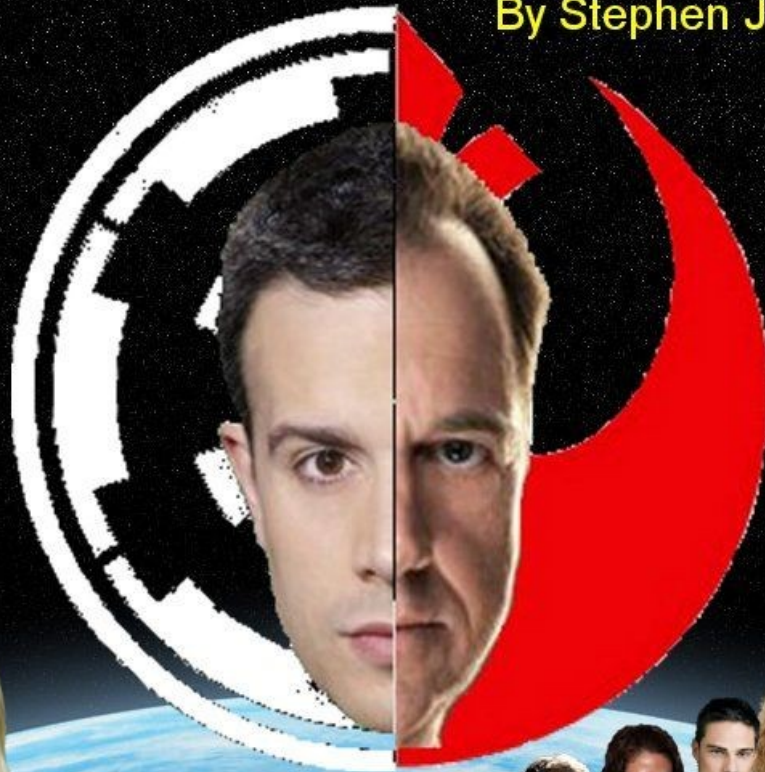


STAR WARS

7-06: Prisoner Exchange (Part 2)

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...

PRISONER EXCHANGE (PART 2)

WITH GARM IN THE HANDS OF TERRORISTS, VORN AND THE REBELS ABOARD THE *SILVER HAWK* SET OUT TO RESCUE HIM. BUT THEY SOON DISCOVER THAT THEY ARE FACING MORE THAN JUST A SMALL BAND OF CRIMINALS...

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

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1.

The droid R5-HV, known to the occupants of the *Silver Hawk* as Harvey, projected a hologram into the centre of the transport ship's lounge area. Around the droid were the seven rebels based aboard the *Silver Hawk*, all focused on the image.

"According to Vay this is the defence force tracing station that was attacked." Major Vorn Larcus III, the rebel team's commanding officer told his team. The Vay he mentioned was not a member of the Alliance to Restore the Republic, in fact she was an Imperial Security Bureau agent who at that moment was tied up in the *Silver Hawk's* cargo hold. She had contacted Vorn following the attack on the tracking station during which his son, another ISB agent, had been captured by the mysterious attackers that the Empire had mistakenly believed were Alliance troops. She had been willing to surrender herself in exchange for Garm Larcus's release but instead had been captured herself by the occupants of the *Silver Hawk* only to find out that the rebellion was not holding Garm after all. However, Vorn had not been willing to let the matter rest there. With his son apparently being held captive he had declared his intention to find him and the other rebels had offered their help. But the first thing they had to do was find out who was behind the attacks to begin with.

"It doesn't use the usual Imperial modular construction." one of the rebels said, a young woman called Jaysica Horbid who was the team's demolition and security expert.

"Because it isn't an Imperial facility laser brain." another female rebel replied. This was Lieutenant Kara Larcus, who despite being more than thirty years younger than Vorn was his wife and the mother of his infant son.

"I know that." Jaysica said, "I just thought that maybe the defence force would have used Imperial components to cut costs."

"The base dates back to before the Clone Wars." the former mercenary Tharun Verser said, "The structures were all designed specifically for this base."

"How do you know that?" the youngest of the rebels asked. Cass Grayle was just under nineteen standard years old and was aboard the *Silver Hawk* only because her adoptive father, Mace, was the owner of the ship.

"Because I've been there before." Tharun said, "When my company was hired to take out bases that had supposedly been seized by rebels this was one of the outposts we attacked."

"So at least we've got someone with physical experience of the place." Mace commented.

"Oh, err, mightn't the government have improved the defences since Tharun's company attacked?" the final rebel, the ship's engineer Tobis Dorfus asked.

"Possibly." Vorn replied, "But from my days in Parliament I don't remember the Estranian government being that worried about defence issues. Other than for propaganda purposes of course."

"Yeah, I suppose that's what comes of having the sector's Imperial Army and Navy forces headquartered right here. Right boss?" Kara said.

"Exactly." Vorn replied, "There are some in Parliament who want to abolish the standing defence force and replace it with a part time militia."

"Ooh, you mean like Tarlen where Kara and I come from?" Jaysica asked and Kara winced.

"Why do you always have to remind people we come from the same planet?" she said, "It always worries me that people will think I'm as big a klutz as you are."

"The first thing for us to do is get someone on the ground to search for any physical evidence not already removed or destroyed by the EDF or Empire." Vorn said, ignoring Kara's comment, "Tharun since you've been here before I'd like you to take command of the team that does this."

"Sure major." Tharun replied, "How big is my team?"

"I'm thinking four people." Vorn told him, "Tobis and Jaysica should be able to search for the actual evidence while Cass can help you keep watch for enemy patrols."

"Me?" Cass asked, surprised.

"Yes, assuming you agree to go." Vorn replied.

"I thought you wanted to get more involved." Mace added.

"I do. It just surprises me when it happens. That's all." Cass said.

"You handled yourself well when we were all captured." Vorn pointed out in reference to an earlier mission to the Imperial Navy's sector headquarters, "I think you've earned the right to take part in field operations." and a smile spread across Cass's face.

"Remember this is a tracking station." Mace said, "That means we can't just set the ship down right outside the perimeter for you lot to jump out. We'll be setting down at a landing field about three kilometres away from the base and you'll have to head in on foot from there."

"Hopefully we'll have timed our landing right and if you can cover the ground in two hours then you'll arrive just before sunrise."

"Or sunset if the klutz really slows you down." Kara muttered.

After the briefing Vorn headed for the cargo hold while the four rebels selected to search for evidence of the attacker's identity went to prepare themselves. Inside the hold sat Vay Udra, wearing just the towel she had been brought to the ship in and bound hand and foot with plastic ties. To further limit her movement her hands were raised above her head and bound to one of the four columns that were part of the elevator mechanism for the cargo loading hatch in the floor behind her.

"I'm sending four of my people to look for clues," he told her, "Is there anything else you have to tell me?"

"Like what?" Vay replied.

"Like whether this really is just some trap that they are walking into." Vorn said.

"It's not a trap." Vay said, "I promise." and Vorn sighed.

"I wish could know whether you were lying," he said, "But I don't have your skills with the Force and I've got a very bad feeling about all of this."

"Do you believe how I feel about Garm?" Vay asked.

"Yes I do." Vorn said, "And that is the only reason I didn't have this ship fly straight back to headquarters and hand you over to our intelligence people."

