

STAR WARS

4-01: Sibling Rivalry

By Stephen J Dutton



IT IS A TIME OF CRISIS. REBEL FORCES FIGHTING AGAINST THE EVIL GALACTIC EMPIRE ARE OUTNUMBERED AND OUTGUNNED BY THEIR FOES. THEY MUST INSTEAD RELY ON 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...

SIBLING RIVALRY

MOST OF THE REBEL UNIT LED BY VORN LARCUS HAS BEEN CAPTURED BY THE EMPIRE OR THEIR ALLIES AND NOW IT IS UP TO MACE GRAYLE, CAPTAIN OF THE *SILVER HAWK* TO FREE THEM. BUT EVEN IF HE MANAGES THIS THEY WILL STILL NEED TO FIND A WAY PAST THE IMPERIAL BLOCKADE...

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<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.htm>

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1.

R5-HV, or Harvey as its owner called the astromech droid was bored. It had been plugged into the sensor array of the YT-1300 class transport *Silver Hawk* to compensate for a malfunction that the droid's owner, the ship's engineer Tobis, had yet to fix. The task was a monotonous one at best and now that the ship was powered down in a field on the backwater world of Tarlen there was nothing for him to do. However, through its connection to the sensors Harvey was also able to detect other fluctuations in the ship's systems, principally the communications array.

So far someone aboard the ship had made repeated attempts to activate the *Silver Hawk's* communications to send a message. A task impossible without the correct access code known only to the ship's crew and the rebel field unit assigned to it. In addition someone had been making unsuccessful attempts at contacting the *Silver Hawk* at irregular intervals. All of this was highly unusual the droid knew. Two living beings and two other droids were supposed to be aboard the ship still, so operating the communications system should not have been a problem unless something untoward had happened to them. Irritated that it could be left out of events because of a fault in the sensor system Harvey decided to go and take a look at what was happening. Rolling through the *Silver Hawk's* workshop, Harvey headed into the lounge where it came to a halt. From here Harvey could hear the sound of someone moving about in the one of the crew cabins. In the lounge itself Harvey could see the protocol droid Jeeves sat immobile and apparently deactivated at the table opposite while lying on the floor in front of it the droid saw Jaysica Horbid, one of the rebels stationed aboard the ship. The droid knew that the young woman was its owner's favourite and in recent months the pair had been spending an increasing amount of time together. Jaysica had her back to the droid and from this angle Harvey could see that her wrists and ankles had been bound with the plastic ties that Tobis typically used when making repairs. This only served to confuse Harvey further, it could see no reason why Tobis would have tied Jaysica up and it let out a low chirp as it rolled closer to her.

"Harvey?" Jaysica whispered, lifting her head from the deck and trying to look around at her, "Untie me. Quickly."

Obediently the droid rolled up to Jaysica, a hatch in its cylindrical body opening up and a compact pincer emerging. Harvey extended this downwards and snipped through the plastic ties binding the rebel. Jaysica sat up, rubbing her wrists and staring at the marks where the tie around her wrists had dug into her skin. A sudden hissing sound from nearby startled Jaysica and looking around she saw that the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp had been lowered and she heard someone running up it. For a moment Jaysica panicked, fearing that Imperial troops had stumbled across the ship. But she breathed a sigh of relief when rather than Imperial troops Mace Grayle, the captain and owner of the *Silver Hawk* rushed aboard with his heavy blaster pistol in his hand.

"Where's Jaynie?" he said, looking around. Jaynie was Jaysica's younger sister. The rebels had encountered her by chance during their mission and had offered to evacuate her to an Alliance safe world. However, it now appeared that she had betrayed the rebel team and turned them into the Empire.

"Searching the cabins." Jaysica replied, "She's looking for the access codes to start the ship's systems. She tied me up."

"She's sold us out." Mace said.

"She told me. She said the Empire might have Tobis, do you know?"

Mace nodded before Jaysica could finish her sentence.

"I saw him and Tharun rounded up with some of the locals. Major Larcus and Kara as well, I saw them being taken from the hotel by the major's son and that witch he hangs around with."

"So we're the only ones left?"

"I'm afraid so. But I wouldn't count on us being able to avoid them forever, the Empire's pulling out all the stops to get us. I've seen stormtroopers, customs and even some of the local cops and militia."

All of a sudden a new voice joined the conversation. It was Jaynie's as she returned to the lounge from the cabins she had been searching.

"Well I couldn't find anything so I'm going to-" and then she froze as she saw Mace standing in front of her with his blaster.

"What have you done to Tobis?" Jaysica yelled and she rushed at her sister.

"Get away from me!" Jaynie shouted back, shoving Jaysica hard enough that she fell backwards. But as she fell she reached out and grabbed hold of Jaynie, pulling her down with her and both young women squealed as they fell and landed in a heap.

Jaysica attempted to wriggle out from beneath Jaynie, but her sister reached down and grabbed hold of her arms and pressed them to the deck above her head.

"I obviously didn't tie you up tight enough." Jaynie said, "Well don't worry, you won't be getting free again. When I'm done with you you'll-"

It was at this point that Mace just sighed and strode towards the two wrestling sisters and pressed the muzzle of his blaster against the side of Jaynie's head.

"Remember me?" he said, "Now how about you let go of my friend and lift your hands over your head."

Jaynie let go of Jaysica and slowly she straightened up, lifting her hands over her head.

"That's better." Mace said, returning his blaster to the holster on his hip and then before Jaynie could react he delivered a blow that sent her tumbling backwards with her hands clamped over her face and screaming with pain.

"Couldn't you have just used your blaster to knock her out?" Jaysica asked as Mace then offered her his hand to help her get back to her feet.

"So I have anger issues." Mace said, "Trust me, if I'd used the blaster it wouldn't have been set to stun."

Agent Garm Larcus of the Imperial Security Bureau surveyed the rebel prisoners. They were knelt down in rows in the forest clearing, organised by the stormtrooper marines now watching over them. Most were native to the planet Tarlen and inconsequential to him personally, but two were part of the unit led by his father and while some of that particular group remained at large he considered his work unfinished. Like the other prisoners, these two men kept their heads lowered on the orders of their guards, but Garm guessed that they knew he was there.

"Is this what you wanted Garm?"

Garm looked around and smiled at the young woman in the bodyglove standing there holding up a pair of transparent plastic bags, each one numbered.

"Ah, their belongings." Garm said, "Thanks Vay." And Vay smiled back as he took the bags from her.

Vay looked at the rows of prisoners for herself and like Garm she focused on the two rebels belonging to Vorn Larcus' team.

"Have any more been brought in?" Vay asked.

"A few." Garm replied, "But none of the two remaining from my father's group. There've also been a few locals caught up in the sweep. The marines have been grabbing anyone with a gun."

"Are many of the locals armed?"

"This is farmland Vay, pretty much every home has a blaster in it. Now let's go see if there are any clues in here." And he held up the plastic bags.

"Well there aren't any weapons." Vay commented, "It looks like they ditched those before giving themselves up."

"Not unusual." Garm replied as he and Vay left the hangar, heading for a large tracked vehicle deployed to act as a mobile command post. He ignored the rows of army technicians inside the vehicle and instead headed directly to holographic display positioned centrally. Currently inactive the display provided Garm with a raised surface upon which he could deposit the contents of the plastic bags.

"These belong to the big one." Vay said, "Tharun Verser."

