

STAR WARS

DARKNESS RISING

5-07: FAR & AWAY

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



STAR WARS

DARKNESS RISING

5-07: FAR & AWAY

Abducted by Neela Vortress, Tylo must find a way to escape and alert the Udras to her location...

Darkness Rising is available from:
<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.htm>

Copyright notice:
Star Wars is the intellectual property of Lucasfilm Ltd. This story is completely unofficial and Lucasfilm has not endorsed or approved of any part of it.

1.

Looking around the compartment Tylo Kurrast was being held in aboard the light freighter being used by the fallen jedi knight Neela Vortress Tylo could see no obvious ways to escape. Neela had left him in the ship's lounge with one wrist bound to a bunk in a crew cabin with the same set of binders that had been used to tie him to a chair while he was being beaten by a pair of thugs Neela had killed before snatching him away to her ship. Tylo had encountered Neela more than once before but her behaviour this time was disconcerting. She had acted as if she expected to be greeted with affection despite their previous adversarial relationship and Tylo could not understand this change of attitude. However, despite her words she had taken him as her own captive instead of releasing him and Tylo waited nervously to find out what she intended to do with him. He did not have to wait long before the door to the cabin opened and Neela entered with a medical kit and sat down on the bunk beside him.

"Well we're in hyperspace. Now let's take a look at you." she said, smiling at Tylo as she opened the medical kit and took out a bottle of anti-septic fluid that she then began to dab on the cuts to his face.

"Hey look Neela, how about you skip to the part where you tell me your evil scheme?" Tylo said and Neela leant back, frowning at him.

"Tylo how could you say that to me given our connection? You and I are going to do great things together. As soon as I've proven to the jedi council that I'm right about the Udras anyway." she said.

Jayk and Brae Udra were a father and daughter jedi team that Tylo transported around the galaxy in his own light freighter, the YT-700 class Swift Exit. Neela had suspected that they had been seduced by the Dark Side and set out to prove this, however her actions had instead led to the death of her padawan and she suffered a breakdown that in turn led to her own fall to the Dark Side. Since then she had continued to pursue her vendetta against the Udras and had even tricked Tylo into helping her by using her abilities with the Force to affect his mind.

"Yeah, about that. You know you've got them all wrong. They're good people." Tylo replied.

"They've clouded your mind. You'll soon see the truth." Neela said as she dabbed at another cut and Tylo winced, "I'm sorry. Did I hurt you?" Neela added.

"I could do this myself if I wasn't tied to this bed. You have a habit of doing this to me." Tylo said.

"Well I suppose it's not like you can run away from me in hyperspace." Neela said and she produced the key to the binders and unlocked him from the bunk.

"Thanks." Tylo said, rubbing his wrist where it had been bound.

"I'm going to meditate. There is food in the galley if you're hungry. I'll see you later on. Oh but just in case I'll be sealing the cockpit and engineering. I can't let you have free reign of the ship just yet." Neela told him and then she kissed him on the cheek before getting up and leaving him alone in the cabin.

As he had suggested Tylo began by using the medical kit Neela had left with him to treat the injuries he had suffered at the hands of the thugs. Thankfully these were all surface wounds, the thugs being more concerned with inflicting pain than killing him quickly. Once he had finished cleaning his wounds he swallowed a pair of the pain killing tablets from the kit and stuffed the rest into his pocket before he resolved to find a means of escape.

The door to the cabin was not locked and Tylo peered out into the corridor outside, finding it empty. This corridor seemed to run the length of the ship and he walked towards what he took to be the front, passing through an area where the corridor suddenly widened out into a lounge. There was a closed door on the opposite side of this and Tylo guessed that this was the cockpit. Although Neela had told him that she intended to seal the compartment from which the ship was controlled Tylo still tried the door and found that it was indeed locked. He suspected that given enough time he would be able to override the lock but he was not certain that he could do this before Neela discovered him and so he decided to look for an alternative means of escape.

With the cockpit sealed Tylo guessed that Neela would also have sealed the engineering compartment to prevent him from sabotaging the engines and so he saw no point in trying. Instead he paused to think. It was possible that somewhere aboard there might be a locker holding some sort of tool that he could use as a weapon but then he considered the chance that he would be able to successfully challenge Neela in combat on his own even if he was fully healthy.

It was then that he noticed a pair of hatches on either side of the lounge area. Unlike the lightweight doors used for other internal doorways these used heavier hatches of the kind used on the air locks located further back along the length of the ship. Tylo did not recall having seen any external doors on this part of the ship when he saw it from the outside and this gave him an idea. A hatch like that would only be used if the other side could be exposed to a vacuum and that meant a potential way off the ship. Moving to the nearest hatch

Tylo opened it and smiled when he that on the other side was an escape pod, just as he had expected. Obviously this was concealed behind a blow off panel from the outside which was why he had not seen it earlier.

He quickly looked along the main corridor again to make sure that Neela was still in her cabin and then he quickly entered the escape pod, sat down and strapped himself in. Ejecting from a vessel in hyperspace was possible but normally regarded as a last resort, an uncontrolled exit from hyperspace could leave an escape adrift in interstellar space or in extreme cases rip it apart. Because of the significant risk of this Tylo began by checking the systems fitted to the escape pod, confirming that it was equipped with a subspace transmitter. This meant that no matter how far from an inhabited system Tylo found himself he would be able to send a call for help. Of course first he had to get off the freighter and that meant activating the pod.

As soon as Tylo reached out and engaged the pod's launch system the hatch slid shut behind him and sealed itself. At the same time an alarm began to sound not only in the pod but also within the freighter itself and Tylo knew that this meant Neela would now know what he was doing. If he gave Neela the time to reach the escape pod Tylo knew that she would be able to break in easily and so before she could do that he reached out for the launch control and pulled the lever towards him.

There was a dull 'boom' sound as the exterior hull plating that covered the escape pod was blown clear and Tylo knew that this would now be tumbling randomly out of hyperspace. This was followed barely a second later by another booming sound and despite the inertial dampening system built into the escape pod Tylo still felt himself being pushed into the padding of his seat as it too detached from the freighter.

As soon as the escape pod separated from the freighter it passed through the energy field wrapped around the vessel by its hyperdrive that allowed it to remain in hyperspace. With no such field around it escape pod was buffeted violently as it was hurled back into realspace and the interior of the pod was filled with more alarms as multiple system monitors tried to make sense of the measurements they were taking during the transition. Tylo himself was oblivious to these alarms, the swirling lights caused by the tearing of hyperspace around the escape pod and the shaking of the escape pod overwhelming his senses before all of a sudden he was thrust forwards against his safety harness as the escape pod completed its transition to real space. Opening his eyes Tylo looked around the interior of the pod to see for himself that it was still intact and when he saw no signs of damage he smiled.

"Okay now let's see where we are." he said to himself and he turned to the console in front of him.

Before he could check the navigation system though he heard and felt the escape pod's ion drive engage as its onboard computer laid in a course automatically. This was a significant happening and Tylo turned to the sensor readouts. Since escape pods were intended to deliver their occupants to a place of safety they were fitted with an autopilot system that would respond to the presence of a transponder signal. This could come from another ship, a space station or settlement and as soon as one was detected the computer would lock onto it and set a course towards it. This told Tylo that it was highly likely that the escape pod had returned to realspace within the confines of a solar system, itself a one in a thousand chance and also that there was a Republic presence there of some kind even if it was only a prospecting ship. Checking the sensors Tylo was able to read the transponder that the escape pod's computer had locked onto and from its format he saw that it came from a Republic surface beacon, most likely from a colony or outpost of some sort. Regardless of the exact nature it still meant that Tylo would be able to wait in more comfortable surroundings than a cramped escape pod for a rescue ship to arrive from Coruscant. He might even be able to book passage on a ship from this world. All he had to do was wait for the escape pod to get him there.

Neela screamed with anger when she realised that Tylo was gone.

"No!" she yelled.

Ejecting from the ship while still in hyperspace was something that she considered far too risky to attempt and because of this she had discounted the possibility that Tylo would attempt it either. Now she had to try and track where he had got to though and she rushed to the door to the cockpit, quickly entering the security code to unseal the door before going inside and sitting down in the pilot's seat. Interrupting a ship's travel through hyperspace was just as dangerous as ejecting but it was now the only way Neela could hope to catch Tylo. Even in the short time since he had ejected the freighter would have travelled several light years and with each passing second that distance increased by billions of kilometres. Strapping herself into the pilot's seat Neela made sure that the freighter's inertial dampening system was turned up to maximum and then activated the hyperdrive's emergency shutdown.

