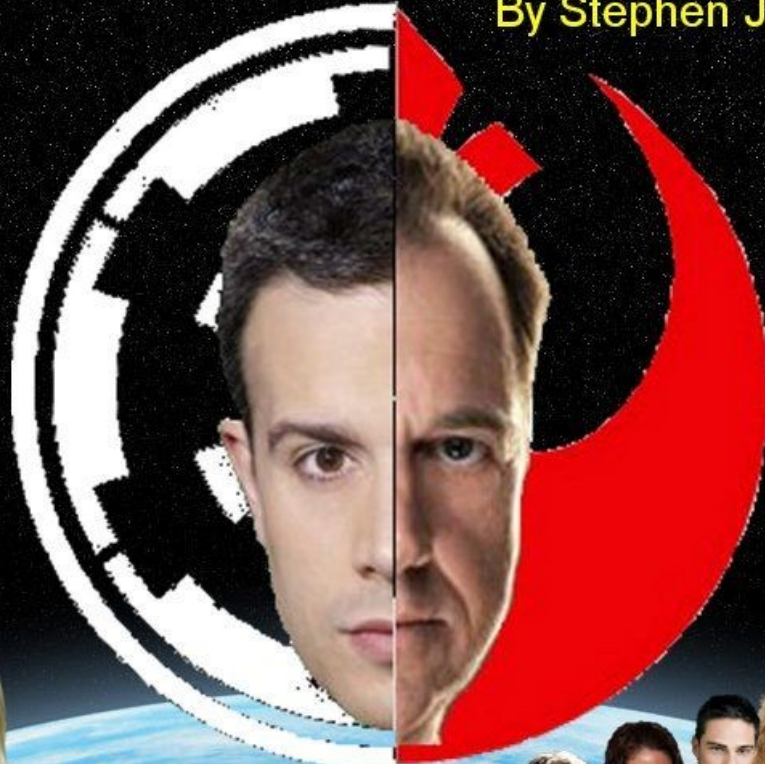


STAR WARS

6-05: Too Good to be True

By Stephen J Dutton



*By JH
JH/JH*



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 GUERILLA WARFARE AND HIT AND FADE STRIKES BY SMALL GROUPS AGAINST STRONGER FORCES.

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

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

TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

TOO LATE THE OCCUPANTS OF THE *SILVER HAWK* DISCOVER THAT THE INFORMATION REGARDING MOFF HORATIAN WAS FALSE, A TRAP INTENDED TO DRAW OUT AND DESTROY A LARGE REBEL FORCE. BUT NOW AN ENTIRE REGIMENT OF ALLIANCE SOLDIERS IS TRAPPED AND ONLY THE REBEL TEAM COMMANDED BY VORN LARCUS III CAN SAVE THEM...

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.

When the rebel transport ships dropped out of hyperspace around Tretor they immediately scanned the planet. Though they did conduct a cursory examination of the other starships and orbital facilities around the planet they were more interested in the results of their passive scans of the planet itself. These revealed a large hole in the world's ground based sensor emissions, producing a large hole in their tracking capability. The co-ordinates of the landing zones assigned to the transports were all within this hole and as soon as they had verified that their path was clear the pilots of the transports headed for the surface. Between them the transports carried just over ten thousand troops, along with several hundred armoured vehicles. This force represented a significant portion of the ground strength of the Alliance forces in the sector and its deployment in such strength was a major departure from the usual rebel hit and fade tactics but their intended target was far from usual.

It was Moff Gregor Horatian, the Imperial governor for the sector.

The Alliance had received intelligence that the moff was planning to leave Estran, the sector's capital world where he was protected by vast Imperial forces and was paying a visit to be at the dedication of a memorial plaque for victims of the Clone Wars. Furthermore the ship that would be bringing him to Tretor was the Imperial-class star destroyer *Iron Warrior* commanded by Fleet Admiral Praus Vretan, the most senior commander of the Imperial Navy in the sector. With two such tempting targets on the fringe of the sector where they were vulnerable, it was an opportunity far too good to miss.

Unfortunately it was all a lie.

Moff Horatian was not coming to Tretor and the squadron of warships led by Admiral Vretan was only the vanguard of a larger force that would overwhelm the Alliance battlegroup sent to engage it while on the surface a massively reinforced Imperial Army would grind the Alliance soldiers into the dirt. Unless that was, Major Vorn Larcus the third had anything to do with it.

