asked.

Mace was about to answer when the shuttle lurched suddenly and Jaysica was thrown across the hold. Tobis let go of the crates he was holding and reached out towards her, causing him to tumble after her.

"Careful Tobis!" Mace called out to his engineer.

The pair landed in a heap, Tobis on top of Jaysica with his face buried in her chest.

"Hey!" Jaysica exclaimed and she pushed Tobis off her.

Tharun reached out a hand to help Tobis up.

"Too bad lad." He said, "Next time don't try it in public."

Tobis went red.

The sounds of the shuttle's systems suddenly died as Mallia cut power now that she had brought the vessel in to land safely.

"Well, we're here." Mallia said as the three rebels who had functioned as the shuttle's flight crew left the cockpit.

"So now what?" Tharun asked as he readied his blaster rifle.

"Well put that away for starters." Colonel Ergard told him, "The dock master will be here at any moment to see our manifest and arrange unloading. Those of us not in Imperial uniform need to keep out of sight."

"Those of us in uniform aren't very convincing." Mallia replied.

Four of the rebels were wearing Imperial uniforms. Jaysica had a false one that she had been issued some time ago by the Alliance and though it was a convincing fake it was currently covered in mud. On the other hand uniforms worn by the flight crew had been stolen from the genuine crew of the ship. Mallia and her subordinate officer, Krissa Dall were both wearing uniforms from crewmen who had been subdued.

Unfortunately they had both been men who were somewhat larger than the two female rebels and the uniforms sagged in places. This left only Geran. He wore the uniform that had belonged to the shuttle's original commander. Jaysica had killed him by stabbing him in the back. Though the uniform fit Geran well, it had been left with a hole and bloodstain where Jaysica's small blade had cut through it.

"They'll just have to do for now." Colonel Ergard said, "Now those of you disguised as flight crew get down the ramp and convince the dock master that we're on the level."

As the head of Imperial Intelligence for the sector, Gayal Tharr was looking forward to getting Vorn Larcus back to her headquarters and into an interrogation chamber. However, the process of transferring the rebel officer from the custody of the Army to her was proving to be tiresome owing to the intervention of the base medical staff.

"He's still drifting in and out of consciousness." The doctor said as they went over Vorn's status in the security section of the base's medical unit, "If we move him prematurely then it could trigger a relapse. And a corpse won't be answering any questions."

"So how long then?" she asked, "I was told twenty four to forty eight hours when I landed."

"That is likely." the doctor replied, "At any rate we will know more by then."

At that moment Vorn emitted a groan and his eyes flickered open.

"Hello my lord." Gayal said with a smirk, referring to the title that Vorn had held during his service in the parliament of the sector capital world of Estran, "I'm here to take you home."

"I think I'll pass." Vorn replied softly, "This place is far more welcoming." And he lifted his wrists as far as the restraints holding him down to the bed would allow.

The dock master looked bored as he took the cargo manifest from Geran.

"Just power converters." Geran said.

"I can read." The dock master replied without taking his eyes from the datapad. Then he handed it back.

"You're cleared." he said and he gave back the datapad.

"That was easy." Krissa whispered to Mallia as the dock master walked away, "He didn't even ask to see inside the ship."

"Why would he?" Mallia asked, "It's not in the manual."

"That's as maybe," Geran interrupted, "but we need to take a look around and find a way of getting the others off the ship unseen."

There was a loud clanking sound from the side of the docking bay and the trio of rebels looked over to see the row of labour droids standing there moving towards them, the dock master standing aside to let them pass.

"This could be our way out." Mallia said, "The droids will unload crates and take them to the storage room over there. Everything should be automated."

"How does that help?" Krissa asked.

"Because those droids are dumb." Geran answered, "Remember the ones at the starport? They'll just move the crates and stack them where they're told without worrying about what's actually in them. Now someone

stand behind me so that the dock master doesn't see the blood on my uniform and let's go tell the others what to do."

The three returned to the cargo hold before the labour droids got there.

"Okay everyone," Mallia said, "there are loading droids on the way to remove all of the crates. You need to be in some of them."

"In the crates?" Jaysica asked, "Why?"

"So nobody sees your ugly face." Kara said as she released the clasps on the crate nearest to her. Before Jaysica could respond to the insult Mace interjected.

"Just do as she says Jaysica, get in one of the crates. The mud on your uniform will attract too much attention"

Frowning, Jaysica copied the other rebels by opening up the crate nearest to her and removing several of the power converters to make room for her. The she climbed inside and reached up for the lid. However, before she could close the lid herself, the first of the labour droids walked up the loading ramp and, ignoring the fact that it was open, grabbed hold of the ends of the crate and lifted it up.

Jaysica squealed as the lid dropped down uncontrolled and slammed shut.

"Are you okay sweetie?" Mallia said as the droid began to walk back down the ramp.

"I'm fine." A muffled cry called back from within the crate, "But my hair's stuck."

"Someone better go with the droid." Colonel Ergard suggested as he was climbing into a crate of his own, "Otherwise she'll likely end up at the bottom of a stack."

Mallia followed the droid while it carried the crate containing Jaysica through the docking bay and into a large storage room beside it.

"Set it down here." Mallia said to the droid and she pointed to a spot on the floor not part of the standard grid layout of crates that filled the room.

Without a word, the droid set down the crate and returned to the shuttle for another.

"We're out of the bay." Mallia said as she knelt down beside the crate, "You can get out now."

There was a thump from inside the crate.

"No I can't." Jaysica replied, "The lid's stuck."

"Hang on." Mallia said, "The latches closed when the lid slammed down." And she fumbled with the pair of latches holding the crate shut. One of them popped open instantly but the second one, the one with Jaysica's hair caught in it remain sealed. "Err sweetie," Mallia said softly, "can you pull your hair out?"

"What?" Jaysica replied.

"Well your hair is jamming the latch. Can you pull it away from the inside?"

"No. It's stuck."

Jaysica began to bang on the inside of the crate.

"Get me out!" she yelled.

"Shush!" Mallia hissed as she looked around to make sure that the dock master had not heard the banging.

"Get me out!" Jaysica yelled again.

"Be quiet!" Mallia snapped, "And that's an order." Then she sat on top of the crate as another droid entered the storage room with a crate and carried it to the location programmed into it.

Mallia watched as more crates were brought in by the droids and stacked neatly. When she saw a crate brought in with its latches open she got up off the crate she was sat on and followed the droid to where it set it down. As soon as the droid turned around Mallia spoke.

"You're clear." She said and the crate opened to reveal Tharun. The mercenary rolled from the crate before picking himself up.

"I've had smoother rides." He said.

"Never mind that," Mallia said, "here's someone else." And she pointed to a droid carrying another unlatched crate towards them.

Tharun slammed down the lid of the crate he had just exited in time for the droid to put the new one on top of it.

"Careful." Tharun said as the crate opened and Tobis looked out from inside, "You're not on the ground." And he held out a hand to help the engineer down.

Mace was the next to be carried in and his crate was also placed on top of another and necessitated his being helped down to the floor. Kara's crate however was placed on the floor and the woman sprang from it as soon as the all clear was given.

"You know," Mace said as she got out, "I always pictured you springing from a cake instead of a crate."

"Dream on." Kara said and Mallia elbowed him in his side.

"Ouch!" he exclaimed, rubbing his side in mock distress.

"Serves you right." Kara commented as another droid entered the room followed by Geran and Krissa.

"I take it that colonel's in this one then." Tharun said to them as the droid set it down on top of the one Kara had been carried in.

"Yes I am." Colonel Ergard replied as he opened up the lid, "Now help me out of this thing."

"We should be safe enough in here for a while." Geran said, "There aren't any security cameras and there's not much need for any living base personnel to come in."

"That doesn't get us any closer to the major though." Tharun said, "Its not much good if we set off an alert as soon as we stick our heads out of the door."

"Any suggestions lieutenant?" Colonel Ergard said to Geran.

The slicer grinned and pulled his portable computer from the bag over his shoulder.