The freighter tumbled forwards as it was hurled out of hyperspace just as the escape pod had been shortly before but the superior inertial dampening meant that Neela was subject to much less turbulence than Tylo had been when his escape pod returned to realspace. This did not mean that the transition was smooth though and Neela paused to collect herself before she looked at the console to find out where she was. According to the freighter's instruments she had dropped out of hyperspace in interstellar space, more than a parsec from the nearest star system and there was no sign of Tylo's escape pod. Neela had more than just

the freighter's sensors at her disposal for hunting for Tylo though, she also had her command of the Force and she took a deep breath and closed her eyes as she reached out with her thoughts to try and locate him. "Tylo Kurrast you are far too important to let slip through my fingers now." she said softly.

2.

As the escape pod flew Tylo towards the colony he studied its sensors to try and learn as much about the planet as he could. As far as he could tell the surface transponder was the only active Republic beacon in the system, suggesting that the planet was not heavily travelled. Since he had been captured by Neela on the core planet of Commenor this suggested that her ship had been travelling outwards towards the rim when he had ejected and depending on the ship's speed he could be anywhere from The Colonies to the Mid Rim by now.

The closer to the planet the escape pod got the more information about it Tylo could determine from its instruments and he saw that although it possessed a breathable atmosphere it was not a welcoming world. Most of the land was barren, with only small concentrations of vegetation around the shores of the small, shallow seas that were scattered across its surface and making up less than a fifth of the total surface area. Energy readings indicated multiple settlements, most of them built beside these seas but only limited signs of travel between them. The nature of the emissions as well as the presence of a Republic beacon made Tylo confident that he would at least be able to communicate his exact location to the Republic from here instead of relying on them to trace his signal to its source and he sat back and relaxed as the escape pod continued to fly towards the planet.

The escape pod's autopilot was only a basic model and it was not programmed to be able to undertake anything other than the most basic of flight. This included a lack of docking or landing routines and the only way that it could make planet fall was using a series of limited repulsorlift bursts to slow its descent through the gravity well. This meant that the exact point at which it would land was subject to a high degree of uncertainty, and attempting to land at a starport or close to a settlement could easily lead to deadly consequences. Therefore, the pod's autopilot simply aimed for an uninhabited area as it began its entry into the atmosphere. The escape pod shook once again as it descended and Tylo gripped the arms of his seat while he watched the ground get closer through the forward viewport. Although the initial descent was steep the escape pod levelled out at the last moment before it ploughed into the ground and then came to a complete stop. It was then that Tylo realised he had been holding his breath and he exhaled in relief at having made it to the ground in one piece. However, his relief was short lived as he looked at the console and saw several red lights glowing on the status readouts, one of these indicating that the escape pod's communication system was completely off line. This meant that he could not send a signal to Coruscant for help or even to a nearby settlement for someone to come and pick him up. Thankfully he knew that the planet itself was likely to have the communication capability he sought, all he needed to do was make it as far as one of the settlements himself.

Like any escape pod, the one that had brought Tylo this remote planet contained emergency supplies to keep the occupants alive until rescue could arrive. This went beyond the basics of air, water and food and various tools were also included. Therefore, rather than simply wandering off into the wilderness Tylo first located these supplies and took stock of what he had at his disposal.

He quickly found a locker that held four pre-packed backpacks, obviously intended for any occupants of the pod to be able to remove in a hurry if they had to abandon the tiny craft after it landed. Taking one of these from the locker Tylo opened it up and began to remove the contents to examine them. Most of the equipment covered the basics of sustaining life in the form of a breath mask, sealed pouches of water, a canteen and also a packet of water purification tablets as well as enough ration bars to last a human being ten days. As he had hoped there were also a number of tools included in the backpack as well though and Tylo found a compact pocket multi tool, a knife in a rigid scabbard that enabled it to be turned into a set of cutters and also featured a saw blade, an axe, a foil blanket, rolls of tape, a reel of syntherope, a fire lighting block, compass, macrobinoculars, anti-glare goggles, two emergency medpacs and three signal flares. There was also a basic but rugged model of datapad that contained files explaining how to use all of the equipment properly as well as providing general survival advice. A quick check of the other backpacks revealed that the contents of each of them was identical. This was to be expected, varying the contents would present a lone occupant such as Tylo with the dilemma of what equipment should be abandoned. Given the lack of any urgency Tylo did stop to plunder some of the items from the other three backpacks though, drinking his fill of water and eating a rather tasteless ration bar to make the supplies he was taking with him last that little bit longer. Then he took as many of the other reels of syntherope and flares as would fit and crammed them into the backpack he was taking with him. In addition to these he also slung the macrobinoculars and goggles from another backpack around his neck so that he could keep those in the pack he was taking with him as spares. He checked the locker once more, looking behind the backpacks in the hope that this model of escape pod also came with a small game hunting blaster. However, in this he was disappointed, finding no weapons

other than the knives in the backpacks so leaving behind what he could not carry he opened the escape pod's hatch and stepped out onto the surface of the planet.

The escape pod had crash landed far from any of the coastal areas where he had seen signs of vegetation and Tylo lifted the macrobinoculars from around his neck to his eyes so that he could take a look around, searching for any signs of habitation. As far as Tylo could tell though his escape pod had come down in an area that was devoid of sentient life. There were no indications that anyone had ever been here, no structures or vehicles or even trash left behind by careless travellers. However, there were several areas of higher ground visible and when Tylo lowered his macrobinoculars he lifted the goggles to cover his eyes before he began to walk towards the closest of these, hoping that from the top he would be able to see over a greater area and hopefully that would include one of the planet's settlements.

Terrain almost totally devoid of life.

Scattered settlements that had a reasonable technology level but largely ignored by the rest of the galaxy.

A way to call for help.

Neela's eyes opened suddenly and she gasped as she saw a vision of Tylo through the Force and then she quickly called up the freighter's navigational database. This included a summary of environmental conditions on tens of thousands of worlds in the Republic and she began to search through this. First she limited the search to the planets in star systems between her current location and Commenor and after that she searched these according to the environmental conditions she had seen in her vision. Only a single world came back as matching what she had seen and Neela smiled when she saw this result.

"Oh Tylo, you can run but you cannot hide from me for long. I will always find you my love." she said before she began to calculate a hyperspace jump to the system.

Tylo was breathing heavily as he neared the top of the hill he was climbing. It turned out to be steeper than he had thought but the effort was worth it when he stood on the top and saw a change to the colour of the terrain on the horizon.

"Come on, come on." he said as he raised his goggles and then held his macrobinoculars to his eyes again and looked towards the horizon.

As he had hoped the discolouration came from the presence of vegetation around one of the small isolated bodies of surface water and at the heart of this was a settlement. From where Tylo stood this settlement appeared large enough to have a population in the tens of thousands although he saw no sign of a beacon tower meaning that it lacked a starport. This lack of interstellar transport did not worry Tylo though, as long as he was able to get a signal off planet from here then a rescue ship would be able to land in any part of the open ground around the area covered by vegetation.

It was then that Tylo spotted something else, something moving away from the settlement that looked to be heading in his direction and he focused the macrobinoculars on this. The object he had seen was moving quickly and it took Tylo several seconds to get a good look at it but as soon as he finished he was able to see what it was immediately.

"A transport. I'm saved." he said to himself, grinning as he lowered his macrobinoculars again and then he set off running down the hill towards the approaching speeder and waving his arms in the air over his head, "Hey! Over here!" he called out, despite being far too far away for his voice to be heard by the vehicle's occupants.

Tylo kept running towards the speeder as it continued on its way but it became apparent that the driver had seen him when it suddenly turned and began to head directly for him, prompting Tylo to stop and catch his breath. The speeder slowed down as it came nearer before it came to a complete stop just a few metres away and two men got out.

"Am I glad to see you." Tylo said.

"Did you come down in that pod?" the driver of the speeder asked and Tylo nodded.

"Yeah, how did you know I was out here?" he responded.

"We work at the refinery. We've got a radar system to watch for the tankers when they land to load cargo. Our controllers were tracking your escape pod from the moment it broke orbit and they ordered us to come out here and look for survivors. Are you alone?" the passenger explained and Tylo nodded again.

"Yeah, it was just me. The pods a few kilometres back there though if you want to make sure I've not killed and eaten everyone else." he told the two men and he pointed back over the hill he had just run down.