Garm began to spread out the items from the bag. Primarily they were the items that would Garm would have expected to find amongst the equipment of most modern soldiers or survivalists.

"There's nothing to give any clue as to the whereabouts of their ship either." Vay said, "Or their other friends."

"Well there's only two of them left on the loose and their ship can't get past our blockade." Garm said, "With any luck our informant will-" and then he stopped suddenly as he rummaged through Tharun's belongings.

"What's wrong?" Vay asked and Garm lifted up a small gold coloured metal band.

"From our previous encounters Mister Verser has never struck me as the type to wear jewellery." Garm said, "So why would he have a ring amongst his belongings?"

"There's writing inside." Vay said, leaning in for a closer look.

Garm held the ring up to the light and turned the ring slowly so that they could both read the inscription.

Tharun and Lyssa. Together forever.

"Lyssa?" Vay said, "As in your sister?"

Anger.

Vay sensed Garm's feelings through the Force at the same time as he scowled.

There were four narrow columns in the cargo hold of the *Silver Hawk* containing the pistons that operated the cargo elevator they were located around. Jaysica stood back in silence as Mace tied Jaynie to one of these using plastic ties identical to the ones earlier use to bind her. Forced to kneel down and with her arms raised above her head, Jaynie's limbs were tied around the column behind her in such a way that she had only minimal movement available to her. The punch from Mace had struck her in the eye and already a bruise was easily visible to Jaysica as her sister glared at her.

"Captain Grayle sir!" a high-pitched electronic voice called out and both Jaysica and Mace turned their heads to see Jeeves shuffling into the hold.

"What is it?" Mace asked, tugging on the strap now holding Jaynie's wrists above her head and the young woman winced briefly.

"Harvey and I have done as you asked sir." the droid answered, "Harvey has brought the *Silver Hawk's* passive sensors on line and I have been monitoring civilian communications broadcasts."

"And what have you found?" Mace then asked and he stepped away from Jaynie who immediately reacted by tugging at the plastic ties, "Don't bother." Mace commented, glancing back at her, "I made sure they're tight." Then he turned back to Jeeves, "Well?" he asked.

"The civilian networks are full of news regarding the Imperial deployment sir. They say that a large naval task force is in orbit and every ship leaving is being intercepted and searched."

"What does Harvey have to say about this?" Jaysica asked.

"He says that he has detected signs of two venator-class ships, four interdicator cruisers and several customs corvettes orbiting this world. That does not include the large number of starfighter patrols. Though I should point out that our sensor capability is somewhat limited using just a passive ground scan and there are likely to be more of them in orbit where the curvature of the planet conceals them."

"Then leaving is clearly out of the question." Mace said.

"Indeed so Captain Grayle." Jeeves responded, "This ship could not possibly—"

"But we can't just leave the others anyway." Jaysica protested, "I don't care if you do find a way through the blockade, I'm not leaving Tobis behind."

"We're not leaving anyone." Mace responded, "But sooner or later we're going to have make a break for it and for that we need to get rid of those ships."

"But how?" Jaysica asked.

"You can't." Jaynie said suddenly, "The Empire's not going to give up until you're their prisoners too. You may as well just give up."

"We're going to have to send for help." Mace said.

"But Captain Grayle," Jeeves said, his arms waving, "any signal we send will be detected by the ships blockading the planet and we'll be located for sure."

"See, even your own droid agrees with me." Jaynie added.

"Oh shut up Jaynie!" Jaysica snapped, "We're not interested in what you've got to say. You're just a collaborator."

"And you're both trapped. Just give up."

"Excuse me Captain Grayle," Jeeves said, "but have you considered the possibility of surrender? It may be preferable to—"

"No!" Mace yelled we are not giving up and we're not listening to this little sleemo either." And he marched back towards where Jaynie was tied up.

"Oh what are you going to do? Hit me again?"

"Actually yes." Mace replied and as hard as he could he punched her in the stomach. The blow knocked the wind from Jaynie and instinctively she tried to curl up, being prevented from doing so by her bonds. Instead after a shriek of pain she began gasping for breath and sobbing.

Though Jaynie had betrayed them to the Empire Jaysica still looked on in horror, fearful that Mace was about draw the blaster his hand now rested on. She breathed a sigh of relief when Mace turned away from Jaynie in disgust and approached her instead.

"You still got that Imperial uniform stashed away?" he asked and Jaysica nodded, "Good. Go get it."

"Why?"

"Because we need to get to where we can send a message from safely and it may be easier to slip past all those troops out there hunting us if they think you're one of them."

2.

"Remember lad," Tharun said quietly to Tobis, "if they're asking us stuff it means they don't know everything yet. Let's try and keep it that way hey?"

"What?" Tobis replied, "Oh, yes of course."

The pair had been moved away from the prisoners taken from the local resistance, into the woods where an entire squad of stormtroopers now stood watch over them as they knelt side by side. From behind them they could hear the sound of approaching footsteps and moments later Garm and Vay appeared, both staring down at them.

"Well its nice to meet you both again." Garm said, "Though this time it seems you are my prisoners."

"Oh yeah?" Tharun replied, "Well if you like you could just both surrender and your girlfriend can wet herself now. It'll save us some time before the major gets here to deliver a spanking to his wayward offspring."

Garm and Vay both smiled.

"We have your commanding officer already." Vay announced, "Kara Bilstran too. We just need to find Jaysica Horbid and your mysterious starship captain. Mace Grayle isn't it?"

"Jaysica's still free." Tobis said, smiling.

"For now." Garm replied, "But not for much longer. I've got thousands of troops out looking for them both."

"Well we can't really wait while you go get enough to do the job properly." Tharun commented, "So how about turning as all loose?"

"I don't think so." Garm replied.

"Oh well, worth a try." Tharun said.

"No it wasn't." Tobis muttered and Tharun shot him a stern look.

"Your friends will be caught no matter what." Garm said, "So right now I'm more interested in this." And he held out the ring he had discovered amongst Tharun's belongings.

"Oh kriff." Tharun commented.

"Why did you bring it?" Tobis asked softly.

"Because Lyssa gets really upset if I take it off." Tharun replied, "I didn't know he was going to take it."

"Why is my sister's name on this ring?" Garm yelled, thrusting the ring towards Tharun's face.

"Ah. Well. How would you describe it lad?" Tharun said, looking at Tobis.

"Well, err. You're married?" he responded.

"Yeah that's it. We got hitched." Tharun said and he looked back at Garm, "We sent you an invite. It must have gotten lost in subspace. Deputy G-man Larcus plus one. Of course your plus one at the time would have been your wife and not this nice little piece of-"

Rage.

The blow caught Tharun by surprise and he fell sideways, unable to stop himself.

"Don't you dare mention Jennay!" Garm yelled as he dropped the ring to the ground, "You're no better than the scum that murdered her." And then he stormed off back towards the clearing where the other prisoners were being held.

Tharun carefully got back to his knees.

"I think I may have gone too far there." He said to Tobis and then he sniffed as he felt blood dripping from his nose.

"Notice how he gets upset when I talk about his wife?" Tharun said to Vay, "So where does that leave you?"

"Put them back with the others." Vay ordered the stormtroopers and she was about to leave when she spotted the ring laying on the ground. Bending over she picked it up and as she walked past Tharun she paused just long enough to slip it back onto his finger and then kissed him on the cheek.

Tharun looked at Tobis again and smiled.

"Do me a favour lad, don't tell Lyssa about that."