"I knew you'd ask." He said as he activated the machine, "Fortunately my program has given me near total access to the base systems. Especially now we're inside the perimeter and I can log onto their wireless network. Oh wait, that's funny."

"I don't get it." Tharun said.

"No not funny ha ha, funny odd." Geran said, "The Imperials are scrubbing their network."

"Have they found your virus? Mace asked.

"No, I don't think so." Geran said as he looked at his computer, "If they had they'd be targeting the sections where my program is lodged. As it is they're conducting a full scale scrubbing. Eventually they'll get to my program and clear it out, but that's not what they're specifically trying to do."

"Then what are they doing?" Krissa asked.

"Someone else has tried to get in here. The network I mean. It looks like they almost made it too, but the firewall kept them out. The Imperials must be just making sure they weren't compromised. Whoever it was is good, but not as good as me." Geran replied.

"So who then?" Mace asked.

"Never mind that now." Colonel Ergard interrupted, "We need to get out of here and we need to do it without raising the alarm."

"There's an access to the ventilation system right over there." Geran said, pointing across the room,

"Hopefully there won't be any crates stacked across it."

"The ventilation system," Mace said, "how original."

"Right then," Colonel Ergard said, "let's go and – wait hang on a minute. We're short someone. Where's Jaysica?"

"Oh my god! I forgot." Mallia exclaimed.

2.

The compact shuttlecraft came in to land on the rooftop pad and Major General Hantz waited for its engines to shut down before he approached it. The vessel was an unexpected flight, but it had a priority clearance code so had been allowed to land. The general was curious to find out who was aboard, especially since his base was already host to the most senior member of Imperial Intelligence in the sector.

He stood up straight as a single hooded figure left the craft and walked right up to him and held out a datapad. The general took the device and looked at it.

"Of course." He said, "My men are at your disposal and your presence here will remain confidential."

"I told you." The doctor said to Gayal while he leant over Vorn, "He drifts in and out of consciousness. His lucid periods are increasing in length, but I don't recommend moving him yet. It could kill him."

"The Empire's prize must not be damaged." Gayal replied, "Do what you can to speed up his recovery, but I must leave here within two days and he's coming with me." Then she left the room.

Jaysica hammered on the inside of the crate.

"Get me out of here!" she yelled.

"Say 'Please'." Kara replied.

"Please!" Jaysica yelled and she hammered on the crate some more.

"Can we leave her in there?" Kara said, "It would probably be safer for all of us having her safely locked away."

"She may have a point there colonel." Tharun added.

"Be quiet the lot of you." Colonel Ergard said, "I'm starting to wonder how Vorn lasted so long with you all."

Tobis knelt down by the jammed latch and examined it closely.

"Damsel in distress lad." Tharun said to him, "Could be your big chance."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Tobis muttered, then he looked at Colonel Ergard, "Its well and truly jammed sir." He said, "We need to open the crate to get Jaysica's hair out of the latch, but we can't get it open with her hair in there. If I had my tools I could just pop out the hinges. But-

"I know," colonel Ergard interrupted, "we're travelling light."

"Can't we blast the carte open?" Krissa asked, "Shoot the hinges off?"

"Do you know what the thermal flash could do to a person inside a crate like that when a blaster hits it?" Tharun said to her.

"Something bad?" Krissa replied.

"Let's find out." Kara said and she drew her sidearm and smiled.

"I heard that." Jaysica said.

Looking down at the crate, Kara stuck out her tongue.

"And stop whatever you're doing now too." Jaysica added from inside the crate.

"Busted." Mace said with a smile, "We can't stay here." he added, "We're too close to the docking bay door. Someone could come past and see us."

"Captain Grayle's right." Colonel Ergard said, "We need to get moving."

"You can't leave me like this." Jaysica protested.

"You've got that map?" Colonel Ergard said to Geran.

"Right here." He replied, holding up his computer.

"Then lead the way lieutenant." The colonel said, "Everyone else grab hold of the crate and lift."

They carried the crate as far as the grill that covered the ventilation shaft.

"Well that puts a stop to this plan." Mace said, "We'll never get the crate in there."

"Does this mean we can leave her behind?" Kara asked.

"No!" Colonel Ergard and Jaysica replied in unison. Then the colonel added, "Put her down a moment while we think about this."

The rebels set the crate down and looked back and forth from it to the grill. It was obvious that Mace's statement was correct – the crate containing Jaysica was far too large to fit through.

"We need something to smash the break off." Mace said, "And without killing Jaysica in the process."

"What about you knives?" Krissa suggested and she pointed at the blades several of the other rebels had hanging from their belts.

"Too short." Tharun replied, "We need something longer to get leverage."

"What about that?" Geran said and he pointed to the wall.

"That should do nicely." Tharun said, "Well spotted sir."

"Hey," Jaysica said, "what are you doing now?"

No one answered and Jaysica called out again.

"Come on guys, you can't just leave me in here."

Then there was a sudden crunch and a thick metal axe blade burst through the top of the crate. Jaysica screamed.

"Sorry little lady." Tharun said, "I think I've got the feel of this thing now."

There was another crash and the crate lurched slightly, after which there was the high-pitched sound of something metal falling to the floor.

"There you are," Tharun said as the rebels standing around the crate watched the end of the hinge rod fall away, "got it."

Jaysica began to hammer on the lid once more.

"Get me out!" she yelled.

"Hold still." Tobis said as he knelt down and he pulled the bar that ran the whole length of the hinge away and separated the lid from the body of the crate. Then he placed one hand either side of the lid and lifted it upwards.

"Ow!" Jaysica called out as her hair was pulled upwards at the same time as the lid, "Be careful Tobis."

"I'm sorry." He said, his face going red and he looked away from her as she climbed out of the crate.

"Now that we're finished," Colonel Ergard said, "let's get going. Lieutenant Pay you've got the map so you've got the lead."

"Sure thing colonel." The slicer replied. He transferred the schematic of the installation from his computer to his much smaller datapad. Then he crouched down and crawled into the vent.

"So where are we heading?" Geran asked as the rebels crawled along the vent shaft.

"Anywhere we can get uniforms." Colonel Ergard said, "We can't spend all day in this vent and we don't want to stand out."

"There's a locker room down the side shaft about ten metres ahead." Geran said and he pointed down the shaft.

"A locker room is good." Mace commented, "No cameras."

"But it's a women's locker room." Geran said, "So more than half of us still won't have uniforms."

"So the ladies get uniforms and the rest of us can stay in the vent and keep watch." Tharun suggested. Then he let out a brief yelp as one of the female rebels lashed out at him from behind.

"Some uniforms are better than none that fit." Colonel Ergard said, "The rest of us will just have to find disguises elsewhere."

Jaysica peered out of the vent shaft to ensure that the locker room was empty before delivering a good hard kick that sent it flying.

"Okay let's go." She said and she slid out of the gap she had opened up. Then she cried out as she landed awkwardly and rolled across the floor.

"Stop being such a baby." Kara said as she followed Jaysica out of the vent.

"For a medic you aren't very caring." Jaysica said, picking her self up.

"Maybe not," Kara said, "but at least I've found us some disguises. These are perfect."

Jaysica now joined by Krissa and Mallia wandered over to see what Kara had found.

"I think you're right." Mallia said, "These are just what we need to get into a medical facility."

In front of Kara was a metal rod fixed to the wall at each end. On it freshly cleaned uniforms from the laundry were hung, still covered in plastic to protect them. Kara had removed one of several that were brilliant white rather than the sombre greenish-grey that most of them were. These were the uniforms of nurses.

"This one's just my size too." She said. Then she added, "Jaysica, how about you put your talent's to use and pick the locks of some of these lockers so I can get some boots to go with it?"

While Jaysica searched for suitable footwear for Kara, she and the others changed into the nurses' uniforms. Then when all four were fully disguised they headed back to the open vent shaft.

"Nurses?" Geran said.

"It makes sense." Mace said, "We're trying to get into the medical ward after." And he reached out to help Mallia back into the vent.