"Hell no that's not our job. If you're the only survivor then you're the only one that we care about." the driver said, "Now get in and we'll get you back into town."

"Thanks. You guys really are life savers, So will I be able to get a signal off world from there?" Tylo said as he climbed aboard the speeder with the two men.

"Can you pay?" the passenger asked and Tylo smiled nervously.

"Let's just say that I'll have to owe you shall we?" he said.

When Neela's ship dropped out of hyperspace she quickly isolated the planet that Tylo's escape pod had crash landed on. This was as close as she could get to determining his location, her vision had not revealed any specific landmarks that she could locate from space. On the other hand the freighter's sensors were able to detect the escape pod's point of impact from the energy its power plant was still generating after impact. Neela flew her ship down into the atmosphere and landed it just over a hundred metres from the escape pod before she disembarked and walked towards it. It did not take her long to realise that Tylo was not inside the pod, she could sense only a few primitive local life forms in the area, nothing that was sentient. She still checked inside the pod though since it was by no means certain that Tylo would have survived landing despite her vision.

She was therefore, relieved when she looked inside the escape pod and found no signs of a body. On the other hand she did see where Tylo had left the contents of an emergency pack spread out on the floor of the pod, proving that he had not only survived but was not injured. The control console was intact and from the readouts she could see that the escape pod's main communication system had not survived the impact. This meant that Tylo could not have sent a call for help, doing so before landing would have left him unable to give his exact position and would delay a rescue. Therefore, it was obvious that Tylo had taken supplies and then left the pod, most likely in search of civilisation. Unfortunately for Neela the terrain was rocky and Tylo had not left any tracks that she could follow when he left the escape pod. She knew that he would try to locate the nearest settlement though so that he could try to call for help and this gave her a slight advantage. Returning to her ship she took off again and ascended high enough to be able to search the surrounding area, using the advantage of height to see over the intervening terrain. This allowed her to quickly pick out the closest settlement to where the escape pod had crash landed. It was of course possible that without knowing exactly where this was Tylo would have walked in the opposite direction but at least it would provide her with a starting point for her search. It was also possible that the inhabitants would have detected the escape pod as it entered the atmosphere and would be able to give her more information about what may have happened to Tylo. Turning the freighter towards the settlement Neela headed there at top speed.

The sound of repulsorlift engines from overhead made Tylo and the other two men in the speeder look up as they drove through the wooded area that surrounded the settlement and they were just able to pick out the light freighter that flew above the treetops, heading towards the settlement.

"I thought you didn't get off a call for help." the passenger commented, glancing at Tylo.

"I didn't." Tylo answered, recognising the ship as the one Neela was currently using, "Will she be able to land in town?"

"Of course. There's the landing field for the tankers, remember?" the passenger responded. Then he frowned and added, "Wait, by 'she' do you mean the ship or do you know who that is?"

"I think so and I've got a very bad feeling about it." Tylo told him, "Look, is there any chance you guys could just drop me off at the edge of town until we know who was in that ship? I'll make it worth your while."

"Worth our while? But I thought you didn't have any credits. How are you going to pay us?" the driver pointed out.

"I don't have it on me but I'm good for it. Look, maybe I shouldn't be telling you this but I'm an agent for the Jedi Order." Tylo said and both men laughed.

"Are you insane? You're no jedi knight." the driver exclaimed.

"No, I never said I was. But I work with a jedi knight and his daughter, err padawan." Tylo said.

"Now I know you're lying. The jedi don't have kids. Everyone knows that." the passenger replied.

"Well the one I work with does." Tylo said but he realised that he was not getting through to either of the men and he decided that he was going to have to take drastic action. Looking over the side of the open topped speeder he saw that the vehicle was driving above what looked like relatively thick foliage and he quickly stood up out of his seat and rolled out of the vehicle.

The fall was barely more than a metre but the force of the impact was made greater by the speed at which the vehicle had been travelling. Fortunately the foliage broke Tylo's fall and he was able to quickly scabble towards a dense cluster of trees too close together for the speeder to be able to follow.

"Stang! He jumped!" the passenger exclaimed as both he and the driver looked over their shoulder. Then the driver looked forwards again just in time to see a tree in the path of the speeder and he swerved sharply to avoid it, "Well aren't you going to stop to look for him?" the passenger added.

"Why bother?" the driver asked, "We were told to find him and we found him. No-one said anything about forcing him to go back to the refinery. If that laser brain is so desperate not to go back then what business is it of ours?"

3.

The landing field at the refinery was nothing more than a large area of ferrocrete where tankers could land but it was more than Neela needed to set her freighter down. Her approach was tracked by the refinery and given her refusal to respond to signals from the ground she found a trio of beings walking across the landing field towards the freighter as she disembarked. Waiting at the bottom of the access ramp she studied these three being closely and it was easy to see from the armoured vests that two of them wore as well as the blaster pistols and batons they carried that these two beings were local security or law enforcement officers of some kind while the third was a human female who was much smaller than the two guards and from the formal appearance of her clothing she was obviously a manager of some kind from the refinery.

"You can't land that ship here." the woman called out to Neela and she smiled back at her.

"And you are?" she asked.

"Zara Rosk, chief executive officer of this facility and this landing area is reserved for official use only." the woman told her sternly and Neela studied her closely for a moment. The woman did not look to be much more than about thirty standard years old, young to be running a facility such as this but she had a strong presence in the Force for someone not sensitive to it that suggested she would be the sort to gain promotion rapidly.

"Neela Vortress. Jedi knight." Neela responded and the woman glared at her, looking her up and down as well.

Before her fall Neela had hunted down agents of the Dark Side in the highest of republic society and to help her blend in she had dispensed with the traditional jedi robes for clothing more suitable for such surroundings. After her fall she had continued to dress in the same manner and right now she wore high heeled shoes and a form fitting red dress that was split on one side from her ankle to near the top of her thigh.

Anger.

"Poodoo. You're no jedi knight. I've seen jedi and they don't look like you." Zara said.

"Have you seen one of these before?" Neela asked as she took her lightsaber from where it hung on the back of her belt and there was a 'snap-hiss' as she activated the blade. However, whereas many people would be convinced by this Zara was not and she just snorted.

"I've got a duros crystal sceptre in my office. That doesn't make me the Queen of Duro." she said and Neela smiled. Obviously it was going to take a display of the Force to convince this woman but she suspected that Zara's mind may be strong enough to resist manipulation, therefore it was going to take something different. Neela suddenly thrust her hand towards Zara as she let the Force flow through her and she lifted the other woman into the air without touching her.

The two guards drew their blasters when they saw this but Neela pulled Zara towards her, the woman's limbs flailing as she floated in mid air and she held her directly above the blade of her lightsaber so that if she fell then the blade would cut Zara in half at the waist.

"Are you really going to shoot me?" Neela said to the guards, "Because if you do then you'll be looking for a new executive officer."

Fear.

Panic.

"Do whatever she says!" Zara exclaimed and the guards exchanged glances nervously before they lowered their weapons.

"There now, that's much better." Neela said, shutting off her lightsaber and she looked at Zara as she gently lowered her back to the ground where she staggered for a moment as she recovered her balance, "Now I think you ought to tell me everything you know about that escape pod that you must have tracked on its way down from orbit."

Tylo made his way through the wooded terrain cautiously. Although the two men in the speeder sent to locate him had not bothered stopping when he unexpectedly leapt out of the vehicle he suspected that a search party would be leaving the settlement soon. Or at least he hoped so. He expected that Neela would take control of the refinery that seemed to be the heart of the settlement and use its resources to hunt him. That could mean dozens of armed beings hunting for him but Neela herself was likely to remain at the refinery itself to co-ordinate the search. This meant that Tylo would not need to worry about facing her directly and he was confident that he could evade a more mundane search, especially if he could make it out of the woods and into the settlement before they set out after him.

As soon as the settlement came into view between the trees Tylo halted and raised his macrobinoculars, studying the way that the trees gave way to buildings. The range finding function of the macrobinoculars told Tylo that the settlement was about five hundred metres in front of him and thankfully it did not appear to be fortified, lacking either a wall or fence around its perimeter. Not only did this mean that Tylo would most likely be able to easily slip into the settlement it also meant that the inhabitants were not worried about dangerous predators entering the settlement from the woods which meant that he did not need to worry about them either while he was still in the woods. Lowering the macrobinoculars Tylo continued on his way, still moving cautiously to avoid being spotted by anyone within the settlement.