Dorvid Corol was not a happy man. His plans relied on making a sales pitch, collecting large sums of credits that he could cash in quickly and then depart before anyone asked too many questions. But as he switched between different channels of the local broadcast networks he found them filled with news of massive Imperial troop movements around the planet and Dorvid knew that he could not risk travelling off world until they were gone.

A chime from the hotel room door distracted Dorvid from the viewer and he went to see who was there.

"Who is it?" he asked at the same time as he looked at the display set beside the door.

"Imperial Army Mister Corol. Open up." He heard a woman's voice reply. Sure enough the display showed a young woman in an Imperial uniform standing in the corridor outside. Dorvid grinned, realising this was a

con. He had used fake uniforms himself to trick his victims in the past and he had a feeling that this was a similar trick. However, the young woman did not seem to be much of a threat so he opened the door. "Hi Dorvid. How's the face?" Mace exclaimed as he appeared from his hiding place just out of view of the camera that had shown Jaysica's image to Dorvid and he pushed past her, shoving Dorvid back into his room.

Behind Mace Jaysica picked up her bag, stepped into the room and closed the door behind her.

"What the kriff do you want?" Dorvid snapped.

"You're going to help us send a message off world." Mace replied.

"The hell I am. Why would I help you?"

Mace grabbed hold of Dorvid's collar.

"Because the only reason we're on this kriffing planet is because of you, you pile of poodoo. So you owe us."

He said, snarling and then he took hold of a nearby chair, "And because we're on the sixth floor and if you won't help us then I'm going to hurl this chair through that window and you after it."

"Well in that case you make a very strong argument Mister Grayle." Dorvid replied calmly and he prised Mace's fingers from his collar, "I would be pleased to assist you. Now exactly what do you need?"

"We need access to the hotel's subspace array." Mace replied, dropping the chair and stepping away from the con man, "You're a guest here so you can ask to send a message."

"I'm guessing that this message will be intended for the Alliance yes?"

"How did you know?" Jaysica asked, but neither Dorvid nor Mace responded to this.

"It is." Mace said.

"Then sending it from here is out of the question." Dorvid replied, "I'll help you, but there's no way that I'm having my name associated with your revolution. I'm just in this for the money."

"We're not paying you." Mace said.

"No, but several of the individuals I've spoken to have." Dorvid told him and he held up a credit stick, "If the authorities get wind of my helping you they'll cancel this before I can cash it in."

Mace snatched the stick from him.

"Your donation to the Alliance is greatly appreciated." He said.

"Hey! That's mine!" Dorvid snapped and he stepped forwards, reaching out for the credit stick. But Mace simply grabbed both his collar and the chair again, scowling at him as he did. Dorvid relaxed, "Oh well," he said, "you can't win them all I suppose."

"No you can't." Mace said as he let go of Dorvid and the chair again, "Now if we can't make the call from here then where can we make it from?"

"The main array control." Dorvid replied and he reached for a datapad on a nearby table, "Here, I was able to obtain a full technical readout of the hotel. Wherever I go I like to know where all the escape routes are. Just in case."

Mace looked at the datapad.

"This area's restricted to hotel staff." He said, indicating the location of the communications office.

"But they'll take us there." Dorvid said as he walked over to one of his cases and opened it up. He tipped out the contents and then slid open a false panel at the bottom. From beneath this he took out a pair of uniforms, one was a standard Imperial one with customs markings on the collar while the other belonged to the sector rangers, the interstellar police force of the Empire and the Republic before it, "Your little friend already has a uniform so we just march up to a hotel employee and tell them we need to inspect the communications array. The problem will be sending the message without them noticing."

"How come?" Jaysica asked.

"Because they're unlikely to leave us alone in there." Dorvid said, "You may need to restrain whoever takes us there."

"That's not good." Mace said, "I'd rather we could get in and out without anyone knowing anything's wrong."

"I may be able to help with that." Jaysica said and she opened up her bag to reveal a hotel uniform, "It's Jaynie's." she said.

"Who's?" Dorvid asked.

"Her sister's." Mace answered, "She works here. Though at the moment she's on our ship learning to stay still and quiet unless she wants the bad tempered astromech droid we left watching her to get upset and poke her with something hot or sharp."

Dorvid smiled.

"Do they look alike? Your friend here and her sister?"

"Well they're not identical." Mace said.

"But close enough yes? Close enough that if unless someone took a good look they'd assume your friend was her sister?"

"I think so." Mace said.

"Then you need to change into that uniform while we change into these." Dorvid told Jaysica, "Then you can escort us to the communications office."

Jaysica kept her head low so that her hair concealed her features as she led the way through the hotel's service level. Behind her Dorvid and Mace followed in their Imperial uniforms. Mace looked decidedly uncomfortable in the customs uniform, Dorvid was somewhat slimmer than him and the disguise barely fit. However, it was good enough to fool the staff they encountered and no one challenged them. That was until a man in a manager's tunic spotted them.

"Jaynie." He called out, "What's going on here?"

"Stay back please sir." Dorvid responded as the manager approached, "Your employee is showing us to the communications suite."

"But why? Jaynie what's going on?"

"She's taking us there because we asked her to." Dorvid said, "Now please stay back." And he drew the compact blaster from his hip, keeping it pointed down at the floor. Mace snapped open the holster of his much more powerful blaster and rested his hand on it.

"Of course." The manager said, stepping back with his hands raised, "But I want to see you later Jaynie." He called after them as Jaysica continued to lead the two men in the other direction, all the while keeping her face hidden from the manager.

The communications office itself was a small room that was unmanned and Mace locked the door behind them.

"So now what?" Dorvid asked.

"Now you just stand there and wait." Mace told him, "Jaysica, send the message."

Jaysica nodded and she produced a mem-stik that she plugged into the subspace array. This told the system how to align the antenna mounted on the roof of the hotel and uploaded the message file that Mace had created.

"It's sent." Jaysica said, "Now we just need to wait and see if the Alliance responds."

"Not me." Dorvid said, "I'm done. Now let's just get out of here and I'll be off."

"That's fine by me." Mace replied, "But I'll give you one piece of advice, stay well clear of me. As far as I'm concerned you're still partially to blame for all of this."

"Oh don't worry about that." Dorvid told him, "I've now wish to meet you again either."

"Captain, I think you should see this." The officer in command of comscan operations called out across the bridge of the venator-class star destroyer *Firebrand*. Captain Sayla Naje turned away from the forward viewport and looked down into the pit where the junior officer was stood over.

"What is it lieutenant?" she replied.

"A transmission captain. Brief, encrypted and not registering on any of the standard channels."

"Let me hear it." Captain Naje ordered and the officer reached over the crewman sat in front of him to begin playback of the recording. It was a brief series of electronic chirps and squeals that the officer set to repeat over and over again.

"Captain our database includes millions of different languages and compression methods. This code is not used by the Empire. It could be an Alliance code."

"Get me the rest of the fleet." Captain Naje ordered, "I'll speak with them via holo." And she made her way to the rear of the bridge. By the time she got there the last of the other captains were just materialising in holographic form. The captains of the other two venator-class ships of her line were women like her, while the captains of all the more modern, if much smaller interdicator cruisers were men. This second line was part of the same squadron as Captain Naje's, but this was the first time she had found herself working with them without being under the command of their superior Admiral Hall.