Though the mission was supposed to be one of intelligence gathering only, the four rebels who set out from the *Silver Hawk* did so ready for battle. Tharun wore combat fatigues, body armour and carried a Blastech A-280, widely regarded as the most powerful production blaster rifle in the galaxy while the other three rebels were all armed with older model carbines that at short range could match the firepower of the more modern E-11 rifles that the tracking station personnel would be armed with. Even with this firepower however, the team was not expected to be able to defeat the tracking station's personnel. Instead it was hoped that the weapons would allow them to hold out long enough for the *Silver Hawk* to arrive and pick them up if they were discovered.

"Shouldn't we be using our glow rods?" Cass asked as the rebel team set out from the landing field in the darkness.

"Oh, err, no." Tobis replied, "We, err, we can only see an extra few metres with them but we can be seen for more than a kilometre by anyone who notices the light."

"Basically you just have to watch where you tread kid." Tharun added, at which point Jaysica squealed and fell forwards, "Pick your girlfriend up lad." Tharun told Tobis as he looked around, using his rifle scope to give him better night vision as he looked to see if Jaysica had attracted any attention.

"It was an accident. I think the ground gave way." Jaysica said while Tobis helped her back to her feet.

"Sure. The ground gave way." Tharun said softly, "Come on, we're on a tight schedule here."

The four rebels were not primarily interested in the tracking station itself. Any evidence relating to the force that had attacked it would have already been removed. Instead they focused on how the attackers approached it. According to Vay there had been two teams involved in the attack that was aimed at rescuing a man caught trying to access one of the station's antenna arrays. The first of these had been a group armed with mortars who had bombarded the tracking station from a distance and drawn out Vay and a squad of soldiers. Then while the defenders were focused in this direction a second group had been able to position themselves to attack the outpost directly from the opposite direction and it was this group that had released the prisoner and abducted Garm and it was from this direction that Tharun chose to approach the tracking station as well.

"There's an area of high ground over there," he said to the other, pointing ahead, "When my company hit this place we put an observation crew up there while the rest of us surrounded the place. My guess is that whoever hit the outpost this time would have done the same."

Heading for the high ground Tharun suddenly held up his hand for the team to halt and crouched down.

"What's wrong?" Cass asked quietly, raising her carbine.

"Look there," he replied.

"Are those footprints?" Jaysica asked.

"They are." Tharun replied, "But not human." The tracks that Tharun had found were not of someone wearing any form of ordinary footwear. Instead they had the look of bare feet and the toes were obviously clawed.

"So, err, not a member of the defence forces." Tobis commented, aware that Estran followed the Empire's anti-alien policy in recruiting for its military.

"No." Tharun replied.

"They're going both ways as well aren't they?" Jaysica asked as she studied the footprints in the dirt, "So someone went up the hill to watch the tracking station and then came back down the same way."

"Very good little lady." Tharun replied, nodding, "Now I suggest that Cass and I carry on up this hill to keep an eye on what's going on at the tracking station while Jaysica and Tobis follow these tracks in the other

direction.

"Oh, err, yes." Tobis replied and he nodded.

"Come on then kid." Tharun said to Cass, "Follow me and stay low." before he started up the hill, keeping as low as he could. Upon reaching the very top he quickly studied the ground beneath him. The clawed footprints did indeed lead up to this point and there were indentations in the ground where someone had lay watching the tracking station as Tharun now did, aiming his rifle towards it. Cass lay down beside him but as she lifted her carbine Tharun stopped her.

"Not just yet kid." he told her, "Wait until I say so. Just keep an eye out around us just in case anyone comes snooping around while I'm concentrating on watching the outpost."

"Sure." Cass replied.

2.

While Cass and Tharun were setting themselves up to observe the tracking station Jaysica and Tobis were attempting to follow the tracks back to their source.

"Tobis look." Jaysica whispered, putting a hand on his shoulder and she pointed to an area of low ground that had been churned up by multiple beings walking over it recently. Though the ambient light was not enough for the two rebels to identify any distinct footprints they could see that they turned to head in the same direction as the ones they were already following and that they spread out to become more identifiable.

"Err, perhaps we should be looking out for anyone that may still be around." Tobis suggested, "If, ah, if I go forwards you can stay here and watch. Then we'll swap places and I'll keep watch for you."

Jaysica nodded and crouched down, cradling her carbine. Then as Tobis hurried further along the line of tracks she kept watch. Tobis halted when the single set of clawed tracks merged with the multiple sets that appeared to have gone to and from the tracking station he dropped into a crouching position to keep watch as Jaysica took her turn to rush forwards.

The two rebels continued like this for just over a hundred metres, taking turns to advance while protected by the other until they reached the point where the tracks stopped. They did not simply vanish however, instead what had been the tracks left by a group of beings all moving in one specific direction the footprints split up and became more distinct from one another before leading to one exact point where they disappeared. It was obvious that this was the spot at which the raiding force had disembarked from and later got back on board the vehicle that had been used to bring them here. This was further proven by the much deeper tracks that the vehicle itself had left in the ground. Since the tracking station could have easily detected an aircraft or starship taking off it was not surprising that the tracks were more than just the indentations left behind by landing gear. Instead there was a trail of large regular shaped footprints created by a walker of some type.

"Err, I think we ought to get Tharun." Tobis said.

"I think so too." Jaysica replied and she reached for her comlink.

"Oh, err, no." Tobis said, reaching out to put his hand over her before she could activate the device, "The tracking station could pick up the signal. I'll stay here and you go and get him."

Jaysica nodded and hurried back along the trail that had led them to this spot, rushing past the low ground where the raiding party had split up from their lookout and back to the hill where Cass and Tharun were keeping watch on the tracking station and the surrounding area.

"Company." Cass whispered when she became aware of Jaysica's approach but before she was able to identify her and both she and Tharun aimed their blasters back down the hill, prompting Jaysica to suddenly grind to a halt and throw her hands up in the air when she saw them.

"Don't shoot me!" she exclaimed.

"Quiet!" Tharun hissed, "Sound carries."

"Sorry." Jaysica replied.

"That's okay, but what are you doing back here?" Tharun asked.

"We've found more tracks." Jaysica told him, "They lead to another set that looks like it was left behind by a walker of some kind."

"An AT-AT?" Cass asked

"I don't know." Jaysica answered.

"Unlikely." Tharun commented, "Anyone other than the Empire that has an AT-AT would do well to not be using it on a densely populated world like Estran. But there are plenty of other types that someone could get hold of. Take me to these tracks." and he retreated a short distance back down the hill so he could stand up without being seen from the other side.

"What about me?" Cass said, looking at Tharun.

"If you really want to stay here and keep tabs on the outpost you can but I think you're better off coming with us." he replied and Cass also got up off the ground.

Jaysica then led both Cass and Tharun to the site of the walker tracks and he crouched down to study them closely.

"Six legs." Tharun said, "You can see the central pair is set wider apart than the front and rear ones. That combined with the fact that the shape is similar to an Imperial AT-AT leads me to think that this was an AT-TE."

"You mean like the walkers used in the Clone Wars?" Cass asked and Tharun nodded.

"There are plenty left. The Empire still uses some in a support role or for training purposes but there are plenty of others who have them. Including the Alliance." he said.

"So do we follow these tracks as well?" Jaysica asked and Tharun was just about to reply when he saw a faint glow coming from behind a nearby hill.

