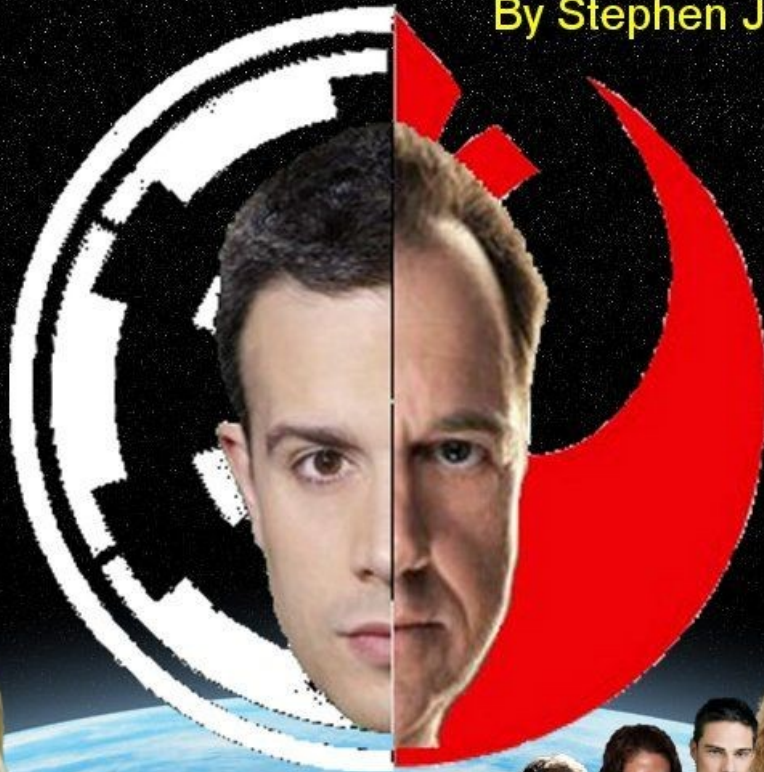


STAR WARS

9-09: False Flag

By Stephen J Dutton



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Civil war turns father against son

IT IS A TIME OF CRISIS. REBEL FORCES FIGHTING AGAINST THE EVIL GALACTIC EMPIRE ARE OUTNUMBERED AND OUTGUNNED BY THEIR FOES. THEY MUST INSTEAD RELY ON GUERRILLA WARFARE AND HIT AND FADE STRIKES BY SMALL GROUPS AGAINST STRONGER FORCES.

ONE SUCH GROUP IS LEAD BY THE EXILED NOBLEMAN VORN LARCUS III WHO, WITH THE HELP OF THE SMUGGLER MACE GRAYLE, CAPTAIN OF THE FREIGHTER THE *SILVER HAWK* TAKE THE FIGHT TO THE EMPIRE.

FACING THEM ARE A MULTITUDE OF ENEMIES, BOTH SEEN AND UNSEEN AS THE EMPIRE PLOTS TO BRING DOWN THE REBEL ALLIANCE AND FOREVER EXTINGUISH HOPE AND FREEDOM IN THE GALAXY...

FALSE FLAG

TARLEN HAS FALLEN TO THE ALLIANCE AND KARA LARCUS IS ABLE TO RETURN HOME. HOWEVER, THE RECEPTION RECEIVED BY THE REBELS IN HER COMMUNITY IS LESS THAN WELCOMING AS IT TURNS OUT THAT REBEL SOLDIERS ARE BEING BLAMED FOR ATTACKS ON LOCAL PEOPLE. REFUSING TO BELIEVE THAT THIS IS GENUINELY WHAT IS HAPPENING, VORN LARCUS AND HIS TEAM SET OUT TO DISCOVER THE TRUTH...

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

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1.

The orbital space around the largely agricultural world of Tarlen in the region of the sector known as the Heart thanks to its central geographical location was normally relatively free of starships. The bulk grain and animal transports that carried the planet's produce to other worlds would land directly on the surface and the world received few visitors not related to these. However, as the YT-1300 class freighter *Silver Hawk* dropped out of hyperspace it was confronted by dozens of large warships of various classes.

"Wow." Cass Grayle, the adopted daughter of the ship's owner Mace said when she saw these, "The Alliance is really taking protecting Tarlen seriously isn't it?" then when she spotted a pair of mon calamari manufactured MC-80 star cruisers she added, "Is Admiral Aphanar here in person too?"

"That's right Cass." Mace replied from the pilot's seat, "The planetary shield was damaged in the uprising so it's up to our fleet to make sure that the Empire doesn't come back and retake control of the world." then he spotted a group of triangular shaped vessels that were only about half the length of the mon calamari vessels and pointed at them, "And there are our latest acquisitions." he said.

"Those are interdictors aren't they?" Cass asked, recognising the class of ship from a recent encounter.

"That's right. An entire line of them defected to us." Mace said and Cass's face fell, "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Oh I was just thinking about how we went to all that trouble to steal the parts for a single gravity well projector and now four ships carrying four of them apiece just land in our laps."

"Those ships came from Admiral Sayer's squadron." Mace told her, "If we hadn't destroyed his battlecruiser they may not have defected and we couldn't have destroyed it without the gravity well projector aboard the *Refractor* that we stole the parts for."

All of a sudden a young woman appeared in the doorway at the back of the cockpit.

"Are we there?" she exclaimed.

"We're there Jaysica." Mace told the security and demolition expert that was part of the rebel team his ship carried, "You're home."

"Kara's home too." Cass pointed out. Then she looked at Jaysica and added, "So where are you going to go first?"

Jaysica hesitated at that point.

"I don't know." she answered as she sat down behind Cass, "I hadn't really thought about it."

"Kara's going to go and visit the farm where she grew up." Cass said, "Perhaps you could try visiting your old home."

"I don't think that's a good idea." Jaysica replied with obvious regret, "My sister Jaynie made it clear that my parents were really mad when I joined the Alliance."

"Yes but maybe things will be different now that Tarlen's left the Empire." Cass said, "You won't lose anything by trying."

"You don't need to make your mind up right away Jaysica." Mace added, "We've got a couple of weeks here and I can get you anywhere on the planet in an hour or two."

Jaysica sighed.

"Okay, I'll think about it." she said, "After all, the locals support us now don't they?"

"Father! Father come quickly!" the young boy called out as he ran into the house as the sun was setting.

"What's wrong?" the boy's father asked.

"Father there are soldiers near the herd. They're loading them onto trucks." the boy told his father and then man scowled.

"Stay here." he said and as he strode out of the door he reached out to pick up the blaster rifle that was stood up against the wall beside it. Carrying the weapon in his hands, the farmer walked towards the fields where his herd was grazing. His son watched as the farmer walked away until, ignoring his father's instruction, he ran outside and started to follow him.

The field was just a short walk away and as soon as the farmer was able to see it he saw that his son had been correct in his assessment. There were two repulsortrucks parked at the side of the field with ramps lowered so that the soldiers also present could load the animals into them. The farmer had seen plenty of soldiers over the years but these did not wear the typical grey uniforms and body armour that he had come to associate with the Imperial army or the brown of the planetary militia. Instead they wore grey trousers and blue shirts with sleeveless black jackets over them. Most also wore large white blast helmets as well while an officer watched as they herded the animals in the field towards the vehicles.

"Hey!" the farmer called out, "What are you doing here?"

"Your herd has been requisitioned by the Alliance." the officer said without making eye contact with the

farmer.

"Requisitioned? This herd is my livelihood. You can't just march in here take it." the farmer said.

"You should be grateful." another of the soldiers told him, "We saved you from the Empire."

"You saved us? We rose up against the Empire without you. Now get off my land and leave my herd alone. You're not better than those Imperial sleemos." the farmer said angrily and he pointed his blaster towards the officer, "Go on, get out of here."

Then there was a sudden flash of red as one of the soldiers fired his own blaster and the farmer fell backwards as the energy blast struck him. As he lay dying on the ground, the farmer spotted the horrified face of his son watching him from behind a nearby tree trunk and then he heard the voice of the Alliance officer.

"The farm house is about half a click west." he said to one of his troops, "Burn it to the ground."

"Are you ready Kara?" Vorn Larcus III, the leader of the rebel unit aboard the *Silver Hawk* asked his much younger wife as she sat on the side of her bunk combing her hair.

"Yeah, let's get this over with boss." she replied and Vorn frowned.