"We've picked up a transmission." She announced to the assembled ships' commanders, "It could be a rebel signal so keep an eye out for any ships loitering near the edge of sensor range. They could be looking for a way in."

"Should we extend our fighter patrols further out?" Captain Celtis of the *Ferocious* asked. A former fighter pilot the woman favoured using the hundreds of starfighters her ship carried and was actually happy with commanding an obsolete venator-class ship.

"No." Captain Naje replied, "Agent Larcus wants us to maintain the blockade, so unless he says otherwise we've got to focus on preventing ships from leaving unchecked."

"Don't worry captain." One of the interdicator captains said with a grin, "Our ships will keep the rebels cooped up long enough for our troops on the surface to deal with them."

"Be sure that they do captain." Captain Naje said, "The moff himself ordered this deployment and I doubt he'd be happy if they got away."

3.

General Syres Kain gazed at the tactical display and sighed.

"It's easy." The older man stood behind him said. This was Colonel Max Collis, head of alliance special forces for the sector, "I can put together a unit that can break out the prisoners in about an hour." He wasn't looking at the main display, instead he was focussed on a datapad that contained everything that the rebellion knew about the Imperial forces on the surface of Tarlen.

"I know that colonel." General Kain said replied, "I have no doubts at all about the competency of your troops. It's this blockade I'm worried about. There's just no way to get our people off Tarlen after we've broken them out."

"Why can't they just go to ground?" this came from the only woman present. Shyla Nerin headed the Alliance's support services in the sector and her responsibility was in the area of supply and logistics rather than military operations.

"For how long?" another man asked. This was Colonel Harris Ergard, he spent most of his time surveying remote worlds and evaluating their potential as bases for the Alliance. A similar age to Colonel Collis he was however almost completely bald, "Look at the positions of those ships. They've the planet sealed up nice and tight and they look like they're in for the long haul. Our long-range scans have picked up regular shuttle movements between them and the surface. Light stuff, not assault transports."

"So they've established a supply chain to the planet then?" Shyla said.

"It looks that way." General Kain replied.

"So we're just writing off Vorn and his unit?" Shyla asked.

"Six people." The general said, "To release them would require a major assault and we'd lose hundreds, maybe even thousands in the attempt."

"That general, is because you're looking at it the wrong way." This statement came from by the door and was not a human voice. Looking around the gathered rebels saw a group of mon calamari entering. Most of them wore Alliance fleet uniforms while one was in civilian garb.

"Admiral Aphanar," Shyla said to the female mon calamari who had just spoken, "You have an idea?"

"This should not be considered a rescue mission." Rear admiral Aphanar replied, waving a webbed hand at the tactical display, "What we have here is an opportunity. Two lines of Imperial capital ships in a lightly defended system, one of which cannot manoeuvre because of the gravity well generators they are using. This fellow beings, has all the makings of a trap. One that will allow us to strike a major blow against the Empire."

"Surely you're not proposing to attack the Imperial fleet?" General Kain said.

"That is exactly what I am proposing." Admiral Aphanar replied, "With the ships at my disposal I can keep those star destroyers occupied long enough for our people to escape and hopefully inflict more damage on them than on us."

"The admiral is correct general." The mon calamari out of uniform added, "The Empire is not stopping ships approaching Tarlen. What we propose is for several of our field teams to infiltrate the world to secure the release of the prisoners. Then our fleet units will launch a surprise attack to break the blockade, concentrating first on the interdicator cruisers to allow us to escape to hyperspace. Our fleet will remain for as long as it is tactically viable and do as much damage as possible. The result will hopefully be the destruction of as many Imperial ships as possible and a major victory that the Empire will be unable to keep secret from the local population."

"But how many ships are you and the admiral planning on using for this Colonel Sallir?" General Kain asked the mon calamari.

"Why all of them general." Admiral Aphanar answered, "Including the *Ocean Queen* and the *Night Wraith*."

"But those ships aren't ready for battle." Shyla said, well aware of the requests she was receiving for the materials and manpower necessary to bring the former star liner and experimental Imperial star destroyer up to scratch."

"They are incomplete that is true." Admiral Aphanar admitted, "But both are combat ready, even if they have reduced crews and poor internal facilities. The *Night Wraith* will prove especially useful. I plan on having it approach the Imperial lines ahead of our other ships so that the Imperial Navy will assume it is one of their own ships."

"Besides," Lieutenant Colonel Sallir added, "Major Larcus himself provided us with both those ships. It seems fitting to me that we use them to free him."

General Kain sighed again. Alliance tactics relied on hit and fade attacks, never remaining in one place long enough for the Empire to organise a counter attack using their full might. What was being proposed here was a massive set piece battle.

"I will take personal command on the ground." Colonel Sallir said, "I will lead several of our field teams in a series of co-ordinated strikes that will free our people. Then, while the Imperial forces are focused on locating us our fleet commanded by Rear Admiral Aphanar will strike at them from space."

"Could we land troops on the surface?" Shyla asked.

"Why?" Colonel Collis asked, "What are you planning?"

"Well Tarlen operates a citizen militia in place of a full time professional military yes?"

"That's right." Colonel Ergard answered, "They don't have much of a population to support a standing army of a reasonable size."

"So that means they must have significant stores of military equipment set aside." Shyla explained,

"Equipment that could be used against our assault or—"

"Or stolen by us as part of the assault." Colonel Collis interrupted and he looked at General Kain, "General, a single transport could net us thousands of tonnes of munitions."

"Food as well." Shyla said, "It's a farming world after all. A lot of what they export is canned and preserved right there."

General Kain smiled. His hopeless situation had just turned into a chance to strike a major blow against the Empire.

The four small transport ships that emerged from hyperspace together all passed through the Imperial blockade without incident. The lead ship, a mon calamari manufactured deep-water-class freighter came in for more attention than the others, but even this was allowed to pass unmolested by the TIE fighters who swooped past it.

Though they had arrived in the system together the four ships split apart as soon as they had entered the atmosphere. The deep-water class *Harpoon* plunged into one of Tarlen's oceans, exploiting the design feature that allowed it to travel underwater as almost well as in air or space. The baudo-class yacht *Artist's Impression* and the YT-2400 *Beauty Queen* headed for starports. The *Artist's Impression* headed for the world's primary starport, landing not far from the ranks of Imperial transports while the *Beauty Queen* instead made for a smaller private docking bay located within the capital city itself. This left just the barloz-class *Scarlet Knife*. The vessel was much older than any of the others and it headed for the wilderness outside of the capital, landing in a field several kilometres from where the *Silver Hawk* had set down.

The *Harpoon* remained just below the surface, extending a sensor antenna above the waves so that it could keep track of the orbiting Imperial vessels and stay in touch with the other rebel field teams as they disembarked from their own ships.

"You're kidding me." Mace said as he watched the *Beauty Queen* come in to land, "Why did they send her?"

"You mean—" Jaysica began before Mace interrupted her.

"Inra." He said, frowning.

The noise of the *Beauty Queen's* engines died away and there was a hissing sound as its access ramp was lowered to the ground and then half a dozen individuals made their way down. At their head was an attractive woman who smiled at Mace.

"Well, well." She said, "Lost your ship? Not much of a loss I know."

"Actually we still have the *Silver Hawk*." Jaysica replied as Mace just glared back at Inra, then more quietly she added, "We've just lost the rest of our team. That's all."

"Oh that sounds so much better." The scruffy looking man at the back of the group said.