"Down!" he hissed, dropping into a crouching position and bringing his rifle up to his shoulder. Cass and Tobis did likewise but Jaysica tried to turn as she ducked and ended up overbalancing herself and landing flat on her face.

"Tobis I-" she began before Tharun cut her off.

"Stay down and stay quiet." he said firmly.

"What's going on?" Cass asked softly.

"There's someone over that hill." he answered, "They're using a glow rod." and then moments later several armoured figures marched into view.

"Those aren't stormtroopers." Cass said.

"No. Not Imperial Army either." Tharun responded, "It must be a patrol from the outpost. Stay still and maybe they won't."

"Over there!" one of the approaching soldiers yelled, pointing towards the rebels.

"Oh stang." Tharun said and he fired a single shot from his rifle that punched right through the armoured vest worn by the pointing trooper and blew him off his feet. Then he leapt to his feet and yelled, "Run!"

The other rebels got to their feet and began to run, following Tharun as he headed away from the patrol that had surprised them.

"Where are we going?" Cass asked.

"Just away from them." Tharun replied as blaster bolts began to sail through the air past them. Fortunately a combination of the poor light and the fact that pursuing soldiers were firing on the move instead of halting to use their sights properly meant that the energy blasts were nothing more than a nuisance. However, now that they had already been discovered by the troopers from the tracking station there was no further need to worry about maintaining a communications blackout and as he ran Tharun fumbling through his webbing for his comlink, "This is Tharun." he transmitted, "We are in contact with the enemy and need urgent extraction. Follow my beacon." and then without waiting for a reply he switched the comlink to emit regular pulses on the same frequency that the rebels still aboard the *Silver Hawk* could easily track.

"Kara we're moving!" Vorn yelled from the cockpit as he and Mace started up the *Silver Hawk's* systems, "Get in the turret." and Kara leapt up from her seat in the lounge and hurried over to the ladder that led to the *Silver Hawk's* only weapon, a laser cannon mounted in a dorsal turret.

The ship lifted off and Mace immediately turned it towards the source of Tharun's beacon, accelerating as fast as he could.

"I'll go stand by the ramp." Vorn told him and he got out of the co-pilot's seat and ran for the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp. Meanwhile Mace focused on keeping the ship heading towards Tharun's team.

The first visual sign that the *Silver Hawk* was getting close to the rebels on the ground was when Mace saw flashes of blaster fire that he rapidly realised were heading in his rough direction.

"Kara." he signalled over the intercom, "We've got enemy troops about four hundred metres ahead."

"I see them." Kara responded, "Can you pull us up some more and then angle us down? It'll make it easier to get a good shot."

"On it." Mace replied and he pulled back on the control column to lift the *Silver Hawk's* nose and gain altitude before angling it down again so that the laser cannon mounted on the top of the vessel had a wider field of fire against ground targets. Knowing that she had little time before Mace would be forced to pull up again Kara opened fire with the cannon, sending a stream of powerful laser blasts towards the soldiers chasing after the other rebels. The weapon was designed to engage other starships in space rather than infantry on the ground but Kara was not worried about scoring direct hits, the amount of energy contained in each blast caused massive thermal disruption to the ground when they struck it and this forced clouds of debris into the air that showered down on the soldiers and forced them to reconsider their pursuits.

Then came more small arms fire from the soldiers, this time aimed directly at the *Silver Hawk* and Mace reacted by raising the deflector shields he had installed. Designed to dissipate the intense power of starship scale weapons the shields had no difficulty in blocking the lighter fire that the *Silver Hawk* was now coming under as Mace brought the ship in lower.

"Major Larcus sir!" the golden coloured protocol droid that Vorn owned called out as the *Silver Hawk* lurched again when Mace brought it to a sudden halt, "Might I enquire what is happening?"

"Not now Jeeves." Vorn replied, "I've got work to do." and he activated the control that would lower the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp. Then as the hatch began to open he drew his blaster, a compact holdout pistol, and aimed it down the ramp just in case the four rebels who had gone to investigate the area around the tracking station were not the first ones to reach it.

But his fears were unfounded as first Tharun, then Tobis, Cass and finally Jaysica came running up the ramp and Vorn closed it behind them before reaching for the intercom.

"Go!" he exclaimed and the *Silver Hawk* suddenly accelerated as Mace put as much distance between them and the tracking station as possible without heading out of the atmosphere.

"Whoever hit that place had an AT-TE major." Tharun said as he removed his blast helmet.

"Did you see it?" Vorn asked.

"Err, no." Tobis replied, "Just the tracks."

"They headed north." Tharun added, "Away from the nearest settlements. My guess is that they went that way for a pick up from the air. They could have easily avoided the settlements on the ground if they wanted but I doubt they wanted to spend that much time travelling."

"That means they'd have a low altitude attack transport as well then." Vorn said, knowing from his experience in the Clone Wars how LAAT/c transports were used to deliver AT-TEs rapidly from the air before withdrawing until the heavy walkers needed to be recovered.

Tharun nodded.

"And a transport like that is going to get itself noticed if it lands at any normal airfield or starport." he said.

"Come with me." Vorn told him and then he led Tharun into the Silver Hawk's cockpit where Mace was still flying the ship.

"Well I'm glad to say that the skies are clear major. There don't seem to be any signs of pursuit." Mace said.

"Excellent." Vorn replied as he sat down in the co-pilot's seat again, "Our ground team found evidence that Garm was taken away in an AT-TE and Tharun believes it was picked up and flown away."

"You want to know where a transport could land with a combat walker clamped to its hull?" Mace asked and Vorn nodded.

"There must be a private airfield somewhere that it could land. Probably within a thousand kilometres. Any more than that and the odds of the transport being noticed would go right up." he said.

"This whole area's littered with private flying clubs and landing fields like where we landed but I don't see any of them being able to hide something like an AT-TE. I could check the directory but we could be talking about hundreds of possibilities."

"Perhaps I better get Jeeves on it then." Vorn said, "In the mean time try and find somewhere that we can land without any questions being asked."

Like all heavily visited worlds Estran maintained a directory of places where aircraft and starships could land safely in an emergency, regardless of who owned them. Many of these were large commercial facilities that could be instantly discounted. They all had both an Imperial and local customs presence that no amount of money could bribe into looking the other way as a transport carrying something as obvious as an AT-TE landed. At the other end of the scale were the individual landing pads that existed all across the planet on top of or even built into tall buildings so that visitors could just step off a shuttle and already be at their destination while others were a feature of expensive private residences. But where the commercial ports were too big for an LAAT/c to go unnoticed, these landing pads were too small to be able to handle the AT-TE itself. The sight of an armoured walker climbing down a skyscraper was again just too obvious to be ignored by the authorities.

This left just the mid sized starports and airfields. Some of these were nothing more than areas of open ground whose owners made money from landing fees but there were others that possessed more extensive facilities than these basic landing fields while being off limits to the general public. Some of these were government facilities, mostly military in function, so they were immediately discounted by Jeeves as the droid searched the directory database. But other such facilities were maintained by private companies that had a need to move goods or people by air or off world and wanted the flexibility of being able to decide on their own arrival and departure schedules.

"Any luck yet Jeeves?" Vorn asked as he approached the droid.