"Is something wrong?" he enquired.

"I don't know. I thought I wanted to come back here now that the Empire's gone but now that we're here I'm not so sure. There are a lot of bad memories for me here. That's why I didn't want to bring Vorn with us."

Kara explained, referring to their young son Vorn Larcus IV who she had named after his father. Then she got to her feet and walked over to Vorn and took his hand, "Let's go visit my family boss." she added.

Mace had set the *Silver Hawk* down less than a hundred metres from the farmhouse where Kara grew up. Much of the structure had collapsed and what remained was overgrown after years of neglect. Walking down the access ramp hand in hand, Kara led Vorn around the ruined farmhouse to a plot of ground at the rear where there was a neat row of stones on the ground, each of which was engraved with a name.

"Are you okay Kara?" Vorn said as Kara sniffed and he saw tears in her eyes.

"I'll be fine boss. Like I said this place brings back bad memories." she said.

"Colonel Larcus sir." a familiar voice called out from behind them and the two rebels turned to see a golden coloured protocol droid making its way towards them.

"What is it Jeeves?" Vorn asked.

"Sergeant Dorfus has unpacked the new grave stones and wishes to know when you will require them." the droid said and Vorn looked at Kara.

"They can bring them now." she told the droid.

"Yes Lieutenant Larcus." Jeeves replied and then the droid turned to head back to the *Silver Hawk*.

Vorn and Kara then turned back to the row of gravestones already in place and Vorn took note of the dates.

"My two eldest brothers both died in the Clone Wars." Kara said, "The Separatists bombed Tarlen and they were caught up in it. Then Danim and Alek took part in some protest against the Empire when it started nationalising farms and were both shot. Dad told them it was a bad idea. He thought they should have just stayed here and not gotten involved. They thought they knew better though and went off and got themselves killed."

"Is that what brought the Empire here?" Vorn asked and Kara nodded.

"My folks just about had time to bury them before the stormtroopers killed them as well." she said, "Ben and I buried them before we left and split up."

It was then that the rest of the rebels from the *Silver Hawk* appeared with a repulsorlift cart on which two more blocks of stone were loaded, each one engraved with the name of one of Kara's parents."

"Where do you want these?" the former mercenary Tharun Verser asked and Kara pointed to a pair of slight bulges in the ground.

"There." she said, "My dad is next to Alek and the other one is my mom."

"Come on then lad." Tharun said, turning towards Tobis Dorfus, the *Silver Hawk's* engineer, "Let's get these in place."

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Jaysica asked.

"Stay the hell away from them." Kara responded, scowling, "Because so help me gods, but if you break one of-

"Kara, not now." Vorn interrupted. Then he looked at Jaysica and added, "I think Tharun and Tobis have everything in hand."

Tharun and Tobis set the stones down to mark the graves and as they stood up straight again Tharun noticed something.

"Company." he said, looking past the other rebels to where a battered looking speeder had come to a halt close to the *Silver Hawk* and two men in civilian clothing were now walking towards the rebels. Each man carried a long barrelled blaster rifle but neither was aiming their weapons towards the rebels.

"We saw your ship come in. Who are- Kara? Kara Bilstran? Is that you?" the older of the two men called out.

"Yeah, it's me Telk." Kara replied and then she addressed her fellow rebels, "Kreven Telk owns the farm

about five kilometres from here. Jacen here is his son." she told them.

"Or at least I did." he replied, "That was until the Empire told me that they owned the land now and I was just a tenant who had to pay rent and meet a quota. What are you doing back here Kara? I heard you'd run off and joined the rebellion."

Kara smiled.

"I did. These are my friends." she replied and she looked around herself at the rest of the team.

Unexpectedly the newly arrived men both scowled and lifted their blasters.

"Easy there." Tharun said as he drew the blaster pistol from his belt and Mace produced a heavy blaster pistol from under his jacket. For now no-one aimed a weapon at anyone but the atmosphere was tense.

"I think you all ought to leave." Kreven said, "The rebellion doesn't have any friends around these parts."

"Why not?" Cass asked, "If the Empire was seizing people's land and-

"The Empire didn't steal entire herds and harvests Then burn farm houses to the ground." Jacen hissed.

"Neither does the Alliance." Vorn said.

"Tell that to the farmers who have lost crops and the young boy that's an orphan now." Jacen said.

"What my son is saying is true." Kreven added, "Kara, you and your friends should leave." then he looked at his son and nodded, "We're done here." he said.

"Wait." Vorn called out after the farmers as they turned to leave.

"My name is Vorn Larcus and I'm a lieutenant colonel with the Alliance. If any of our troops have acted in a criminal manner then I can make sure action is taken against them. But I need you to tell me exactly what has happened."

"We told you lieutenant colonel. "Jacen said, snarling, "Rebel soldiers came here and started stealing crops and herds. They told us that it was being requisitioned for the war effort. Some farmers were beaten when they protested and the Menner farm was burned down. Only their son escaped to tell us what happened."

"Then I need to speak with this young boy." Vorn said.

"Colonel are you sure this is a good idea?" Mace asked.

"Yeah, the Alliance does have a dedicated military police force. This sounds like their job colonel." Tharun added.

"We have something that the Alliance's military police doesn't though." Vorn responded and he looked at Kara, "Someone the locals can trust."

2.

When Kreven sent out word that Vorn wanted to speak with the young boy who had witnessed his parents' murder and the destruction of his home it attracted interest from all over the area and in addition to the family now looking after the boy, many more farmers arrived at Kreven's farm to hear what the rebel leader had to say.

"After they shot my dad they went to the house and set fire to it." the boy said as Vorn crouched in front of him, "My mom was inside and she ran out screaming. That's when they shot her as well."

"They tossed her body back inside." the woman who had arrived with the boy said, "We found her remains all burned."

"Tell me more about these soldiers you saw." Vorn said to the boy, "What did they look like."

"Like the men on the news." the boy answered and Vorn looked up at the other locals.

"News feeds are full of your troops." one of them said, "Black, blue and grey uniforms with white blast helmets."

"Fleet troopers." Tharun commented as Vorn looked at him and then nodded in agreement.

"How many times have they been seen?" Vorn asked.

"Four times since your troops started landing." Kreven said, "Each time they turn up in repulsortrucks and fill them with whatever they want."

"Repulsortrucks. That's interesting." Mace commented.

"Why dad?" Cass asked.

"Oh, err, because fleet troopers should be able to deploy straight from orbit." Tobis pointed out, "They, err, they'd use shuttles or light transports like the *Silver Hawk*."

"Well these had trucks with local plates." another of the assembled farmers said, "I saw them myself when they stole my grain crop."

Vorn then stood up straight and looked around the room.

"You have my word that I will get to the bottom of this." he announced, "The Alliance does not steal from the people and it most certainly does not murder civilians in their homes. If any of you encounter these soldiers again then please do not attempt to resist. Instead let us know as soon as possible. Our ship is located on the Bilstran farm where my wife used to live so we're close at hand. Just ask Kreven if you have to, he's seen it."

There were mutters from the assembled crowd as they discussed what Vorn's assurance could mean and when the rebels then left the farmhouse the crowd also began to disperse. However, a small group of them remained behind.

"Haven't you got homes to go to?" Kreven asked as he stared at them.

"We wanted to speak to you first." one of the other farmers said.

"About what?"

"About these rebels." another of the farmers said, "We don't trust them. They're here to spy on us."

"Kara used live around here." Kreven pointed out, "She knows what things are like for us."

"That's just it. She used to live around here. But I remember her before she left, she was never a farmer. She's not one of us any more."

"So what are you suggesting?" Kreven asked.

"There are only seven of them and you know exactly where their ship is." one of the farmers said, "We're thinking of paying them a little visit to let the rebellion know that we won't be pushed around."

"So the real question is where do you stand Kreven?" another farmer added, "Because if you're not with us then you're against us."

"Colonel Larcus sir, I am so glad to see you back again." Jeeves said when the rebels returned to the *Silver Hawk* "Might I ask how your meeting went?"

"Poorly." Vorn replied, "Someone is stealing from the locals and the Alliance is being blamed. I need to speak to Rear Admiral Aphanar immediately." and he marched past his protocol droid and to the ship's cockpit. Meanwhile Tharun reached out and took hold of Mace.

"Something wrong?" Mace asked.

"I'm not sure. Did you get a look at that crowd there tonight captain?" Tharun asked.