As he got closer to the edge of the settlement he heard voices and he came to a sudden halt again, ducking and placing a hand on the knife that was his only weapon. Peering through the undergrowth he saw that there was a small group of half a dozen beings leaving the settlement from between two of the structures. They had parked an open topped speeder that looked like a larger version of the vehicle he had leapt from close to the perimeter and two of them were still in the process of unloading equipment while four others carried what had already been unloaded into the woods. As far as he could tell all six of the beings wore overalls similar to the two men in the speeder who had been sent to find him so Tylo guessed that they too came from the refinery he had been told about. However, none of them looked as if they were armed so Tylo did not believe that they were a search party sent to find him but if they saw him then they might still start asking questions about what he was doing here, especially if Neela started issuing orders to be on the look out for him so he thought it best to avoid them. It occurred to Tylo that their speeder could be of use to him though and so when the group had finished unloading it and were all heading into the woods Tylo slowly made his way towards it, continuously checking to see whether any of the six were looking in his direction. It took just a few minutes for Tylo to get to the parked vehicle and by that time the occupants had all disappeared into the trees although he could just about hear their voices in the distance. As was to be expected when he checked the speeder Tylo found that it had a security lock that prevented him from starting the engine. Tylo still smiled when he saw this though and he drew his knife, using the tip to pry open the plastic of the steering column inside which the security lock was located.

"Piece of advice guys," he muttered to himself, "try getting a speeder with a security system that isn't older than you are."

Tylo recognised the speeder's security system as a model that he was familiar with from his youth during the days he spent stealing such vehicles either to sell for their parts or sometimes just for fun. Swapping his knife for the survival kit's multi-tool Tylo quickly disabled the security lock out and then set to work on the ignition circuit and in under a minute the main thrust engines began to hum as they powered up.

"Like riding a swoop. You never forget how." Tylo commented but he did not drive off just yet, instead he quickly checked the other systems installed in the speeder to see whether it was fitted with a tracking device of any kind and he found one set into the comlink that the vehicle carried. Disabling this was a simple matter of cutting the power line to the comlink although it also meant losing the use of this. That was a sacrifice Tylo was willing to make though given that he was alone on the planet anyway and after rendering the tracking device inoperable he took hold of the speeder's controls and drove it into the settlement.

When the two men who had been sent to look for survivors from the escape pod returned to the refinery they were met by a security guard.

"What's going on?" the driver asked as he looked around at the staff rushing around.

"Did you find any survivors?" the guard responded and the driver nodded.

"Sure, some nerf herder who jumped over the side when we were almost back here." the second man told him, "You'll never believe this but he said he was working for the jedi."

"Now that's a coincidence." the guard commented, "We've got another visitor."

"From that freighter we saw on the way back?" the driver said and the guard nodded.

"Yes and it turns out she's a jedi, though she's not like any jedi I've ever heard of. She wants to see the pair of you as soon as possible and I really don't think it would be a good idea for you to keep her waiting."

The two men from the speeder then looked at one another.

"I think that guy we picked up was right." the driver commented, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

The guard showed the two men to the office occupied by Zara Rosk and even before they reached it they realised something not right. All of the other offices normally occupied by senior staff at the refinery in the same section of the building were now empty, many of them left wide open.

"Where did all the managers go?" one of the men asked.

"The jedi woman ordered them out. Said they could use their leadership skills to help organise the search for the fugitive." the guard told them before stopping outside a door that was labelled 'Zara Rosk, Chief Executive' and he pressed the intercom, "Mistress Vortress I have them." he said and the door slid open to let the men inside.

When they entered they found Neela now sat behind the chief executive's desk. But it was not the fallen jedi that immediately attracted their attention, instead it was their employer Zara Rosk herself and they both stared at her in surprise. Zara had been stripped to her underwear and now sat on a couch normally used by visitors to her office. Her legs were pressed tightly together and likewise her arms were pressed against her sides. Both men could also see that her cheeks bulged outwards slightly while her mouth was closed and she avoided making eye contact with the two men.

"Zara is a little embarrassed." Neela said from behind the desk, "You see she was complaining too much so I had to find a way of keeping her quiet and preventing her from interfering with my work here. Fortunately your facility produces some very effective chemical adhesives that work wonderfully on human skin. Now I take it that you two were sent to find out who landed in that escape pod. Would you like to explain why you have returned alone or has someone glued your mouths shut as well?"

"We found a man. He said he was alone and wanted to send a message off world." the driver said quickly, not wanting to risk having what had been done to Zara being done to him.

"And he said he worked for the Jedi Order." the second man added quickly.

Fear.

Neela waited for a few moments, sensing how afraid they were. She could not sense any deception from them though and it appeared to her that the example she had made of Zara was working.

"So where is he now?" she asked eventually.

"We don't now, honest. He saw your ship coming in to land and then he just jumped out of a moving speeder. He could be anywhere." the driver said.

"Then I suggest you get out of this office and join the search parties that are being assembled because underneath this pleasant exterior I am not as forgiving as your executive is." Neela said, glancing to where Zara sat immobile and helpless.

It did not take Tylo long to realise that getting a signal off world was not going to be easy. Driving around he saw a number of transmission antennas but the only one that looked like it was for a subspace transceiver was located on the roof of the refinery complex itself, all the others were ordinary electromagnetic communication systems limited to the speed of light and even if any of them were powerful enough to reach another system Tylo did not relish the idea of waiting several years for a rescue. Although the speeder Tylo had stolen obviously belonged to the refinery he doubted that it would get him through the gates unchallenged without a way to disguise himself first.

For a moment Tylo considered trying to use the speeder to get to another settlement in the hope that he would find the means to communicate with the Jedi Order from there but then he considered the likelihood of actually making it that far. The theft of the speeder would be noticed sooner or later and from the way it handled on the streets of the settlement Tylo knew that it did not have the speed to outrun pursuit by many of the other models of vehicle he noticed around him, let alone the freighter Neela had arrived in if she decided to come after him personally.

All of a sudden Tylo noticed a speeder bike in a narrow side street. The rider of this wore a uniform that marked him out as some sort of law enforcement officer and moments after Tylo drove past the speeder bike pulled out behind him, accompanied by flashing lights and the sound of a siren.

"Stang." Tylo cursed, knowing that the speeder had already been reported as stolen.

Even though he knew that he could not outrun the speeder bike Tylo was unwilling to simply give up. If he was arrested then it would only be a matter of time before he was back in Neela's hands and he pushed the speeder as hard as he could, the noise from its engine increasing. The speeder bike soon caught up with Tylo's stolen vehicle though and as he drew alongside the rider waved at Tylo.

"Pull over." he called out, his voice amplified by the helmet he wore.

Seeing a turning up ahead Tylo braked suddenly and the speeder bike shot on past him. Then while the patrol officer was turning his vehicle around Tylo turned his down the side street and drove down it. As he had hoped there were numerous other turnings and gaps between the buildings along this road and brought the speeder to a rapid halt before jumping out and rushing down one of them, an alleyway between a cantina and what seemed to be some sort of small manufacturing unit and Tylo ducked into a doorway of the latter, peering back towards the street he had left his speeder on as he saw the police speeder bike drive past before stopping.

In the street the police officer dismounted from the speeder bike and drew his sidearm as he looked around, searching for where Tylo had gone. With so many possibilities the police officer could not hope to search them all on his own and so instead he opted to stay by his bike and the stolen speeder while he contacted his headquarters to report what had happened and summon reinforcements. Meanwhile Tylo took advantage of this to quietly slip away, hurrying to the far end of the alleyway while repeatedly looking over his shoulder to make sure that he had not been seen by the police officer.

"Mistress Vortress." the refinery's chief of security said as he rushed into Zara's office.

"You have news. Good I hope." Neela replied.

"Yes ma'am." the chief of security said as he walked over to a large map fixed to one of the walls of the office, "One of our survey teams reported their speeder missing from here." he said, pointing to the point on the map where Tylo had stolen the speeder from, "This is just a few hundred metres from where the man identified as Tylo Kurrast leapt out of the speeder sent to find him. Now we've just had a call from the local police department. One of their patrols has found the speeder right here." he continued, pointing to a different spot on the map.

"And Tylo himself? Is there any sign of him?" Neela asked.

"No ma'am. It seems that he's abandoned the vehicle." the security chief answered.

"Then have them comb the area. I want him brought to me alive and unharmed." Neela ordered.

"There's a problem with that ma'am."

"I don't want to hear about problems. I want results." Neela said sternly, glaring at the security chief.