"I have narrowed the number of possibilities down to four Major Larcus sir." Jeeves replied and the droid brought up a list of the four possible landing sites on the display in front of it, "As you can see, each of them is owned by-

"That one." Vorn interrupted, pointing to one of the entries on the short list, "Is that ownership up to date?"

"Why yes Major Larcus sir. The information has been confirmed with the main Estranian registry."

"Then that's where they went." Vorn said and he turned and left the cockpit, heading for the Silver Hawk's lounge where most of the other rebels already were, "Can I have everyone in here." he called out and Kara and Cass appeared from inside their cabin.

"What's wrong boss?" Kara asked when she saw the concerned look on Vorn's face.

"Jeeves has narrowed the list of possible places for that AT-TE to have gone down to four." Vorn announced, "And one of them stands out above all the others. It tells us not only where my son has been taken, but who took him."

"How so major?" Tharun asked.

"Because it's a private freight handling port owned by Xizor Transport Systems." Vorn replied and there were groans from around the room.

"Kriff, that's just what we need." Kara said.

"Language." Mace commented.

"I don't get it." Cass said, "What's so important about a transport company? And why would they be attacking

a defence force base?"

"Xizor Transport Systems was until recently owned by a Falleen known as Prince Xizor." Vorn explained, "And as well as using the business to make himself very wealthy he used it as a front to launder money for his other primary enterprise. Black Sun."

Black Sun was one of the most infamous criminal organisations in the galaxy, infiltrating planetary governments, Imperial departments and even the rebel alliance. The recent death of its leader Prince Xizor over Coruscant had thrown the organisation into disarray but it had not simply ceased to exist.

"Black Sun?" Cass repeated, "Like those two guys who tried to kidnap me?"

"And tortured me." Kara added.

"The very same." Vorn said, "And if Garm is being held captive by them then I'm doubly determined to rescue him."

3.

The rodian Treego had been the senior agent of Black Sun in the sector prior to the death of Prince Xizor and he had been fortunate enough to receive word of the prince's death early enough that he was able to hide all evidence of his links to Black Sun just hours before Imperial sector rangers arrived at his office to search it. The problem was that with Black Sun now tearing itself apart as potential successors to Prince Xizor struggled for supremacy while rival organisations sought to encroach on its business. In this sector alone Treego had lost control of every world but Estran to subordinates who had decided they could do better on their own and the network of informants that he had relied on was falling apart without the financial support or pure intimidation value of Black Sun's galactic organisation.

That was why he had come up with the idea to tap into the governmental communications network on Estran directly and ordered one of his operatives to plant a listening device in an antenna array that would enable what remained of Treego's little piece of Black Sun to stay one step ahead of the authorities. Or at least that was the theory. The agent sent to access the antenna array had been caught and an armed assault had been necessary to release him before he talked. But even though this attack had resulted in the loss of a number of other operatives and some heavy weaponry it had had an up side to it that Treego was looking at on a monitor.

Sat in one of the dungeons hidden beneath the private starport was ISB Agent Garm Larcus.

"Has he talked yet?" Treego asked the interrogator who had spent the last few hours with Garm.

"No sir. Though as per your instructions so far I have refrained from using any enhanced interrogation methods."

Treego snorted at the term 'enhanced interrogation methods'. It was a fancy way of saying 'torture' and Treego was perfectly happy to sanction it if he thought it would get results. But the problem was that ISB agents tended to undergo training in how to resist torture and the extra time spent torturing him was more time during which the person asking the questions could be imprinting the required answers onto him. This was the primary reason for the development of torture droids. With no emotions and no patience to wear thin they were better able to determine the truth of the answers they were given. But without access to such a droid Treego was having to rely on an organic being instead.

"Keep trying." Treego said, "I want to know how much the Empire knows about me. If this agent was part of an official investigation then he will know."

"Of course sir." the interrogator replied, nodding with respect and then leaving the room that was currently serving as Treego's office while the sector rangers were distracted with searching his actual office.

The only images available of the starport operated by Black Sun under the guise of a private corporate starport came from orbital surveys accessible from public data networks. Fortunately Black Sun had not attempted to have their facility censored in the images as many military and law enforcement facilities were, knowing that this could backfire and draw undue attention from the large number of beings who were naturally averse to such secrecy. But even these relatively poor quality two dimensional images were sufficient for the rebels to be able to see the entire external layout.

"Err, these look like hangars for atmospheric craft here." Tobis said, pointing to a row of buildings in the image that Harvey was projecting onto the floor of the *Silver Hawk's* lounge area so that it could be viewed as large as possible.

"How can you tell?" Cass asked, "What's the difference between a hangar for an airspeeder and one for a shuttle or space transport?"

"Fuel mainly." Mace told her, "Starships need fuel for their ion drives and hyperdrives that speeders don't for their repulsorlifts."

"Err, yes. That's right." Tobis added and he stepped across part of the image, "Ah, see these? These are starship fuel cell containers."

"Do we know how old this image is?" Vorn asked as he looked at the aircraft hangars Tobis had pointed out.

"Time stamp when we downloaded them said two weeks boss." Kara said and Vorn sighed.

"So no chance of us finding any trace of that walker then." he commented.

"Probably not the sort of thing that they'd parade around in public major." Tharun said, "I doubt a starport security force would be allowed to operate something with that sort of firepower."

"So how are we going to get in there?" Jaysica asked, "Fake an emergency landing?"

"No." Mace replied, "I doubt that would work. Black Sun would probably just shoot us down then present a recording of our distress call to government crash investigators as proof we were in trouble before exploding."

"Besides which I doubt we could find out where Garm is being held if they knew we were inside their

perimeter." Vorn added, "In fact I'm thinking that we ought to take a file out of their network and use a big distraction to get them looking one way while we go in another."

"I know that look." Kara said, smiling, "The boss has a plan."

"Yes I do." Vorn said, "But we'll need a starship or airspeeder. One with a reasonable transport capacity."

"What about the *Silver Hawk*?" Cass asked.

"I've got a feeling that the major's plan involves blowing up whatever vehicle we use sweetheart." Mace told her and Vorn smiled.

"Yes. Yes it does." he said, "We fly our vehicle in from this direction." and he walked around the image until he reached a point outside the starport perimeter opposite the aircraft hangar and started to walk towards the centre of the image, "On remote of course. We also use a communications relay that lets us send a distress signal at the last minute before our transport touches down."

"But won't they just blow it up then?" Cass asked.

"Yes they will and that will ignite all the extra fuel we'll pack it with that ought to create a nice little bonfire that will keep them occupied while we sneak in over here near the aircraft hangar." Vorn answered and he walked over to the other side of the image.

"Sounds pretty good to be major." Tharun said, "Though I'd like to scout out the perimeter first."

"You'll have plenty of time." Vorn told him, "I'll go with Tobis and Jaysica to procure our aircraft and you can be conducting your reconnaissance then. Look for any signs of detention cells or prisoner handling equipment."

"How are we supposed to locate junior if Tharun doesn't spot him before we go in boss?" Kara asked.

"Two methods spring to mind." Vorn replied, "Firstly we'll locate the hangar that holds the walker and its transport and see if there's a trail we can follow. Alternatively we just find someone to tell us."

"Why would they?" Cass asked.

"Because if they don't I'll shoot them." Vorn replied, "We're dealing with Black Sun here. Not bystanders who have been caught up in a fight that's nothing to do with them."