"The farmers? Sure, why?" Mace answered.

"I think some of them would have liked to have strung us up from the nearest tree." Tharun said.

"But the colonel said that we would help them. Why would they do that?" Jaysica asked.

"Because they didn't believe him." Kara said as she sat down in the lounge, "That's the problem with the people around here. Some of them literally are nerf herders and it shows."

"I think we should be prepared for any eventuality captain." Tharun said.

"You want to post a guard in case they attack?" Mace asked and Tharun nodded.

"We can stick Harvey in the house." he said, "That little droid will be able to alert us if anyone comes near the ship."

"Oh, err, I'm not sure Harvey would like that." Tobis said. Harvey was an R5 astromech droid that belonged to Tobis and like most R5 droids, the basic nature of the droid's personality matrix had produced a machine that could frequently be cantankerous.

"That's why you get to tell him Tobis." Mace said, smiling and he started to head for his cabin.

"Where are you going?" Jaysica called out after him.

"To get my deck sweeper." Mace replied without turning around, "if we're going to have to shoot at angry farmers then I'd rather not have to kill them."

In the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit Vorn sat down in the co-pilot's seat and immediately activated the ship's communication system, connecting with the orbiting rebel star cruisers.

"Lieutenant Colonel Larcus calling *Wave Rider*, do you read me?" he signalled.

"Yes Colonel Larcus, we read you." a mon calamari voice responded.

"Is the admiral there? I need to speak with her urgently." Vorn told the communications officer.

"One moment colonel. I'll see if she's available."

Vorn only had to wait for a few seconds before another mon calamari voice was heard over the communication link, this one the slightly higher pitch of a female member of the species.

"Colonel Larcus, I wasn't aware that you had been deployed to the Tarlen system." Admiral Aphanar said.

"I haven't been." Vorn replied, "My wife is from here and she wanted to visit her old family home now that it's been liberated from the Empire."

"I see. But I don't see why you needed to contact me about it." the admiral said.

"There's an issue with the locals admiral. They are claiming that units of Alliance fleet troopers have been requisitioning their crops and herds. Worse still there have been deaths. An eye witness says a unit of our troops murdered two people who resisted. Admiral, have any fleet trooper units been deployed to the surface?"

"Negative colonel. Only army units have made planet-fall, not marines" Admiral Aphanar said, "All fleet units are still in orbit. I can also guarantee you that no unit has been given permission to carry out any requisitioning of supplies without paying for them. Whoever is responsible for these acts are not acting on behalf of the Alliance."

It was then that Kara entered the cockpit, kissed Vorn on the top of his head and then sat down in the pilot's seat beside him as he smiled at her.

"I'm going to send a security detachment down to you now, what is your location?" Admiral Aphanar asked.

"I don't think that's a very good idea admiral. The locals probably won't react well to more Alliance uniforms. My team and I can handle the investigation for now." Vorn told her in response.

"Very well colonel, but keep me informed of your progress. If word of this spreads then it may cause dissatisfaction with the Alliance to break out among the general population."

"Understood admiral, *Silver Hawk* out." Vorn said before shutting off the communications and then he looked at Kara.

"Not to try and sound alarming boss, but the others are getting ready to start shooting the locals." she said and Vorn's eyes widened.

"What the hell?" he exclaimed as he leapt to his feet and hurried out of the cockpit. Reaching the lounge he found the other rebels there checking their weapons, "What's going on here?" he asked.

"Just a little insurance policy." Mace replied, "The locals didn't look too happy about us being here and we thought it better to be prepared just in case they decide to try and pay us a visit."

"We're only using weapons that can be set to 'stun'." Jaysica added, "We won't hurt anybody." and then she slammed a power cell into her carbine while her finger was holding down the trigger, producing a sudden blue pulse of energy that shot upwards into the ceiling and only narrowly missed Jaysica herself, "That was an accident." she added as the other rebels stared at her.

"Did someone just fire a blaster in here?" Kara said as she came running from the cockpit. Then when she saw everyone staring at Jaysica she scowled, "Oh, I should have known it was you." she said.

"You only made that hole, not hurting anyone little lady?" Tharun said to Jaysica.

"Mace may I have a private word?" Vorn asked.

"Sure, Let's go." Mace replied and the two men headed for the cockpit.

"What do you suppose that is about?" Cass asked.

"My guess is that the boss doesn't like your plan." Kara replied.

Inside the cockpit Mace closed the door behind him and Vorn.

"Mace, do you really think that shooting the locals is the way to go?" Vorn asked.

"If they start shooting at us then yes I do. Like Jaysica said colonel, our weapons will be set for stun. I'll wager that any blasters pointing in our direction won't be. Why, what would you have us do?"

"I was thinking that we could just sit inside your shielded starship and have Kara fire a couple of blasts from our laser cannon over their heads." Vorn said, "Your plan is good if they come at us on foot but supposing they decide to rig up a speeder with explosives and crash it into the ship? We can't be outside shooting at them when something like that goes off."

"You're right." Mace replied, "Tharun and I just figured that the locals would come at us more directly."

"That's okay." Vorn said, "Everyone may as well be armed but we need to be alert for something more than a few angry farm hands with hunting weapons."

Just then there was a sudden whistling from the communications panel and Vorn looked at it.

"What's going on?" he said.

"Harvey." Mace replied, "We sent him out to act as a sentry." and he quickly looked at the communications display where the astromech droid's transmission was translated into legible text, "They're here." he said, "There are several vehicles approaching from the south west."

"We need to be ready." Vorn said, opening the cockpit door again and the two men rushed to the lounge, "They're here." he told the gathered rebels. Cass, get in the cockpit, power up the shield and start running preflight checks. Kara, I want you in the turret."

"The turret? Isn't that overkill boss?" Kara said.

"I don't want you firing at anyone. It's just to scare them." Vorn told her and she nodded.

"Okay got it boss." she replied and she ran to the the ladder that led up to the *Silver Hawk's* turret.

"What about us colonel? How should we deploy?" Tharun asked.

"We don't for now." Mace told him, "We're going to see if we can persuade them that attacking us is more trouble than it's worth."

"Oh, err, what about Harvey?" Tobis asked, "He, err, he's still out there."

"Then get him back in." Vorn answered, "If e can't drive them off then we may need to leave ourselves and I don't want to leave him behind any more than I would one of you."

Tobis nodded and ran to the access ramp, hurrying down it to retrieve his droid.

"I better go as well." Jaysica said before running after Tobis, "Tobis, wait for me." she called out after him.

In the *Silver Hawk's* turret Kara activated the laser cannon's targeting system and turned the weapon towards the oncoming vehicle. Although there was an area around the *Silver Hawk* when the hull prevented the turret from being depressed far enough, the approaching speeders were still well beyond that point and as Kara aimed her laser cannon at the lead vehicle the targeting system gave her a close up view of it.

"Okay I see them." she said into the intercom, "Looks like a trio of skiffs, each one carrying about a dozen of the locals, plus a number of others on speeder bikes. Looks like seven or eight of them."

"A proper little local militia." Tharun commented when he heard this.

"We need to make sure that the entrances are all secured." Vorn said, "Tharun you guard the cargo elevator and Mace you take the access ramp. When Tobis and Jaysica get back station them in the lounge to watch the top hatch."

"What about you colonel?" Mace asked.

"I'm going to go and see if I can talk to our guests." Vorn replied.

3.

"Watch that cannon!" the driver of one of the skiffs yelled when he saw the *Silver Hawk's* turret suddenly turn towards them. However, the weapon that was easily capable of turning any of the open topped skiffs into burning scrap metal held its fire as another of the skiff drivers also gave a shout.

"Movement!" he yelled, "There's someone underneath the ship."

As the other locals watched Vorn came walking out from under the *Silver Hawk's* hull and stood between them and the ship. Then he took his comlink and raised it to his mouth.

"Kara I need a warning shot about fifty metres in front of me."

"Got it boss." Kara responded and the turret suddenly tilted downwards before there was a bright flash of red and Vorn felt the heat of the energy blast as it passed over his head and struck the ground ahead of him, sending lumps of dirt high into the sky. The effect of this was immediate as the skiff drivers and the outriders on speeder bikes all veered off. There was no sense of order in this as Vorn would expect from a properly trained military unit and many of them had to swerve again before they crashed into one of the other vehicles. Three of the speeder bikes accelerated and shot past the *Silver Hawk* while Tobis and Jaysica were still rushing back towards it with Harvey and the men riding the lightweight vehicles fired blaster pistols at the two rebels. Thankfully, despite being caught out in the open the two rebels escaped unscathed when the riders proved unable to accurately aim their weapons from their still moving mounts.