Vorn commanded the rebel field team that had been sent ahead to meet up with the local resistance. They would help his team obtain a copy of the moff's itinerary, survey suitable landing sites for the troop transports and disable the tracking station that watched over the landing zones. All had gone well with this, too well in fact and Vorn had deduced that the information was being deliberately fed to the Alliance in order to trick them into deploying a large military force that the Empire could then bring to battle. Unfortunately the revelation had come too late to prevent the Alliance from launching its force and now Vorn and his team faced a race against time to try and warn them off.

"There they are major." Mace Grayle told Vorn from the pilot's seat of the *Silver Hawk*. Mace was the owner and captain of the YT-1300 transport that Vorn's unit was assigned to and as soon as Vorn had realised the danger to the Alliance force he had launched his ship in the direction of the landing zone selected for the single armoured regiment included in the Alliance division being landed. Vorn looked out of the cockpit canopy and his eyes widened as he saw the tell tale clouds of dirt being produced by the repulsorlift engines of the tanks and other armoured vehicles being unloaded from the transport ships.

"Get us down there quickly." Vorn replied, "They won't accept a signal from anyone outside their own division so we need to find their commander in person."

"Got it major." Mace said, "There's a spot just there in front of the lead ship." and he aimed his ship towards the ground.

Meanwhile in space around Tretor there was a series of bright flashes as the squadron of warships built around the *Iron Warrior* arrived. In addition to the star destroyer itself there were half a dozen gladiator-class medium cruisers and a similar number of light corvettes to provide support. After dropping out of hyperspace the entire formation headed towards the planet, decelerating as they drew closer and from the bridge of his vessel the fleet admiral watched his squadron's progress.

"Now approaching high orbital altitude admiral." one of the junior officers called out from a crew pit behind Admiral Vretan.

"Get me Kellesen." he responded and a holographic image of a tall, gaunt appearing man in robes appeared beside him.

"Report admiral." Kellesen said.

"We're in position now." the admiral replied, "You may launch when ready." and then the hologram vanished without a word.

From beneath the *Iron Warrior* a lambda-class shuttle descended out of its forward hangar, its wings lowering into flight position before it began its flight towards the planet below and Admiral Vretan smiled as he watched it go.

"At least he's off my ship now." he said to himself. Then in a louder voice he addressed his crew, "Send to all

ships, action stations. All pilots to their fighters but no one is to launch yet. We'll show those rebel scum what the might of the Empire means."

On the outer edge of the system two mon calamari star cruisers and the six squadrons of fighters they carried waited with a small group of Corellian corvettes and gunships. They picked up the arrival of the Imperial squadron, but picking up the launch of the shuttle in real time would have required using their active sensors and giving away their presence. Instead they were relying on the ground forces to tell them when the shuttle they believed would be carrying the moff had entered the atmosphere of Tretor.

"Admiral we're getting a signal from the surface." one of the mon calamari bridge crew said and Rear Admiral Aphanar turned in her seat to face him.

"Confirm it." she told him.

"Signal source confirmed admiral. It's one of our regiments. They've sighted the moff's shuttle leaving the *Iron Warrior* and entering the atmosphere."

"Then now's the time." Admiral Aphanar said, "All craft prepare to attack."

"Incoming!"

Alliance Colonel Max Collis spun around when he heard the warning of an approaching vessel.

"Identify it." he yelled, rushing towards the sentry. As he did so there was a whirring sound as the turret of a nearby anti-aircraft battery turned to track the approaching craft. The sentry pointed with one hand while he continued to observe the incoming craft through his macrobinoculars. The colonel produced his own macrobinoculars and raised them to his eyes to look for himself. Through them he saw the familiar saucer shape of a YT-1300 and he realised that he recognised this particular example of the popular transport.

"Hold fire! Stand down." he shouted, lowering his macrobinoculars, "That's one of ours."

The *Silver Hawk* swooped down towards the Alliance troops, its landing gear extending as it came in to land and along with several of his SpecForce troopers Colonel Collis ran towards the light freighter. They reached it just as Vorn came running down the access ramp with a large man in combat fatigues.

"Colonel!" Vorn exclaimed.

"Larcus." Colonel Collis responded, "What the kriff are you doing here?"

"It's a trap colonel." Vorn said, "The Empire has set all of this up."

"How do you know that?" the colonel asked.

"The Empire's been quietly moving troops here to reinforce its garrison." Vorn replied, "Plus they've arranged a lot of coincidences that allowed us to get all the information we needed without any interference."

"Sounds pretty thin." Colonel Collis said, frowning.

"It's true colonel." the man with Vorn told him, "The empire deliberately lowered security at the tracking station to let you through."