Just then Harvey let out a series of chirps.

"Excuse me Major Larcus sir, but Harvey wishes to know why he cannot just access the starport computer network to locate Master Garm." Jeeves translated.

"Because this will be a hot combat zone." Vorn replied, "I'm afraid Harvey will just slow us down and be too much of a target. I want him and you to stay here on the *Silver Hawk* and be ready to pick us up when we call for it."

"Think we can suppress all the surface to air defences they may have major?" Mace asked.

"No. But I'm not planning on us being picked up from inside the starport. I'm planning on us stealing a ground vehicle to escape in. Then we'll take Garm home and leave him there."

"We're not taking him back as a prisoner then boss?" Kara asked and Vorn shook his head.

"This may be causing more problems in the long run but this isn't an Alliance operation and I think that if Vay senses we're going to take him prisoner ourselves then she won't continue to be as well behaved as she has been so far." he replied, "Oh just one more thing." Vorn added, "If Garm recognises any of us he may resist so there are two things we need to do to stop that happening. Firstly we need to make sure that our appearances are disguised and secondly the first thing we have to do when we find him is stun him."

"Ooh!" Kara exclaimed, raising her arm up into the air and waving her hand, "Boss! Boss! Boss! Can I do that?" and Vorn sighed.

Before leaving to try and obtain a suitable aircraft to use in the rescue mission Vorn wanted to be certain that he had exhausted all possible sources of intelligence on Black Sun. With this in mind he headed back into the *Silver Hawk's* cargo hold and sat on a crate facing Vay.

"I don't need the Force to tell how worried you are." she said.

"Garm's being held by Black Sun." he replied and Vay's jaw dropped, "How much do you know about their organisation here on Estran?"

"Nothing." Vay replied, "Except of course that they were using the offices of Xizor Transport Systems as a front. The sector rangers raided it."

"Well unfortunately they didn't raid their private starport as well." Vorn said, "It looks like that's where Garm's been taken."

Vay tugged at the cable ties binding her wrists.

"Untie me." she said, "Give me some clothes and a blaster and I'll help you free him."

"I don't think so young lady." Vorn said, "You'd turn on us the moment Garm was free and he could get hurt in the crossfire. Frankly out of you and Black Sun, I'm not sure who I'd trust the least."

Sat bound to a chair in the same way as the prisoner at the tracking station had been Garm had remained silent so far, not wanting to accidentally give away any information by responding to any particular question. Had the interrogator been a droid then Garm knew that it would be programmed to also monitor his facial

responses to any questions asked, but whoever his captors were they were relying on an organic interrogator instead and Garm knew how he intended to use that to his advantage. He avoided making eye contact as the questions were asked, instead looking down and concentrating on the tone of the interrogator's voice as much as the questions themselves. To begin with he had assumed that he had been abducted by members of the rebellion by the lack of physical torture but as time went on he became less and less certain of this. The questioning began by asking about why Garm had gone to the defence force tracking station and how much he knew about the man that had been captured by the base personnel. All of this had been normal enough, the rebellion would have been eager to know if one of their cells had been exposed. But as the interrogation went on the questions took another turn, asking about the contact he had with both local and sector wide law enforcement. Given that combating the rebellion was purely a matter for Imperial authorities this suggested that he was not dealing with that organisation after all. "What do you know of Xizor Transport Systems?" the interrogator asked and with his head still bowed, Garm's eyes widened. As part of the ISB he had been informed that XTS had been exposed as a front organisation for Black Sun, but knowledge of who his captors were did not fill him with any confidence. Though both the rebellion and Black Sun were considered equally outside the law it was known that genuine members of the rebel alliance had a form of misplaced honour that limited the extents to which they would go in search of information. Black Sun on the other hand knew no limits to its savagery. All of a sudden there was a bleeping sound from a speaker set into the wall and the interrogator frowned for some reason before he turned around and exited the room, leaving Garm alone. "I've got a very bad feeling about this." he muttered to himself as he looked up.

4.

Finding a suitable aircraft to use for a distraction proved to be rather simple. The rebels did not need one that was particularly sturdy and so there were a great deal of vehicles that ought have been scrapped available to them cheaply from sellers who asked no questions about operating licences.

Modifying the controls so that the ancient shuttle they finally purchased could be piloted remotely did not take long either. The shuttle had only to be capable of the most basic manoeuvres before it would be destroyed and the autopilot, though outmoded, could handle any of these. All that was required was for Tobis to modify the communications to route it into the autopilot and navigation system so that both could be programmed from Tobis's datapad.

At the same time as this work was being carried out, Tharun crept as close to the starport as he dared just as he had with the tracking station and began to study its layout and defences. Unsurprisingly there were no obvious weapon emplacements anywhere around the perimeter. Such defences would attract far too much attention from the authorities and the starport's first line of defence was anonymity rather than firepower.

There were however, several structures spread around the outer edge of the starport just a few metres within the wire fence surrounding the entire facility that served no obvious function even when Tharun examined them closely through his macrobinoculars. Each of these was identically constructed from lightweight pressed materials rather than the more sturdy ferrocrete used for most of the other starport structures and was of just the right size to conceal a surface to air laser cannon inside.

Just then he heard movement from behind him and he looked around to see the other rebels moving towards him, all fully armed like Tharun clad in black fatigues rather than their usual clothing.

"What do you have to report sergeant?" Vorn asked.

"There are what look like about a dozen concealed weapon emplacements spread all around the perimeter major." he answered.

"Enough to bring down a ship?" Mace said.

"Probably. Not much point in having them otherwise." Tharun replied.

"What about anti-personnel defences?" Vorn said.

"I've seen a few guards with blasters and that's about it. I don't think that they're all that worried about a few troublemakers like us trying to break in."

"That's only because they don't know how much trouble we can cause." Kara commented.

"And I take it that there's no sign of my son?" Vorn added.

"None sir. If he's down there they've got him hidden better than those defence batteries."

"He's down there." Vorn said, "Now where would you suggest we break in?"

"Right there." Tharun replied and he pointed to a narrow ditch that stretched out from the perimeter fence and led to a stream, "We should be able to get all the way to the fence using that without being seen. My guess is that there's a pipe running out from under it to allow ground water to drain off."

"But wouldn't a drain pipe be blocked to prevent someone from sneaking through it?" Jaysica asked.

"Then it's a good job we've got a security expert with us to override any lock that they've put in place isn't it?" Mace responded, frowning.

"Oh right." Jaysica said.

"Of course that means you get to go first." Kara added.

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Jaysica said.

"Never mind that now." Vorn said and he looked at Tobis, "Tobis call in the shuttle." and then reaching up to his forehead he rolled down the mask he had perched on the top of his head that matched his black fatigues and left only his eyes visible.

"Oh, er, yes sir." Tobis said as one by one the other rebels also donned their masks and he took out his datapad that he had linked his comlink to. As part of the process of configuring the shuttle to be flown by remote control Tobis had created a simple program on the datapad to allow him to execute several basic commands with just a single press of a button. So he had only to tap the screen once and the datapad confirmed that the shuttle was no longer in a holding pattern outside of visual and sensor range of the Black Sun starport.

The starport's sensors soon detected the incoming shuttle and the single flight controller activated his communication system.