"Inra, Sen, quiet the pair of you." The man who was visibly the eldest of the group said. This was Commander Dayle Kord, the commander of the rebel unit assigned to their ship. Then he looked directly at Mace, "So have there been any developments?" he asked.

"None sir." Mace answered, "The Empire has everyone else and the planet is still blockaded."

"Yes we saw that on the way in." Dayle replied, "Don't worry though, that's going to be taken care of."

"How?" Jaysica asked.

"That's not important." Dayle said, "Now do you have transport?"

"Seems pretty important to me." Jaysica muttered as Mace nodded.

"We rented a speeder van. One big enough to carry us all." Mace replied, "It parked outside."

"Good." Dayle said, "Then I suggest we get moving because we need to hook up with the others as soon as we can."

"Others?" Jaysica asked.

"That right short stuff." Inra said, "You lot screwed up so bad that Colonel Sallir himself is here with everyone he could rustle up on short notice to save your sorry asses."

"So what brings you here? Tarlen doesn't seem like a hotbed of revolution to me." Mack Hurnon said as he rearranged the cards in his hand. The experienced gambler knew that the cards were about to shift and at the last moment he placed two of them in the field that fixed their value.

"We can't answer that." One of his opponents replied. All of them were in military uniforms, part of the task force now orbiting the planet. Some of them were here on the shore leave that had been arranged while others were crews of the transports that had brought the ground forces here and were waiting orders to either return to their orbiting mother ships or re-deploy to elsewhere on the planet. Of course none of them suspected that Mack was a member of the Rebel Alliance, as far as they were concerned he was a rather poor sabacc player with an expensive private yacht.

"Now that just makes me even more curious." Mack said, "You'd have been better off lying."

"Well you're not much for bluffing yourself." Another of the card players said, laying down his hand of cards and smiling, "My game I think."

"Idiot." Mack said and the Imperial soldiers all glared at him, "Oh sorry." Mack said, "I was just telling you what my hand is." And he exposed his cards to show the values zero, two and three. The best possible combination in sabacc, known as the 'Idiot's Array' and he smiled as his opponents' expression turned from anger to astonishment. Mack had carefully given the impression to these men that he was not a very good sabacc player, deliberately throwing hands and setting up fake 'tells' to suggest the quality of his hands until he was ready to pounce and take everything. Of course had his opponents not been so reticent about their activities on Tarlen he would have continued to forfeit hands while he gathered intelligence. Now though he was forced to pursue a different strategy. The looks on the soldiers' faces turned back to anger again as Mack swept his hand over the table, dragging all of the money piled up in the two central piles towards him. His hand had not only won him the smaller pot for this particular hand, but also the larger central sabacc pot that had been steadily increasing in size for the time they had been playing, "I think I'll be taking this now gentlemen." He said, standing up as he pushed cash and credit sticks into every pocket he had, "I shall go back to my ship and count it."

The Imperial soldiers scowled at Mack as he left the starport cantina, pausing by the door to pull up his collar for better protection from the rain that was now falling and he dashed away. He halted again part way towards the Artist's Impression and he heard the sound of footfalls following him, clearly some of his opponents had come to the conclusion that he had cheated somehow and were seeking to reclaim the money he had taken from them. Mack smiled as he counted three men following him. This was exactly what he wanted and he continued to head back to his ship, making sure that he kept ahead of his pursuers, but not so far ahead that he lost them.

The access ramp of the Artist's Impression was raised and sealed and the ship dark, so when Mack reached the vessel he had to spend several seconds opening up the ship before he went aboard. The trio of Imperial troops following him rushed forwards, disappearing up the ramp after him and almost straight away there was the high-pitched sound of blaster fire from inside.

4.

"Wake them up." Captain Grayce Myrell commanded and her husband and pilot of the *Artist's Impression* Captain Trent Myrell obliged by hurling a bucket of cold water over the three Imperial prisoners tied to chairs. Immediately the three men's eyes snapped open and they spluttered.

"Told you they were fine." Mack said.

"Good." Grayce said, "Now they can answer our questions."

"We're not telling you any—" one of the prisoners began as he looked at the three rebels standing in front of them, but he stopped speaking part way through his sentence and stared at Grayce, "Hey I know you." He said, "You're that actress."

"Yeah that's me." Grayce replied, "Though thanks to your Empire I had to change my career. I'm a freedom fighter now and what happens to you in the immediate future is going to depend on whether you change your mind about answering my questions. Now where are Vorn Larcus and his people?"

"Don't say a thing." The Imperial soldier replied, glancing at his two fellow prisoners, "Rebels are soft. They won't hurt us."

"I also told you they wouldn't answer any questions." Mack said and he held out his hand towards Trent, "Pay up."

"Time for plan Besh then I think." Trent said and he looked at Mack, "I'll pay when he's had a go as well."

"Oh stang. He always gets answers." Mack said.

"Who?" one of the prisoners asked nervously, but the three rebels just smiled.

"You can come in now Combrowda." Trent called out and a nearby door slid open to allow a wookiee to enter the room. The alien stood just within the doorway and roared, snarling at the prisoners. The three human rebels walked past the wookiee and through the door.

"Just call out when you're ready to talk." Grayce said, looking back at the three terrified Imperial soldiers, "Then we'll call him off." And she shut the door behind her. In the room on the far side of the door the three humans stood facing a muscular iotran and a short snivvian.

"So they didn't talk then?" the snivvian asked.

"Not yet Druvvon." Trent replied.

"I told you so." The iotran said, glancing at Druvvon.

But then there was a roar from behind the door followed by three simultaneous screams.

"Soon though." Trent said "Very soon."

In the cockpit of the *Scarlet Knife* the ship's captain Anzar Deller and Major Jym Shrell, commanding officer of the rebel field team assigned to the ship were on hand to receive the transmission from the *Artist's Impression*.

"Larcus and one of his people are being moved right now." Grayce told them, "A prisoner transport is moving along route six towards the main deployment zone to pick up the other two members of his unit they've caught. Our prisoners didn't know anything about the last two."

"We've already heard from Commander Kord." Jym replied, "The last two are with him. They're en route to hook up with us and should be here in about an hour."

"Well from what we've been told the transport should have reached the main Imperial force in the field by then." Grayce said.

"Copy that. *Scarlet Knife* out." Jym said and he frowned as he shut off the communication system.

"That means we need to intercept that transport by ourselves." He said to Anzar, "We can't risk hitting the entire force, even with the help of the others."

Anzar sighed.

"This isn't good major." He said, "One signal from that transport and we'll have TIE fighters swarming all over us. Just like at Estran."

"I know." Jym said, "But what else can we do?"

Anzar activated the ship's intercom.

"Lannaye, we're about to take off." He said, "What's our status?"

"I wouldn't recommend it just yet captain." A woman's voice replied, "We blew out a couple of repulsors on the way down."

Anzar looked at Jym.

"We don't have time to fix them." Jym said and he got to his feet, "I'll go tell the others we're moving. You just do the best you can."

Leaving the cockpit Jym stood in the communal area immediately behind it where the three members of his team waited. The former bounty hunter Travis Jesler and doctor Devid Nerreck were both checking their equipment while the only partly reformed thief Tayal Lineer was sat reading.

"We taking off?" Travis asked, having felt the vibration of the ship's engines.

"Hopefully." Jym replied, "Lannaye says we've lost a couple of repulsors."

"Oh great." Tayal exclaimed, "Another botched run."