After Mallia Krissa climbed back up.

"Okay you next." Kara said to Jaysica, "Then I'll put the cover back on."

"But how will you get back into the vent?" Jaysica asked her.

"I won't I'm going to find the medical section and check on the boss."

"Not on your own you're not." Jaysica said, "I know you, you'll say nasty things about me."

"Oh like what?"

"That I got stuck in a crate."

"I wouldn't."

"Yes you would."

"What's going on out there?" Colonel Ergard demanded.

"One of us has to stay down here to replace the vent cover," Kara said, "and Jaysica's stalling on getting back in so I can do it."

"I think I should stay down here." Jaysica said, "Kara just wants to stay here so she can be the one to go and find the major. I'm the infiltration expert, so I should do it."

"I'm the medic." Kara responded, "I'm the best qualified to check on the boss's condition."

"You're both bloody annoying." Colonel Ergard said, "Now its clear that both of you ought to reconnoitre the facility, locate Major Larcus and assess his condition." Then he looked at Geran and passed him his own datapad, "Copy that map onto this datapad and give it to them."

Geran copied the map and then handed it down from the vent. Before Kara could let go of the vent cover, Jaysica reached up and took it. Then she smiled at the scowling Kara.

"You're both armed right?" Colonel Ergard asked.

"Yes sir," Jaysica replied, "Kara's got her pistol and I've got my hold out blaster."

"Well keep them out of sight." The colonel said, "Now get that vent cover back on and go. Report in when you find the major."

Kara held up the vent cover and pressed it back into place. The she turned towards Jaysica.

"Now let's get one thing clear," she said, "I'm in charge here."

"Says who?"

"Me. I've got more command experience. I was an officer."

"You were court-martialled for hitting Captain Tarl."

"Its still better than anything that may qualify you."

"Okay then," Jaysica said with a smile, "lead the way ma'am."

Smiling Kara strode towards the door and opened it. She looked each way down the corridor and picked a direction before walking down it.

"Oh nurse Bilstran." Jaysica called out as she walked in the other direction with the datapad and its map held up, "Its this way. Follow me."

Back in the vent Colonel Ergard looked at Mace.

"Why do I have such a bad feeling about what I've just done?" he asked.

"Because you're getting to know those two." Mace replied.

"I'm sure they'll be fine." Krissa said, "They're both experienced field agents aren't they?"

"That's because you don't know them so well." Tharun said.

"Where are we heading now anyway?" Krissa asked.

"Well we still need disguises for the rest of us," Geran said, "and since the women's locker room got us some for you ladies I figured that the men's locker room will do the same for us."

"So how far is it?" Tharun asked him.

"Oh not far, just across the corridor in fact." Geran answered, "The problem is that the vent doesn't run there directly. So instead we have to carry on down here, turn left, carry on to the next junction and double back until we hit the vent access."

"Then lets stop talking and get crawling." Colonel Ergard said and the rebels continued on their way.

3.

In the docking bay an Imperial technician approached one of the droids now inspecting the cargo shuttle. The droids were more complicated than the simple automated labourers that had removed the spare parts carried inside the vessel, but they still required a certain degree of oversight to make sure they were functioning properly. Going from droid to droid the technician watched each one in turn as it went through a test routine designed to verify that the shuttle was in full working order. As he turned away from one droid something caught his eye inside the shuttle.

Just visible from where he stood in the docking bay was what looked like a power converter on the floor of the cargo hold.

"What the hell?" the technician said to himself and he walked up the loading ramp for a closer look. Sure enough there was a power converter lying at the top of it and when the technician picked it up he saw that it was brand new.

"What the hell?" he said to himself again. He knew that the shuttle had just delivered a shipment of power converters, but they should have all been boxed so that the droids could unload them. Looking around the interior of the shuttle he saw several more of the devices scattered about. All of them shiny and new. Then he heard something from the rear of the ship. A muffled thump like something banging on a bulkhead.

"Hey!" he called down the ramp, "I think something's wrong here!" and he ran back out of the shuttle as quickly as he could.

"If this is nothing but a mynock then my supervisor is going to be really annoyed." The guard sergeant said to the dock master as he approached the shuttle.

"It can't be a mynock." The dock master replied, "My man heard a noise on the inside of the ship. Mynocks attach themselves to the outside of the hull to feed off the ship's power system. Besides, how could mynocks have gotten to the ship? It's flight here was entirely atmospheric. Mynocks live in space."

"Well whatever it is, we'll deal with it." The sergeant replied and he drew his blaster before signalling for the rest of his men to follow him.

The security unit approached the ship calmly. As far as they were concerned it was a false alarm caused by an overly jumpy docking bay crew. They had been this way since a light freighter penetrated the base's defences and rebel agents stormed out and abducted a dock master.

"I'll take the lead." The sergeant said, knowing that it made him look good even though there was no danger at all and he strode up the ramp.

At the top of the ramp he saw the mess that the dock master had reported, equipment was strewn about the hold when it should have been packed in crates for unloading.

"Hello?" he called out, "If anyone's here you better show yourselves now." Then he turned towards his men and with a smile he added, "If you don't there'll be trouble."

"Nice one sarge." One of the guards said. Then he saw the sergeant's face fall.

"Did you hear that?" the sergeant asked and he raised his weapon and looked around the hold again,

"Sounded like something banging."

The sergeant crept into the hold properly and turned around, sweeping his blaster across the hold as he went. Then he heard the sound again. This time it was obvious that it was coming from the back of the ship.

"Follow me lads." He said, "Blasters ready."

Followed by his men the sergeant made his way towards the back of the hold where there was a door that lead to the engineering section of the shuttle. Nervously he reached out his hand towards the door control and activated it. The he leapt backwards as the bound and gagged flight crew came rolling out.

"What's the matter?" Mace asked when Geran stopped crawling suddenly.

"Shush!" the slicer hissed back. Then he whispered, "Listen."

The rebels all remained motionless and listened. Ahead of them they could hear the sound of voices.

"Okay then," Colonel Ergard said quietly, "everyone keep quiet while we move past them to the locker room."

"We can't." Geran replied, "They're in the locker room."

"Let me see." Mallia said and she began to crawl forwards.

"How come she gets to look?" Tharun whispered, "We couldn't look at the women's locker room."

"Will you lot keep quiet?" Colonel Ergard said. "Lieutenant, what do you recommend?"

Geran turned on the spot and sat with his back resting against the wall of the vent as he studied the base schematic on his datapad.

"I can't find anything on this level." He said.

"What about other levels then?" Mace asked.

"I'm checking." Geran said.
"Check faster." Tharun suggested.

Gayal Tharr glared at the two shuttle crew as a medic inspected them. Each man had a blanket wrapped around him after having his uniform stolen by rebel infiltrators.

"Tell me what happened." She said.

"They overpowered us." One of the men replied, "There were three of them and they had a stunner."

"Yes we know there were three." Gayal said, "A man and two women."

"No ma'am." The other crewman said, "All three that attacked us were men. Two of them looked military." "Imperial?"

"No, they took our uniforms. I guess they must have taken the other one from our commander. We haven't seen him since he left the shuttle at the spaceport to check on the droids."

Gayal turned to the guard sergeant.

"Contact base security," she said, "Tell them we're looking for at least five intruders. And tell them that three of the intruders are disguised as shuttle crew."

Major General Hantz knocked on the door and entered the small office where his mysterious guest was waiting.

"We've just heard from the docking bay." He said, "They're here."

"Hmm. Armoury." Geran said.

"We need disguises, not guns." Mallia responded.

"Guns would still be good." Tharun said, "Ours aren't exactly the most powerful around."

"How about both?" Geran asked.

"Go on." Colonel Ergard said.

"There's a stormtrooper contingent assigned to the base," Geran said, "and they have an armoury all to themselves."

"Won't it be guarded?" Krissa asked, "It's an armoury after all."

"They'll rely on a blast door." Geran told her, "Even if there is a guard, they'll be outside."