"Unidentified craft you are approaching private air space. Veer off immediately." he signalled, but there was no reply from the unmanned shuttle, "Unidentified craft you are ordered to veer off." he repeated but still the shuttle flew towards the starport. This was not the first time that unauthorised craft had headed for the starport and the controller knew exactly what to do, his hand moving towards the alert button. But just as he

was about to press it there was a signal from the shuttle.

"Attention starport control." Mace's distorted voice said, "This is shuttle *Azbek*. My flight systems are damaged and I am losing power to repulsorlifts. I am declaring an emergency and request that your landing pattern is cleared for my approach."

The flight controller smiled. The communication logs were recording everything that was being said and the man he believed to be the pilot of the shuttle had just provided Black Sun with all the justification it needed to explain its destruction.

"Confirmed shuttle *Azbek*." he responded, "You are clear to make an emergency landing. Just follow our beacon in."

Crawling along the ditch the rebels heard a klaxon sound moments after Mace stopped speaking with the flight controller.

"Sounds like they're expecting company." he said.

"Just so long as it's not from this pipe up ahead." Vorn replied.

The rebels continued as far as the end of the pipe that Tharun had correctly guessed was in place to carry ground water out from under the starport and as expected it was covered in a grill that was held in place by an electronic lock.

"I just need a couple of minutes." Jaysica said, "This isn't very complicated."

"You're a perfect match then." Kara muttered as Jaysica began to probe the lock. Meanwhile the sound of the shuttle's engines was becoming louder as it neared the starport.

"Got it." Jaysica said and there was a brief whistle from the lock as it disengaged, allowing Jaysica to remove the grill and move it aside. Then she turned on her glow rod and crawled into the pipe.

Flying under the control of its autopilot, the shuttle descended towards the starport and lowered its landing gear. On the ground below most of the Black Sun operatives had concealed themselves, especially those responsible for manning the laser cannons that would be used to destroy it after it landed. The last thing that Black Sun needed right now was for the crew of the shuttle to spot the laser cannons before landing, pulling out and making it as far as another landing zone to alert the authorities.

The shuttle continued its descent however, the autopilot unaware of the weapons standing ready to fire on it and it touched down on one of the landing pads. A single Black Sun operative stood close by, dressed to appear as a normal member of the ground crew. In fact he was just there to confirm that the shuttle had landed and give the order to open fire.

"It's down." he signalled using his comlink and he was about to turn away when he noticed something odd about the shuttle. The cockpit canopy was dirty, making it difficult to see inside properly but the agent could make out numerous lights on consoles and instrument panels at the rear of the cockpit and thanks to these he could see that there was no-one inside it. Gasping, he reached for his comlink again, "It's a trap." he called out, "Don't-" but he was too late and as he watched one of the structures near the perimeter fence that Tharun had identified unfolded to expose a heavy laser cannon that swung to face the shuttle and opened fire.

The powerful energy blast tore through the hull of the unshielded shuttle and blew it apart from the inside, just as the Black Sun crew had intended for it to do. But every available space inside the shuttle had been filled with volatile substances and scrap metal so when the laser blast penetrated the shuttle's hull it ignited the contents immediately and the resulting explosion created a fireball that spread across the landing pad, incinerating the Black Sun operative who had been trying to abort the attack and hurling shrapnel in all directions.

In several builds around the landing area Black Sun agents dived for cover as the shrapnel from the shuttle ripped through windows and also several of the more lightly built walls. This included many of the laser cannon emplacements, their pressed metal walls proving totally inadequate to protect their crews.

5.

Inside the pipe the rebels had found a ladder that led up to a manhole cover and Jaysica climbed up first. "It's not sealed." she said, "We can just climb out."

"Wait." Vorn called out from below, "Don't go until we hear the-" at which point there was a loud rumbling sound as the shuttle exploded, "Okay go." and Jaysica pushed the manhole cover up and crawled out. Tharun quickly followed her and then the rest of the rebels who spread out around the manhole.

"Stay down." Mace warned Cass as the rebels took in the effects of their improvised bomb.

The damage was widespread and already Black Sun operatives were rushing from buildings to deal with the fires now raging around the starport as well as to check on those who had been injured or killed. If there was a single voice directing all of this then it was not obvious to the rebels and Vorn saw their chance.

"Come on." he said, "Let's move. Quickly." and they began to run towards the row of aircraft hangars. As they passed a storage bunker that had survived the explosion the rebels were surprised by the sudden appearance of a Black Sun operative from inside.

"What are you doing?" the operative demanded and Mace raised his blaster rifle, expecting to have to use it. But Vorn reacted quicker.

"Securing the hangars." he said, "We're under attack."

"Good." the operative replied, slapping Vorn on the shoulder, "Call for more men if you need them." and then he darted away, heading for the starport control tower.

"Looks like these outfits let us blend in pretty well then." Tharun commented, "Useful to know." and then the rebels set off towards the hangars once more.

Each hangar was a large free standing building with a front wall that was dominated by armoured doors designed to allow an aircraft to fit through. Though these doors were not locked the rebels avoided making use of them since doing so would undoubtedly attract attention from individuals that would not easily be fooled into believing that the rebels were in fact Black Sun operatives. Fortunately there were smaller personnel access doors on each side of the hangars and the rebels made use of these instead. Entering through one door they spread out to check the contents of each hangar before leaving via the door on the opposite side.

The first hangar held two atmospheric transports while the second housed a variety of smaller airspeeders but obviously nothing on the scale of the LAAT/c and the AT-TE. However, as soon as Tharun first entered the third hangar he knew that they had found what they were looking for. Right in front of him was an LAAT/c positioned ready to take off and fly straight out of the hangar if the doors were opened. The AT-TE itself was positioned further back in the hangar, its hatches standing open.

"This is it." he said and he started to head for the walker. But at that moment another Black Sun operative appeared from behind it.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" the operative called out and he began to draw his blaster.

"Take him." Vorn said and Tharun promptly shot the operative in the chest, "Spread out." Vorn ordered, "Mace, take Tobis, Jaysica and Cass to secure the transport. Kara and Tharun with me. We'll take the walker."

The rebels split into two groups as more Black Sun operatives appeared from behind not only the LAAT/c and AT-TE but also some of the other military style airspeeders inside the hangar and began shooting. Fortunately all of these had the look of technical crew rather than fighters and their weapons consisted of an assortment of blaster pistols rather than the rifles and carbines the rebels carried. Apart from Cass who was still getting used to such actions the rebels returned fire, firing short bursts of blaster bolts towards their opponents on the move. This had the immediate effect of making most of the Black Sun operatives retreat behind the vehicles that they were using for cover but even this was not enough for some of them. The LAAT/c and AT-TE were designed to go into the thickest of combat and so were heavily armoured whereas most of the others were lighter atmospheric fighters that relied more on their speed and agility for survivability in addition to whatever ray shielding they possessed. This meant that even the small arms that the rebels were armed with, especially the Blastech A-280 heavy blaster rifle that Tharun carried, were able to punch holes in the skins of these speeders and with repeated hits they shot right through them, hitting the Black Sun operatives on the other side.

Vorn's team was first to reach their target and as Tharun kept watch Vorn and Kara rushed up the ramp at the rear of the walker, Vorn firing a rapid burst of fire into a single Black Sun operative who had sought shelter in the back of the vehicle.