"Down!" Tobis yelled before diving on top of Jaysica and she squealed as he knocked her to ground beneath him. Meanwhile Harvey let out a similar sounding shrill whistle and the droid continued to head towards the waiting access ramp of the *Silver Hawk*.

Crawling off Jaysica, Tobis unslung his carbine and unfolded the stock for better accuracy. He did not return fire right away however, even with his weapon on its stun setting he knew that shooting someone riding a speeder bike would still be lethal if they promptly fell from a vehicle travelling at significant speed.

Meanwhile the skiffs had come to a complete halt and the occupants were hurriedly disembarking and spreading themselves out, fearing that Kara would fire another blast from the laser cannon at any moment.

"Good day gentlemen. Ladies." Vorn shouted, "Perhaps we can discuss this in a civil manner."

"You shot at us!" one of the locals who had confronted Kreven earlier yelled back and he advanced towards Vorn with a blaster in his hand that was aimed directly at the rebel officer. In response Vorn did nothing, instead allowing the local man to approach him to the point where the muzzle of his blaster was pressed up against his chest.

"Yes, but given that you were all clearly armed as you rushed towards us suggests that you intended us harm." Vorn pointed out, "If you hadn't then you would have called ahead. I'm guessing that Mister Telk told you the location of our ship?"

"Yeah, he told us. Now what's to stop me from pulling this trigger right now and sending the message that we won't be pushed around by people wanting to steal our crops?"

"Firstly because killing me won't do anything to stop whoever it is that has been attacking your community. Right now I'm all that stands between you and them." Vorn said and then as he continued he pointed towards the *Silver Hawk's* turret, "Secondly you may want to consider that highly efficient Taim and Bak laser cannon up there? You'll find that it's my wife currently sat at its controls and she has been known to get angry when I'm threatened"

The still active comlink in Vorn's hand picked up his words and the mention of her by him caused Kara to adjust the aim of the laser cannon, now aiming it at where he and the local man stood. The threat was clear, if the local shot Vorn then there would be nothing to prevent her from vaporising him with a shot from the laser cannon that was designed for engaging starships.

"You can keep your weapon pointing at me if it makes you feel better." Vorn said, "After all I don't think either of us wants there to be any more shooting now do we?"

"What are you doing Josha? Kill him!" another of the locals called out as he came marching towards Vorn and the man holding a blaster to his chest.

"Stay back." the man identified as Josha responded.

"Very good." Vorn said, smiling, "Now I've just been in communication with Rear Admiral Aphanar. She commands the fleet currently parked in orbit around Tarlen to protect it until the planetary shield can be repaired made operational. The description you've given me of the uniforms worn by whoever is responsible for the attacks on your community suggest that they belong to fleet troopers but the admiral has confirmed that there are no such units deployed to Tarlen at all. She offered to deploy a security unit to investigate what has been happening but I told her that you'd rather my team handled this."

"Why should I believe you?" Josha said, snarling.

"Perhaps because my team are well trained and better armed than your people are? Think about this for a

moment, the *Silver Hawk* may only be a light freighter but Mace has made some special modifications himself. The main modification is the addition of some very effective deflector shields. That ship will easily soak up everything you can throw at it and once it's in the air it can rain down fire on you. If I'm the villain you believe me to be then why haven't I already done that? Trust me, I'm not afraid to shoot first when threatened. Even then, I could lie and claim the other guy just missed an easy shot before I returned fire later on. So what's it to be?"

Joshua lowered his blaster.

"Stand down." he shouted. At first the other locals just looked at one another, confused, "I said stand down."

Joshua called out again, "I'm starting to think we may have been a bit hasty."

"Thank you." Vorn said, "Now what about Mister Telk? Can I have your assurance that he will be released unharmed?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Joshua said, "We've not done anything to Kreven."

"Then how did you find out where we were?" Vorn asked.

"We just asked him and he told us." Joshua told him.

Vorn looked around, trying to see if he could see Kreven among the mob of locals.

"He didn't come with you though?" he said when he failed to spot the man and Joshua shook his head.

"No, he didn't want to. But he gave us your location and that was enough for us." he said.

"Very well." Vorn said, "Now if you'd like to gather up your people and head back to your homes then my team can get to work on stopping these attacks."

Vorn then watched as Joshua retreated and the other locals began to retreat to their vehicles as well.

"Nice work boss." Kara's voice said from Vorn's comlink, "Sometimes I forget how persuasive you can be.

You know, like the first time we slept together." and Vorn frowned as he raised his comlink to his mouth.

"If I recall correctly Kara it was you that suggested it. Something along the lines of 'If I'm going to die stuck in an escape pod then I may as well go out-'"

"Open channel colonel." Mace's voice interrupted.

"I'm heading back." Vorn said, "I think we've got a new problem but it's one that could help us solve this problem."

"Really? What's that boss?" Kara asked.

"Kreven Telk. I think he has something to do with what's going on around here." Vorn answered.

4.

The cantina was much quieter than was normal for this time of day and week but this did not surprise Kreven as he entered it, guessing that many of those who would normally be here were instead out launching their attack on the *Silver Hawk*. However, there was one familiar face sat in the far corner of the cantina and after buying a drink from the bar Kreven headed towards the man.

"What's going on?" the man asked as Kreven sat down, "Where the hell is everyone?"

Kreven smiled.

"Did you see that ship come down earlier?" he responded.

"Of course. It looked like just a freighter." the other man said.

"There was a rebel team aboard it. One of the members used to live around here and she came to visit her old home."

"You saw them?"

"Of course. My son and I went to take a look and I recognised Kara Bilstran pretty much right away. I warned them that they might not be so welcome around here but they took it upon themselves to try investigating the raids. Mind you, I think they'll be changing their minds right about now."

"Why? What have you done?"

"I told everyone that the rebel leader wanted to talk to everyone about the attacks and they came to hear him out. Turns out that some of them were already planning to launch an attack on the rebel ship without me needing to prompt them. I gave them the location and I guess that's where they all are now."

"Very good." the other man replied, smiling at Kreven and then he slid a package across the table, "This is your cut from what we've taken so far."

"It's not much." Kreven commented.

"We're dealing in crops here, not black market kyber crystals. There isn't a massive demand for nerfs and beans."

"It'll do. But I expect a bonus next time for dealing with these rebels." Kreven said as he took the packet and pushed it into his pocket and then gulped down what was left of his drink. Then he added, "Or maybe next time I just won't bother doing anything about them."

"That would be a mistake Kreven." the other man hissed.

"Really? Because you guys can't threaten me like you used to be able to. I can tip off the rebels about where you are any time I like. In fact I think I deserve a bigger share as standard."

"That was never a part of our agreement." the other man said.

"Then I'm altering our agreement." Kreven said as he got to his feet, "Pray I don't alter it any further."

The other man at the table glared at Kreven as he left the cantina. Then after waiting several minutes more to make sure that he would not be seen leaving with the local farmer the other man also got up and made his way outside, walking the short distance to where he had left his speeder bike. The bike was a standard Imperial military model, an Aratech 74-Z commonly used by scout troopers but this example had been disarmed. The man climbed onto his bike and started it up before riding it out of town. However, rather than making his way to one of the many farms that covered the surrounding countryside for many kilometres in all directions he headed for the rough terrain of the hillside beyond these. This land was too uneven for use with crops and the presence of predatory animals made it unsuitable for allowing herds to graze there. He rode his speeder bike to a large cave opening and headed straight inside before coming to a halt next to a row of similar vehicles that still possessed their ventrally mounted laser cannons while beyond them were several repulsortrucks.

Dismounting from his speeder bike the man walked past the parked vehicles to where a cluster of silver coloured survival tents had been erected and outside some of these sat several more men who looked up and nodded to acknowledge him before he went into one of the tents. Inside a man dressed in the black of an officer in the stormtrooper corps sat behind a folding desk and the man snapped to attention.

"At ease sergeant." the officer said as he looked up, "You have something to report?"

"Yes colonel. The farmer, Kreven Telk, I think he's going to be a problem."

"Kreven Telk was an ISB informant for more than a decade. What makes you think his loyalties will suddenly shift now?"