"There'll be no vent." Tobis said suddenly.

"What was that?" Colonel Ergard said.

"I said there won't be a vent into an armoury." Tobis repeated, "A secure room like that will have an isolated air conditioning system to stop anyone doing what we want to do and get into it without going through the secure blast door."

The other rebels looked back towards Geran.

"The quiet one's right." The slicer said, "I can't find a ventilation access we can use on this schematic."

"So how do we get in then?" Mace asked.

"What about just picking the lock on the door?" Mallia suggested.

"It'll be alarmed." Tobis replied, "Even a legitimate opening of the door will alert the central security control room."

"Got it!" Geran said suddenly. Then he pulled his portable computer from his bag and opened up the schematic on its larger screen so that all of the other rebels could see what he was talking about. "Here." He said, pointing at a mazelike shaded pattern that was overlaid on the map of one of the base levels, "This is the ventilation system we're using to move about in and this," he moved his finger to one of the rooms on the map, "is the stormtrooper armoury."

"It looks like the vent runs right through the place." Mallia said.

"Almost," Geran said, "the vent runs above the armoury, but as Tobis pointed out there is an isolated air conditioning system between the vent and the armoury that prevents us from getting in there. But the Imperials have made some modifications to the structure of this base so that they could install their new communications array."

"What array?" Krissa asked.

"It's what brought us here the first time," Mace said, "we wanted to see if we could tap into it and listen in."

"How does that affect us now?" Colonel Ergard asked.

"Because they've been putting new ducting in all over the place." Geran said, "One of these ducts runs right alongside the vent as it passes over the armoury. Now typically the ceiling would be reinforced, but the Empire's techs haven't got around to reinforcing it where they've just installed the new duct. All we need to do is break into the new duct from the vent and then we can break into the armoury."

Jaysica and Kara walked confidently through the corridors of the Imperial base, acting as if they had every right to be there. Most of the Imperial personnel who they encountered paid them no attention and those that

did were only doing do so because a pair of attractive young women were walked past them. Periodically Jaysica would glance at the datapad to check directions to the medical unit.

"How far?" Kara asked quietly.

"The primary medical unit is just ahead." Jaysica replied, "There's a secure ward connecting to that."

Kara nodded and she continued to follow Jaysica until they reached a large set of doors. Jaysica pressed the control button and they slid apart instantly with a hiss. Just as Jaysica had expected they found themselves looking into the base's medical unit. Both of the rebels took a good look around as they entered. Military bases such as this were equipped with medical treatment facilities suitable for treating large numbers of combat casualties at once. So in the absence of any major fighting or natural disasters in the area most of the beds were empty. A handful were occupied by military personnel suffering from the effects of injuries or illness unrelated to battle.

"Nurse, bring me a shot of bycollatine." A man called out.

"What?" Jaysica said and she saw a man standing beside one of the occupied beds staring straight at her.

"I said bycollatine." The doctor repeated, "Are you deaf? Bring me some."

"I, err..." Jaysica stammered. She had no medical training beyond basic first aid and had no idea what the doctor was talking about.

"Where the hell did you learn nursing?" the doctor snapped, "I want bycollatine and I want it now."

"Here it is doctor." Kara said as she took a vial from a nearby shelf and walked over to the doctor and gave it to him.

"Thank you." He said as he snatched the vial from her grasp and loaded into an injector, "At least one of you seems to know what you're doing."

"Oh her?" Kara said and added, "Don't get me started." before she returned to stand beside Jaysica. "Just tell me where we need to go now," she whispered, "and try not to get us caught."

Jaysica looked at her datapad again.

"Its through there." She said and she pointed towards a door at the side of the main ward. Calmly they both walked towards the door and opened it.

Beyond the door was not another hospital ward, but instead a tiny room that contained only a security station and a guard. He looked up at Jaysica and Kara for a moment, but on seeing their uniforms he looked down again without saying anything to them. The pair of rebels walked across the tiny room to the door opposite to the one they had entered through, opened it and stepped through.

The secure medical ward was similar in appearance to the main one that they had left but there were two slight differences. The first was its size; this ward was much smaller than the main one. While that could have easily held several dozen patients at once this one had only eight beds in it. More significantly each of these beds was fitted with restraints to prevent patients from escaping. Patients such as Vorn Larcus III who was in the only occupied bed.

"Boss!" Kara exclaimed as soon as she heard Jaysica closing the door behind her and she ran to where Vorn lay.

"How is he?" Jaysica asked as she followed behind Kara.

"Unconscious." Kara replied, picking up the datapad hooked onto the end of the bed and looking at Vorn's medical reports.

"I can see that miss medical marvel." Jaysica said, "But how do we wake him up?"

"It says here that he keeps on waking up and then passing out again." Kara said as she flicked through the pages of data held in the datapad.

"But how do we make him wake up now?" Jaysica asked.

"Well he's a nobleman right?" Kara asked and Jaysica nodded, "So perhaps a kiss from a beautiful princess will wake the sleeping prince." And she leant over Vorn.

"Hang on," Jaysica interrupted, putting her hand on Kara's shoulder, "how come you get to kiss him?"

"Because I said 'beautiful', not short and stumpy with a nose I could land a starfighter on."

Jaysica gasped, opening her eyes and mouth wide and placing her hands on her nose.

"I'm not 'stumpy' and my nose is not that big!" she hissed, "I had it fixed when I broke it in high school."

"I knew it!" Kara exclaimed, "I said so the first time I saw you. Just ask Mace. I said there was no way that was natural. How much of the rest of you is plastic?"

Vorn let out a groan and the two women stopped bickering long enough to stare at him.

"Is he waking up?" Jaysica asked.

Kara picked up a small light and shone it into Vorn's eyes one after the other.

"I don't think so." She said, "I think it was just a subliminal reaction to us arguing. Now help me get these restraints off him."

Jaysica and Kara each reached for one of Vorn's bound limbs.

"This is no good." Jaysica said, "They're locked. We need a key."

"Can't you pick them?" Kara asked.

"Perhaps. Given time. But if anyone came in it would be obvious what I was doing."

"Then go find the others." Kara told her, "I'll try and get him ready to move. If I find a way of getting him out of here before you get back I'll head back to the shuttle."

"Okay." Jaysica said. Then she lifted up her finger and pointed it at Kara, "But no kissing him while I'm gone."

"No kissing. I promise."

Still pointing at Kara, Jaysica returned to the door and left the secure ward. After the door slid shut again

Kara leant over Vorn and kissed him on the lips.

"That can be our secret boss." She said softly.

4.

"We'll need to increase patrols." Gayal told Captain Larman, "We know that three of them are disguised as shuttle crew so make sure that your men know to stop anyone wearing that sort of uniform and check their clearance. Anyone who can't be cleared should be taken straight to detention."

"Of course ma'am." Captain Larman answered her. He had of course already done all of that but he saw the benefit of letting the woman from Imperial Intelligence think that she was running things.

"And where are my men?" Gayal asked. She had brought a squad of Imperial Intelligence's own armed security unit along with her as guards both for herself and their prisoner. Now she wanted troops she could count on, "I want to make sure that the prisoner is secure."

"They're outside in the corridor." Captain Larman answered, "And I'll accompany you too." He added, "To make sure that you get all the assistance you require."

"If you must." Gayal said.

The fire fighting axe that Tharun had brought along with him featured a sharp point behind the blade and it was this that he used as a lever to prize a panel away from the inside wall of the vent.

"There we go." He said as he removed the axe and bent back the thin metal sheet to open up a gap large enough to see through.

Sure enough just outside and below the ventilation duct was another metal duct made of the same material.

"We need a hole in that." Geran told Tharun, "One big enough to climb through."

Tharun nodded and clambered out of the vent into the void between the floors of the base and down onto the top of the other duct. Then he repeated the procedure of prising the edge of a panel up until he could get his hands into the gap and bend it back far enough.

"Its full of wires." He said, looking back up at the other rebels in the vent.