"No sign of junior boss." Kara said. Then she halted under a rail that had scratch marks in it and there was blood on the floor beneath them, "Though it looks like someone was bound to this rail here."

At that moment another Black Sun operative appeared in the doorway that led to the forward compartment of

the walker holding a wrench in his hand.

"Drop it!" Vorn yelled, aiming his rifle towards the man and faced by two opponents armed with blasters he tossed the wrench aside and raised his arms.

"Don't shoot!" he yelled.

"The ISB agent. Where is he?" Vorn demanded.

"I don't know." the man replied and Vorn fired a burst from his rifle into the bulkhead beside him, making him flinch and duck, "There are cells under the main barracks." he yelled.

"Where are the barracks?" Vorn snapped.

"That way." the man answered, pointing while keeping the other arm still raised, "The large building beside the control tower."

"Thanks." Vorn said and with a flick of his finger he set his rifle to 'stun' and shot the man before turning around and exiting the walker.

The shooting in the hangar had ceased by this point and the rebels had secured both the AT-TE and its transport and Vorn looked towards the LAAT/c.

"Mace!" he called out, "I've got a location. We'll leave Tharun, Tobis and Cass to sort out some transport while the rest of us go get Garm."

The interrogator had been yelling questions at Garm, doing his best to keep him awake in the hope that it would wear down Garm's mental defences. It was an ancient tactic and one that Imperial Intelligence still made use of instead of the more coercive methods employed by the ISB. The distraction made the interrogator look upwards, pausing in his questions before all of a sudden the cell door opened and another Black Sun operative leant into the room.

"We're under attack." the newcomer said, "Mister Treego wants everyone up top to defend the starport." and the interrogator looked back towards Garm to see that he had finally lifted his head.

"Looks like your lucky day sleemo." he hissed, "Well, make the most of your break because I'll be back soon."

Now alerted to intruders within their perimeter, the Black Sun personnel on the base could not be tricked into accepting the rebels as their own people and they met the rebels with weapons drawn whenever they appeared. Fortunately however, they were unsure of exactly who was attacking them and many expected to see opponents in Imperial uniforms. This meant that they paused when they saw the rebels and this was enough chance for them to get in the first shots as they hurried towards the barracks.

They burst into the building and immediately began firing, scattering the Black Sun operatives they encountered as they came through the door.

"Find the way down to the cells." Vorn ordered as he put a shot into another Black Sun operative.

"Boss! There are stairs over here." Kara called out as she rushed down a hallway and fired a quick burst down the stairs to clear out anyone that was below her. The other three rebels ran after her and with Mace pausing to bring up the rear they hurried down the stairs where they found themselves in a corridor lined with doors at regular intervals.

"Look like a cell block to you?" Vorn asked and Mace nodded.

"It does have that appearance, yes." he replied.

"Set for stun." Vorn instructed his team, "Then let's find my son and get out of here."

"Don't forget I called dibs on shooting junior." Kara added.

"What do we do about other prisoners major?" Jaysica asked.

"We don't have time to waste on helping people we know nothing about." Vorn replied, "Just let them go and move on."

As it happened the issue of other prisoners did not come up. Each cell that the rebels checked was empty until they came to the one that contained Garm, who looked up towards the door as it slid open to reveal Mace and Vorn. Fortunately both were still masked and Garm did not recognise them.

"Garm?" Vorn said and Garm frowned, certain that the slightly muffled voice from beneath the mask was familiar. But before he could respond Kara suddenly stepped in front of Vorn and fired her blaster. The bright blue energy pulse struck him cleanly and he groaned as he slumped forwards, held in the chair only by the straps binding him to it.

"Quick, untie him and let's get out of here." Vorn ordered and he stood back as Kara and Mace hurried into the cell to untie Garm and lift him up between them. Meanwhile Vorn took out his comlink and activated, "Tharun, we've got Garm." he signalled, "How are you going on with transport?"

"We've found a speeder major." Tharun replied, "There's not much room for all of us plus Garm but it'll do. Problem is I don't think much of our chances of getting close to you." and he peered out of the building that he, Cass and Tobis had located a suitable landspeeder in at the barracks that was being surrounded by Black Sun troops as he spoke, "Looks like you're about to have company. Lots of it."

"Can you come up with a distraction?" Vorn asked and Tharun looked at Cass and Tobis.

"Any ideas?" he asked.

"Oh, err, maybe." Tobis replied and he pointed back towards the hangar where the AT-TE and its transport were stored. Tharun smiled.

"Stand by major." he transmitted, "Cass and I will draw these guys away from you and Tobis will bring the speeder in to pick you up."

"Understood sergeant." Vorn said and then the channel went dead.

"Okay let's move." Vorn said, "Jaysica, you and I need to cover the others while they carry Garm."

"Yes major." Jaysica replied.

"Boss, can you cover me rather than the klutz?" Kara asked.

"Just move." Vorn told her and he started headed back towards the stairs leading up to the surface.

The rebel group encountered no Black Sun operatives as they made their way through the barracks building but when they reached the exit and looked outside they saw that Tharun had been correct and a large number of them were now laying siege to the building.

"Stang." Mace hissed when he saw this, "Major, it's only a matter of time before they come in here after us." he added.

"I know." Vorn replied, "Tharun's distraction better be good." before there was a heavy pounding sound from somewhere outside the barracks.

"Oh no." Kara said, "Boss, I've got a bad feeling about this." and the AT-TE came striding around a hangar.

6.

"Okay, there's your target, ready kid?" Tharun asked from the cockpit and up in the roof mounted turret Cass looked again at the controls in front of her.

"Hang on." she replied, "I'm still trying to figure this thing out."

"It's easy kid." Tharun said, "Controls are up and down and left and right. Then you've got your ammo select between explosive and armour piercing plus a big red button on the grips to fire. Now make sure you've picked armour piercing and let them have it."

"Okay. Here goes."

Cass drew in breath as she lined the sight up on a cluster of Black Sun troops, some of whom had looked around when the AT-TE first appeared but then ignored it on the assumption that it was coming to support them.

The turret mounted mass driver boomed as it fired a single projectile at hypersonic speeds. But Cass's unfamiliarity with the heavy weapon meant that her shot was off target and instead of tearing through the Black Sun operatives it ploughed into the ground in front of them. But the projectile did not simply come to an immediate halt. Instead its sheer velocity meant that it had enough energy to carry on moving underground, slowing down as it transferred more and more energy into its surroundings. This transfer of energy in turn manifested as a powerful shock wave that tore up the ground above and hurled debris up from above the tunnelling projectile.

Panicked by this sudden unexpected and powerful attack the Black Sun troops stopped focusing on the barracks they had been ordered to surround. Some tried turning their weapons on the fearsome walker itself but despite its age it was still more than adequately protected against the personal weapons that they had to defend themselves with and those shots that hit the AT-TE simply bounced off its thick frontal armour. Meanwhile even more of the Black Sun troops ran for cover, just hoping to get out of the way of the advancing vehicle.

"They're still blocking Tobis's path." Tharun told Cass, "Find some else to shoot. Something too big to miss."

"Too big to miss?" Cass repeated as she looked around for a target. Then she smiled as she found one, "That ought to do." she said.

"What is going on?" Treego demanded as he looked out of the control tower at the AT-TE that was supposed to be under his control now bearing down on his own men. But before any of the control tower staff could reply the turret mounted on top of the heavy walker turned and elevated to point directly towards the tower, "Oh no." Treego added just moments before the mass driver was fired again.

