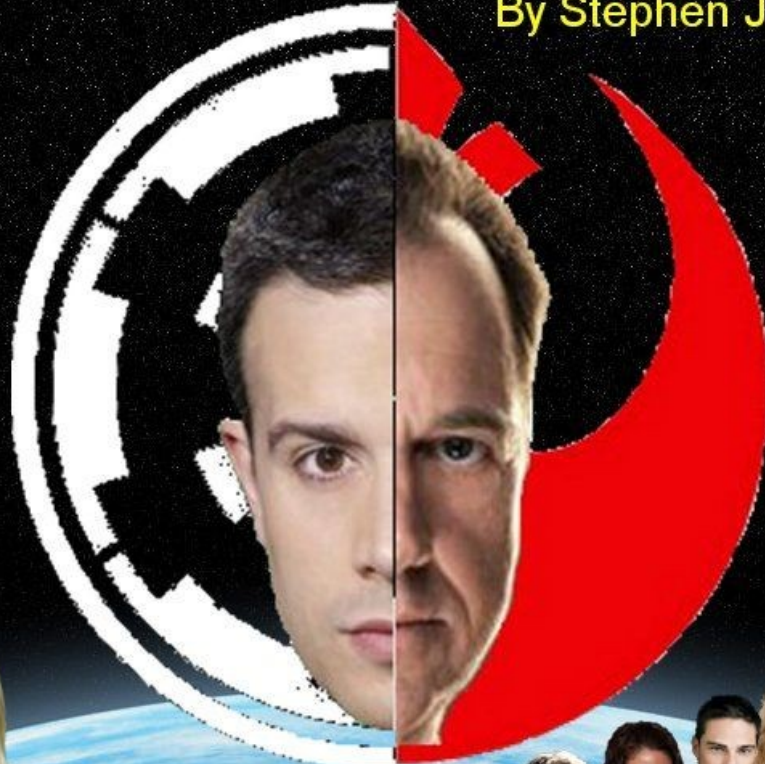


STAR WARS

1-05: The Lost Haven

By Stephen J Dutton



Handwritten signature



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...

THE LOST HAVEN

ON REMOTE WORLDS, FAR FROM THE PRYING EYES OF THE GALACTIC EMPIRE THE REBEL ALLIANCE MAINTAINS COLONIES WHERE THE FAMILIES OF ITS MEMBERS CAN REMAIN SAFE FROM IMPERIAL REPRISALS. BUT SHOULD THE EMPIRE DISCOVER THE LOCATION OF SUCH A WORLD, THEY ARE ANYTHING BUT SAFE...

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

Star Wars is the intellectual property of Lucasfilm Ltd. This story is unofficial and Lucasfilm has not approved any of it.

1.

Unlike the air around the starport outside the air in the cantina did not smell of all of the industrial by-products associated with space travel Mace Grayle, captain of the freighter *Silver Hawk*, thought to himself. Instead it was filled with the aroma of alcohol and herbal mixtures being smoked

"This shouldn't take long," he said to his engineer Tobis who followed close behind him leading him towards the bar.

"What can I get for you?" the bartender, a gruff sounding near human alien asked him.

"I'm just making a delivery," Mace replied and subtly he placed a small package on the bar.

The bar tender picked it up and looked at the bank notes stuffed inside.

"Oh its you," the bartender said, "the boss wants to see you. Out back," and he nodded towards a nearby door and gave the package back to Mace.

"The payments on time," Mace said, "What does your boss want?"

"He doesn't tell me what he wants - just who he wants to see. Now unless you want him to come looking for you I suggest you go in and see him."

Mace threw a glance at Tobis before they headed for the door.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," Mace whispered as the door hissed open and allowed the pair to enter.

In the room behind the bar a balding man sat behind a desk. This was Odras Balve, the head of the underworld around the starport and the man that Mace Grayle had been forced to turn to for a loan when business became difficult. A loan that he was still a long way from paying off.

"Ah Mace," Odras said with a smiling, "do come in and take a seat. But first if you wouldn't mind handing over your weapons to my associate here."

A shadow fell over Mace and Tobis and they looked around to see Odras' wookiee bodyguard standing beside them. The wookiee held out his hands and growled. Mace knew that somehow the wookiee had incurred a life debt to Odras and the crime boss now used him as a bodyguard. An effective one too, there were few people with so little love for their limbs that they were willing to try and harm Odras with his bodyguard nearby.

Mace opened his jacket to expose the heavy blaster pistol that he kept holstered beneath his shoulder and the wookiee removed it from its holster. Then the wookiee looked at Tobis and growled again.

"He's not armed," Mace said.

"Still not trusting your little monkey lizard with a gun then?" Odras said as he poured a pair of drinks, "Can he even speak?"

"What do you want Balve?" Mace said, sitting down and picking up one of the glasses. Odras Balve wasn't someone that Mace really wanted to share a drink with, but he knew that the man he owed money to only drank the best and today was no exception.

"That's mister Balve to you," Odras said, "Now I believe you have some money on you."

Mace slid the package across the table.

"Its all there and its on time so no late fee this month," Mace said.

"Of course not," Odras said as he took the package, "but I think you'll want to send your friend out to cash in that credit chip you're carrying anyway."

"That money's for a cargo," Mace said, "Why would I turn it into cash for you?"

"Because I know all about the cargo you're going to buy and who its for," Odras said, leaning closer to Mace, "The rebellion."

"So you're blackmailing me then?" Mace said.

"Not blackmail, business," Odras answered, "I have information they'll need and you are going to pay me for it instead of filling your hold with pointless trinkets and petty items that your fellow revolutionaries can't get hold of away from the civilised systems."

"How would you get information that the rebellion needs?" Mace asked.

"Because of the business I do with the Empire."

"What do you do for the Empire?" Tobis said, suddenly breaking his silence.

"Ah, your pet does speak," Odras said, "though he should be careful about what he says."

"I still want to know how you came by this information," Mace said.

Odras leant back in his chair again and took a sip of his drink.

"A lot of Imperial troops come through this place," he said, "they are far from home and have money to spend. I help them spend it on chemicals to put into their bodies, the chance to spend some time in the company of a woman or in a few harmless games of chance."

"Harmless?" Mace interrupted, "Yes, I'm sure they are completely unbiased."

"I provide entertainment so its only fair I should be paid for my efforts. Of course sometimes people spend more than they should, or in this case more than they have and they instead have to pay in some other way."

"So some fool in the Imperial military owed you enough money that only way he could keep his legs was to give you information to trade then?" Mace asked.

"Exactly," replied Odras, "In this case a navigator on a troop transport that has seen the destination of his ship and several others as well."

"And you know where this place is?"

"No, but I do know that the Empire knows it to be an Alliance safe world," Odras said, "but in about four or five days time its going to be anything but safe."

The R5 unit made an unpleasant sound from behind Mace and Tobis as Mace piloted the *Silver Hawk* away from the world of Estran.

"I think Harvey thinks you're pushing the ship harder than you should," Tobis said, "and I think I agree."

"We don't have a choice," Mace replied, "The major and the others are on that safe world right now. Not to mention a few thousand other people. If we are going to warn them about the Imperial attack then we'll just have to cut a few corners here and there. How's the course looking?"

Tobis looked at the control console where with his astromech droid's help he had been plotting the fastest possible course from Estran to the Alliance safe world.