"Yes I know." Geran said, "Don't break any of them, just try and hold them to one side and then smash down into the armoury."

Tharun sighed and sat at the edge of the hole. Then he used the handle of the axe to push the clusters of cables up against one side of the duct before bringing his foot down sharply on the bottom of it.

There was a loud 'clang' and Tharun's boot put a large dent in the panel but did not dislodge it.

"Make the next one louder." Mallia said, "I don't think the Emperor heard that one on Coruscant."

"Do you want to try this captain?" Tharun said as he looked up and gave another kick at the same time. This time, instead of the 'clang' there was a clatter as the panel gave way and dropped down into the armoury below. Swiftly, Tharun unslung his blaster rifle and pointed it down through the hole in the armoury ceiling just in case anyone appeared below him to investigate.

"Here goes." He then said and he leapt down through the hole.

Landing on his feet, Tharun immediately looked around the room for any signs that he was not alone and as he looked his rifle was held at the ready. All Tharun could see from his position towards one side of the armoury was row after row of lockers and racks of weaponry. Beyond this he could see a heavy blast door at the far end of the room and he was relieved to see that it was sealed.

"All clear." He said. He did not whisper, but he kept his voice below a shout just in case the sound carried through the blast door however unlikely that was. Then he stood up and moved away from the hole before the other rebels began to drop through.

Tharun's attention was immediately drawn towards a rack of long barrelled blaster rifles mounted on a nearby wall. He slung his own shorter rifle over his shoulder and took one of the larger weapons. It was one of the heavier blaster rifles occasionally issued to stormtroopers in place of the short-barrelled weapons similar to Tharun's own that could be wielded one-handed if necessary. He lifted the weapon to his shoulder and looked down the sights.

"It suits you." Mace said as he dropped through the hole the former mercenary had made in the ceiling.

"There's enough for us all." Tharun replied, "Which could be useful."

"We need armour." Colonel Ergard said, "Otherwise we'll be stuck crawling about in air vents all day."

"Here sir." Tobis called out as he opened up a locker to reveal the eighteen individual pieces of plastic that made up a full suit of stormtrooper armour on shelves and a one size fits all black bodyglove hanging beside them.

Kara carefully checked the datapad that detailed the treatments given to Vorn. The last thing she wanted to do was give him something that would react with another medication and kill him. Once she was satisfied that his body would tolerate it she gave him a stimulant injection.

"Boss can you hear me?" she said to him, placing her head near his ear so she did not have to raise her voice, "Please wake up." she added, "I need you to wake up for me."

Vorn did not respond, instead remaining still and unconscious on the bed. Kara did not want to risk another injection yet so instead she looked around to see what else was in the room. Something shiny caught her eye and Kara saw that an emergency surgical kit was laid out on a wheeled tray in a corner. Kara smiled as she realised she had a way to release Vorn. She took a scalpel from the tray and returned to Vorn's bed. She leant over him and held the scalpel against one of the restraints on his wrists. "What are you doing?" a woman called out from behind Kara. As she looked around Kara slipped the small blade beneath the mattress of the bed.

"I was just checking on the patient." Kara said to the woman in the black uniform. The rank badge indicated that she was someone very important, as did the squad of guards from Intelligence's internal security division pointing their weapons at her.

"The hell you are." The woman snapped back, "Step away from him."

Kara raised her hands into the air and took a step away from the bed on which Vorn lay. Stepping out from behind the guards the doctor that Kara had encountered earlier walked up to Vorn and checked him. "He's still alive." He said to Gayal, "Whatever she was doing she hasn't harmed him."

"Stupid." The woman said to Kara, "You should have killed him. That way I wouldn't have been able to interrogate him."

"He won't tell you anything. I know he won't." Kara replied.

"You know him then?" Gayal asked.

"Yes." Kara answered.

"Then you've made things easier for me." Gayal said, "Now get out of that uniform." Kara remained motionless and Gayal turned towards the troops behind her, "She shouldn't be in that uniform. If she doesn't remove it herself, remove it for her."

"Don't worry. I'll do it." Kara said and she removed the nurse's uniform. She saw one of the troops behind the woman staring at her as she stood there in her underwear. Unlike the others he was in an army officer's uniform, "In your dreams." She said.

"Doctor," Gayal then said, "would you mind securing this spy to the bed beside her friend?"

Kara did not wait to be specifically ordered to lie down, instead getting onto the bed beside Vorn's and lying out straight.

"Now young lady," Gayal said to Kara as the doctor strapped down her wrists and ankles, "when your friend wakes up you can explain to him how I'm going to torture you in front of him until he tells me what I want to know. Then the pair of you can discuss how damaged you want to be before he talks."

Gayal turned to leave, accompanied by her guards and the doctor.

"Wait." Kara called out and Gayal turned to face her once more, "Push me closer to him." She added, "I want to hold his hand."

Gayal looked at one of her guards.

"Do it." She said, "Let them have their moment while she's still pretty to look at."

After leaving the medical ward Jaysica noticed that there seemed to be a lot of activity from the base security forces, including some of the stormtrooper contingent. At first she thought they were stopping people at random and checking identification. This was a worrying prospect since she had no forged identity to go with her stolen nurse's uniform. But then she spotted that they were only stopped people wearing the uniforms of flight crew. At first Jaysica was relieved since it made it unlikely that she would be stopped, but then she realised that it must mean that the two men the rebels had left in the back of the shuttle had been discovered.

Jaysica found herself a secluded spot and took out her comlink and activated it.

"It's me." She whispered.

"What's your status?" Colonel Ergard answered, following her example by keeping his voice low.

"Kara's with the major." She answered him, "She's sent me to meet up with you. Where are you?"

"An armoury on level four. Can you reach us?"

"I think so. There are troops everywhere, but they're picking on flight crew. I think our prisoners have been found."

"That's unfortunate." The colonel replied, "It means that docking bay will be locked down tight. We'll have to figure out another way out of here."

"What do you want me to do now?" Jaysica asked.

"Keep heading for us." Colonel Ergard told her, "We'll meet you here on level four." Then he looked at Geran,

"Where should she meet us?" he asked.

Geran checked his map of the base.

"There's a corridor along the western side of the base," he said, "none of the rooms there are in use so it should be nice and quiet."

"Did you get that?" Colonel Ergard asked.

"I got it. Level four, west corridor."

"Good. See you soon." Colonel Ergard said and he shut off his comlink.

Jaysica tucked her own comlink in her tunic and after looking each way down the corridor she headed for the turbolifts.

In the armoury the five male rebels had all put on stormtrooper armour taken from the lockers. All they lacked to complete their disguises were the helmets that were laid out in a row. Using a toolkit brought by Geran, Tobis was making adjustments to the built in comlinks.

"What are you doing?" Colonel Ergard asked him.

"I've got him fixing the comlink frequencies." Geran said before Tobis could answer, "I want us to be able to communicate without the base's real stormtroopers listening in."

"But wouldn't it be an advantage to be able to hear what they're saying to each other?" Krissa asked.

"Full marks to the navigator." Geran said, "For that you get this." And he handed the young woman a comlink to which an earpiece had been connected.

"What's this?" she asked as she took the device from him.

"It's one of the reserve comlinks from a stormtrooper utility belt." Geran said, "While Tobis has been modifying the helmets to keep our communications secret, I've modified this to jump frequencies in tune with the stormtrooper networks so we can listen in. The earpiece lets you keep it active at all times without everyone hearing. Just be careful to keep the wire hidden underneath your hair."

"I've got us our guns." Tharun said and he handed Tobis and Geran a pair of heavy rifles.

"That's a lot of blasters." Mallia said when she looked at the remaining weapons laid out in a row on a bench.

"One standard rifle for each of us disguised as a stormtrooper." Tharun said, "To be carried holstered. Then there are four heavy rifles for us to carry, one fitted with an underslung grenade launcher and finally a light repeating blaster for that extra little bit of firepower without risking bringing the roof down on us."

"What about those?" Tobis asked, pointing at several backpacks and a large duffel bag beside the bench.