"I got it!" Cass exclaimed as the projectile punched through the control tower and everything above the point of impact toppled over before it came crashing down to the ground, scattering dust and debris in all directions.

"Great kid." Tharun replied, "Don't get cocky." and then he turned his attention back towards the barracks to see what effect this had had on the Black Sun troops surrounding it.

The effect was just what Tharun had hoped for, with the Black Sun troops now fleeing away from the AT-TE as Tharun continued to pilot it awkwardly towards them. Had he been a properly qualified walker pilot then he could have likely crushed them underfoot, but he was as much a novice at piloting the vehicle as Cass was at operating its main gun. Not that he intended to tell her that of course. Tharun then smiled as he saw the landspeeder hurtle past the AT-TE, rushing up to the entrance to the barracks and decelerating sharply before coming to a complete halt just long enough for Vorn's team to emerge carrying Garm and get aboard it.

"Okay Tharun," Vorn's voice signalled via Tharun's comlink, "now get out of that thing and into the speeder."

"No can do major." Tharun replied, "There's still too many Black Sun creeps around. Head for the gate and Cass and I will follow and keep you covered."

"You better look after my little girl there sergeant." Mace's voice added and Tharun smiled, "Haven't I always?" he asked.

Tobis then accelerated, steering the speeder towards the starport's main gate while Tharun turned the AT-TE to follow. In the turret Cass aimed the main gun at any sizeable group of Black Sun troops to appear, letting off rapidly aimed shots from the mass driver that although often failed to find their mark were still sufficiently intimidating that the troops withdrew. But the main gate itself was a different matter entirely.

Either side of the gate the Black Sun troops had set up tripod mounted repeating blasters that only narrowly missed the landspeeder as Tobis swerved moments before they opened fire. Added to which one of the laser cannon emplacements was located just within the gate to protect the entrance and it had survived the

explosion of the shuttle intact and operational.

"Cass, switch to explosive rounds." Tharun ordered, "Take out that cannon before-" but then the laser cannons fired and the sudden flash of light dazzled Tharun momentarily as the energy blast slammed into the front of the walker. Had the shot been aimed just a little more to the right then it would have struck the forward viewport directly and most likely have brought the walker to a halt as its controls, along with Tharun were destroyed, but fortunately it missed the cockpit narrowly and instead blew off one of the laser cannons that neither Cass nor Tharun could operate from their locations anyway.

Cass then returned fire, sending a stream of projectiles one after another towards the laser cannon emplacement. Once more her poor accuracy showed and not one hit the cannon directly. But given that she was using explosive projectiles instead of solid armour piercing ones a near miss was good enough and the fragmentation was enough to incapacitate or kill the exposed crew, thus rendering the gun useless. Cass then swung the turret towards the repeating blasters and before she could fire even a single shot their crews decided to abandon the weapons, fleeing away from the gate as fast as they could.

"Tobis," Tharun signalled as he continued to pilot the AT-TE towards the sealed gate, "get behind us and I'll take care of the gate for you."

Like the fence the gate was made of wire and although signs indicated that it was carrying a lethal electrical charge that could easily damage the landspeeder it was no barrier at all for the heavy walker. The front foot of the AT-TE simply came down on top of the gate, crushing it and producing a shower of sparks as the electrical charge was suddenly connected to the ground. This shower did not last long however, as the power supply was rapidly overloaded and cut out, leaving a gaping hole in the starport fence behind the walker that Tobis could easily drive the speeder through.

"Okay now let's find somewhere to ditch this thing and hop over to that speeder with the others." Tharun said to Cass.

The rebels drove the unconscious Garm back to his home where Jaysica once again bypassed the security system so that they could deposit him on his bed and leave him to recover on his own while they returned to the *Silver Hawk*.

Vorn had just changed out of the black combat fatigues he had worn for the raid on the starport and was sat alone in the cockpit when he noticed Kara enter and she sat down beside him.

"That's Mace's chair." Vorn pointed out.

"I know. I asked him to give us a few minutes." she replied.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Vorn said, "What's wrong?"

"It's about Vay." Kara said.

"Ah."

"Look boss, when I was trapped under that rubble and went into labour she was right there. For a while I thought she was going to take little Vorn away and send me off to a labour camp or something but when junior and his goons dug their way into the basement she told them she was alone. I think she even put a hex on them with the Force to stop then noticing Vorn crying."

"What's your point Kara?" Vorn asked.

"I'm saying that I think I – no, I think we owe her one."

Vay could tell that the *Silver Hawk* had been in flight for several minutes when the door to the hold next opened and Kara entered alone. The first thing that Vay noticed about her was that she was clutching a roll of thick silver tape.

"Oh you've got to be kidding me." Vay said, "You're going to gag me as well? Look, I'm not causing any trouble and I'm not even making any noise. So why-"

"Shut up." Kara interrupted as she took out a mem-stick and pressed it against one of Vay's arms before she began to wrap tape around it, covering it completely.

"What's that? What are you doing?" Vay asked.

"It's the mem-stick you sent you message on." Kara replied, "I wiped it and instead put on copies of every picture I've got of baby Vorn. He's junior's brother so I figure that he ought to have them. Plus I've got some pictures from Tharun of the major's little princess and their daughter. Oh and I'm taping a couple of coins to your arm as well. You may need them."

"Daughter?" Vay asked.

"Oh yeah. Tharun and Lyssa just had a baby girl a few days ago." Kara said and Vay smiled.

"So if you married Garm's father," she said, "and Garm's sister just had a baby then doesn't that make you that child's-"

Anger.

"Don't!" Kara snapped, "Or maybe I will wrap this tape around your face as well. Now where was I? Oh yes, junior's back at home sleeping off getting stunned. By the way, shooting him felt really good. But since you let me and baby Vorn go when you could have had me arrested I figure I should return the favour." and at that

point she reached into her pocket and produced a compact set of cutters that she used to cut through the plastic ties that bound Vay's wrists and ankles before helping to her feet, "So we're letting you go." Kara added as she then walked around Vay to reach the controls to the cargo elevator set into the floor of the hold.

"And will the ship be landing before I depart?" Vay asked.

"No. But Mace is going to hover low over somewhere that you can safely jump to." Kara said and she opened the hatch in the floor and retracted the elevator platform to reveal a body of water beneath the ship.

Vay looked down through the hatch as the *Silver Hawk* came to a halt and hovered over the water.

"All set Kara." Mace's voice sounded over the intercom.

"Well I suppose this is goodbye." Kara said, "Just don't make me regret this okay? I went to bat for you with the boss." and Vay frowned.

"You don't think we're becoming friends do you?" she asked.

"Kriif no." Kara replied, "The very idea is just disgusting on so many levels. Besides which, would a friend do this?" and before Vay could react Kara reached out to take hold of the towel that was all Vay was wearing before she shoved her backwards through the open hatch with her other hand and listened to her scream as she fell into the water below. Smiling, Kara draped the towel over her shoulder and closed the hatch again.

Vay gasped as she broke the surface once more and trod water, watching the *Silver Hawk* fly away leaving her naked in the middle of a lake. Then she looked around to see if the area was at all familiar to her but she saw no landmarks that she recognised. So instead she set her sight on the closest shore and started to swim towards it.