"It looks ready," he said, "we can make the jump as soon as we're clear of the planet's gravity well."

"Good," Mace said, "punch it."

The stars visible outside the cockpit blurred as Tobis activated the *Silver Hawks* hyperdrive and the ship made the transition to hyperspace.

The Imperial captain stood on the bridge of his cruiser and looked out of the window at the other ships gathered around his own. A junior officer walked up to him and stood to attention.

"Sir we have completed our calculations and the data has been distributed to all of the ships in the taskforce," he said.

"Good," the captain replied, "I see no need to delay any further. Commence the jump into hyperspace."

"Thank you." Kara Bilstran said to the bartender when he put the drink down in front of her and she took a sip. It wasn't the best beer she'd ever tasted, but it was just about passable. On an alliance safe world like this you could not afford to be fussy about what you ate or drank and refreshments were in short supply. There was little that was not in short supply on a safe world in fact. Though the Alliance had access to some of the best technology in the galaxy, it had little of it and what it had got diverted to its front line units. The bar Kara was in did not even have a modern climate control system, instead it was heated by a stack of burning logs beneath a shaft to carry the smoke outside.

"Well, well, well," a voice said from behind Kara, "what do we have here?"

Kara had no need to turn around to know who was speaking to her - she had worked with its owner for over a year not so long ago.

"Get lost Jarad," she said.

"Speaking like that to superior officer could be considered insubordination," captain Jarad Tarl replied, "I could have you brought up on charges. Again."

Kara spun around on her stool to face Jarad and she saw that he was not alone. He stood at the front of a group of Alliance pilots: a quick head count showed that he had his entire squadron with him. Kara knew most of them from when she had been part of the squadron herself, but two of them were strangers.

Obviously one of them would be her replacement, while the other presumably replaced someone who had been lost in battle.

"Your eye looks better," Kara said to Jarad and she pointed to where she had struck him, triggering her court martial.

"Well you would know Kara," Jarad said, "You're the field medic. That is right isn't it? You're not allowed to be a pilot any more and you don't even a commission thanks to your irresponsible behaviour."

"Just tell me what you want Jarad."

"That's captain Tarl to you soldier and all I want is a round of drinks for my pilots, I'm buying today," Jarad replied and at the mention of free drinks the pilots gave a cheer while Jarad placed a handful of Alliance coinage on the bar, "Send our drinks to our table and keep the change," he said to the bartender.

While the pilots gathered around a table, Kara turned back to the bar.

"Could this day get any worse?" she said to the bar tender as he poured drinks for the pilots.

"Hey Kara," another voice called out and Kara recognised her squad mate Jaysica Horbid's voice.

"Yes it could it would seem." Kara whispered to herself and she took another sip of her drink.

"May I be of assistance sir?" the protocol droid asked when Vorn Larcus III entered the supply building, then it added, "Oh its you sir, its so wonderful to see you again," then the droid turned its back on Vorn and called into another room, "Mistress Lyssa you have a visitor," it said.

"A visitor? Who is it?" a woman's voice called out from the back room and a moment later an attractive young woman appeared. When she saw Vorn her face fell, "Oh. It's you. What do you want daddy?"

"I came to see how you were Lyssa," Vorn said to his daughter.

"I'm trapped on this backwater dump of a world where you brought me daddy. I have no friends and the only way I could keep Emsee was to agree to work here."

"We all have to make sacrifices darling," Vorn said, "Protocol droids are valuable to the rebellion."

"Ooh, don't you get it yet? I don't care about your rebellion daddy. I just want to go home," Lyssa said before storming into the back room again. Walking past the droid MZ-3PO that Lyssa referred to as Emsee, Vorn followed her.

"I'm sorry things are difficult Lyssa," he said, "but you have to understand that what I'm doing is for the best. Things would be better if you just made more of an effort to mix with the others here. You're not alone."

"Don't be ridiculous daddy," Lyssa snapped, "how am I supposed to mix with the other people here. You know what they're like, they're common labourers. What could I possibly have in common with them?"

"Well come with me then," Vorn said, "I'm heading off to meet Jaysica and Kara, I could introduce you to them."

"And which one do you think I'd get along with better?" Lyssa asked, "The thug who beat up her commanding officer or the idiot who can't even stand up straight?"

Vorn shook his head.

"I'm trying to make things easier for you Lyssa," Vorn said, "but you have to meet me half way."

"I don't have time daddy, thanks to you I have work to do."

"Then we'll try this another time," Vorn said, "Goodbye Lyssa."

Out side the supply building was a wagon pulled by animals. In the back of which another protocol droid sat.

"How was mistress Lyssa sir?" it asked when Vorn climbed aboard.

"Still difficult Jeeves," he replied, then he spoke to the driver, "To the cantina please," he said and with a word of command from the driver the animals pulling the wagon began to move.

Kara was relieved to see Vorn enter the bar. Jaysica was still going on about something that Kara could not care less about, while Jarad's squadron was making quite a lot of noise.

"Thanks for coming boss." Kara said, standing up to embrace him when he arrived at the table.

"Well its nice to feel welcome." he replied when Kara released him and he sat down. Then he took a look around the barroom, "Where's Tharun?" he asked.

Tharun Verser was an ex-mercenary who was now part of Vorn's unit and Vorn had expected him to be here.

"Still clutching that bucket," Kara said. On their most recent mission Tharun had been attacking by a dianoga that had set up residence in a city storm drain and while he had been able to escape from it, he had become ill from swallowing too much of the dirty water in which the dianoga lived, "He'll be fine once he's had a few days to get over it," she added.

There was more noise from Jarad's table and Vorn threw them a glance.

"Who's the party crowd?" he asked.

"Don't ask," Kara replied.

"Its her old squadron," Jaysica said.

"Thanks, thanks a lot," Kara said.

"So the guy in charge of them..." Vorn began.

"Is the one she punched," Jaysica said.

Before anyone could say anything else the bar was filled with the sound of a low flying vehicle passing overhead.

"There's nothing due in," Vorn said, "I better go and see what's happening."

The landing strip on the Alliance safe world was located underground for added security. Alliance engineers had expanded a cave that ran through a mountain to create a large area with two access points. Pilots landing here were taught to use one access point as an entrance to the cave and the other as an exit. Thus a simple one-way system kept craft from colliding because of the lack of any modern traffic control. A metallic mesh cage lined the cave to shield it from electronic detection, while the access points were placed so that they were invisible from high altitude. If a pilot did not know what he was looking for the landing strip was nearly undetectable.

Mace however, knew exactly what he was looking for as he brought the *Silver Hawk* in on final approach. Without any landing beacon he had to pilot the ship manually towards the access point that was used as an entrance. The *Silver Hawk's* engines screamed as he decelerated sharply as he saw the cave opening fill his view port. Then, as soon as he was inside the cave he steered off to the side and set the ship down with a bump.

"That was a bit rough," Tobis said.

"They say that any landing you can walk away from is good one," Mace said while he shut down the *Silver Hawk's* systems.

"They lied." Tobis replied.

The two men ran down the *Silver Hawk's* entry ramp before it had even fully opened and found a party of rebels waiting for them. In the centre of the group was a man in an officer's uniform.

"What the hell is going on here?" the officer demanded, "I've got more than a million credits worth of equipment in here and you come hurtling in like its your own private pod racing track."

"Commander it's important." Mace said, holding up his hand.

"It better be."