"I've filled the backpacks with as many spare powerpacks and grenades as I think we can carry." Tharun said, "But since we're crawling through ducts I've avoided the thermal detonators I found back there just in case they go off."

"And the bag?" Mace asked.

"Its an extra set of armour and another rifle." Tharun said, "I figured we want a disguise for the major as well."

"Then it looks like we're set." Colonel Ergard said, "Everyone grab your gear and get back into the vent. Then we'll find somewhere nice and quiet to drop out and hook up with your Jayscia."

Aside from Tharun, the male rebels donned their helmets.

"I can't see a thing in this." Geran said as he adjusted his. Then he noticed that Tharun was smiling.

"What?" Geran asked.

"Oh its nothing." Tharun said, "Its just that with everyone here dressed either as stormtroopers or nurses it reminds me of a movie I saw once."

"I think I've seen that one." Mace said, "Of course the nurse's uniforms were a little tighter and the stormtroopers' armour had an unusual shape to it."

"That's the one." Tharun said.

"Mace darling," Mallia said, "I am never watching it with you." And she slapped his helmet faceplate playfully.

"Will you at least keep the nurse's uniform?" Mace asked her.

"No."

"Enough of this larking around." Colonel Ergard said, "We've still got a job to do, now let's get going. I'll take the grenade launcher."

The rebels began to pick up the equipment laid out before them. However, Tobis instead wandered over to Tharun.

"Where are the thermal detonators you mentioned?" he asked, "I've got an idea."

5.

"Boss. Boss, please wake up." Kara asked as she tugged at Vorn's hand.

Vorn's eyes flickered for a moment and then opened.

"On thank god." Kara said. Then she added, "How are you feeling boss?"

"Are you in your underwear?" he asked.

"Do you like it?"

"Its very nice yes, but I need to know that I'm not hallucinating."

"You're not." Kara said, "Some bitch took back the uniform I stole fair and square from the locker room."

"I think I spoke with her." Vorn said.

"Yeah well she's planning on using me to force you to answer her questions. We have to get you out of here."

"How long have I been here?" Vorn asked as he looked around the ward properly for the first time.

"About six weeks boss." Kara answered.

"Six weeks." Vorn repeated. Then he looked Kara dead in the eyes, "Please tell me you haven't left Jaysica tied up all this time."

"Of course not." Kara protested, "What sort of people do you take us for?"

"Ones that are always complaining about Jaysica's little accidents." Vorn answered.

"Well we didn't leave her tied up long at all." Kara said and then she added, "And Colonel Ergard made us let her out of the crate."

"You shut her in a crate?"

"She got in the thing all by herself and it was Captain Mayan's idea anyway."

"Mallia's here? How many people are in on this rescue?"

"Well there's Captain Mayan and one of her people, plus Colonel Ergard and that slicer guy Pay."

"And how is it going?"

Kara lifted her wrists and tugged at the restraints."

"Same as usual." She said.

"That bad hey? I suppose the others know where we are and will come looking for us, yes?"

"Actually boss," Kara replied, letting go of his hand, "I'm hoping I can avoid having to wait for Jaysica for me to get untied. The last time that happened I was stuck to a ladder for hours with her prattling on."

Slipping her hand between the two hospital beds, Kara felt for the handle of the scalpel she had concealed. She smiled when she found it and pulled out the tiny bladed tool.

"Hold still boss." Kara said, looking towards Vorn.

Taking care not to accidentally jab the blade into Vorn, Kara reached out with the scalpel. Holding it by the very tip of the handle she was just about able to drag the point of the blade across the restraint wrapped around one of his wrists. She repeated this several times, each stroke cutting deeper into the padded material.

"That's it!" Kara exclaimed suddenly as she saw the restraint split open and Vorn snatched his hand away.

"Give me the blade." He said and he took the scalpel from Kara before using it to slice through the remaining restraints.

Kara wriggled on her bed.

"Great boss." She said to Vorn as he carefully got to his feet, "Now untie me. You know, unless you want take advantage while I'm all tied up and helpless like this."

"Kara," Vorn replied, looking her straight in the eyes, "the way I feel right now I really don't have the strength. Even with you strapped down."

"Okay." Kara said, "Rain check." And she smiled at him.

Steadying himself on his bed, Vorn made his way towards Kara. Still coming to terms with moving again he accidentally dropped the scalpel.

"Hang on a moment." He said as he bent down to pick it up.

"Whoa boss!" Kara called out as she averted her head, "That gown doesn't fasten all the way at the back."

Vorn stood up straight again and reached around to pull the sides of his gown together.

"I thought there was a draft." He said, "Now hold still while I do this."

Vorn sliced through the restraints holding Kara down. Then he gave her his hand to help her up. She took it and he winced at the extra stress on his wounds.

"Are you okay?" Kara asked him.

"I'm fine." He replied, "But since you're in your underwear and I've got my ass hanging out of the back of this thing, I think we'll be a bit conspicuous making our escape."

"So what do we do then?"

"We wait for the others to get here. Until then we hide."

Jaysica stepped from the turbolift to see a squad of stormtroopers conducting spot checks on identities further down the corridor. At first it did not bother her and she headed straight for them. However, she ground to a halt when she saw that these troops were not just stopping flight crew, they were stopping everyone. The corridor was too crowded for her to be able to contact the other rebels, so that only left her with the option of looking for another way around them. She took a glance at her datapad before tucking it back in her tunic and turning around.

"Oh I'm sorry." She said as she bumped into a man coming the other way before walking around him.

Watching her leave, the man just shook his head. Then he noticed the datapad lying on the floor.

"Hey!" he called out after her, "You forgot this." And he picked up the device. As he did so he saw the map on it that highlighted key areas of the base. "Hey you!" he called out, "Stop right there!"

Jaysica broke into a run as the stormtroopers saw what was happening, abandoned their checkpoint and began to chase after her.

"Yes." Gayal said when she answered her comlink.

"Security here, we have one of them. A woman on level four, stormtroopers are in pursuit now. They say she's disguised as a nurse."

"Keep me informed." Gayal replied and she put the comlink away before looking at Captain Larman, "The other one disguised as a nurse." She said, "I want to head back to the medical unit again and see how that woman we caught reacts when she realises we've found her friend."

The guard to the secure ward snapped to attention when Gayal and her personal guards reappeared.

"Has anyone else been here since we left?" she asked.

"No ma'am." The guard answered.

Gayal did not reply, instead she just opened the door to the secure ward and looked inside. Straight away she saw that the prisoners were gone, the restraints had been cut. Unable to believe this at first, Gayal ran towards the nearest bed.

"No!" she yelled as she looked one of the damaged restraints. Her anger clear on her face she turned around and stared at the guard, "How do you explain this?" she demanded.

"I... I don't know." He replied, well aware of the trouble he was in.

"They can't have got far." Gayal said, "Get out there and find them, all of you."

Her personal troops, accompanied by the guard and Captain Larman turned and left to join the search for the intruders and left Gayal alone with her anger. After the door shut she turned around again and slammed a fist down on the bed in front of her where she had left Kara secured less than an hour earlier.

A sound caught her attention and Gayal span around to face it. Ahead of her she saw a second doorway beside the exit. She had ignored this door when she had been in the room earlier and had not looked in its direction when she returned here until now. She reached for her comlink but then stopped, deciding that there was no point in calling back her troops if it turned out to be a false alarm. Instead she drew her compact blaster and advanced cautiously on the door. With her free hand she then reached out to open it. As soon as the door slid open Kara's fist came hurtling towards Gayal. The Intelligence agent dodged the attack and brought her blaster up.

"Hold it right there!" she shouted at Kara as the rebel stepped from the supply room. But with her attention focused on Kara she failed to spot Vorn as he picked up a box of bacta geltabs and hurled it at her. The box struck Gayal's hand and the blaster flew from it. Seeing her opportunity, Kara lunged and knocked Gayal to the floor.

As the two women wrestled Vorn stepped out of the storeroom and scooped up Gayal's blaster. Then he pointed it at Gayal's head.