"Hey don't look at it like that." Devid replied, "Our luck's bound to change eventually."

"Before or after we end up looking for another replacement?" Travis commented.

"Cut it out!" Jym snapped, "Look, we're intercepting a prisoner transport carrying two of our people. We've got good intel and the advantage of numbers and surprise. This one should be a simple by the numbers ambush." Then the ship rocked and everyone grabbed hold of something solid, "Assuming the ship makes it there." Jym added.

"Lieutenant Lerner I need an update." Admiral Aphanar said to the young woman in the hangar bay of the rebel headquarters.

"Don't worry admiral." The lieutenant replied, "You'll have your droids in time. I've had my entire staff working round the clock to get them ready."

The mon calamari then watched as a column of droids marched across the bay and into a waiting shuttle destined for the lucrehulk-class Trading Dream. She noticed that several of the droids were well out of date.

"You are using the droids found here?" she commented.

"Yes admiral. We're going to need every droid we've got to keep your ships running at combat readiness. I had no choice."

"I was not aware they were even in service."

"You mean because the spy was using one of them to transmit information to the Empire? Well don't worry. My deputy wiped the core memory of every last one, if there was any espionage programming in there it's long gone now. Though Lieutenant Pay won't be too happy about it. Even though he's had a year to do it he never got around to checking them for evidence."

"Don't worry lieutenant," admiral Aphanar said, "I will deal with our friend from counter intelligence if needed. Call it a thank you for the effort you and your people have put in."

"My pleasure." Lieutenant Lerner answered with a smile, "I'm happy to help."

Confined in a cell designed to hold only a single prisoner Major Vorn Larcus III and Kara Bilstran were still bound together, their arms wrapped around one another. Kara had her head leant on Vorn's shoulder, unable to speak because of the bright red ball strapped into her mouth since her arrest. Because of the confines of the cell Vorn was unable to reach up high enough behind her to remove the gag.

The transport was not designed for the comfort of prisoners, if anything it seemed to Vorn that the Empire had specifically designed the vehicle to be as uncomfortable as possible. Not only was the cell stiflingly hot due to being close to one of the repulsors keeping it aloft, but there was little sonic baffling around the engine and so the noise was loud enough that he guessed that even without Kara being gagged he could not have held a conversation with her.

Then something caught Vorn's attention, a bright light in the sky that he noticed only briefly as it passed the tiny window set near the ceiling of the cell and he looked up, straining to see through the window. As he did so Kara lifted her head from his shoulder and looked into his face. Still looking through the tiny window Vorn smiled as he saw the old-fashioned barloz-class freighter descending.

5.

“Right below us now captain.” Lannaye said from the co-pilot’s seat, “Though I wouldn’t recommend taking us much lower.”

“We’re still too high for the winch.” Anzar replied, “So keep an eye on our engine status and let me know if we lose any more repulsors.” Then he activated the intercom, “Heading in now major.” He said, “Hang on tight.”

“Copy that.” Jym replied from the hold, “Opening the door now.”

There was the roar of passing air as the hatchway set into the floor slid open and Travis briefly leant over the opening to take a look at the ground below.

“Careful.” Devid said.

“Hey I know what I’m doing.” Travis replied and then Tayal suddenly stepped up to him and playfully grabbed him. Travis leapt backwards, “Watch it!” he exclaimed as Tayal grinned.

“Almost had you.” She said.

“Cut it out!” Jym yelled, “I’m not losing another man. Now get hooked up and let’s get this over with.”

“Its just like we figured.” Travis said to her, “A simple repulsor carrier. Doesn’t look armoured and no weapon emplacements.”

“Good.” Tayal replied as she put on a pair of thick gloves, “Otherwise this would be one of the shortest offensives of all time.” Then she reached out and took hold of the cable now dangling through the hatchway loosely and connected it to the harness she wore, “Here goes.” She said and she jumped through the hatch, “Whoa!” she called out as Jym extended the line towards the transport below. As she descended Tayal noticed that the line was drifting away from the transport and she waved her arm, “That way! More that way!” she shouted.

In the *Scarlet Knife* above her Tayal’s shout could not be heard. But Travis saw her waving and reacted.

“Send us to starboard.” He said quickly, “About another three metres.”

As Jym halted the winch Devid rushed to the intercom and repeated the instruction.

“Starboard three metres.”

“We’re trying damn it.” Anzar’s voice replied, “We’ve lost another repulsor on the port side. If we try an adjustment as small as that we’ll overshoot.”

“Stang!” Jym exclaimed and Travis lent over the hatchway again, waving both arms.

“Oh you’ve got to be kidding me.” Tayal muttered as she realised that she needed to get herself across to the transport. Fortunately for her Tayal also carried a line thrower of her own, one equipped with a grappling hook. She unslung the launcher from her shoulder and aimed it as best she could while dangling from a cable and moving at almost a hundred kilometres per hour. The launcher kicked somewhat as she fired it and she smiled as the grapple became caught on the antenna array on the roof of the transport.

“She’s got it. Give her more line.” Travis said to Jym and as he allowed more cable to unreel Tayal pulled herself towards the transport until she was able to climb onto its roof, “Hold it.” Travis then said and Jym locked the winch.

Travis took another look out of the hatch and saw that Tayal was now roughly in the centre of the roof and pulling the winch cable taught.

“See you soon.” Travis said to Jym and Devid before he grabbed the cable and slid all the way down to join Tayal below on the transport’s roof.

Inside the transport, the sudden ‘clump’ as Travis landed on the roof made everyone inside look upwards. But while the two Imperial soldiers in the cabin at the front and both Kara and the guard in the rear appeared puzzled at the sudden sound Vorn just smiled.

With the winch cable still connected to Tayal’s harness she and Travis crawled forwards across the roof of the transport, pausing to untangle Tayal’s grapple along the way. They came to a halt on top of the cabin that housed the driver and one of the guards and both rebels reached to their belts. Tayal produced a short black rod that expanded to almost a metre long with a flick of her wrist while Travis took a stun grenade from his and pulled out the pin.

“How about that hug?” he said to Tayal and the pair wrapped their free arms around one another and leant over the side of the transport.

Tayal acted first, swinging her arm in an arc that brought the tip of her baton down through the side window of the driver’s cabin. Then, as Tayal withdrew the baton and collapsed it Travis hurled the stun grenade through the broken window.

Looking down through the open hatchway of the *Scarlet Knife* Devid saw all of this and looked up at Jym.

"Now!" he snapped and Jym pressed hard on the winch control. All of a sudden the winch motor came to life as the cable was retracted, snatching both Tayal and Travis off the roof of the transport and dragging them back up to the ship.

In the cab of the transport below both soldiers cried out in alarm as soon as the grenade came in through the window.

"Get rid of it!" the driver yelled.

"Where is it?" the guard snapped as he released his safety harness and began searching for the grenade.

"By my feet. Hurry before it—"

The stun grenade was state of the art and instead of exploding it instead released a sudden pulse of energy that overloaded the nervous systems of both soldiers and instantly rendered them both unconscious. The driver slumped forwards over the controls and the transport rocked as it careered off the road. It travelled in a wide arc until striking a tree that had stood for decades and was strong enough to flip the out of control vehicle over rather than break and the transport began rolling across the ground until it eventually came to a halt the right way up.