"It's the Empire," Mace said, "they're on their way here now."

2.

News of the imminent Imperial attack spread quickly around the settlement and spread panic. Terrified civilians gathered what belongings they could and began to congregate near the landing strip, all hoping to be able to get on a ship that would take them to safety.

In a small chamber located under the same mountain that housed the landing strip Commander Resk had summoned all the military officers ranked captain and above he had available to him. That meant four including himself.

"I'm sorry to say it Commander Resk but my fighters are far too valuable to waste," Jarad said, "I should get my squadron out of here now." and he stood up.

"Sit down captain." Vorn said, but Jarad remained standing.

"He's right major," commander Resk said, "we've been over these numbers and there's no way that we can take out those cruisers with just one squadron of X-wings and apart from captain Grayle's ship we don't have any transports for evacuation."

"So what are you saying commander?" Vorn asked.

"I'm saying that captain Tarl should get his ships to safety before the Empire arrives and we should just cram as many people as we can aboard the *Silver Hawk*."

"Excuse me," Mace interrupted, "but even if we have people standing shoulder to shoulder in my ship we'll only get a couple of hundred inside her and a more realistic limit is just under a hundred. How many people are there here?"

"Fourteen thousand," Vorn said and he looked at a datapad, "including four thousand younglings and three thousand sick and injured."

"They should scatter." Jarad said, "If the intel is good then we can be back here in a week with enough ships to drive the Empire off and evacuate the civilians."

"They won't last a week!" Mace shouted, "If it can't capture this planet then the Empire will just bombard it from space."

"My mind is made up captain Grayle," Commander Resk said, "and we will go with captain Tarl's plan. We evacuate what we can and do our best to come back for the rest later."

"We can evacuate them all." Vorn said solemnly and the other officers at the briefing all stared at him.

"And just where do we get the ships?" commander Resk asked.

"From the Empire," Vorn replied, "We steal their landing ships. Sentinel class shuttles are fast and well armed, they should make it past the cruisers providing they have a fighter escort."

"That's ridiculous," said Jarad, "We'd need hundreds of those ships to get all our people away from here."

"Actually we can do it with twenty," Vorn replied, "providing that people don't mind sitting on the floor."

"And how would we go about seizing these ships major?" commander Resk asked.

"We bring our people in to this facility begin with," Vorn explained, "It's the only place likely to provide any real concealment from orbital scans. Then we use decoys to give the appearance of a small force located in the main settlement and use our fighters to provide air cover. Then when they close in we use what combat troops we have to seize their landing craft and get our people on board them."

Jarad just shook his head.

The landing strip cave was a hive of activity when Mace and Vorn reached it. Ground crews were preparing the X-wing fighters for take off while other personnel were dismantling equipment and disabling it before it could fall into the hands of the Empire.

"Its no good," Vorn said the rest of his unit who were all waiting by the *Silver Hawk*. Even Tharun was there, though he still appeared decidedly unwell, "Commander Resk has opted for an immediate evacuation."

"With one ship?" Tharun said, "How are we supposed to manage that?"

"We're not," Mace said, the anger showing in his tone of voice, "We're leaving almost everyone behind. Only a handful on a list the commander is drawing up will be evacuated."

The reaction from the rebel unit was plain to see, they were furious.

"We can't just leave these people sir." Jaysica said.

"I much as I hate to agree with her, I agree with her." Kara added. Jaysica frowned and stared at her.

Vorn was about to speak again when he was interrupted by the arrival of commander Resk.

"Get this ship ready to launch," he said to Mace, "we'll be leaving just as soon as everyone on the evacuation list arrives."

"And who gets to be on this list?" Kara snapped.

"Not that it's any of your business trooper, but I have compiled a list of the most valuable personnel here with the help of captain Tarl."

"Oh great," Kara said, "Looks like I'm turbolaser fodder then."

"Actually you are on the list trooper," commander Resk replied, "though your name can be removed if you persist with that attitude," then he turned to Vorn, "Major, as active service troops your entire unit will be on the evacuation ship and I have also added your daughter's name to the list so you may want to go and fetch her."

"She isn't here?" Vorn said. He had assumed that she would have joined the rest of the civilians when they gathered around the entrance to the cave system.

"No," commander Resk answered him, "her section leader said that she remained in her residence. Something about surrendering to the Imperial troops when they arrive."

"Oh no," Vorn said.

"Hang on major," Tharun said, getting slowly to his feet, "I better come with you just in case."

"I'll come too," Jaysica added, "Perhaps a woman's point of view will help convince her."

"You've never met Lyssa have you?" Mace said.

"No, but how different to the major can she be?"

Bright flashes of light marked the exit from hyperspace of the Imperial ships. The force's senior officer had made sure that he was on the bridge of his cruiser when this took place.

"We have successfully exited hyperspace captain Lanvart." a junior officer told him, "All ships reporting safe."

"Comscan?" he said.

"Nothing detected captain, the target appears completely undefended," a crewman replied.

"Range to target?" Lanvart then asked.

"Thirty million kilometres sir."

"Excellent, launch the bombers."

Accompanied by Jaysica and Tharun, Vorn made his way through the crowd outside the entrance to the cave system.

"What's happening?" one asked.

"When will we be evacuated?" another shouted.

"Why won't you help us?" another cried out.

Vorn ignored them all and continued to make his way past them towards the settlement where his daughter was supposedly still located, oblivious to the danger.

Once past the area immediately outside the cave entrance the way became clear and Vorn broke into a run. On any normal day Tharun would have easily kept pace with the sixty year-old noble in exile, but today he found himself struggling to keep up with either him or Jaysica.

"I'm fine," he gasped as he was forced to stop for breath, "keep going and I'll be right behind you."

Vorn ran all of the way to the tiny hut where Lyssa lived and he hammered on the door with his fist.

"Lyssa. Lyssa are you there?" he yelled.

"Go away daddy!" a voice yelled back from inside the hut.

"Stand aside boss," Tharun said as he arrived and the former mercenary delivered a single strong kick to the door and it flew open with a crash as the lock was torn off.

"Lyssa we have to leave now," Vorn said as he rushed inside.

"Oh master Larcus," Emsee said when it saw him come through the doorway, "thank the maker its you."

Mistress Lyssa refuses to leave."

"Where is she?" Vorn asked the droid.

"In her bedroom sir."

"Right then," Vorn said and he stormed into the next room.

"I'm not leaving," she said, lying on her bed, "When the Imperial troops get here I'll surrender to them and they can take me home."

"They'll kill you more likely," Vorn said, "Now come on," and he grabbed hold of Lyssa's arm.

"Let go of me!" she screamed and she produced a slim blaster and pressed it against Vorn's chest.

"Don't be so stupid Lyssa," he shouted back at her and he snatched the blaster away from her before someone could get hurt, "Now let's go," and he dragged her towards the bedroom door.

As they approached the doorway there was a loud retching from the next room and as they entered it they saw Tharun standing bent over with his hands on his knees, a pool of vomit at his feet.

"There, there," Jaysica said, patting him on the back, "better out than in."

"Has he just been sick on my floor?" Lyssa said in astonishment, her argument with her father suddenly forgotten.

"Afternoon miss, nice to see you again." Tharun said, standing up and raising a hand to his forehead, "Sorry about the mess."

"Hi," Jaysica said, "I'm Jaysica," and with her hand outstretched in front of her she stepped forwards to greet Lyssa, putting her foot in the pool of vomit.