"Ma'am the local police department is very small. Barely a dozen officers and about that many droids for support. They're asking for our help." the security chief explained.

"Then provide it. Give them all the support we can. No wait." Neela said and she got up from behind the desk and walked towards the security chief, "I'm going myself. I don't trust anyone else not to either let him slip through their fingers as has already happened twice now or harm in the process of capturing him. What is the status of our communications?"

"Exactly as you requested. Planetary communications are being jammed to prevent the fugitive from contacting other settlements and the subspace system has been taken off line. It can only be brought back on line from the antenna array by entering the correct security code."

"Good. Tylo will try to contact his accomplices if he can and we can't let that happen. Now let's go, the longer we delay the harder Tylo will be to find." Neela said.

"What about Miss Rosk?" the chief of security said, looking at the couch where Zara still sat with her arms, legs and mouth glued.

"What hof er? She's not going anywhere but just in case I'll lock her in when we leave. Between you and me I sense that she isn't as unhappy about her predicament as she'd like people to think." Neela replied.

4.

After a few blocks of doing his best to keep out of sight Tylo decided that it was safe to come out into the open, mingling with the settlement's inhabitants going about their daily business. Tylo didn't know whether the settlement had the capability to issue bulletins to all of its inhabitants but he decided that the risk was worth being able to move more quickly as he headed back towards the refinery, hoping to find a way in without being seen. No-one seemed to pay any attention to him as he walked along a busy street, confirming that the general population had not been alerted to be on the lookout for him.

As he walked along a street he suddenly saw a vehicle round a corner that had markings on it the same as the two from the refinery that he had ridden in and he quickly ducked into the open doorway of the store he was walking past and peered out through the window as the vehicle drove past and he saw a number of security guards sat in its open rear section.

"Excuse me sir, may I help you?" a female voice said as Tylo continued to watch the transport go past and Tylo turned around, only then realising what it was that the store he had entered sold.

"Err no thanks." he said, looking at the rack after rack of undergarments meant for humanoid women, "I don't think you'd have anything in my size." and he hurried back out of the store.

"What a pervert." the sales assistant who had spoken to Tylo said to her co-worker, "I bet he'd have walked all round the store smelling everything if I hadn't said something."

Outside the store Tylo looked in the direction the transport from the refinery had taken and he saw it turn off in the direction he had come from, suggesting that security staff from the refinery were being sent out to hunt for him. He smiled as he realised that this presented him with an opportunity. If security staff from the refinery had been sent out into the settlement to find him then there would be fewer of them guarding the refinery itself and his chances of being able to break in unnoticed had just gone up. Taking one last look around to make sure that none of the security staff from the transport were heading back towards him Tylo turned around and started walking towards the refinery at a brisk pace.

Getting closer to the refinery, Tylo got a good look at its operations for the first time and it was then that he understood what it was that the facility actually refined. He saw massive tanks filled with discoloured water that was being drawn into the machinery of the refinery while the tanks were then refilled from the nearby sea. The tanks were obviously being used to breed some local microbial life form that could be used to produce useful chemicals. This also explained what the party from the refinery had been doing going into forest surrounding the settlement. If there was one species of native life that could be used to produce saleable chemicals then there could be others in the same ecosystem. The party had probably been carrying out a survey looking for more of them.

The refinery was surrounded by a conventional fence that, as far as Tylo could tell was not backed up by any form of modern security technology such as stun pulses or a deflector shield generator. He opted to test this theory first though rather than simply rushing up and trying to scale it and he tossed his knife at the metal mesh where it was connected to one of the posts positioned at regular intervals. The knife hit the fence on target and dropped to the ground without any sparks. Smiling Tylo rushed to pick up the knife and unhooked its scabbard from his belt. Lying down on the ground he hooked the knife and scabbard together using the lug provided on the scabbard and then moved the blade from side to side, assessing how effective this wire cutter configuration would be.

"I never thought I'd have to use one of these this way." he muttered to himself, "Not so much of a gimmick now I suppose."

Carefully he then began to cut through the fence, one wire at a time and it was not long before he had created a hole large enough for him to crawl through. After he had done this Tylo unravelled a length of syntherope from the dispenser and used this to replace the section of fence he had cut out. The crude repair of syntherope woven between parts of the fence would not fool anyone who looked closely but it would delay the discovery of the hole from casual observation. Tylo then made a quick check for surveillance and when he saw none he broke into a sprint, running for the nearest point of the refinery's main building. As soon as he reached this he began making his way around the building, keeping close to the wall until he reached a cluster of wheeled trash containers where he concealed himself among them, watching the nearby door closely.

As Tylo expected this door soon opened as a labour droid emerged to deposit more trash into one of the containers. Since it was a droid Tylo had no hesitation in striking, leaping out behind the machine and slamming his hand against the main power switch located on the back of its head, at which point the machine dropped what it was carrying and collapsed to the ground. This did not seem to attract any attention

from inside the building though and Tylo darted inside through the open door, closing it behind him so that no-one would notice the droid he had disabled lying on the ground right outside.

"Okay Tylo you're inside." he said to himself, "Now you just need to find out where you can access the subspace transmitter from."

Tylo moved cautiously through the refinery, retreating whenever he heard the sound of someone approaching until he found his way to a computer terminal. The terminal itself was not secured but unsurprisingly it would give him only limited information without a security pass that Tylo did not have. Luckily for him a floor plan was considered important for guests to have access and Tylo called this up.

"Let's see, if I was a subspace transmission station, where would I be?" he muttered, "Main control room? Yes but along with various technicians and guards. Come on Tylo, think. Where would-" he continued before he saw a moderately sized room on the uppermost floor of the refinery and he smiled, "Chief executive's office." he said, "Boss is bound to want to talk directly to head office in private."

Tylo then assessed the quickest route to the chief executive's office and closed the map, leaving the terminal exactly as he had found it before hurrying away.

Using the emergency stairs instead of risking the turbolifts Tylo was still soon on the top floor of the building and he peered out of the stairwell to see if anyone was about. The hallway outside was strangely quiet though and as he walked along it he saw that the offices he could see into were all empty. Reaching the office that was marked as belonging to the chief executive, who judging by the name was a woman, Tylo found the door locked and he smiled. This suggested that the office was empty and if he could get inside he would be able to access the transmitter in private.

Using his multi tool Tylo opened the security panel beside the door and examined the lock. This was as out of date as the security lock used on the speeder and it took him just a few seconds to bypass the lock and open the door. Quickly he jumped through the doorway and closed the door behind him before anyone could happen to come along. It was only then that Tylo realised that he had been wrong in assuming that the office was empty and his eyes widened when he saw Zara sat in her underwear staring at him. It took Tylo a few moments to notice the unnatural way she was sitting and he looked closely at her arms, legs and mouth as he walked closer.

"Excuse me for asking but are you glued like that?" he asked and Zara nodded, "And was it a very angry woman in an expensive red dress that did this to you?" he added and she nodded again, "Okay well since I've seen that underwear you're wearing hanging up in a shop and I know it's worth more than every item of clothing I own I'm going to guess that you're Zara Rosk, the chief executive of this facility. Am I right?" and Zara nodded again "In that case I'm Tylo Kurrast and I'm here to rescue you I suppose."

Zara then began nodding her head towards her desk and Tylo frowned.

"What, is there something to remove the glue in there?" he asked and Zara nodded, prompting him to rush over to the desk and start opening drawers and searching inside until he came across a strip of plastic vials that each contained a different chemical, each one labelled with the technical names for the contents.

"Is this it?" Tylo said and once more Zara nodded. Tylo then walked back over to where Zara sat and pointed to the first vial in the strip but she shook her head. Tylo then moved his finger along the strip until Zara nodded, indicating that he had found the chemical to remove the glue that bound her.

"Okay here goes. Mouth first okay?" Tylo said as he separated the vial from the others and then broke open the end as Zara leant forwards and tilted her head back.

At first Tylo let just a few drops fall onto Zara but her mouth remain glued shut until he tipped the vial up more and the entire contents poured out.

"Stang!" he exclaimed, realising that he had used up all of the chemical. However, this was now enough to dissolve the glue from Zara's mouth and she turned her head to spit out the squeezable rubber stress toy that had been used to fill it before she began sucking in as much air as she could.

"Thank you, oh thank you." she gasped.

"Don't thank me yet lady. I used all of that stuff just on your mouth." Tylo responded.

"It was just a sales sample for customers." Zara told him.

"So do you have any more?" Tylo asked.