"I think his only loyalty was money sir. He's got it into his head that we need him more than he needs us." the trooper explained, "He's demanding a larger share. His threat seems to be that he'll inform the rebels about our presence. That freighter we saw landing earlier brought a team of them to the area."

"Are they hunting us?" the officer said, suddenly concerned.

"Yes sir. Though it is my understanding that that was not why they came here. Apparently one of their number, a Kara Bilstran is a local to these parts."

"Kara Bilstran." the officer said, frowning, "I know that name from somewhere." and he reached out to the portable computer terminal on his desk and entered the name into the database he had been able to download before he and his men fled from their outpost when they heard that a large local militia unit was on its way to arrest them, "Ah yes, here it is. The Bilstran family were labelled as traitors about seven years ago. This Kara is known to have joined the rebellion and returned here to cause trouble a couple of years ago." then he stopped reading and his face fell.

"What's wrong?" the trooper asked.

"Kara Bilstran is part of Vorn Larcus' unit. As in Lord Vorn Larcus the third, former member of Parliament on Estran. He is high on the sector's most wanted list. If he's here then we need to deal with this threat quickly." "If Vorn Larcus is so important and we kill him then won't the rebellion send more of its agents to find out what happened?"

"Most likely yes. So after we deal with him and his fellow band of terrorists we'll move on to another area. I'm sure we can stir up more anti-rebel sentiment just as easily somewhere where we don't have to buy off one of the locals." the officer said, "Tell the men to prepare to move out. We'll hit Telk's home after sunset. We'll kill him and raze the buildings. We won't bother with the fake uniforms but we'll make sure the rebellion is blamed.

"Boss what makes you say that Kreven is behind all this?" Kara asked as the rebels gathered around the table in the *Silver Hawk's* lounge area.

"Only he and his son knew where the ship had landed." Vorn replied, "He told that mob where to find us without any pressure being applied to him."

"According to the mob's leader." Mace pointed out.

"He had no reason to lie." Vorn said.

"So what do we do about it colonel?" Tharun asked, "Are we going to take him out?"

"No, not yet at least." Vorn said, shaking his head, "Tharun I want you and Jaysica to go to his farm and see what you can find. Avoid all contact with anyone unless absolutely necessary."

"A stealth job. Got it." Tharun said and then he looked at Jaysica, "Okay little lady, we're up."

"Seriously boss, you're sending the klutz?" Kara commented.

"She is pretty good with alarms." Mace reminded her.

"Pretty good? I'm really good with alarms." Jaysica said.

"Oh, err, yes she is." Tobis agreed and Jaysica smiled as she reached out and held his hand.

"Like you wouldn't agree to that." Kara muttered.

"What are the rest of us going to be doing while Tharun and Jaysica are watching the farmer?" Cass said.

"Listening for any news of more attacks." Vorn answered, "I'm the only one of the five of us remaining aboard that can't fly the ship so I want the four of you to take it in shifts to monitor local communications for word of an attack. If there is anything then get us off the ground and we'll see if we can make it there in time to stop anyone else getting hurt."

"Let's just hope these guys don't have the same access to military firepower as they do to military uniforms." Kara said.

The sun was just starting to set when Tharun and Jaysica arrived outside Kreven's farmhouse, having made their way from the *Silver Hawk* across country on foot.

"Stop fidgeting." Tharun whispered as he took up a position beside an outbuilding and aimed his rifle at the main structure so that he could use its built in optical sight to observe the farmhouse in more detail.

"It's not my fault." the soaking wet and mud covered Jaysica responded, "This mud is everywhere."

"Well I warned you not to try stepping on those rocks when we crossed that river. You should have just waded through like me." Tharun said.

"I didn't want to get my pants wet." Jaysica replied, "It's not my fault that one of those rocks was a giant freshwater crab."

"I just wish I'd had a recording rod. Kara would have paid me for footage of that. Now try and stay still while I see who's home before you break in." then he looked at each window and doorway in turn to see what he could see. Fortunately his task was made easier by the internal lights being on in occupied rooms and the difference in lighting not only illuminated the occupants very well, Tharun also knew that those inside the building would have difficulty in seeing out because of the way the light inside would reflect off the windows.

"That's not funny." Jaysica said, frowning as she reached inside her jacket and pulled out a small eel-like creature that she tossed away with a look of disgust on her face.

"Looks like they're sitting down to dinner." Tharun said as he turned his attention back to the farmhouse, "I see Kreven, a woman I'm guessing is his wife and three others, including Jacen. The other two are younger so they're probably his kid as well."

"If they're all gathered together then this is a good time for me to break in and take a quiet look around."

Jaysica said and Tharun winced. He knew that Jaysica was highly proficient in dealing with security systems

but he also knew that stealth was not her strong point.

"Perhaps we should go in together little lady." he suggested, "You make us an entrance and then keep watch while I take a look around. First though I need to figure out where we should look." and he began to study the rooms of the farmhouse that were visible from the rebels' hiding place.

"You don't think I can do it, do you?" Jaysica hissed and then she punched Tharun in his arm, narrowly avoiding causing him to let off a shot from his rifle.

"Hey, careful there little lady." he said, "This thing will put a hole right through the wall of that farmhouse and then it'll be pretty difficult to hide the fact that we're out here."

Just then there was a sharp 'crack' from in the darkness and both rebels froze, recognising the sound of a piece of wood being stepped on and snapping. Tharun turned his rifle away from the farmhouse, using its optical sight to peer into the darkness and he suddenly stopped when he saw something.

"What's wrong?" Jaysica whispered.

"I count three, no make that four men heading for the farmhouse. All armed." Tharun told her and Jaysica quickly checked her carbine, shaking it to make sure that the last of the river water was out of it. Meanwhile Tharun continued to watch the four men as they made their way quietly towards the farmhouse. The men were all of similar height and build and each man carried a Blastech E-11 rifle. Not as powerful as the A-280 that Tharun carried, the E-11 was the standard issue weapon for most troops in both the Imperial and Alliance armed forces and many had also found their way onto the black market. On closer inspection Tharun noticed that all of the equipment carried by the men had a uniformity of style. Most significantly the belts they wore were the standard white equipment belts of Imperial stormtroopers.

"Stormtroopers." Tharun said, snarling, "I should have recognised those buzz cuts they're all sporting. They'd fit perfectly inside a stormtrooper's helmet."

"Stormtroopers? Here? But why?" Jaysica replied, unfolding the stock of her carbine and bracing it against her shoulder before she too pointed her weapon towards the advancing stormtroopers.

It was then that the four stormtroopers came to a halt and all dropped into crouching positions so that they faced in all directions and a smile spread across Tharun's face.

"Can't see so well in the dark without your helmets huh?" he muttered to himself, "Okay little lady, don't move a muscle." he added, "I don't think they've seen us and I like it better that way."

While Tharun continued to watch the stormtroopers through his rifle's scope he saw the trooper facing towards the farmhouse unfold his rifle's stock and take aim towards the illuminated window where Kreven and his family could be clearly seen eating their evening meal.

"They're here to kill him." Tharun said suddenly and with a flick of his thumb he released the safety catch of his rifle before he squeezed the trigger and fired a single shot that struck the aiming stormtrooper in his back, "Down!" Tharun snapped the moment that the stormtrooper fell dead and he dragged Jaysica to the ground with him as the remaining stormtroopers returned fire, sending rapid bursts of blaster fire into the darkness towards the source of the bright red bolt of energy that had just killed their comrade.

As the barrage of blaster fire passed over the two rebels, the occupants of the farmhouse also threw themselves to the floor. The sudden exchange of energy bolts outside their home alerted them to the hostile presence.

"Jacen, we need to get the blasters." Kreven told his oldest son and while Kreven's wife did her best to comfort their younger children the two men crawled across the floor to a closet at the side of the kitchen. Kreven opened this to reveal a pair of hunting blaster rifles that he removed, handing one of the weapons to his son.

After loading his rifle, Kreven risked getting to his feet and dashing across the room to the light switch to turn off the lights and make his family harder to target.

"When we open fire you need to get the kids out of here." he told his wife and she nodded.

"Who do we shoot at dad?" Jacen asked as he peered through the kitchen window and saw bursts of blaster fire moving back and forth.

"They're all on my land. Shoot everyone." Kreven said, snarling and his son nodded, "Now!"