Jaysica squealed as she slipped and landed flat on her back.

"You brought the idiot as well," Lyssa said to Vorn.

"Not now Lyssa," Vorn said, "Come on everyone, we're leaving."

As Vorn stepped outside the hut there was a screaming of engines from overhead.

"Are fighters leaving already?" Jaysica said, "I thought they were waiting for us."

"Those are incoming," Tharun said.

"Down!" Vorn shouted as the familiar twin hulled form of Imperial TIE bombers came into view from high above and began to drop their payloads.

The X-wing fighters were fully fuelled and Jarad would have left had commander Resk not ordered them to remain here until the *Silver Hawk* was ready for launch also. He was considering suggesting to the commander that he choose alternate personnel to be evacuated when he heard the noise of approaching aircraft.

"We've got incoming!" he shouted.

Commander Resk turned to face him then on hearing the sound of explosions from outside he ran to the cave opening used as the launch exit to take a look.

"Get away from there!" Jarad shouted.

"I'm fine," he said to them, "I just need to see the damage," then he saw one of the bombers heading directly for him, as if its pilot knew about the underground landing strip, "Oh no," he said when he saw the dark shape of the bomb fall from beneath the craft.

The powerful explosive missed the opening, the bomber pilot had never intended to send the bomb inside anyway and instead it impacted just above the cave exit and detonated on impact. The blast ripped free hundreds of tonnes of rock and the debris toppled down the mountainside, burying the cave opening.

"Everyone get down!" Jarad shouted as a cloud of dust and smaller fragments hurtled along the landing strip. Two of his pilots were not quick enough and they cried out as they were knocked off their feet by the blast wave.

Dazed, Jarad got carefully back to his feet.

"Check the ships!" he called out, "Make sure they can still fly," and then he spotted the bodies of the two pilots who had not got behind cover before the blast hit them, "Medic!" he yelled.

Inside the *Silver Hawk*, Vorn's unit had been protected against the bomb blast and when Kara heard the call for medical help she grabbed her bag and ran out of the ship. The orange flight suits of Alliance pilots made the bodies easy to spot and she dashed towards them. Kneeling down beside them it was obvious that there was nothing she could do for either of them.

"What's going on?" Vorn's voice suddenly called out across the cave and Kara looked up to see her superior running across the landing strip dragging a woman that Kara took to be his daughter behind him.

"A bomb collapsed the opening at that end of the cave," Jarad called back.

"Where's Resk?" Vorn asked in return.

"He was standing right by the opening when it collapsed," Jarad answered him, "so right now he's buried under that lot," and he pointed towards the pile of rocks that blocked the end of the cave, "Okay everyone," Jarad shouted, "We're leaving," then he turned to Vorn, "We'll clear you a path," he said, "just keep as close behind us as you can."

Vorn remained still and stared at the pile of rocks that had buried the base commander beneath it. Then he shouted out.

"Stand down captain," he yelled at Jarad, "No one's going anywhere yet."

"What are you talking about?" Jarad replied, "Everyone's here now, we can leave."

"We're not leaving the civilians behind," Vorn said, "we're getting them out in the Imperial troop ships."

"That's not the plan," Jarad said, "Resk was clear about that."

"Resk is dead," Vorn said, "so I'm in charge here now, captain."

The Imperial captain smiled as the bomb damage reports came in. The planet's only settlement had been hit repeatedly and over half of its structures levelled. More importantly the opening to the underground landing strip had been collapsed, leaving any spacecraft that may be there trapped behind tonnes of rock. The captain turned to an army officer who had joined him on the bridge.

"You may begin your landing," he said.

3.

“So how do we go about carrying out this master plan of yours then?” Jarad asked. Vorn had gathered together a handful of military, technical and logistical personnel in order to explain the course of action he had decided on and tell everyone of their expected role in it.

“Firstly I’d like to hear some numbers.” Vorn said and he looked at one of the administrative staff, “How many people are left?”

“We took surprisingly few casualties in the bombing raid,” the woman replied, “the Empire hit buildings rather than people and most of the people had already left the settlement. The only real loss was the hit to the hospital. We lost about two hundred staff and patients. Aside from that fewer than fifty died.”

“So we’re still looking at trying to get almost fourteen thousand people off planet then?” Jarad said, “How do we move that many anywhere without the Empire spotting them?”

“Actually the bombing raid has provided us with our cover,” Vorn replied, “The smoke and flames from the explosions will obscure their sensors. That’s why I gave orders for the fires to be allowed to burn unless lives were threatened. I want to force the Empire to send troops down here to take a look for themselves.”

“And that’s when we help ourselves to their ships?” Mace asked.

“Yes,” Vorn answered, “They’ll have to land here,” he added, pointing to a spot on the map laid out on the table that the rebels had gathered around. Most military planning meetings, Alliance ones included, used holographic display systems for briefings such as this. But as with most other modern military equipment there were no such systems on the safe world so Vorn was having to make do.

“I want to get as many of our people into the woods around the landing site before the Empire gets here as possible.” Vorn continued, “But I only want a small group, led by myself, in the area between the landing site and here. When the Imperial troops land we’ll fall back to here and draw them away from their transports. That’s when the forces on the other sides take the transports.”

“What’s to stop the troops from turning around when they realise that their ships are under attack?” Jarad asked.

“I’m going to copy their own tactic,” Vorn answered, “What do we have in the way of explosives?”

“Quite a lot actually,” the base supply officer replied, “But its not military grade, its just commercial stuff that we use for mining and road building.”

“That’s good enough,” Vorn said, “I want all of the charges laid out on the mountain side. Then when we fall back into this complex I’ll have my demolitions expert bring the entire mountain down on the Imperial troops following us. Those that don’t get blown apart or buried should be sufficiently shaken up to stop them reacting to anything.”

“And if all of this goes to plan, what happens next?” Jarad asked.

“That’s when we launch,” Vorn said, “The fact that Empire only hit one of the exits from here suggests that they don’t know about the other one, but they will just as soon as you fighters and the *Silver Hawk* come flying out. From the intel we got about the composition of the force in orbit we believe there to be three Strike-class cruisers plus four troop carriers. That means there are just three squadrons of fighters with them and we know that two of those are TIE bombers because we counted them when they hit us. That leaves at most one squadron of fighters that I want your ships to take out.”

“Ten X-wings against a squadron of TIEs. I like those odds,” Jarad said, smiling for the first time in the briefing.

“What if they’ve got TIE Interceptors?” someone asked from the back of the room.

“They won’t have,” Jarad replied, turning around to face the direction of the question, “this is just a small skirmish to them, they won’t have committed squints to that,” he added using the slang term ‘squints’ that was popular amongst Alliance fighter pilots.

“And it will be twelve X-wings,” Vorn added.

“But I’ve only got ten pilots left,” Jarad pointed out.

“Yes I know. I want Kara and Mace to fly the other two.”

A look of disbelief appeared on Jarad’s face.

“No way,” he said, “Captain Grayle may be a qualified pilot, but only in cargo haulers. A fighter’s completely different,” then he looked at Mace, “No offence,” he added but Mace kept silent, “and that medic of yours isn’t allowed anywhere near a cockpit.”

“That may be,” Vorn said, “but the fact is that I am not leaving those two ships here for the Empire to recover and we could use the extra cover. You said it yourself earlier today those ships are valuable. Do you really want to leave them behind just because you don’t like my pilots?”