"That's enough Kara." He said. Kara looked around and when she saw Vorn holding the weapon she let go of Gayal and got up. Meanwhile Gayal lay on the floor and held her hands above her head.

"Get up." Vorn told her sternly.

Slowly Gayal got to her feet, taking care not to provoke Vorn into shooting her with her own gun. She was well aware that it did not have a stun setting. Once she was standing up again Gayal looked at the two rebels and raised her hands.

"Now what?" she said, "You'll never get away dressed like that."

"We've already discussed that." Vorn replied, "But at least we have one uniform."

"We do?" Kara said.

"Yes." Vorn said, "Hers."

Frustrated at having the tables turned on her by her prisoners, Gayal nevertheless removed her uniform rather than risking being shot. Then she watched as Kara put it on herself.

"What do we do about her now boss?" Kara asked, "We can't take her with us."

"We'll leave her here." Vorn said, "We can strap her to one of the other beds."

"Payback. I like it." Kara said then she turned to Gayal and added, "Okay bitch, get on the bed."

"You're kidding." Gayal said.

"I'm in pain and I'm pointing a blaster at you." Vorn said, "I suggest you do what my friend tells you."

"See," Kara said, "he likes me. He never says that about Jaysica."

"Not now Kara."

"Sorry boss."

Gayal climbed onto one of the undamaged bed and lay still as Kara secured her.

"As soon as we leave she's going to scream for help boss." Kara said when she was done.

"I know." Vorn replied, "See what you can find to do something about that will you?"

Kara disappeared back into the storeroom for a moment before emerging with a small box in her hand.

"These should do." She said and she pulled several small packages from it. She tore open one of the packages to reveal a small self-adhesive square of plastic. She pulled the backing off and stuck it over Gayal's mouth. She repeated this twice more so that the patches completely sealed Gayal's mouth.

"Okay boss, all done." She said.

"Let's get out of here then." Vorn said as he handed the blaster to Kara, "You better lead the way." Then as they headed towards the door he added, "Will those plasters hold for long?"

"They're not plasters boss."

"What are they then?"

"Oh they deliver medicines directly through the skin."

Vorn took hold of Kara's arm.

"What sort of medicines Kara? You used three of them. Could she overdose?"

"I doubt it boss." Kara answered him, "Laxatives don't work like that."

6.

Still pursued by the stormtrooper squad Jaysica ran around a corner, desperately trying to lose them. Ahead of her the corridor was deserted and she ran as quickly as she could. She knew she had to reach the junction at the far end before the stormtroopers rounded the corner or they would have a clear field of fire at her. She glanced over her shoulder as she approached the junction just in time to see the squad appear behind her and take aim. Turning around again she tried to increase her speed, but the appearance of another stormtrooper from around the junction corner of her made her grind to a sudden halt right in front of him.

"Get down!" the stormtrooper yelled at her and he fired a warning blast from his heavy rifle before he levelled it towards her.

Jaysica froze as more heavily armed stormtroopers appears and pointed their weapons towards her.

"Jaysica, I said get down!" the stormtrooper yelled and he stepped forwards and pushed her to the floor.

Immediately the stormtroopers standing over Jaysica opened fire, their weapons set on fully automatic. From where she lay, Jaysica could feel the heat of the high-energy blaster shots as they passed almost two metres over her head towards the troops that had been pursuing.

Jaysica curled up in a ball as the shooting continued. She looked up only when she felt a hand on her shoulder and she looked up to see Krissa crouching down beside her.

"Are you okay?" Krissa asked.

Jaysica nodded and Krissa pulled her around the corner out of the field of fire entirely. There both Krissa and Mallia helped her back to her feet just as the shooting stopped.

"The next time I tell you to get down," Colonel Ergard said to her as he pulled off his helmet, you get down. Understood?"

"Yes sir." Jaysica replied, "I'm sorry I just didn't recognise you dressed like that."

"That's the idea little lady." Tharun said as he swapped the powerpack in his weapon for a full one. Though his repeating blaster was powerful, it got through ammunition at a much higher rate than the rifles the other men carried.

"How did you find me?" Jaysica asked.

Krissa pulled back her hair to reveal the earpiece of the comlink that Geran had given her.

"Those stormtroopers were relaying their position to their superiors." She said, "So we just let them guide us to you."

"I guess your cover's blown now though." Jaysica said, looking at the rebels in stormtrooper armour, "The security cameras will have picked up what you just did."

"Not necessarily." Colonel Ergard said and he pointed down the corridor to where its surveillance camera had been, "I took it out with that first shot." he added, "But we need to get moving anyway. The base commanders are going to notice that those troops have gone missing before long."

Kara looked out into the main medical ward. The attention of all of the staff was elsewhere and she stepped through the doorway of the guard post and moved carefully across the room, doing her best to avoid attracting attention. She knew that the people in here would likely recognise that she was not the woman from Imperial Intelligence. But if they only saw her from the corner of their eyes and she kept her face out of view they may not notice anything was wrong.

She was looking for something for Vorn to wear and unfortunately the medical ward was not the sort of place that kept large amounts of clothing on hand. The best she could see were robes hung on the walls beside beds for patients able to get up. But still, she thought, it was better than nothing and she grabbed the nearest one before heading back to the secure side ward.

The main medical unit doors slid open with a hiss and Kara glanced around to see what was happening. At first she was concerned when she saw stormtroopers entering the ward, but she breathed a sigh of relief when she saw that the other women she had come here with all accompanied them. A quick count of the stormtroopers told her that her male companions had found effective disguises and she continued walking into the secure ward.

Captain Larman watched as the corpses of the stormtroopers were lifted onto stretchers for removal to the base morgue.

"Sir," he said into his comlink, "I believe that the rebels are heavily armed and present a clear and present danger to the base. Additionally I can't raise Ms Tharr on her comlink. I would like you authorise the issuing of heavier weaponry to our own troops."

There was a brief pause during which the comlink picked up only faint whispers as General Hantz discussed the matter with some third party.

"Very well," he responded eventually, "I'll authorise the issuing of heavier weapons. In the mean time try and locate that Intelligence woman."

The blast door that sealed the stormtrooper armoury rumbled open. The noise was sufficient that it completely masked the faint whine as the thermal detonator Tobis had jammed up against it was primed by the movement of the door against its safety switch.

Before the door was fully open, the first of the stormtroopers stepped through the widening gap and ran towards the nearest rack of heavy blaster rifles. It was his companion behind him that saw the spherical explosive rolling across the floor.

"Gren-" he began to yell, but the explosion of the device cut him short.

The lights flickered for a moment as a dull rumbling sound spread across the base. This was followed almost immediately by an alarm.

"Okay everyone," a doctor called out, "that's the fire alarm. Check our patients are stable and be ready to evacuate them." Then he turned towards the disguised rebels, "I take you're here to check on the prisoners." He said, "Well they're yours now, but I don't have any more personnel to spare so you better make do with the nurses you've got." And then he scurried to a computer terminal at the far end of the ward.

"You heard him." Mallia said, "We can take them."

"Where are they?" Colonel Ergard asked.

"This way." Jaysica replied and she led them to the secure ward.

Inside the secure medical ward they found Vorn just tying the belt cord of the robe Kara had brought for him.

"Were you planning on bringing down the entire base?" Vorn asked when they appeared.

"Major." Mace said as he removed his helmet, "Its good to see you alive."

"Its good to be alive." Vorn replied, "Now does your plan extend to getting us out of here."

Krissa set down the large bag she had been carrying.

"We brought you a disguise sir." She said and she removed a stormtrooper's helmet from the bag.

"I don't know who you are young lady," Vorn said, "but I'm grateful."

"Kara," Jaysica said, staring at her fellow rebel, "why are you dressed like that?"

"That's a good point," Geran said, "you were a nurse the last time I saw you."

"I got promoted." She replied, "By her." And she stepped aside to reveal Gayal Tharr strapped to the bed behind her and Vorn.