"No, not in my office but I know where we can get all we need." Zara said.

"Right but first things first. I came here to use your subspace communications. I've got friends that need to know that Neela Vortress is here." Tylo explained.

"You can't. She had the system shut down. Everyone around here is terrified of her, I doubt they'd follow my orders to reactivate the transmitter after they all saw what she did to me. She even threatened to cut me in half."

"So your staff are a bunch of cowards who left you like this and won't let me bring in the very help that would save them? Great, just great." Tylo said.

"We can berate my staff later. Right now I need you to carry me to the development lab." Zara responded and Tylo frowned.

"Why? What's in the development lab?"

"More of that solvent that will release this glue in a lot less time than the weeks it will take for my skin to naturally shed and replace itself." Zara told him.

"Right okay. So are you going to hop or-" Tylo began.

"You look strong enough to carry me. I'll assume that you've washed your hands." Zara interrupted.

"Don't worry princess I'm very hygienic so there's no need to get excited." Tylo said as he crouched down to pick Zara up and carry her over his shoulder.

"Being carried by you is not enough to get me excited." Zara said

"Keep talking like that lady and I'll glue you to the ceiling in the men's bathroom." Tylo muttered as he stood up again.

Fear.

"Well, what is it?" Neela demanded angrily when she sensed someone approaching her from behind, "Have you found Tylo yet?"

"No ma'am," the security officer replied, "I'm afraid that there's bad news from the refinery though."

"I am not interested in disruption to your production schedule." Neela told the man.

"No ma'am." he said again, "One of the technical staff noticed that a droid had gone off line and he went to try and find it. It was cleaning the offices on the executive level and when he went up there he found that Miss Rosk's office was open and she wasn't inside any more. Someone must be-"

"Tylo!" Neela exclaimed, "Order all guards to return to the refinery. Tylo is there, I sense it."

"But we-" the guard began before Neela extended a hand towards him and he suddenly felt his throat tightening.

"I gave you an order!" she snapped, "I expected it to be followed."

5.

Tylo paused at the bottom of the flight of stairs, still holding Zara over his shoulder, her head hanging down behind him.

“What’s wrong? Why have we stopped?” she asked.

“We? I’m the one who stopped princess. You’re not exactly weightless you know.” Tylo replied.

“Are you saying I’m fat? I’ll have you know I work out every day for all the good it’s done me. You know I had everything planned out when I graduated at the top of my class of the expensive university my rich parents paid to send me to? I was going to get a good job and get promoted so I could get rich quickly. Then I’d get a rich boyfriend who would become my rich husband and we’d live in an expensive house with rich friends and rich neighbours and have lots of rich babies. Do you know what actually happened? I got my good job and I got my promotion but it was to here. Six years running a refinery on the fringe of space surrounded by science geeks and middle managers with an overinflated opinion of their attractiveness and personality who make nasty comments about my private life whenever they think they can get away with it. Sure I’ve made thirty million credits in cash and stock options but I’m a laughing stock to my staff and I haven’t had a date in the six years I’ve been here. Tonight is Benduday night and all I have to look forward to is my usual bottle of wine and something that promised a battery life of twenty four hours but I still have to charge it up after just a few hours.”

“Did you just say thirty million credits?” Tylo said in surprise.

“That’s right. Not that it’s doing me any good right now is it? My arms and legs are still glued together and frankly the novelty has long since worn off-”

“I’m not sure how much more of this I can listen to. I’m starting to understand why Neela glued your mouth shut if you always talk this much.” Tylo said.

“Ooh I would give you such a slap if I could.” Zara said.

“Oh yeah? Well I’d put you over my knee and give you a spanking princess but I get the feeling you’d enjoy it too much. Now shut up and don’t wriggle about so much.” Tylo replied as he started down the next flight of stairs.

This was the last flight of stairs before reaching the floor of the development laboratory and Tylo looked out into the hallway.

“Okay the coast is clear. Which way?” he said.

“Left. Then it’s the third door on your right.” Zara said and Tylo hurried out of the stairwell and along the hallway towards the laboratory until he came to a door labelled ‘DEVELOPMENT LABORATORY’.

“It’s locked.” Tylo said, “Do you know the code?”

Zara then sighed.

“Of course I do. It’s three one four one five nine. I told you I work with geeks.” she told him.

“Huh? I don’t get it.” Tylo said, entering the code into the keypad beside the door.

“It’s pi. The number. Three point one four one five nine and so on.” Zara said, “Didn’t you go to school?”

“Sure I went to school.” Tylo said, darting into the laboratory as soon as the door slid open and he set Zara down on the nearest stool, “Now where’s this solvent I’m looking for.”

“Over there.” Zara said, nodding towards a cupboard, “Top shelf, blue liquid.” then as Tylo walked over to the cupboard she added, “So you never took advantage of a girl who was drunk?”

“Hey look princess,” Tylo responded, turning back towards Zara, “I’ve slept with plenty of women and one or both of us may have regretted it afterwards, especially when it comes to the woman you so accurately called a witch who is now hunting me, but never have I slept with a woman who didn’t or could ask for it.” then he smiled before he added, “In fact on one occasion she even got down on her knees and begged me. Consider your own situation right now. If I was the sort to take advantage of a helpless woman then wouldn’t I have taken advantage of you?”

Zara smiled as Tylo turned back towards the cupboard and opened it, searching through the contents of the top shelf for a bottle with blue liquid inside it.

“You like me.” she said.

“Says the woman who told me all about what she does on a Benduday night.” Tylo muttered before adding in a louder voice, “I need your help to get out of here.” then he found a bottle that contained a pale blue liquid and was fitted with a spray nozzle, “Is this it?” he asked, holding it up where Zara could see it.

“What does the label say?” she asked and Tylo turned his head as he tried to read the chemical name printed on the side of the bottle.

“It doesn’t even look like a real word but there’s a serial number THX one-one-three-eight.” he said after several failed attempts at pronouncing the full name of the chemical.

"That's it. Just spray it on the glue and it'll break it down." Zara said and Tylo walked back across the room to her and held up the bottle with the spray nozzle pointed towards her. Then starting at her feet he began to spray the fluid where the glue bonded her flesh together.

"Wait." she said suddenly as Tylo reached the level of her elbows, don't get any on my hair."

"What? Is this stuff dangerous? It's not going to melt your skin off if I use too much is it?" Tylo said, looking nervously at the bottle for any signs of a warning label.

"No but thank you for being concerned. It is an organic solvent but it only affects certain organic compounds, those that form into strands like hair rather than larger areas such as skin or fat." Zara said.

"Not that there's much of that on you." Tylo said, moving her hair aside to keep it out of the path of the spray. Then when he had finished a thought occurred to him, "Hold on." he said, frowning, "So if I spilt any of this down my front then it wouldn't do any damage to my cheap synthetic shirt or jacket right?"

"That's right."

"But what if I was someone who had been forced to strip down to a set of very expensive underwear woven from all natural fibre and had just had me spray the entire length of her body with this stuff?" Tylo added and Zara looked down at herself.

"Oh no." she said.

"How long will it take to dissolve the glue?"

"With this much glue? About five to ten minutes."

"And how long will your underwear last?" Tylo asked and Zara smiled nervously.

"Since I can already feel it loosening I'm going to say about five to ten seconds. I've got a very bad feeling about this." she said.

Arriving back at the refinery Neela dismounted from her transport while police officers, security guards and other refinery staff who had been pressed into joining the search disembarked from their vehicles.

"Ma'am we've checked the perimeter." one of the guards who had been left behind at the refinery said as he walked up to Neela.

"And?" she asked.

"It looks like the fugitive cut through the fence then patched it. He gained entry by disabling a service droid when it opened an external door. He must still be somewhere inside the refinery. I've sent what men I had left to protect the main control room and the subspace antenna just in case he tries to patch in manually." the man explained.

"Very good. Now let's make sure he doesn't escape again." Neela ordered.

"So two million credits? I've got your word?" Tylo said, "Remember I have your thumb print here on my datapad."

"Yes Tylo two million credits for the rental of your jacket." Zara replied as she zipped up the jacket that Tylo had taken off so that she would have something to wear, "So much for you never taking advantage of a woman."

"This is business. You should be familiar with the theory of supply and demand." Tylo told her.

"Okay so what's your big plan to get us out off this planet then Tylo?" Zara asked.

"Us'? Since when were you leaving the planet?" Tylo responded.