Anzar set the *Scarlet Knife* down not far from the wreck and the access ramp facing it was lowered the moment the ship touched down. Jym lead the way down the ramp and was closely followed by Travis, with both men keeping their rifles aimed at the transport all the time. If any of the guards were still mobile neither man wanted to be taken by surprise. Along with Lannaye, Devid and Tayal brought up the rear while Anzar remained in the cockpit, prepared to lift off at a moment's notice.

"You take the front." Jym ordered and Travis headed for the cabin while the unit's leader made his way to the door at the back of the transport.

Peering through the broken window of the cabin Travis saw the driver still slumped over the steering column, while the other guard was hunched up on the floor, his head at an awkward angle and blood dripping from his nose and ears.

"Two down here major." He called out as he tried the door, hoping to be able to retrieve the soldiers' weapons.

"This way's locked." Jym said as he tried the rear hatch.

"Let me see." Tayal called out as she rushed up to the door with Devid and Lannaye, fumbling at her belt.

"Wait!" Lannaye called out, "The frame's just warped, look." And she pointed to the top corner of the hatchway where the transport's hull was buckled and pressing against the hatch itself.

"Okay everybody grab hold." Jym ordered and the five rebels all reached up and took hold of the top of the hatch, "Now pull!" he snapped and with one strong tug they pulled open the hatch, jumping back to avoid it as it dropped to the ground.

Immediately they all reached for their blasters again as they saw the guard sat inside staring at them. But the vacant look in his eyes told the rebels that he was dead, killed on the crash as he was thrown about inside the vehicle.

"Major Larcus!" Jym called out, "Can you hear me?" and there was a muffled cry from one of the rows of cells that ran down each side of the transport, "Vorn!" Jym called out again, entering the transport. This time there was a hammering that enabled him to identify which cell it was coming from, "This one really is locked." Jym said as he tried the door and he was just turning to the guard, intending to search him for a key when Tayal rushed up to him with her lock breaker in her hands.

"I've got it." She said as she plugged the device into the lock and moments later the door opened to reveal Kara and Vorn squeezed inside the cell. Vorn had his head resting against the cell wall, his eyes closed and Kara was staring straight at Tayal, "Stang." Tayal exclaimed as she looked at Kara and her gag in particular, "Did you bite the nose off a clown or something?" Kara reacted by scowling and let out several short muffled grunts that even while gagged could be identified as an insult.

"Get them out of there." Jym said.

"Carefully." Devid added, noticing the blood coming from Vorn's head.

As soon as Kara and Vorn were clear of the cell Travis released their binders and Kara reached behind her head to release her gag and ripped it from her mouth.

"What the kriff are you lot playing at?" she snapped, "Your little stunt could have killed us!"

"Perhaps you'd prefer it back in your cell?" Travis said and Kara glared at him.

"How is he?" Jym asked Devid who was checking over Vorn.

"He'll be fine." The doctor replied as he broke open a medical kit and administered a shot. Immediately Vorn groaned and opened his eyes.

"You okay boss?" Kara asked, staring down at him and smiling.

"Better now you're calling me that again." He said, "Even though you know you shouldn't." and he smiled back.

"Like I say, he'll be fine." Devid said as he helped Vorn to his feet, "He just got a bump on his head the size of a torpedo sphere that's all. All he needs is some rest, a strong drink and the attentions of a good woman."

Vorn looked at Kara.

"Drink and debauchery." he said, "You're my unit medic, how come you never prescribe that?"

"Because if I did it would turn Tharun into a hypochondriac." She replied.

"Careful." Vorn said, "That's my son in law you're talking about."

"If we're done with the chit chat we need to be going." Jym said, "It's only going to be a matter of time before the Empire figures out that this lot should have checked in."

As soon as the rebels were aboard the *Scarlet Knife* Lannaye retracted the access ramp and Anzar lifted off. "So how did junior and stinky find us anyway?" Kara said, referring to Garm and Vay by her nicknames for them.

"An informant." Jym replied.

"Let me guess," Vorn said, "Dorvid Corol. That crooked little sleemo must have figure out who Mace and I were and turned us in for the reward."

"Actually I don't think it was." Jym said, "All I know is that it was a woman."

"A woman? But who?" Vorn said.

"The klutz." Kara exclaimed, "It must have been her sister, she was mad as hell to see us. Why that little nerf herder. I'll kriffing kill her when I find her."

"Let's not jump to conclusions." Vorn said and then he looked at Jym again, "So how come you're here?" he asked, "What's happened to the rest of my people?"

"Captain Grayle and your security expert are fine." Jym replied, "They're with Commander Kord's people now I think."

"With Inra?" Kara exclaimed, "Oh then Mace won't be fine. Not by a long shot." And then Vorn held up his hand for quiet.

"What about Tharun and Tobis?" he asked.

"The Empire has them." Travis answered before Jym could.

"Then we need to go and find them." Vorn said, "I'm not leaving them behind."

"Too right." Kara added.

"Now hang on." Jym said, "No-one's getting left behind, but do you have any idea how many Imperial troops are on this planet? There are two full lines of warships in orbit and thousands of troops down here on the surface."

"Then what-" Kara began before Jym cut her off.

"Colonel Sallir and Admiral Aphanar cooked this rescue up." He said, "Its not just us and Commander Kord's team here. Captain Myrell and the colonel himself are here with their units as well and when we've got your entire team freed the admiral is going to smash into that blockade with everything she's got."

Vorn just stared at Jym, shocked at how a simple investigation was now about to turn into the largest naval engagement in the sector since the end of the Clone Wars.

6.

Garm looked around him while he ate, despite his length of service he had never gotten used to seeing stormtroopers without their helmets on and he felt uneasy at seeing so many people with identical faces sat around him in the hastily set up mess tent. Fortunately for Garm, none of the stormtroopers' officers were clones so at least he felt like those people at his table were real human beings instead of something built in a factory. All of a sudden Vay sat down opposite him and blocked his view of most of the stormtroopers.

"Not eating?" Garm asked when he saw that she had no tray of food with her.

"It tastes like bantha poodoo." Vay said, "Besides I've just been talking to the commander at the starport. He says the transport with your father and Kara left more than three hours ago."

Garm frowned and put down his fork.

"But that can't be." He said, "They should have been here ages ago. We need to get in touch with them."

"I've tried." Vay replied, "No response on any frequency."

Garm got to his feet, lifting up his mug and gulping down what was left of his drink.

"Get us a speeder." He said, "We need to find that transport."

The pilot of the gunship kept both the speed and altitude of the vehicle relatively low as he followed in reverse the path that the prisoner transport would have taken from the starport. But although the occasional civilian vehicle was seen on the road, there were no signs of the transport itself.

"Did the starport commander explain why he didn't assign an escort?" Garm asked Vay. The question had been puzzling him since before they had taken off, but he had failed to figure it out for himself so he decided to ask instead.

"As far as he knew there wasn't a threat." Vay replied, "We still don't know for certain what happened anyway. It could have been an accident."

"Maybe." Garm said, "Or maybe not, look." And he pointed down to where the ground beside the road was torn up leading to the wreck of the transport, "Pilot, take us down."

"Yes sir."

Garm was the first off the gunship as it hovered less than a metre off the ground and he did not even bother to draw his sidearm as he ran towards the transport's open rear hatchway. He pulled himself up into the back of the vehicle and was immediately confronted by the sight of the dead guard slumped at the far end of the prisoner carrying compartment and a single cell door wide open, the same cell that he had seen his father and Kara locked into.