"Do you know who that is?" Geran said in amazement, "She's in charge of Imperial Intelligence for the entire sector." Then he looked at Colonel Ergard, "We have to take her with us." He added.

"No can do." The Colonel replied, "This is a rescue mission. We can't handle a prisoner, she'll slow us down and we need to keep moving."

"That being the case," Vorn said, "could I have a moment to get into this uniform? Tharun could you give me a hand?"

"We'll be right outside major." Colonel Ergard said.

By the time Tharun and Vorn appeared the ward was empty aside from the other rebels, the medical staff having evacuated along with their patients.

"How do I look?" Vorn asked.

"Great boss." Kara said, "But you're limping a little too much for a stormtrooper."

"Do you think you can make it to the docking bay?" Mace asked.

"I'll make it." Vorn replied, nodding, "Now let's get out of here."

Captain Larman and the men accompanying him had to force their way through people fleeing in panic as they moved towards the medical unit. The stormtroopers assigned to the base were sufficiently well disciplined to be continuing with their search for the rebel intruders even with the fire alarm sounding, but most of the other personnel were not.

As his group finally approached the doors to the medical unit he caught sight of Gayal Tharr from behind. She was in the company of some nurses and a squad of stormtroopers.

"Ms Tharr!" he shouted out, "Ms Tharr!" The general needs to speak with you!" and he ran towards her.

Suddenly he halted. The woman in the intelligence uniform had not turned around when he called out her name and now he noticed that the hair tucked beneath her cap was too dark.

"Hey!" he called out, "Who are you?"

"We were so close." Kara muttered.

"Now!" Colonel Ergard yelled and aside from Vorn, the men disguised as stormtroopers all whirled around and fired their weapons.

The hail of blaster fire would have been devastating to troops prepared to take fire, but the unsuspecting Intelligence security troops had no chance to even take aim to return fire before they were cut down. Caught out in the open between the two groups, Captain Larman was dead before he even hit the floor. "No way the cameras missed that." Colonel Ergard said, "Give the ladies some guns and let's move."

"I understand." General Hantz said into his comlink, "I'm on my way to join you now." Then he shut it off and looked at Vay. "We've found them," he said, "disguised as stormtroopers leaving the medical unit and heading towards the docking bay they arrived in. I'm guessing the prisoner is with them. I'm going to bring our anti-air defences on line just in case they make it before we can stop them. Will you be alright here by yourself?"

"Don't worry general." Vay replied calmly, "I can take care of myself."

The general just smiled and left the room. Vay gave him a few minutes and then followed him.

"Get back!" Tharun exclaimed as he rounded the corner leading to the docking bay before suddenly stepping back again.

"Guards?" Mace asked and Tharun nodded.

"Three that I can see." He said.

"We need to find another way out then." Jaysica said.

"No time." Krissa said, "There are more troops on they way, I can still hear their comms."

"Then we need to rush them." Tharun said, "Take out these three and be ready to shoot anyone else that appears."

"Can you run?" Mace said looking at Vorn.

Vorn shook his head.

"I don't think so." he replied, gasping for breath, "Whatever Kara gave me seems to be wearing off."

"I'll help you major." Jaysica said and she wrapped an arm around his waist.

"I'll help too." Kara added, "He's just got out of a hospital, we don't want you putting him back in another."

"Colonel," Tharun said, "may I suggest that this may be a good time to use your grenade launcher?"

"I think you may be right." The colonel replied and he placed the butt of his rifle on the floor so that the under slung grenade launcher was easily accessible. The powerful weapon had a capacity of two rounds and Colonel Ergard loaded a pair of concussion grenades into it before closing it up again.

"Locked and loaded." He said. Then, standing at the corner he swung round it and pointed his rifle towards the doorway of the docking bay. The weapon kicked as he fired one of the grenades in the under slung launcher before ducking back behind the corner.

"And three. Two. One!" he said before there was a dull 'thump' as the explosive detonated.

"Run!" Now!" Mace yelled and he set off down the corridor ahead of the others. Ahead of him he could see the bodies of the three stormtroopers caught in the grenade explosion. Two of them were clearly dead, while the third was twitching. A blaster shot from behind Mace slammed into the injured stormtrooper and he too lay still.

Then another stormtrooper appeared in the doorway and Mace squeezed the trigger of his rifle and held it back. The stream of energy bolts slammed first into the wall, then the doorframe and finally the stormtrooper himself, causing him to fall also.

The next stormtrooper to appear came out shooting, his rifle set to fire short, limited bursts. But he had not enough time to aim his weapon properly and the burst went wide before a volley of returned fire from the rebels killed him.

Mace made it to the doorway just as the third stormtrooper appeared and he swung his rifle so that the butt came up underneath the man's jaw. There was a 'crunch' as it made contact above his chest plate but under his helmet.

Mace dived as the stormtrooper fell and he was just in time to avoid being shot by the remaining pair standing at the base of the shuttle's loading ramp.

"Two more!" he shouted, "Base of the ramp!"

"Got them!" Colonel Ergard replied and in a duplicate of his earlier manoeuvre he aimed as he looked around the doorframe and fired the grenade towards the shuttle. There was another 'thump' and then nothing but the sound of the base alarm.

"That's it!" Mace shouted, "Everyone get on board."

The rebels all ran for the shuttle, except for Jaysica and Kara who helped Vorn as he struggled to keep moving. Mallia headed straight for the cockpit only to find Mace already in the pilot's seat preparing for lift off.

"Not this time honey." He said, "Its my turn to drive. But get Krissa up here, we'll need jump co-ordinates calculating pretty darn quick when we lift off."

"Everyone's aboard." Krissa said when she rushed into the cockpit after Mallia.

“Good. Now take a seat and calculate the numbers for a jump.” Mace said, then he glanced up out of the cockpit canopy to see stormtroopers rushing into the docking bay, an unarmoured man in a general’s uniform amongst them. “Hang on!” he yelled and he pulled back on the control column.

Several of the stormtroopers fired their rifles at the shuttle as General Hantz watched it lift off into the sky and unfold its wings.

“Hold your fire!” he shouted, knowing that the shots would have little if any effect. Then he pulled out his comlink. “Rebels escaping in stolen shuttle.” He said, “Bring it down.”

“The major’s passed out. Kara says its nothing to worry about though.” Tharun said as he appeared in the cockpit doorway, “How are things going in here?”

“I think we’ve –” Mace began before an alarm sounded.

“What’s that?” Tharun asked.

“The Empire.” Mace said, “They’ve got a missile lock!”

The gunner smiled as he saw the targeting system indicate that it had acquired the fleeing shuttlecraft and he reached for the launch button.

“Wait.” A woman’s voice said from behind him, “Let them go.”

“What?” the gunner asked, not understanding what was being asked of him.

Vay Udra stared coldly into the man’s eyes.

“Your targeting system went dead.” She said, “It was a computer malfunction and I was never here.” Then she turned around and left the room.

The gunner shrugged and turned back to his panel before activating his communicator.

“Hello maintenance,” he said, “my targeting system just went dead. Looks like a computer malfunction.”

A flight of alliance Y-wing fighters kept the shuttle in their sights as it approached the docking bay of the ancient space station that served as the rebellion’s headquarters in the sector, peeling off as its slowed down and landed. Inside the cockpit, Mace looked out to where his own ship was parked.

“Looks like the droids brought her back safe.” He said. Then he saw a tall, dark skinned man approaching in the company of a squad of marines, “Uh oh.” He added, “I think the general is going to want to know where we’ve all been for the past three days.”

General Syres Kain was waiting at the bottom of the ramp when the rebels came down it.

“Err, hello general.” Mace said, “I can explain everything.”

“Have you heard?” Director Helieos asked Garm Larcus.

“No. What’s happened?” he asked.

“Your father escaped.”

“Escaped? How?”

“Well I don’t know the precise details just yet, but it seems that he slipped right out from under Gayal’s nose. Moff Horatian will be furious, especially since she refused to take your young lady friend with her as he ordered.”