"Since the only person that lifted a finger to help me turned out to be the man that I am now paying a small fortune just to avoid having to run around naked in my own refinery despite him being the ex-boyfriend of the witch who attacked and humiliated me."

"Hey I said I slept with Neela but I was under the influence of a jedi mind trick. I was never her boyfriend, okay? Now let's get out of here." Tylo protested.

"Tell me your plan first Tylo. I may have quit but I still know this place better than you do." Zara pointed out.

"Okay fine. We can't access the refinery's subspace communications, right? So we need to find an alternative." Tylo said.

"We need to get to the next town. It's two hundred and seventy kilometres away but-" Zara began.

"No there's a closer solution. Much closer. Right here at the refinery in fact." Tylo interrupted.

"No there isn't. I know every system of this refinery and-"

"Neela's ship." Tylo said, interrupting again, "We're going to steal Neela's ship. She probably stole it from someone herself so it's only fair that we get it back to its original owner. Plus we cut out having to wait for a rescue by rescuing ourselves. Now what's the quickest way to the landing field from here?"

"Back down the stairs we used to get here. It goes all the way down to the basement and there's an access tunnel there that runs under the refinery to the landing field. It's used so a hard line can be established to the tankers." Zara said and Tylo nodded.

"Okay lets go." he said and he hurried to the exit from the laboratory. However, when he opened it he immediately jumped back and closed it again.

"What's wrong?" Zara said.

"Guards. It looks like they are two of them searching every room along this hallway and they've got two more covering it so no-one can get past them." Tylo told her.

"Do you think you can overpower two?" Zara asked.

"They have blasters. If I could get their attention focused away from me then I might be able to take one of them and get his weapon but just throwing something across the room to get them to look that way is only going to work for about half a second. I need ten times that at least." Tylo said and Zara sighed.

"I can get you your distraction Tylo." she said as she walked over the cupboard of chemicals and took one of them out, "I can't believe I'm doing this though." she added.

"What's in that bottle? Is it flammable? Because starting fires in a building we're in is a very bad idea." Tylo said.

"No Tylo I'm not proposing burning down the refinery. This is the same liquid adhesive Neela used to immobilise me. Do it to me again and sit me on this workbench facing away from the door. When the guards come in they'll head straight for me I guarantee it. After all you did in my office."

"Wouldn't it be easier to just pretend you were still glued?" Tylo asked.

"I wish I could Tylo but what if they notice? Just promise you can take them both before they get around in front of me, okay? Then once you've dealt with them carry me down to the basement and get the glue off me. There are plenty of places to hide down there." Zara said as she put the bottle down on the workbench in front of her. Then she hesitated before she unzipped Tylo's jacket and took it off.

The two security guards carrying out the room to room search in this section of the refinery positioned themselves either side of the door to the development laboratory with their blasters in their hands before they opened it and as soon as they did they heard a muffled cry from inside.

"Mmmmph! Mmmmph!"

Stepping through the doorway together both men came to an immediate halt when they saw Zara Rosk sat on a workbench at the far side of the room, her arms obviously still glued to her side and she looked back over her shoulder at the men to reveal more glue sealing her mouth shut.

"Mmmmph! Mmmmph!" she called out, shaking her body from side to side.

"Hey look at this, it's little miss bossy boots herself." one of the security guards said to the other, "Looks like the story of what that woman did to her are true. I think we should take our time making sure she's okay before we call this in, don't you?"

"Definitely. A few photos and a bit of video uploaded to the network should prove we found her safe and sound." the second guard replied as they began to walk across the room one behind the other.

All of a sudden Tylo leapt out from the gap between two work benches just after the guards had gone past him, their attention focused on Zara just as she had said it would be. Wrapping an arm around the guard's neck in a choke hold, Tylo used his other hand to grab the hand the guard was using to hold his blaster. There was no opportunity for Tylo to check how the blaster was set but he still dragged the guard's hand so that it was aimed at the one in front before squeezing it to set the weapon off. He was relieved when the pulse of energy released was bright blue instead of red, indicating that it was set to 'stun' and the other guard collapsed as Tylo continued to wrestle with the one he held by the neck and hand. There was another flash of blue as the blaster went off again and Tylo thought he heard the sound of something falling to the floor before the guard went limp, the lack of air finally rendering him unconscious.

Snatching the guard's blaster from him as he collapsed, Tylo rushed to the open doorway and leant around the door frame to see the two guards who had been keeping watch over the hallway rushing to find out what was going on in the laboratory. What they did not expect was for Tylo to launch a counter attack and he shot one of them instantly before ducking back behind the door frame to avoid the return fire from the second. Tylo then backed away from the doorway and waited until the remaining guard came into view at which point Tylo promptly shot him as well and he collapsed in the doorway, his blaster sliding across the floor towards Tylo. Scooping this weapon up Tylo looked across the room to where he had left Zara sat on the workbench but she was no longer there and he remembered the second shot as he wrestled with the guard and the sound of something falling.

"Stang Zara. Please be okay." he said as he rushed across the room.

"This is patrol group besh on level five." a voice said over the intercom while Neela stood in the refinery's operations room monitoring the search of the facility.

"Go ahead besh." a technician responded.

"We've found patrol group herf, they've all been stunned. It looks like they were ambushed in the development lab." the guard reported and Neela turned towards the technician.

"What is in that room?" she demanded, "Are there any computers that Tylo could use to try and access communications?"

"No ma'am. The computers there are isolated for security. It prevents slicers from accessing research data remotely." the technician replied nervously.

"Then what's in there that he could have been after?" Neela said.

"It doesn't look like the door was forced. Zara Rosk must have helped him get access." the security guard on the other end of the communication channel said.

"Does the development lab include samples of everything you produce?" Neela asked and the technician nodded.

"Yes ma'am." he said.

"Then it must hold something that would remove the glue from your chief executive. Tylo is playing the hero and betraying me in the process. Tell everyone that I want Zara Rosk alive as well. I will make her regret her interference."

6.

Zara gasped as she awoke, finding herself once again wearing Tylo's jacket and her limbs and lips no longer glued together. Looking around she saw that she was now in what she recognised as the refinery's basement and Tylo was sat beside her.

"Hey careful." Tylo said softly, "I think there are more patrols about."

"What happened?" Zara asked.

"You were shot in the struggle. Thankfully the guards seem to keep their weapons set on 'stun' or you wouldn't be here right now. I carried you down here to the basement like you said and got the glue off you again. Don't worry, I didn't do anything to you while you were unconscious." Tylo told her.

"I know." Zara replied, "After all you told me yourself that Tylo Kurrast wouldn't take advantage of a woman like that. Plus you obviously like me too much."

Tylo frowned.

"I may not have more of that glue lady but I did grab the binders from those guards and I have plenty of tape. I can seal that smart mouth of yours shut again real quick. Oh I also picked up this for you." Tylo said.

"Whatever it is I'm not paying another two million credits for it." Zara said before Tylo handed her the second blaster he had picked up.

"Do you know how to use this?" he said and she nodded.

"I've fired one a few times. I'm not so sure I could kill anyone though." she said.

"Like I said, it's set on 'stun' just shoot away and ask questions later. Now which way to the landing field from here?" Tylo responded and Zara looked around again to confirm their exact position.

"It's about a hundred metres that way." she said, pointing in the direction of the tunnel.

"Then let's go, but be careful. This place is crawling with Neela's new minions and if what those guards in the lab said holds true for the rest I think I'm safer falling into their hands than you are." Tylo said before he started to move in the direction Zara had pointed and she picked up her blaster and followed him.

The basement was a network of narrow passageways and small interconnected chambers that Tylo could have wandered around aimlessly in for days without finding the tunnel that led under the landing field but with Zara to guide him they reached the entrance in just a few minutes, even having to divert to avoid a patrol.

"This is it." Zara said, "We go right down there and there's an exit out on to the landing field right by the ship. I saw it while I was floating in the air and screaming."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Tylo said, "If anyone's lying in wait for us down there then we'd be caught out in the open. Worse yet we couldn't retreat if they got someone at this end to cut us off."

"If you want to check it out I could cover you from here." Zara suggested and she held up her weapon, "I have a blaster."

"So do the guards." Tylo pointed out and Zara smiled.

"There it is again. You're afraid I'll get hurt - you really like me." she said and Tylo frowned.

"Okay princess wait here while I scout ahead a bit. But if you see someone coming don't call out just get running down the tunnel and we'll have to hope there's no-one lying in wait for us." he told her before he set off down the tunnel, soon disappearing into the darkness.