“Fine,” Jarad said, “they can pilot the other two X-wings. But they fly together, I’m not putting my pilots at risk for them.”

"Good, then it's settled," Vorn said, "our departure will be covered by twelve X-wings. I know that the *Silver Hawk* and the ships we're planning to steal are armed as well, but they're no match for fighters so I don't want them to engage unless absolutely necessary. Now I've had a hyperspace course plotted already that will take us to a point in deep space that we'll distribute to everyone who can fly so they can just enter it into their ship's computer. Each evacuation ship is to jump to that location as soon as they can. When everyone's there we'll plot another jump to an Alliance base. Are there any more questions?"

There was silence.

"Good," Vorn said, "Now everyone get to it and may the Force be with us."

Vorn and Tharun both studied the open fields beyond the woods through their macrobinoculars. Around them was a motley assortment of rebels. Some were soldiers, while others were military personnel who normally fulfilled non-combat roles. Today they had been given what few blasters were available and assembled into a fighting force. All of the X-wing pilots, Kara and Mace included had been kept out of this force and their weapons given to others instead. As Jarad had said, the X-wings were valuable and if this went wrong they would still be able to flee.

"I'd say there's about forty ships there sir," Tharun said, "And it looks like regular army rather than stormtroopers," and he put his macrobinoculars away and instead pointed his blaster rifle towards the landing zone and looked down its scope.

"Pick a target. In your own time," Vorn said to Tharun then he looked around at his force, "After sergeant Verser has fired I want you all to open fire yourselves. Aim for larger troop concentrations. Remember, we just need to get them to come this way, we don't need to kill them all just yet," then he lifted up his own lightweight small game rifle and pointed it at the landing zone.

Tharun panned the scope across the landing zone until he saw the familiar form of an Imperial Army officer directing the unloading of the transports. Tharun grinned as he held the scope on the officer and squeezed the rifle's trigger.

The powerful energy bolt struck the officer square in the chest. His armour could not protect him from such a hit and he fell dead immediately. From where the rebels were they could hear the reaction of the other Imperial troops as they sought cover and searched the woods for targets. Moments later the entire tree line was lit up as the rebels concealed there all opened fire on the landing zone.

The barrage of blaster fire did little damage, only a few of the rebels had rifles and the Imperials were too far away for pistols to be of much use. But the torrent of blaster bolts heading towards them convinced the Imperial troops that they were under serious attack.

"Fall back!" Vorn shouted when he saw the Imperials begin to move several armoured vehicles towards the woods and the rebels fell back towards the mountain landing strip.

In orbit captain Lanvart eagerly awaited the initial report of the landing force. When he was informed of an incoming transmission he stood beside the communications station to hear it personally.

"We are under heavy rebel fire, major Kells is dead," a panic-filled voice stated.

"Comscan," Lanvart said abruptly, "What's down there?"

"I don't know sir," the crewman answered, "the damage inflicted by the bombers is masking the area."

Captain Lanvart replied to the army officer who had reported in.

"There can't be too many of them," he said, "Don't just sit there, use your armour and counter attack them," and then he broke the link.

All things considered, Vorn thought to himself as he ran through the woods, it was going rather well.

The Imperial forces had not pursued the fleeing rebels immediately; instead they had wasted time by firing their heavy weapons at the tree line to clear it of troops that were no longer there. Only then had they formed up behind their armour and advanced, by which time the rebels had a considerable head start. Then it occurred to Vorn that perhaps they had too much of a head start. If they left the Imperial Army too far behind then it was possible that their pursuers would fail to spot which direction they were all moving in and spread out. That would leave many of them too far from the mountain when the explosives were triggered.

Vorn suddenly stopped. He was about to issue orders to the other rebels when he heard a squeal and a sudden unexpected impact knocked him to the ground.

"Ow!" he cried out as Jaysica landed on top of him, "What are you doing?"

"I'm sorry," she replied, "I was right behind you and I didn't expect you to stop."

Tharun and Tobis ran over and picked them both up.

"Keep moving everybody," Vorn called out to the other rebels, but before the members of his own unit could move on he added, "Not you three. We need to stay here and make sure that the Empire knows to come this way."

"Right you are major." Tharun replied and he quickly found a suitable spot from which he could fire on the pursuing Imperial forces and the others followed his lead.

The first sign of the Imperial Army was the sound of ground vehicles forcing their way through the undergrowth.

"Wait for it," Vorn said, "Let's see what we're dealing with here."

Moments later a row of compact tracked vehicles came into view. These vehicles were well known to the Alliance, Compact Assault Vehicles or CAVs, each one was operated by a single crewman with the assistance of an advanced computer system.

A computer system that could be disrupted.

"Tobis," Vorn whispered, "What can you do about those things?"

"Just a minute," Tobis replied and he put his blaster away and instead took hold of his datapad into which he plugged his comlink.

The engineer set his datapad to look for compatible networks of which only one was found, the one that linked all of the CAV computers together. Then he set to work convincing them that his datapad was also a part of their network.

"Got it," he said excitedly, "I'm in."

"Good," Vorn said, "now start feeding them ghost data. Tharun get between them."

The CAVs all ground to a halt as the operators attempted to interpret the data that was being fed to them. With no open view ports to look out of not one of them was aware of Tharun creeping in between them. Tharun fired his blaster rifle into the side of one of the CAVs. At this close range the energy bolt punched through the armour plating and blew one of the tracks away from the vehicle. In response the turret of the CAV swivelled round to face in Tharun's direction and fired just after he dived out of the way. Instead of incinerating Tharun the blaster bolt slammed into the CAV beside it and blew the vehicle apart.

At once the remaining CAV drivers panicked. Their control network was disrupted and they were apparently under attack by rebels equipped with anti-armour weaponry. They did their best to reorganise themselves into a more effective formation, but without their computers they wound up repeatedly crashing into one another. Some mistook the impacts for further attacks and opened fire at random, hitting their own vehicles again. As the four rebels slipped away in the direction that the others had gone they left behind an entire squad of burning vehicles.

"That should keep them coming this way." Tharun said.

"The rebels have heavy weapons," the senior army officer on the surface reported, "I am requesting immediate air support."

Captain Lanvart looked towards the comscan station, but the crewman there just shook his head.

"Negative captain," Lanvart replied, "the low level smoke from the bombing mission does not allow for accurate TIE support to be provided."

"But sir -" the officer began to protest.

"No buts captain," Lanvart interrupted him, "you will carry out your task with the resources you have. Call your rearguard from the landing zone if you have to. The rebels are ahead of you after all."

After the destruction of the CAV squad, the Imperial commander on the ground had become far more cautious Vorn noted. Now instead of sending a lighter formation ahead of his main force he had let a force of repulsortanks take the lead. These vehicles floated above the undergrowth and were heavily armoured enough to make them invulnerable to most infantry carried weapons. With a direct attack out of the question Vorn resorted to something subtler.

"Not yet," he said, observing the approaching tanks from their hiding place, "Nearly there."

Beside him Jaysica sat with her comlink in her hand. Rather than set for voice transmission she had it set to send a data burst on a specific frequency. The same frequency that the wireless detonators she carried used.

"Now," Vorn said when he saw one of the repulsortanks glide over the spot where Jaysica had buried her explosives.