Simultaneously the two men pointed their rifles out of the window and opened fire. The first shots blasted holes in the window and sent fragments of molten glass flying away from them as the blaster bolts headed towards the rival rebel and Imperial troops.

Jaysica squealed as one of the shots from inside the farmhouse passed close enough by her that she felt the heat of its passage through the air.

"Now they're shooting at us as well?" she exclaimed, "Don't they realise that we're trying to help them?"

"My guess would be 'no'." Tharun responded, "Now how about you use that carbine to keep their heads down? Set it to burst fire and put a few blasts over their heads long enough for me to get over to that speeder." and he nodded towards the Telk family's landspeeder that was parked outside the farmhouse.

Jaysica nodded as she adjusted her weapon to fire in short bursts and then she opened fire in the direction of the stormtroopers. The darkness continued to inhibit her aim but by firing bursts instead of trying to pick off the stormtroopers with individually aimed shots she forced the three surviving soldiers to cease fire and take

cover. This gave Tharun the chance to emerge from cover and make a run for the speeder. However, as he ran there was a flash of red from the direction of the farmhouse that slipped his side.

"Kriff!" he exclaimed as he fell.

"Tharun!" Jaysica called out.

"I'm fine." he replied, "It just caught my blast vest, that's all." then he got up and ran the final few metres to the speeder and used it for cover against both the stormtroopers and Kreven and his son. Hidden from view, he adjusted his rifle to emit a stun pulse rather than lethal blasts before he leant over the speeder and aimed it at the window Kreven and Jacen were firing from. Tharun knew that the two farmers would be using rifles and thus when the next flash of red indicated the position of a blaster's muzzle he knew to aim off by about a metre before he fired two rapid shots back through the shattered window. One of these struck Kreven and he collapsed to the floor.

"Dad!" Jacen exclaimed before another bright blue pulse of energy incapacitated him as well and he fell to the floor beside his father.

A single blaster shot from a stormtrooper then struck the landspeeder and Tharun ducked down behind it again while he reset his rifle. Although the stormtroopers were not wearing their usual plastoid armour, Tharun could not be certain that they were not wearing more covert types of body armour beneath their clothing that would dampen a stun blast entirely and so firing lethal shots was his only real option.

One of the stormtroopers began to move closer to Tharun and when Jaysica saw this she fired towards him. In the poor light she missed him narrowly and he turned to return fire but in that moment Tharun leant over the speeder once more and shot him in the neck, the powerful energy blast coming close to decapitating him and killing him instantly.

Their team leader having been killed by Tharun's first shot and now another member of their unit killed, leaving them with no numerical advantage, one of the two remaining stormtroopers decided that their mission here was no longer viable.

"We should withdraw." he told him comrade.

"Fall back to the trees, I'll cover you." the other said and the first nodded.

The second stormtrooper then began to fire short, rapid bursts, alternating these between firing towards Jaysica and Tharun while his comrade got up and started to run. However, Tharun quickly noticed this pattern and realised that only one of the stormtroopers was firing while the other withdrew. He waited for another burst of blaster fire to pass above him while he hid behind the speeder and the moment that it ceased he rose up from behind the vehicle with his rifle set to fully automatic and fired at the running stormtrooper. The darkness was lit up by the bright red of the blaster bolts and two of them struck the stormtrooper in the back, sending him tumbling to the ground.

Seeing his final comrade killed, the last stormtrooper got to his feet and began to back up slowly. He continued to fire as he withdrew, now concentrating more fire on Tharun than Jaysica but this gave the female rebel all the opportunity she needed to aim her carbine towards the highly visible source of the blaster fire and two rapid shots fired by her sent him to the ground as well.

"Nice shooting there little lady." Tharun called out as he emerged from cover, as much to guarantee that even in the darkness she would know it was him as to congratulate her.

"What happened to Kreven?" she replied.

"Stunned. Along with his son." Tharun said, "Now let's get inside. We'll have to wait for them to wake up for some answers.

The two rebels made their way to the farmhouse, Tharun keeping his rifle at the ready just in case there were any further potential hostiles lurking in the darkness. The door that led into the kitchen was locked but rather than waste time in letting Jaysica try to override the lock Tharun simply blasted the mechanism with his rifle and then kicked the door open.

"Clear." he said when he saw Kreven and Jacen both lying unconscious on the floor and Jaysica hurried inside, grabbing the two hunting rifles that lay beside the farmers and placing them out of reach before they could regain consciousness.

"So what now?" Jaysica asked.

"Now we wait little lady." Tharun said and then he smiled, "So you may as well make us both a caf while we're here."

5.

A bucket of cold water was thrown over Kreven and Jacen when they began to stir, accelerating the process of waking them up and bringing them both into a more lucid state together.

“Good evening gents.” Tharun said as he stood over the two men and aimed his rifle down at them, “Now how about you tell us why Imperial stormtroopers want you dead?”

“Why would they want to kill us?” Jacen exclaimed suddenly, looking at his father, “You said they had no choice but to pay us more.”

“Shut up boy!” Kreven snapped as Tharun snarled.

“Collaborators.” he hissed, “The colonel figured as much.”

“It's not like you think.” Kreven said, “After the revolt some guy turned up here to blackmail me.”

“How could he blackmail you if you didn't already have something to hide?” Jaysica asked.

“That's a very good point there little lady.” Tharun said, smiling at her before he looked back at the two men on the floor and his expression hardened, “So why don't you two be proper gentlemen and answer the little lady's question?” he said, “What have you done that would be worth blackmailing you over?”

“I didn't do anything.” Jacen said, “It was all him.” and he glared at his father.

“I said shut up you stupid nerf herder! Kreven yelled and he reached out to strike his son. Tharun was quicker though, spinning his rifle around and bringing the butt down on Kreven's temple and the man rolled aside with his hands pressed to his forehead.

“Talk.” Tharun said as he turned his rifle again and pointed it at Jacen.

“Dad was an informer for the ISB.” Jacen replied.

“It kept the Empire away from my farm.” Kreven hissed, “More or less.”

“I thought the Empire nationalised your farm.” Jaysica commented.

“That's what dad told people to explain why we'd get Imperial visitors. He said they coming here to monitor our quotas.” Jacen said.

“So in reality they were coming here so you could tell them what all your neighbours were up to.” Tharun said and Jacen nodded, “But now you're taking a cut of what's being stolen from them.”

“What should we do with them?” Jaysica said, looking at Tharun.

“Nothing.” Tharun replied, lowering his rifle, “I'm sure that the colonel will want to let the local authorities know so that they can decide if they're going to take any action but it's not up to us now.”

“You can't. They'll kill us. Mobs are hanging people in the cities.” Kreven said.

“Then perhaps you should make it worth our while to keep our mouths shut.” Tharun said and Jaysica frowned.

“Doesn't that mean that we're blackmailing them as well?” she said and Tharun smiled.

“That's right little lady. But I figure that they're used to it by now.” he replied.

“Kreven's a collaborator?” Kara said when Tharun and Jaysica returned to the *Silver Hawk* and broke the news about Kreven's true role in recent events to the other rebels, “How long?”

“From the sounds of it not until after you joined the Alliance.” Tharun said, “So he probably wasn't responsible for what happened to your brothers if that's what you're wondering.”

“How many stormtroopers are we talking about here?” Vorn asked.

“Kreven said he didn't know colonel. But I don't see it being more than a platoon or so.”

“How do you know?” Cass said.

“From the number of troops involved in the raids.” Mace told her, “From what we've been told it's only about a single squad. If there were many more then they'd come in larger numbers.”

“That is how the Empire tends to operate.” Vorn commented, nodding in agreement.

“Yeah, why send ten men when you can send a hundred?” Kara added.

“The doctrine of fear.” Vorn said.

“Kreven seemed to think that they're based somewhere east of here.” Tharun said.

“That makes sense boss.” Kara said, “There are caves around there and the land's no good for farming.”

“My guess is that they'd set up a camp inside one of the larger caves.” Tharun said, “One big enough to keep their vehicles out of sight from the air.”

“That's going to make finding them tough colonel.” Mace commented, “The *Silver Hawk's* sensors aren't set up for ground penetrating searches.”

“Kara, can you direct us to the largest caves?” Vorn asked, looking at his wife and she nodded at him.

“Sure boss. All the local kids spent at least some time exploring them.” she said.