Turning around Zara suddenly felt very vulnerable. Even with the blaster in her hand was worried for her safety. Being naked apart from Tylo's jacket concerned her for the first time as well and she looked down tugging at the base of the jacket to see how far down her legs she could stretch it.

"Oh now I've got a very bad feeling about this." she said to herself.

"Don't feel bad about it gorgeous. Just drop the blaster and get your hands up." a voice said suddenly from behind her and Zara spun around, levelling her blaster towards the pair of guards who had managed to creep up on her. Both were very large and brutish looking men who held their own weapons pointing at her. Before Zara could fire the guard who had spoken lashed out with his hand and knocked her blaster from her grip, sending it flying into the darkness of the tunnel.

"I give up." Zara said instinctively, raising her hands and stepping back from the two men.

"That's better, now take off that jacket so we can be sure you're not hiding another weapon under it." one of the guards instructed her.

"I can't." Zara replied, "I'm not wearing anything underneath it." but the guards both just grinned at her.

"You know that's what we were both hoping you'd say. Now strip and then keep those hands up."

"No." Zara said but one of the guards placed the muzzle of his blaster beside her head and pulled the trigger. The stun blast did nothing to the wall it hit but the energy pulse was close enough to Zara's head that it felt as if she had just been hit very hard and she screamed in pain as she flinched.

"Now you've got a choice." the guard said, "Either take off that jacket yourself or the next shot is in your face. Then we'll strip you ourselves and you'll never know what we did to you while you were out cold. Understand?"

Zara nodded as she straightened up and the guards both grinned as she took off the jacket and raised her hands again.

"Very nice." the other guard said as he snatched the jacket from her and hurled it into the tunnel, "Now turn around and face the wall. Then put your hands behind your back."

Zara did as she was told and she heard the sound of a set of binders being released. However, before they could be locked around her wrists Tylo suddenly came charging out of the darkness and slammed into the guard holding the binders, knocking him into the other guard and all three men landed in heap.

Turning back around to see what was happening, Zara used her hands to try and cover herself as best she could and she saw Tylo grab the binders and lock them around the guard's own wrist. Then the guard howled in pain as Tylo twisted his arm and bent it towards the second guard who was trying to struggle out from underneath the two men. The binders clicked again as the other half was locked but this time it was around the second guard's ankle, fastening them together in such a way that their movement would be severely limited. The instinct of both guards was to unlock the binders but while they were distracted Tylo landed blows on both of them, punching both men in the face. Then before they could regain their senses he released their equipment belts and pulled them off.

"Come on princess, don't just stand there looking beautiful." he said, leaping back to his feet as he slung the belts over his shoulder and kicked the guards' blasters down the hallway. Then he grabbed Zara by the wrist, dragging her into the tunnel and leaving the guards unable to unlock the binders holding them.

"You came back for me." Zara said to him, "You could have left me but you didn't."

"I guess I'm just a heroic sort of guy princess." Tylo responded.

"That and you really like me." Zara added.

"Not now princess!"

The soon came to where Tylo's jacket had landed and Zara scooped this up.

"Tylo wait." she said, holding the jacket across her body.

"Come on princess, you can run and get dressed at the same time." Tylo said, taking hold of the jacket as well to pull Zara onwards.

"No I have to go back." Zara said.

"Go back? Are you insane? Those guards could have friends on the way. Lots of them with bigger guns that aren't set to 'stun'. Now get a move on princess or two million or no two million I'm taking back my jacket and leaving you here." Tylo told her.

"Tylo I will double that two million if we can just go back. This won't take long I promise." Zara said.

"What good's a reward if you're not around to spend it?" Tylo said.

"Five million then. Please Tylo." Zara said and Tylo sighed, realising that their arguing was probably costing more time than going back was.

"Fine. Five million credits." he said and while Zara put his jacket back on they both ran back to where the two guards were still lying on the floor struggling to get free and arguing about whose fault it was they were in this predicament.

"Hello boys. Remember me?" Zara said before in rapid succession she brought the heel of her foot down on both of the guards' groins as hard as she could and they howled in agony, "That was the best three million credits I ever spent." she said to Tylo and then they both began to run back down the tunnel towards the landing field again.

"Ma'am they're in the access tunnel." a technician called out.

"Tunnel? What tunnel?" Neela asked.

"It leads under the landing field." the technician told her and Neela's eyes widened as she realised what Tylo's objective was.

"My ship." she said, "He's going to steal my ship."

"This is the one." Zara said, coming to halt beside a ladder that led up a vertical shaft in the tunnel's ceiling and Tylo nodded.

"I'll go first." he said, climbing up the ladder and pushing open the hatch at the top. Looking out onto the landing field he saw Neela's transport just a few metres away, its access ramp wide open and unguarded but looking around he saw a group of speeders heading across the landing field towards it and he realised that there was little time to act, "Come on princess! Climb!" he shouted as he climbed out of the shaft. Then he reached back down into it to help Zara out and keeping hold of her hand he ran towards the transport.

"Tylo Kurrast stop!" Neela's voice called out just as Tylo and Zara reached the ramp and looking behind them saw the speeders had come to a stop and Neela and a group of guards were getting out. Neela glared at

Tylo angrily and then yelled at him again, "Are you really going to leave me for her?" and Tylo grinned. "In a heartbeat Neela." he said and then he slammed a hand down on the control to close the access ramp while wrapping his other arm around Zara to pull her close enough to kiss. "No!" Neela screamed and all around her the guards fell to their knees, dropping their weapons as they were suddenly assaulted by a wave of Dark Side energy. Meanwhile inside the transport Tylo released Zara. "Sorry about that princess." he said as she stared back at him open mouthed, "You find something to wear. I'm going to get this ship off the ground before Neela can cut her way inside. Knowing the layout of the ship Tylo then ran straight for the cockpit that he was relieved to find was no longer locked. More importantly the security lockout on the flight controls had already been disabled, presumably when Neela stole the ship originally. This meant that he was able to immediately start up the repulsorlift engines, skipping the usual checks and the transport rose up off the ground. Tylo then pulled back on the flight controls as hard as he could, sending the ship up into the atmosphere and after a short span of time into the blackness of space.

The transport had just entered hyperspace when Zara entered the cockpit and sat down beside him. "I thought you were finding something to wear." he said when he noticed that she still appeared to be wearing nothing but his jacket.

"I like this better than anything else aboard." she replied then she added, "Are we on course for Coruscant?"

"The good news is yes we are course for Coruscant and we'll get there in one piece."

"And the bad news?"

"Well it looks like Neela managed to burn out the hyperdrive when she pulled an emergency exit from hyperspace to come after me so we're running on the backup. It's going to take us about eight days to get there."

Zara smiled.

"So you've managed to get me all alone for eight days." she said.

"Look princess I didn't-" Tylo began.

"Tylo please." Zara interrupted suddenly, "Please let me speak. In the past twenty four hours I have been threatened with death by being literally cut in half. I have been forced to strip twice. I have been bound and gagged in a way that wasn't enjoyable, made into a prisoner in my own office and totally humiliated. Added to that I'm pretty sure that those two security guards by the tunnel were planning on raping me. Now I've lost my job and all my possessions. The only good thing to have come out of today is the guy who didn't have to lift a finger to help me but did."

"Hey look I'm sorry princess." Tylo said, "What happened today has become pretty mundane to me and I sometimes forget that most people never have this sort of stuff happen to them. If it makes you feel better I think you handled yourself pretty well. I mean you willingly took off the only thing you were wearing and then let yourself be used as bait. Then of course you risked everything just to go back and make those guards pay for threatening you. Although now I wish I'd shown you how to adjust your blaster to full power so you could have done some permanent damage to where you stomped."

Zara smiled.

"I dare you to deny you like me now." she said and Tylo groaned, "One thing I did find back there though was this." she added, holding up a bottle of wine, "It's a bit rough I think but I'm in the mood to something rough. Now tonight is Benduday night and I spend every Benduday night drinking a bottle of wine. How about tonight you share this bottle with me? And then..."

"And then what?" Tylo asked when Zara trailed off.

"And then if I have to I will become the second woman in your life who gets down on her hands and knees and begs you. That woman has a really big bed back there. So what do you say?"

"Three things." Tylo said with a smile.

"Go on."

"Firstly I admit it. I like you."

"I know."

"Secondly your rental time is up so give me back my jacket."

"And thirdly?" Zara said as she started to slowly unzip the jacket.

"Never mind, it's not important." Tylo said before they leaned towards one another and kissed.