The armoured vehicle was engulfed in a ball of flame and debris was thrown in all directions by the detonation. The blast ripped one of the tanks drive units away from its hull and the vehicle sagged at one side before gouging a groove in the ground as it lost control. With its propulsion seriously unbalanced the vehicle flipped over and landed upside down before exploding.

"Good work Jaysica." Vorn said as he put his macrobinoculars away, "Now lets get out of here while they try and figure out what just happened."

Mace sat in the cockpit of the X-wing fighter and stared at the controls. On the ladder beside him Kara stood and pointed at the various systems as she explained what they all did.

The basic concepts were well known to him of course, he had been piloting spacecraft for nearly twenty years now. But as Jarad had pointed out, a starfighter was a much different vehicle to a freighter. In a

freighter all you had to do was fly while in the X-wing he would have to fly, shoot and manage damaged systems all at the same time.

"Don't worry," Kara said to him, "the artoo unit can help you out if you need it. Besides you'll be flying as my wingman, all I really need you to do is stick near me and keep an eye out for enemy fighters."

"Sounds easy enough," Mace replied, "and at least it beats being cooped up in the *Silver Hawk* with her," and he nodded towards the entry ramp to his freighter where Lyssa Larcus was sat with her head in her hands. While everyone else was busy preparing for the evacuation, she was doing nothing.

"Is she really that bad?" Kara asked.

"Oh yes," Mace answered, "Remember I flew her and the boss away from Estran and she was not at all happy about it. Tharun was close to shooting her."

"He was going to stun her keep her quiet?"

"I never actually saw the setting on his blaster."

"Oh. So even worse than Jaysica."

"Our Jaysica doesn't compare."

It was then that rebel troops began to pour into the cavern.

"Looks like the major's back," Kara said and she climbed down the ladder.

Mace was about to begin powering up the X-wing fighter he was sat in when Jarad called out.

"Stand down everyone, we're leaving yet."

"What's happening?" Kara shouted back at him.

"The major and your other buddies aren't back yet," Jarad said, "Looks like they stayed behind to make sure that Empire came the right way. So until either he or the Empire get here no-one powers up a ship."

"Tharun are you okay?" Tobis asked as the former mercenary stopped running.

"I'll be fine lad," he answered, "I just needed to catch my breath that's all," then he set off running again.

Following the destruction of the repulsortank, the Imperial commander had brought up his infantry to check for mines ahead of his advance. This had slowed the Imperial advance considerably as the foot soldiers picked their way through the undergrowth instead of relying on the path beaten out for them by their armour. As a result the small group of rebels had managed to stay ahead of the Imperial Army units following them while at the same time making sure that they knew exactly what direction the rebels were heading in.

"I can see the cave entrance ahead," Vorn called out, "we're nearly there."

At the entrance to the cave there was a small boxlike droid.

"Penny!" Jaysica shouted, "Its us!" and the droid chirped at its owner.

"Quick, everyone into the cave," Vorn ordered and the rebels rushed past the droid and took cover further in the narrow passageway that lead up to the landing strip. Jaysica took out her comlink and gripped it in her hands. It was still set to broadcast on the frequency used by her detonators.

Time dragged as the rebels waited in silence for the Imperial Army to reach the base of the mountain. The silence was broken when Penny came racing along the cave floor towards them, chirping loudly.

"They're here," Vorn said, "Jaysica, now!" Jaysica sent the signal to the charges laid out along the mountainside.

The Imperial Army captain who had taken control of the battalion when Major Kells was shot observed the advance of his force from inside his commander speeder. Things were not going as planned, he thought. This was supposed to have been an Alliance safe world filled with helpless refugees, but instead it appeared that it was the base for a significant rebel garrison that had taken out some of his most heavily armoured vehicles. What was worse, the initial bombing raid that had failed to spot, let alone destroy any of these defences had now made air support impractical.

However, his force had steadily advanced to the point where they now had the rebels holed up inside the mountain fortress that was their base of operations. There would be no escape for them.

"What was that?" his driver suddenly exclaimed as a dull 'thump' from outside was heard inside the commander speeder, followed immediately by panicked calls across the communications net from all across the battalion.

The captain adjusted his scanners, panning an optical scope around for a look at what was happening outside. After rotating the scope through three hundred and sixty degrees he aimed it up the mountainside. "Oh no," he said when he saw what was heading towards them.

When the Imperial troops saw the landslide heading down the mountain towards them all command and control broke down. Troopers abandoned heavy equipment and turned and fled, while vehicle crew did their best to steer away from the oncoming wave of destruction. But without the unity of purpose provided by clear orders each driver responded in his own way. Men screamed as armoured vehicles ran them over as they too tried to escape the landslide and more than one vehicle ground to a halt when they collided. The captain tried desperately to regain some semblance of order.

"All units steer west! All units steer west!" he screamed into the comlink that would just as easily have picked up a whisper. But it was too late for him to stop the panic now. Seeing that their vehicles were useless to them in the panic to escape, the crews were now baling out and running away on foot with the infantry. The captain decided that his crew should join them.

"Lets get out of here," he said and he got up and activated the command speeder's self-destruct. Just because the rebels had driven him back did not mean that he was going to allow this vehicle and all of its secrets fall into the hands of traitors.

There was a massive lurch as one of the few vehicles in the force still trying to move struck the side of the commander speeder and its occupants were thrown across the interior. The driver was the first to recover his senses and he headed straight for the hatch and tried to open it.

"Its jammed!" he exclaimed when the hatch remained firmly shut.

The captain rushed to the second hatch on the far side of the speeder and tried to open it. The hatch opened about ten centimetres before it struck another vehicle that the speeder had been pushed into when it was struck. There was no way out for any of the speeders occupants.

"Assistance, assistance," the captain called out over the communication network, "command crew trapped inside vehicle," but outside the soldiers were fleeing away from the abandoned vehicles and even those who heard the call for help were too afraid to go back and risk being buried.

At the landing zone the crews of the troop transports heard the massive explosion from the mountain and most of them looked around to see what was happening. Many assumed that the advancing battalion had just destroyed something and they smiled at the thought. But when they saw the enormous cloud of dust hanging over the mountain they realised something was wrong.

Some of them tried to contact the battalion, but all they got back in response were random calls to retreat.

Every company and platoon commander seemed to be giving contradictory orders to their men. Then there was a sudden cry for help from the battalion commander followed by a mysterious roaring sound before the communications net went silent.

It seemed the entire battalion was gone.

4.

Meanwhile, in the woods surrounding the landing zone several thousand people had been waiting for the explosion that had just happened. Without even needing to look towards the massive plume of dust now hovering over the mountain they began to make their way towards the Imperial shuttles.

A sharp 'crack' marked the start of the rebel attack on the landing zone. The rebels here were armed not with blasters, but instead with primitive firearms that they had fashioned for themselves from locally available materials for hunting. A few of them had self loading rifles, but far more had to make do with manually operated rifles and shotguns. More still were completely unarmed.

Despite their lack of modern weapons, surprise was on the side of the rebels and more than a dozen of the soldiers guarding the transports had fallen before they even knew that they were under attack. The Imperial troops looked around in an attempt to see where they were being attacked. But though firearms were primitive they did not leave the clearly visible trail through the atmosphere that blasters did, and the Imperial soldiers could find no targets in the trees.

"What's happening?" captain Lanvart demanded.

"I'm not sure sir," the comscan crewman replied, "I've lost all contact with the battalion on the ground and the transport crew are now reporting that the landing zone is under attack."