“Then we have a plan.” Vorn said, “Come first light we'll use the *Silver Hawk* for transport and check out each of the caves in turn. Then once we've found the Imperial troops we'll evaluate the situation further. If there

are too many for us to handle on our own then we'll call in support from the fleet. I'm sure Admiral Aphanar can get some genuine fleet marines here in a matter of minutes. Otherwise we'll deal with them ourselves."

"Report sergeant." the stormtrooper officer told the soldier who had just entered his tent and saluted.

"Captain the team sent to eliminate Telk and his family hasn't returned yet." the sergeant said and the captain frowned.

"They were on foot weren't they?" he asked.

"Yes sir. But they still should have been back by now. They should have made it to the farm just after nightfall. Say twenty minutes to take out the family and burn their house then it's a three hour march back here. They're four hours overdue."

"Surely you're not suggesting that a farmer could fight off four highly trained scout troopers with the advantage of surprise." the captain said.

"No sir. But if the rebels intercepted them-"

"Then they could have identified our men from their equipment and know we're here." the captain interrupted and he got to his feet, "We're done here." he said, "Tell the men to load up the repulsortrucks, we're going to evacuate."

Tobis took the controls of the *Silver Hawk* before lifting off from the ruined Bilstran family farm. This freed Mace up to man the turret just in case any Imperial resistance was encountered while in turn Kara gathered her equipment and made her way to the cargo hold where she and Tharun put on the safety harnesses that would allow them to be winched to the ground through the cargo hatch set into the floor.

"You understand your role?" Vorn asked as he helped Kara put on her harness and she nodded.

"Sure boss." she said, "Tharun and I get lowered down to the ground and I guide him to the nearest cave. He checks it out and if it's clear we both head back to the ship and we repeat it with another set of caves."

"Very good." Vorn said, "Now are you sure you don't want any extra back up?" and then he pulled one of the straps on Kara's harness tight, causing her to gasp.

"Nice work with the straps boss, you're giving me ideas for later. We'll see how tight you can strap me into something then." she said with a smile and Tharun winced.

"Is it too much to ask not to have to listen to my mother in law planning sexual fantasies?" he asked.

"Yes. Yes it is." Kara replied.

"Okay mom. Have it your way." Tharun said and Kara scowled at being referred to as 'mom' by the son-in-law that was more than ten years older than her. Then Tharun looked at Vorn and added, "The two of us will be enough for this colonel." he said, "Besides, if we were going to have anyone else in the team then I'd want it to be Captain Grayle and he's needed here in the turret."

"Very well then." Vorn said as he felt the *Silver Hawk* cease its motion and he opened the cargo hatch, "In that case I wish you good luck and may the Force be with you down there."

Tharun was first to be lowered down, unhooking the line from his harness as soon as he touched down and as it was pulled back up to permit Kara to be lowered to the ground he dropped into a crouch and began to survey the area using his macrobinoculars. Noticing a cloud of dust on the horizon he concentrated his scan on this area and when Kara landed beside him he handed her the macrobinoculars.

"What do you make of that lieutenant?" he asked.

"Hang on." Kara responded as she released the line from her harness. Then she smiled to herself and added, "I hope the boss doesn't make it so easy for me to get free later on." Tharun snarled at this but Kara just grinned at him and took the macrobinoculars, "Okay, so where am I looking?"

"Right over there on the horizon." Tharun said and he pointed towards where he had seen the dust cloud.

"Dust." she said, "Moving. I can't see the source mind you but I don't like the look of it."

"Neither do I. I've got a bad feeling about this." Tharun said as he took out his comlink and activate the device, "*Silver Hawk*, we've got a dust cloud bearing three three zero relative. Anything on the sensors?"

"Hang on, I'm just checking now." Cass's voice responded.

In the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk* both Cass and Tobis checked the ship's sensors and these revealed a strong energy signature coming from the direction Tharun had specified.

"Oh, err, I think that looks like a repulsorlift field." Tobis said, "I, err, I should take us in closer." and he flew the *Silver Hawk* towards the source of the energy signature.

"Captain, we have company." the voice of a speeder bike mounted scout trooper reported via comlink and the captain looked out of the repulsortruck he was riding in.

"Where?" he responded.

"South east. Single airborne target." the scout trooper told him and the captain grabbed the macrobinoculars that were on the dashboard and looked into the sky.

"Stang." he hissed as he saw the shape of a YT-1300 freighter heading towards them, "It's the rebels." then he lowered the macrobinoculars and looked at the driver, "All stop. We need to deal with this threat now." he

said.

"Yes sir." the driver, another of the scout troopers under the captain's command replied and he brought the vehicle to a halt while the captain himself got up and headed into the back of the repulsortruck. Here, amongst all of the supplies they had been able to escape with were four more of his men and he stood up straight as he addressed them.

"The rebels have found us." he told them, "Break out the GAM missiles."

Gravity Activated Mode missiles were designed specifically to track the energy fields given off by active repulsorlift drives. This could be from a ground or air vehicle or even a starship operating in the atmosphere and two of the scout troopers exited the repulsortruck with tubular launchers over their shoulders, each of which held two of the guided missiles.

"Target acquired." one announced as he weapon beeped to indicate that it had locked onto the *Silver Hawk*.

"Target acquired." the second said as his weapon also locked onto the approaching freighter.

"Fire at will." the captain ordered and the two scout troopers fired their missiles together, each of them launching both of the rounds in their magazines.

"Look!" Cass exclaimed when she saw the bright flames of the missiles' exhausts as they headed towards the *Silver Hawk*.

"Oh, err, hold on." Tobis said and he suddenly yanked the flight controls sideways, causing the *Silver Hawk* to turn sharply in the hope that he could get the ship outside the angle of detection of the missiles' tracking systems.

"Tobis what are you doing down there?" Mace asked over the intercom.

"Dad someone's shooting missiles at us." Cass responded.

"Missiles? Well are our shields up?" Mace said and Cass's eyes widened.

"No. We had to lower them to let Kara and Tharun off." she said, reaching out for the controls to the *Silver Hawk's* shields.

The first missile to reach the *Silver Hawk* struck it before Cass could raise its shields, slamming into one of the drive units at the rear of the ship. The blast from the detonation tore apart the drive unit and the cargo hold began to fill with smoke.

"We've got a fire in the hold!" Vorn yelled as he hurried towards the lounge where Jaysica was sat at the table, hurriedly strapping herself into a chair as the freighter lurched. On the other side of the room Jeeves had been thrown to the floor and was struggling to get up again, "Harvey, get in there and extinguish it." Vorn ordered and the astromech droid chirped as it rolled past him to the doorway leading to the hold. Using its internal fire extinguisher, Harvey then sprayed a dense cloud of carbon dioxide into the hold that displaced the oxygen feeding the fire. However, the blaze was too powerful for the droid to handle alone and after sealing off the hold it returned to the lounge, chirping loudly.

"Oh colonel Larcus sir," Jeeves said, "Harvey has been unable to extinguish the fire. Whatever are we to do?"

"What's going on down there?" Mace called out from the turret.

"We've been hit." Vorn replied, "I don't know how bad." and then he ran for the cockpit, "What's going on?" he asked.

"Err, ah, someone down there is shooting missiles at us colonel." Tobis told him.

"I've got our shields up now." Cass added, "But the first one got through before I could."

"We've got a fire in the hold. I think at least one of the drive units was taken out." Vorn said, "What other damage has it done?"

"Oh, ah, the power core is leaking." Tobis replied.

"Leaking? Are we in danger?" Cass asked, concerned about the potential for radioactive contamination.

"Err, oh, oh no." Tobis said, "The, err, the leak is external. But, err, we're losing power. We won't be able to keep the shields operating and stay airborne."

"Cass let me sit down." Vorn said and Cass nodded as she got out of the co-pilot's seat so that Vorn could sit there instead. Then as Cass sat down in the seat behind him Vorn activated the *Silver Hawk's* short range communications, "Kara can you hear me?" he asked.

"Sure can boss." Kara responded, "We can see smoke from down here. How bad is it?"

"Pretty bad. Look Kara we need to get the ship into space. There's a fire in the hold that we can extinguish by decompressing it and Tobis says we're losing too much power to keep the shields up." he told her.

"Let me guess, you can't come down here to pick me and Tharun up either. Right boss?" Kara said.

"I'm afraid so Kara, but I have a task for you and Tharun anyway. The smoke you saw came from a column of Imperial vehicles. I want you and Tharun to follow it. I'll get Admiral Aphanar to send in air support."