"Kriff!" he bellowed.

"One dead up front." Vay said as she appeared behind him, "The driver's in critical condition, but he may just make it, the stormtroopers are getting him out now." Then she too saw the dead guard, "No blaster burns." She added, "I guess he died in the crash too."

"Does it matter?" Garm replied angrily and he waved at the open cell door, "They're both gone."

As Garm marched out of the transport Vay looked at the cell and then down at the floor where the binders and gag used to restrain Kara and Vorn had been discarded. Bending down Vay scooped up the gag and brushed it with her hand before putting it into a pouch at her belt.

"I'm sure I'll be needing you again soon." She said to herself and then she followed Garm from the truck. Just as she reached him a stormtrooper called out to them both.

"The tracks go off in this direction."

Garm and Vay ran over to the stormtrooper and saw the cluster of footprints in the dirt that he had spotted. The tracks led across open ground until they vanished next to a deep furrow.

"The imprint from a starship access ramp perhaps?" Vay suggested and Garm nodded.

"I think so." He said, "The two we didn't catch must have used their ship to force the transport off the road." Then he lifted his head and called out to the nearby stormtroopers, "Spread out! Check for the imprints of a starship."

The squad of stormtroopers began to fan out over the surrounding terrain and several of the halted and called out as they came across the indentations left by a transport ship's landing gear. But it became instantly apparent that they were not looking for a YT-1300 like the one they knew Vorn's unit used. The ship they were looking for was significantly longer and narrower as well.

"Two possibilities." Garm said to Vay, "Either the rebels hijacked a ship locally to use for the rescue, or we're dealing with a second rebel field team."

"If they'd stolen a ship we'd have heard about it." Vay said, "There aren't that many about on Tarlen."

"Then it's option number two." Garm said, "There are more of them here and more still could be on their way." And he pulled his comlink out of his pocket.

"Captain, there's a message for you from the surface." The comscan operator called out to Captain Naje, "It's Agent Larcus."

Captain Naje headed down into the crew pit and made her way to the comscan station.

"Put him through." She ordered, then when the channel was opened she added, "This is *Firebrand*, go ahead Agent Larcus."

"Captain we have reason to believe that more rebels have arrived on Tarlen." Garm's voice said to her.

"Well we haven't been searching ships approaching the planet Agent Larcus. We don't have the resources to halt them all."

"I know that captain." Garm said, "So from now on I'm ordering the blockade stepped up. Cease all stopping and searching of vessels trying to leave. From this point forwards any ship attempted to approach or leave Tarlen is to be shot down."

Captain Naje looked up, glancing nervously at a nearby officer who had overheard this and looked back at her with a similar expression.

"Can you confirm that order Agent Larcus?"

"The blockade is now total." Garm said, "Give ships one warning and then fire on any that ignore it." And then the channel went silent.

"Get me the rest of the fleet." Captain Naje said to the comscan operator, "I need to update them."

"There'll be hell to pay if they fire on an innocent transport." Vay said to Garm as he put the comlink away.

"They won't." Garm said.

"How can you be so certain?"

"Because they'll be warning every ship approaching the blockade to turn around."

"But what if they don't?"

"Then they'll be committing an offence. The press can hardly portray them as innocent victims of military brutality if they refused a lawful order to halt now can they?"

People are going to die. Lots of them unless you can get him to give up and leave now.

The warning came out of the blue from the mysterious voice that had been in Vay's head for some time now. But just as with most occasions when it made its presence felt it only gave her part of what she felt she needed.

"Garm," she said, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

Sat on the bridge of her flagship, the *Wave Rider*, an MC-80 star cruiser built in the shipyards above her homeworld of Dac, Rear Admiral Aphanar reviewed the fleet she had assembled. It was centred around four massive capital ships, her own, a second MC-80, the *Ocean Queen*, a *lucrehulk-class* battleship left over from the Clone Wars, the *Trading Dream* and an experimental Imperial star destroyer, the *Night Wraith*. Escorting these were more than a dozen frigates, corvettes and gunships along with over a hundred hyperspace capable starfighters. Also accompanying the fleet on this mission was a single gallofree yards medium transport. The elongated egg-shaped vessel was painfully slow and weakly armed and armoured, but it was hoped that during the engagement it would be able to land a force on Tarlen itself and seize as much war materiel as possible.

Though this was a powerful fleet the admiral still knew that she was taking a significant risk by using all of these ships for the attack. If the Empire happened to locate the space station used by the Alliance as its headquarters in the sector then the only defences it would have were in the form of more than forty sublight TIE fighters stolen from the Empire and a handful of armed freighters and it was unlikely that they would be able to hold off an Imperial attack force long enough to evacuate the station. But the admiral appreciated that war often required that risks be taken and this was a risk that both she and General Kain considered worthwhile.

"Admiral all ships are reporting ready." One of the bridge crew said out loud.

"Excellent." Admiral Aphanar replied, "Send to fleet all ships prepare to jump to the rendezvous point two parsecs out of Tarlen. Good hunting and may the Force be with us."

The *Scarlet Knife* set down on a quiet section of coast and as its occupants disembarked a pair of speeders approached, one a basic model and the other clearly an expensive luxury vehicle. The speeders pulled up close to the transport ship and their occupants also got out and stood on the sand.

"Major, Kara." Mace called out, "Good to see you both."

"Your boy needed help breaking you out though." Inra added and she grinned. However, both Mace and Vorn ignored the dig.

"So why are we here?" Jaysica asked.

"Isn't it obvious?" Mack responded and he looked out to sea, "We're here to meet the colonel." And then right on cue the *Harpoon* surfaced just off the shore.

"I hope someone remembered to bring a boat." Commander Kord commented.

The *Harpoon* was designed for only eight occupants, so with almost thirty now standing in its cargo hold the ship seemed somewhat cramped.

"Well," Colonel Sallir said as he looked around at the other rebels, "it would seem that we have yet to secure the freedom of two of Major Larcus' team."

"Do you even know where they're being held?" Vorn asked.

"Not precisely." The mon calamari colonel replied, "But we are certain they are alive."

"We may be able to help with that." Grayce said.

"How?" Mace asked.

"We've got three Imperial navy boys tied up in our hold." Trent said, "And they seemed quite keen to tell Combrowda here what they knew. Didn't they?"

Combrowda just growled.

"The transport carrying yourself and your female associate was headed to pick them up." Druvvon said.

"Unfortunately," Grayce went on, "they, along with a contingent of local resistance fighters are being held by a sizeable Imperial force that includes light armour."

"Yeah, I saw that." Mace said.

"But we can't just leave Tobis behind." Jaysica protested.

"Nobody is getting left behind." Colonel Sallir said.

"So what you're saying is that you've got a plan for us, less than thirty rebels, to fight our way through the boss's son, his stinky little witch friend, not to mention a few thousand Imperial stormtroopers to rescue our friends?" Kara said to the colonel, "Oh and I'm guessing we can't just use our ships to strafe them because that will attract the attention of the Navy ships Major Shrell told us about."

"She catches on quick doesn't she?" Tayal commented and looking at Kara she added, "How come you're not an officer?"

The assembled team leaders looked at one another awkwardly and no one spoke.

"What?" Tayal said, "What did I say?"

Devid leant over and whispered into her ear.

"Really?" she said, making a fist and swinging it in front of her, "Twice?"

"If we could return to the matter at hand?" Vorn said, "I believe we have a rescue to plan."