Captain Lanvart stared out of the bridge window towards the planet below, unable to believe what was happening. Then the comscan crewman interrupted him and he turned to face the man.

"Sir! I've detected a new group of signals coming from the rebel base. It looks like a squadron of fighters, X-wing class."

Captain Lanvart stared back at the planet again. This was no primitive safe world, he thought, it was a major rebel military base!

"What's the status our fighters?" Lanvart asked.

"The bombers are still refuelling sir," one of the crew answered, "but our own fighter squadron is on standby ready for launch."

"Then get them out there." Captain Lanvart ordered and he pointed out of the window towards the planet below.

The platoon of soldiers left to guard the troop transports was on the verge of being wiped out when one of the transport crews took action themselves. Sentinel-class ships those that the army battalion had been landed in were equipped with a variety of weapons. Most of these were intended to deal with planetary defence ships on their way from their mother ship to the surface, but in addition each ship carried a pair of blaster cannons meant for use on the surface.

The hatches concealing these blasters slid back with a hiss and the guns dropped down into their ready position.

"Guns ready sir," the gunner informed the pilot.

"Open fire," the pilot responded.

Located on the edge of the landing zone, the ship had a wide field of fire towards the positions occupied by the rebels and the powerful energy blasts ripped through the trees and undergrowth. The guns were designed for engaging speeder sized targets, so although they were powerful their targeting systems could not be relied on to accurately pick out the rebels in the woods. But it did force them to pull back from the tree line and cease their attack. Seeing this, other transport crews began to deploy their own ships' defensive weapons.

Seeing their attack falter the rebels signalled for help.

"We're coming under heavy fire from the landing zone," the voice said as Vorn listened to the signal from the co pilot's seat of the *Silver Hawk* as it climbed through the atmosphere, "the transport ship crews have activated their defensives."

"Turn around," Vorn said to Tobis who in Mace's absence was flying the ship, then he activated the ships communication system.

"Captain Tarl we need to support the attack on the landing zone."

"We have new contacts coming from the Imperial cruisers," Jarad replied, "Looks like they're launching their fighters to engage us."

Vorn looked at the sensor display in on the *Silver Hawk's* control panel and he saw an extra set of blips moving out from the blip that represented one of the Strike-class cruisers.

"Give me Kara and Mace," Vorn said, "You take the rest of your men and take out those enemy fighters."

"You're welcome to them," Jarad replied. Then, still on the same frequency he signalled to his squadron, "Lock S-foils in attack position," he ordered, "and follow me in."

"We've got air support!" one of the transport crewmen said when he heard the sound of the incoming repulsorlift engines.

"Oh no we haven't," another crewman said when he recognised the outlines of a pair of X-wing fighters heading straight for them.

Kara looked down at the landing zone and saw the massed ranks of troop transports. Around the edges of the landing zone, where their fields of fire were unobstructed by the other transports there were flashes of blaster fire directed towards the rebels in the woods.

"This is it Mace," Kara said, "Lock you S-foils into attack position."

"Wait, how do I do that again?" Mace asked.

"The control on your right," Kara answered. But before Mace could react the astromech droid mounted behind him squeaked and activated the system itself.

"Thanks," Mace said as his fighter's wings split apart and formed the infamous X shape that gave the ship its name.

Ahead of him Mace saw Kara dive down towards the troop transports and open fire. She had set her laser cannons to fire in sequence, sacrificing hitting power for accuracy and the stream of laser blasts tore up the ground beside the transports.

"Its not working boss," Kara said as she looked out of her cockpit to evaluate the effectiveness of her strafing run. The crews of the troop transports seemed to be staying put for now and were still firing at the woods.

"Target some of the ships themselves," Vorn ordered, "Fire for effect."

"I thought we needed those ships," Mace said.

"We do," Vorn replied, "but there are more than we need so we can afford for you to take a few out."

"You heard the major," Kara said, "Let's go," and she steered her ship back towards the landing zone.

The sky outside Jarad's cockpit had turned from blue to black as he left the atmosphere and in the distance he could just about make out the shape of the Imperial capital ships. They were of little interest to him right now, what he was more interested in were the fighters heading towards his squadron.

"Eyeballs," he transmitted to the rest of his pilots when he recognised the incoming fighters as the standard TIE fighters of the Imperial Navy, "Just as I said. Now everyone knows what to do, stick with your wingmen."

The squadron of TIE fighters split apart just as the X-wings opened fire with their laser cannons. But in spite of the surprise manoeuvre, two of the Imperial ships vanished in short lived but brilliant balls of flame.

"This is it," Jarad said, "Break and engage."

Kara flew over the landing zone once more and fired her fighter's laser cannons. But this time instead of aiming beside the immobile transport ships she rained energy bolts down on the row of ships along one outside edge of the landing zone.

As well as being well armed, the Sentinel-class ships were well armoured to protect their occupants from being killed before they could land on a planet and do battle. But against the sustained fire from a starfighter their armour was insufficient to protect them. Explosions lit up the row of transport ships as Kara's attacks struck them. Behind her Mace followed her example and opened fire with his own fighter's laser cannons. Though he was new to flying this ship he was familiar with the operation of starship weaponry and his strafing run inflicted even more damage to the row of transports.

Circling the landing zone at a higher altitude, Vorn looked down at the burning ships from the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk*.

"Cease fire for now," he ordered, "Let's wait and see how they react to that."

As long as the only rebels engaging them were infantry armed with only with personal arms the transport crews knew that they were perfectly safe inside their ships. But when the rebels brought in air support that changed things radically. Even if they were able to get any of their ships off the ground, they were not fighters and attempting to dogfight the X-wings that looked to be banking around for a third attack run was tantamount to suicide. It was quite possible that all of the transports working together could bring down the fighters but the losses would likely be massive and none of the crews wanted to be the ones to bravely sacrifice themselves for the rest. So knowing that to either try and take off or remaining on the ground in their transports was likely to get them killed, the crewmen opted to abandon their vehicles.

At first it was just one crew that ran. They dashed out of their ship and headed into the woods in the direction that the army battalion had gone, hoping to join up with any survivors.

"Let them go," Vorn ordered the rebels using the *Silver Hawk's* communication system when he saw the transport crew exit their vessel.

This order had the exact effect that Vorn had desired. The other crews saw that the crew that baled out of their vessel had made it to the safety of the woods and they decided that they too would be better off away from the landing zone that was now under attack from both the ground and air.

Less than a minute after the first crew reached the trees another abandoned their transport and ran after them. That one crew became three as two more followed their example and before long there were crews from more than half of the transports fleeing into the woods.

“Now, move in and take the ships,” Vorn ordered and the rebels on the ground charged the landing zone.

Captain Lanvart could not believe how badly the situation had deteriorated. The army battalion had apparently been wiped out, the landing zone was being over-run by rebel militia and his fighter squadron was desperately fighting what was now a superior number of rebel craft. His bombers were useless to him. Even if they were able to evade the enemy fighter squadron out there long enough to get into the atmosphere they would not be able to pick out any targets because of the smoke and flames left from their last attack run. He had only one resource left to him.

“Helm, set a course for low orbit,” he ordered, “and have the other ships follow us in. We’re going to bombard them from space.”