"Got it boss. We won't let them get away." Kara said and then she turned off her comlink.

"Okay Tobis," Vorn said, "get us out of here." and Tobis pulled back on the control column to send the *Silver Hawk* rocketing upwards.

6.

"They're withdrawing." one of the scout troopers commented as the Imperial troops watched the *Silver Hawk* gaining altitude.

"We need to move." the captain announced, "Quickly. Those rebels will undoubtedly report this engagement and there's an entire fleet of their warships up there. We need to disappear before they can find us."

Following and keeping up with repulsorlift vehicles on foot was out of the question but fortunately for the two rebels the Imperial captain was making use of his scout troopers to patrol all around the convoy and this included having a pair of biker scouts watching for signs of pursuit.

"Down!" Tharun hissed when he spotted the scout troopers heading towards their position and both he and Kara threw themselves to the ground.

"What's wrong?" Kara asked as Tharun unslung his rifle and she did the same with her carbine.

"We've got two scouts inbound lieutenant." Tharun replied.

"Do you think they've seen us?"

"I don't think so. Their course is at an angle. I think they're just trying to make sure that no one does what we're trying to do."

"You know if we could get hold of one of those bikes then catching up with the rest of the convoy would be a lot easier." Kara pointed out and Tharun nodded.

"My thoughts exactly. Problem is we need them to slow down enough that I can take out both riders and still keep at least one bike intact." he said.

"Stay here." Kara said and she suddenly leapt up and began to run towards the biker scouts, making sure that they saw her.

The advanced optics in the helmets worn by the scout trooper ensured that he spotted the running rebel easily and immediately turned towards her. Seeing this Kara immediately threw herself to the ground again, crawling into a ditch where she was out of sight.

"Clever girl." Tharun muttered to himself and smiling as he aimed his rifle towards the biker scouts.

By ducking out of sight Kara forced the two scout troopers to slow down to try and find her and it was then that Tharun struck. With his rifle set to semi-automatic he fired a single shot that took one of the riders off his bike. The bike itself promptly went out of control, but without a rider to keep its throttle engaged it rapidly slowed down and when it struck the ground it flipped over before coming to a halt but there was no explosion. Having seen where the blaster shot had come from the second scout turned his bike towards Tharun and began to accelerate just as Tharun brought his rifle around for a follow up shot. Aiming for the centre of the rider's chest, Tharun fired again and his shot punched a smoking hole right through the rider. As the body of the scout trooper fell backwards from his bike the shifting balance pushed the speeder bike sideways into a spin and unlike the first vehicle it slammed into the ground hard enough that there was a dull 'crump' as its power core was ruptured and a plume of smoke and flames rose up from the wreckage.

"Stang Tharun." Kara exclaimed as she emerged from her hiding place just a few metres from where the second speeder bike had crashed, "That almost landed right on top of me."

"Almost doesn't count mom." Tharun replied as they both ran towards the first speeder bike and Kara began to inspect it, "Well? Will it run?" he asked.

"I think so. It won't run at full speed with both of us on it though." Kara answered as she looked around for the bodies of the scouts.

"Doesn't matter. Those repulsorlifts will be slowing the Imperials down anyway." Tharun pointed out while he watched Kara remove the helmet from one of the dead scouts and put it on.

"Okay then," she said, "this should protect my face, let's get going."

Tharun nodded and pulled his scarf over the lower half of his face while lowering the goggles from where they sat strapped around his blast helmet so that he too would be adequately protected. The two rebels then climbed onto the speeder bike with Kara at the controls and set off after the Imperial convoy.

Just as Tharun had said, the convoy's speed was limited by the slower moving repulsorlifts and the rebels' stolen speeder bike soon caught up with it.

"Uh-oh." Kara commented when she heard a garbled sound through the comlink built into her helmet.

"What's wrong lieutenant?" Tharun asked.

"I think the convoy just tried to make contact. The comlink in this thing was scrambled when I took it off the stormtrooper so I can't tell what they're saying but I bet they know we're here." Kara answered.

"Here they come." Tharun added when he saw four other speeder bikes break off from the convoy and head towards them.

"Time to see what sort of punch this thing packs." Kara said, "Watch this." and she pressed the firing button

for the speeder bike's laser cannon. However, instead of a rapid burst of energy blasts from beneath the speeder bike, nothing happened at all.

"Is that it?" Tharun said.

"It's not my fault." Kara responded, "The cannon must have been damaged in the crash."

Just then there was a bright flash from one of the approaching speeder bikes as its rider fired his laser cannon and missed the two rebels only narrowly.

"Kriff!" Kara exclaimed as she turned the speeder bike away from the convoy.

"We'll never outrun them." Tharun pointed out.

"Agreed." Kara said and she brought the speeder bike to a halt beside a rocky outcrop and ripped the helmet from her head before tossing it aside, "Get off. We'll have to make a stand here."

The two rebels hurriedly dismounted from the speeder bike and took cover as the Imperial scout troopers approached them. The scout troopers opened fire in unison and the two rebels were forced to duck out of sight. Their opponents had seen where they had gone, however and they continued to lay down suppressive fire as they raced towards them.

"Stang." Kara hissed, "With those cannons pinning us down we're stuck. We can't even shoot back."

"Maybe we don't have to." Tharun said, "Look." and he pointed skywards to where several vapour trails were visible at high altitude.

"Our air cover." Kara said, smiling and she reached for her comlink, "Quick Tharun, pop a smoke grenade."

"Right on it." Tharun said as he pulled a smoke grenade from his webbing and tossed it a short distance.

There was a soft 'pop' as the grenade went off and cloud of red smoke began to form around it, expanding slowly.

"This is Lieutenant Larcus to Alliance fighter unit, do you read me?" Kara signalled with her comlink and after a moment's pause there was a response.

"Well hello Lieutenant Larcus, this is Captain Tarl. Are you having trouble?"

Kara winced, recognising the sound of her former squadron leader before she was court-martialled for punching him over being passed over for promotion even before he said his name.

"It just had to be him didn't it?" she said to Tharun and then raised her comlink to her mouth again, "Captain we are under fire. We have laid red smoke to mark our position. Fire for effect."

"Copy that Kara. Locking S-foils in attack position, we're on our way in." Captain Tarl said.

Even as the biker scouts continued to fire on Kara and Tharun a flight of four X-wing fighters descended rapidly overhead and just seconds after calling them in the two rebels saw them swoop down and fire spat from the laser cannons mounted on their wings. Designed to attack other starfighters, the X-wings' laser cannons were more than enough to deal with the speeder bikes and even a glancing hit was enough to reduce one to burning wreckage scattered across the hillside.

It took less than ten seconds from the first shots being fired to the last of the speeder bikes being destroyed but the X-wings did not stop there. Captain Tarl and his pilots had seen the rest of the convoy and they flew straight towards it. Kara and Tharun peered out of their hiding place just in time to see a scout trooper attempt to fire a GAM missile from a hatch in the roof of one of the speeder trucks but the X-wings' shields proved more than adequate to stop the shoulder fired missile. On the other hand the laser blasts that then struck the repulsortruck reduced it to a burned wreck instantly.

The X-wing flight then flew low over the convoy on a strafing run that tore through all of the remaining vehicles before banking sharply and circling around while they assessed the damage they had inflicted.

"Negative on movement." Captain Tarl broadcast so that Kara could hear him through her comlink, "Aurek Flight withdraw to base." and the four X-wings then climbed back up into the sky.

"Hey!" Kara shouted as she leapt to her feet and waved her arms, "What about us?"

"Looks like we're going to be here a while then." Tharun commented.

Vorn walked into the bridge of the MC-80 class *Wave Rider* and found Rear Admiral Aphanar sat in her command seat while her fellow mon calamari officers worked around her, keeping watch for any approaching Imperial vessels.

"Colonel Larcus." she said when she noticed him, her chair rotating to face him, "Your team was successful I take it?"

"Yes admiral." Vorn replied, "I've just spoken with Kara and she says that the convoy was completely destroyed. Fortunately the wreckage included enough evidence of who they really were to convince the locals that it wasn't the Alliance that was attacking them."

"Excellent." Admiral Aphanar said.

"There is just one thing admiral." Vorn added.

"Really and what is that colonel?"

"Could I borrow a shuttle?" Vorn asked, "I've got people stuck on the surface still and unfortunately the *Silver Hawk* I somewhat unavailable right now."