"Tharun's right colonel." Vorn added, "Right now the entire division is sat right where the Empire wants it to be."

Colonel Collis grabbed hold of his comlink and lifted it to his mouth.

"This is Colonel Collis," he said, "get everyone back on the transports. The mission is blown and we're getting out of here. Someone warn the other regiments and the *Wave Rider*, everyone needs to get out of the system as fast as we can."

"Colonel its too late." a voice replied, "Admiral Aphanar's force has already entered hyperspace."

"Oh kriff." Colonel Collis said, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

The mon calamari cruisers and their accompanying starfighter squadrons dropped out of hyperspace just beyond the outermost of Tretor's three moons.

"Report." Admiral Aphanar commanded, her chair turning to face the comscan officer.

"Single star destroyer detected. Imperial-class plus twelve smaller escorts. Medium cruisers and corvettes." the other mon calamari replied.

"Signal Captain Tarl. Tell him to commence his run on the *Iron Warrior*. We'll keep those corvettes away from him while our escorts keep those cruisers busy."

"Yes admiral."

In the cockpit of his X-wing starfighter Jarad Tarl was waiting for the order to attack and when it came he grinned.

"This is Captain Tarl to all squadrons, lock S-foils in attack position and accelerate to attack speed. We're going in." he broadcast to the seventy two starfighters in the wings carried by the star cruisers. Half of these were X-wings like his own while the other half were older Y-wings. But despite their age the Y-wings were still potent combat craft, as the Empire was about to be reminded.

The wings of three X-wing squadrons split apart to form the distinct shape that gave the fighters their name and their engines flared as they accelerated towards the star destroyer while the slower Y-wings followed

behind them, using the more modern and agile starfighters as a screen. Further back the two star cruisers moved out of eclipse as well, maintaining a steady distance from the moon's surface as they appeared from behind it and immediately opened fire. Bright flashes of light leapt from their turbolaser emplacements and in an instant a corvette that had been positioned between the rebel ships and the *Iron Warrior* was reduced to nothing but flaming debris.

Admiral Vretan flinched when he saw the corvette explode right in front of the *Iron Warrior*. "Shields up!" he ordered, knowing that the rebel assault he had been waiting for was now underway, "Comscan, what's going on out there?" "Two rebel cruisers, five escort craft and six squadrons of fighters closing admiral. The *Garrotte* is down." "Launch all fighters and get me General Dern." Admiral Vretan ordered and a hologram of the general appeared beside him where the image of Ibram had appeared earlier. "Admiral." General Dern said, "I take it from the alarms that the battle has begun." "It has." the admiral replied, "You may begin your landing now. The planetary shield will remain down long enough for you to get inside. But hurry, if the rebels realise what we're up to then-" "Yes, I understand the importance of haste admiral." General Dern replied as he put on his blast helmet, ready for action, "Dern out." Then as the hologram of the general disappeared Admiral Vretan turned to the comscan operator again. "Tell Admiral Hall that he needs to get into position now." he said.

The tector-class star destroyer *Horrific* waited in the empty depths of interstellar space. Lined up beside the ship was a trio of older venator-class star destroyers and four interdicator cruisers that mounted gravity well projectors that would prevent nearby ships from escaping into hyperspace. Finally in the gaps between them was a ten-strong pursuit line on skipray blastboats, little bigger than starfighters the compact gunships packed impressive fire-power for their size and unlike most TIE fighters were capable of independent hyperspace travel.

The commanding officer of this squadron was Admiral Kenit Hall and he smiled as he surveyed the ships under his command from the bridge of the *Horrific*.

"Admiral." a voice said and Admiral Hall turned to see one of his officers standing behind him.

"Ah, Lieutenant Halowan." he said, "I take it that the fleet admiral has requested our presence?"

"He has indeed sir." the lieutenant replied.

"Excellent. Get me the captains." Admiral Hall replied and Halowan nodded to one of the technicians in the crew pits. Eight holograms promptly appeared on the bridge. Three of these, those of the captains of the older venator-class ships were women, while the four captains of the interdicator cruisers and the commanding officer of the blastboats were all men, "I've just heard from the fleet admiral." Admiral Hall said, addressing the holograms, "Now you all know the plan. We will deploy behind the rebels and our gravity well will prevent them from escaping into hyperspace. Then I will take the *Horrific* and engage the enemy directly supported by the fighters from the *Fireblade*, *Ferocious* and *Falchion*. Meanwhile those ships will remain by the interdicators to protect them against rebel attack." At the mention of this one of the female captains, the red-headed Captain Yay of the *Falchion* scowled. Her preference was for aggressive tactics and being told to hold back did not sit well with her at all. The admiral was aware of this but cared nothing for her opinion, "Now get going." the admiral concluded, nodding just before the holograms faded.