Some of the transport crews stayed with their ships and tried to make a fight of it. But with their ships weapons’ fields of fire blocked by other transports they found that the rebels were easily able to keep out of the way of their guns. The crews of the ships nearest to the woods where the other crews had fled to came out best. They had the chance to see the mass of rebels storming aboard the other ships and in some cases throwing out the bodies of the crew who had not taken their chance to escape earlier.

Fearing for their lives, these final few crewmen also chose to abandon their ships and run. The rebels did not even try and stop them.

Jarad squeezed his trigger and saw another of the TIE fighters explode, that was his third kill of the day. At this rate his squadron would be done with the Imperial fighters in a matter of minutes. But then he glanced towards the cruisers that had hung back from the fight and he saw that they were getting closer.

“Oh crap,” he said out loud, accidentally broadcasting it to his entire squadron.

“Look!” Jaysica said excitedly and she pointed over Vorn’s shoulder and out of the viewport towards the Imperial troop transports, “They’re taking off.”

Sure enough when the other rebels in the cockpit looked at where Jaysica was pointing they saw that one of the Sentinel-class ships was rising gently up off the ground, its wings folding down into their flight position as it gained altitude.

A second ship took off and began to follow behind the first, then a third and a fourth took off as well. Vorn smiled as he realised that the evacuation was now under way.

“Captain, our ships are taking off.” the crewman called out from the comscan position.

“What do you mean taking off?” captain Lanvart asked.

“I have multiple signals sir, they all read as our landing craft.”

“Hail them,” Lanvart ordered, “Find out what’s going on down there.”

There was a delay while the comscan operator attempted to raise the pilots of the transports.

“Sir,” he said eventually, “there’s no response from any of them.”

“It’s the rebels!” Lanvart exclaimed, “They’re stealing our bloody shuttles!”

5.

The last of the TIE fighters spiralled out of control towards the planet's atmosphere right as Vorn signalled Jarad.

"The transports are on their way up now," he said, "What's the situation?"

"We've cleared the fighters out of the way," Jarad responded, "but the cruisers are moving in now."

"Try and distract them," Vorn told him, "because we'll be up there any minute now."

Jarad opened a channel to his fighters.

"Activate targeting computers," he said, "we're going to attack the cruisers."

The Imperial cruisers began to fire on the rebel fighters as soon as they came into range, but the nimble X-wings proved too difficult for their heavy guns to track and the volleys went wide of their mark.

"Angle your deflectors double front," Jarad ordered even though he knew that a direct hit from a turbolaser would vaporise his fighters with or without their ships up.

His computer began to bleep at him as it tracked the nearest cruiser. The bleeps became quicker until they formed a continuous tone.

"I've got a lock," he said and he squeezed his trigger.

This time instead of bright red energy blasts coming from his laser cannons, Jarad's entire ship shook slightly as a pair of proton torpedoes shot from the launchers mounted in the small craft's nose. He watched as the projectiles streaked towards the cruiser, banking slowly as they tracked its movement until they impacted on the side of the massive ship. Jarad's cockpit canopy and suit visor darkened in response to the detonation of the torpedoes and it took a few seconds for them to clear and let him see the damage that he had inflicted.

As far as he could tell the cruiser was undamaged, its thick armour plating had absorbed the attack entirely. But he could also see more torpedoes heading towards the ship.

One after another the torpedoes struck the cruiser and this time when Jarad was able to look he saw that the ship was burning along almost half its length. Then another volley of turbolaser blasts came from the next nearest cruiser and Jarad feared that his moment of hesitation to check the damage inflicted on the first ship would cost him his life. But instead the entire volley passed harmlessly underneath him by a margin far too wide to be accidental.

Jarad checked his sensors and saw that there was now a cluster of signals behind him, the stolen troop transports were leaving the atmosphere.

The beings piloting the stolen ships had little if any previous experience of flying; they were mainly ground crew from the landing strip. But all they had to do was hold a relatively straight course and execute a hyperspace jump that had been prepared for them and they would be safe. Unfortunately the commander of the Imperial task force was not prepared to sit back and let them go.

The attack run made by the X-wings on one of the Imperial cruisers had demonstrated how difficult it was for their heavy turbolasers to track small and fast moving targets, but the troop ships were all clustered together and flying in a straight line away from the planet. No gunner could fail to find a target under those conditions. The volley was not aimed at any particular ship, instead it was just aimed into the centre of the convoy of troop transports and two of them vanished in balls of flame.

"Scatter!" Vorn ordered when he saw the ships destroyed, "All ships spread out, don't give them an easy target. Try not to stay straight and level, execute a few random manoeuvres."

At once the convoy of ships began to break up as their pilots put as much distance between themselves and the other transports as they could. The Imperial cruisers continued to fire but without a large group of targets to aim at the blast passed harmlessly through empty space.

"Captain Tarl," Vorn signalled, "try and distract those cruisers, we have to give the transports time to make the jump to hyperspace. Kara and Mace, you two as well."

At once the twelve X-wings steered towards the Imperial cruisers and opened fire. Their weapons could do little to the capital ships but they did divert the attention of some of the gunners away from the transports. But some was not all and one Imperial gunner caught sight of a transport that had kept a straight course for just a few seconds too long and he destroyed it without a second thought.

"Not another," Vorn muttered to himself as he saw the ship explode. Each troop transport had close to four hundred people crammed on board it, so the three ships destroyed meant that over a thousand helpless beings had died in the last few minutes.

Another flash caught Vorn's attention and he looked towards it. But instead of the ball of flame that signified another destroyed ship and more dead civilians there was only empty space. Then there was another flash, followed by another and another where there were no turbolaser blasts to destroy them and Vorn realised what was happening.

The transport ships were jumping to hyperspace.

"Captain, the rebels are jumping to hyperspace," the comscan operator called out across the bridge. Captain Lanvart did not reply, instead he just stood and stared through the bridge windows into space where he could see one bright flash of light after another as the transport ships that the rebels had stolen from his force jumped into hyperspace. He flinched as an X-wing flew close by the window, but he remained silent as his crew continued to call out to him for orders.

"That's the last of them," Vorn said when the final transport ship jumped to hyperspace and he activated the communication system, "Break off," he signalled, "the transports are away."

A moment later Tobis activated the *Silver Hawk's* own hyperdrive and space twisted as the ship made the jump to hyperspace.

The strange pattern of lights outside the cockpit last for only a minute or so before the *Silver Hawk* returned to realspace, closely followed by Jarad's X-wing squadron including Kara and Mace. Vorn looked out into deep space where nearly twenty transport ships filled with refugees floated in front of him, all waiting to be led to another safe world.

Most meetings with General Syres Kain, commander of all Alliance operations in the sector took place either in his office or the briefing room of his headquarters. But today he had come to see Mace and Vorn aboard the *Silver Hawk* while it was docked at his headquarters.

General Kain brought with him Jarad Tarl and a female Mon Calamari, Rear Admiral Aphanar the head of the Alliance fleet in the sector and insisted that the ship be cleared of everyone else.

"Why the secrecy?" Vorn asked.

"What I have to say," General Kain began, "is of the utmost importance to the Alliance in this sector and must be kept to as few people as possible. I take that this ship is secure?"

"It is," Mace replied.

"Good," Kain said, "Because I have studied the reports of what happened at the safe world and given the Empire's knowledge not only of its location but the existence of the underground facility there I have come to an unpleasant conclusion. Someone in the Alliance in our sector is a spy for the Empire."