2.

From the *Iron Warrior's* hangars a small swarm of TIE fighters emerged, unlike the hexagonal winged craft launched by the surrounding gladiator-class ships the fighters carried by Admiral Vretan's flagship were of bent wing design. One squadron was made up of the double hulled bomber variant while the remaining five squadrons were all made up of the latest state of the art TIE interceptor. Being a fleet admiral meant getting first pick of fighters and Admiral Vretan had taken advantage of that to acquire only the best available. Following the fighters came several bulky box shaped shuttles that headed for the surface of Tretor, following a nearly identical course to that taken shortly before by the lambda-class shuttle. Unlike that shuttle these were designed to carry vehicles rather than just passengers and inside each of them was an AT-AT walker to bolster the ground forces already on the surface.

Before the heavily armoured walkers could be used against the rebels they still had to reach the surface however, and what they did not expect as they descended towards the planet was to encounter rebel transport ships coming the other way.

"Admiral I have rebel ships leaving the planet." the *Iron Warrior's* comscan operator called out.

"Are you certain they're rebels?" Admiral Vretan asked.

"Yes sir. They launched from the areas identified as rebel landing zones."

"Can we intercept?" Admiral Vretan said, but the junior officer shook his head.

"No sir, not without moving out of formation."

"And leaving our other ships unsupported against those star cruisers." the admiral commented and he took a deep breath, "Stang Hall, you better get here soon."

"Dammit we're not moving fast enough!" Colonel Collis snapped as he and Vorn watched the rebel soldiers rushing to load their equipment back aboard the bulky transport ship that had brought them here.

"Err major." a voice then called out from the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp and Vorn looked around to see the ship's engineer standing at the bottom of it.

"What is it Tobis?" he asked.

"Ah, err, Captain Grayle says that the other regiments have cleared the perimeter of the planetary shield, but he also says that there are more Imperial shuttles descending from orbit and there are fighters heading for us from the capital." Tobis answered.

"Come on." Vorn said to the Colonel, "We need to intercept those fighters." and the pair ran towards the *Silver Hawk*, racing past Tobis and up the access ramp. As they entered the lounge area of the ship they encountered a tall woman exiting the crew cabins, "Kara," Vorn said, "get on the turret."

"Way ahead of you boss." she replied, pausing only briefly to kiss him on the cheek before she headed to the ladders that led up to the turret that mounted the ship's only weapon. Reaching the cockpit they found Mace already preparing the ship for take off while a gold coloured protocol droid studied the sensor display with the help of an R5 astromech droid that was plugged into the control console.

"Oh Major Larcus sir!" the protocol droid exclaimed when it saw Vorn, "I'm picking up major concentrations of Imperial signals. They appear to know exactly where we are."

"Of course they do." Vorn replied, "That's why we need to get everyone out of here."

"Which means doing something about those fighters." Colonel Collis added and he looked at Mace, "How soon can we take off?" he asked.

"Any time colonel." Mace answered, "I'm just making sure that the shields are on line. We've only got one laser cannon against those fighters so we're going to need it."

"Worry about the shield once we're in the air." Vorn said as he sat down beside Mace, "Get us off the ground now."

"Okay, hang on." Mace said and grabbing the control column in front of him he pulled it back and the *Silver Hawk* leapt into the air. Then he activated the intercom, "Tobis how are we looking?" he asked.

There was a short delay and then Tobis' voice was heard.

"Err, all systems functional captain. We've full power to both the shield and turret."

"Good." Vorn commented as the astromech droid chirped loudly, "Because here they come."

Ahead of the *Silver Hawk* a full squadron of twelve TIE fighters approached. At first glance these looked like the standard superiority fighter version, but as they drew closer the astromech droid chirped again.

"Yes Harvey." the protocol droid said, "I can see that as well."

"What did he just say Jeeves?" Mace asked, "I don't have time to read translations."

"He says that the fighters heading towards us are in fact the ground support variant." the droid replied.

"Makes sense." Vorn commented, "They're after transports and vehicles on the ground, not us."

"But if even one of them gets past us they'll cause havoc." Colonel Collis pointed out.

"Don't worry colonel." Vorn replied, "Kara will deal with them."

In the *Silver Hawk's* turret Kara watched her targeting display and smiled when she saw that she was facing the TIE/lt type.

"Oh this is going to be too easy." she said to herself.

"Kara." Vorn's voice said over the intercom, "Fire at will."

"Got it boss." she replied and she swung the turret towards the closest fighter.

The Imperial pilots did not expect the rebels to have any active air support and initially mistook the *Silver Hawk* for an ordinary commercial vessel. But this error became clear when a stream of bright red energy blasts erupted from the freighter's turret and blew a wing from one of their number, sending the remainder of the fighter spinning hopelessly out of control until it ploughed into the ground below and exploded. Lacking any form of ejection system, the pilot perished with his ship.

"I got one boss." Kara exclaimed, but it was not Vorn that responded to her.

"Don't get cocky lieutenant." Colonel Collis said, "There are still eleven left."

Now that the *Silver Hawk* had been revealed as hostile the remaining fighters broke into three groups. One, consisting of three fighters continued towards the *Silver Hawk* while the other two groups of four each split up and attempted to circle around the freighter. The oncoming fighters all opened fire together, bright flashes of green light erupting from their cannons. The standard TIE/ln fighter mounted two powerful laser cannons in the roots of its wing supports, but fortunately for the rebel aboard the *Silver Hawk* the ground attack variant that they now faced carried only a single light laser cannon for protection, relying on its payload of bombs and missiles for its hitting power and even the concentrated fire of all three fighters failed to do anything more than make the freighter shudder as its shield absorbed the shots.

"I have you now." Kara muttered as she turned the turret to face one of the oncoming fighters. Heading straight for the *Silver Hawk* the fighter presented an easy target with no relative motion between the two ships for Kara or the targeting computer to compensate for and her next short burst of fire smashed right into the cockpit of the fighter, killing its pilot and sending the wings flying off in opposite directions. By chance one of these clipped a second of the oncoming fighters and its pilot pulled up suddenly, smoke and flames trailing from where the wreckage had struck.

"Kara ignore that last one coming for us." Vorn told her, "We need to go after the others." and Kara felt the *Silver Hawk* adjust its heading as Mace turned towards one of the groups of fighters trying to get around the ship to their target. Firing at a target crossing her field of view was harder than firing at one moving straight towards or away from her, but the ground support variant of the TIE fighter was slower and less manoeuvrable than the standard version and firing a sustained burst from her laser cannon Kara blew another out of the air before the *Silver Hawk* positioned itself directly behind the remaining three members of the flight. Kara picked the centre starfighter as her next target, correctly predicting that the three small craft would split up and unable to turn to left or right the centre one remained dead centre of her targeting screen. "That's four." Kara said with a grin as the Imperial fighter exploded in mid air when Kara's shots struck its payload.

"Too late." Vorn's voice responded just as there was a sudden flash from the direction of the grounded rebel transport ship.

Although the *Silver Hawk* possessed the weaponry to bring down the fighters and an impressive shield that could protect against their defensive weaponry it was only one ship and could engage only one target at a time. Despite the best efforts of the rebel crew to despatch the Imperial fighters as quickly as possible they had just not had enough time to prevent them all from getting into range of the transports.

The rebel forces on the ground were caught in the process of loading their heavy equipment aboard their ships and were virtually defenceless against the missiles launched by the fighters. The crew of one armoured vehicle attempted to shoot down the first approaching missile, but lacking any true anti-aircraft weapons their efforts were born of desperation rather than any realistic chance of shooting it down. The stream of bright red energy blasts streaked through the air only to miss their target by a narrow margin before the missile itself suddenly veered downwards and slammed into the upper hull of a transport.

The explosion tore a massive hole in the vessel and produced a ball of flame that expanded to swallow most of the rebel soldiers still outside the ship. Those not burned alive ran, heading either for hiding places in the surrounding terrain or attempting to reach the perceived safety of another of the transports.

"All craft prepare to retreat." Admiral Aphanar ordered, "Tell our fighters to disengage from the *Iron Warrior* and move to protect our transports. All other ships are to form a screen between them and the Imperial ships."

"Yes admiral." the ship's helmsman replied and through the main viewport the planet Tretor and the Imperial squadron orbiting it seemed to move off to one side as the *Wave Rider* steered to get between the Imperial ships and the transports now fleeing Tretor.

One of the outlying Imperial cruisers found itself in the path of the transports and turned to engage them.

Locking onto one of the slow moving ships the cruiser opened fire and the transport was struck, the bodies of hundreds of rebel soldiers blown out into space. But the transport itself continued moving and just seconds later it found itself beyond Tretor's gravity well and it vanished into hyperspace with a flash of white light.

"The first transport is away!" Admiral Aphanar broadcast to the other rebel forces in the sector, including those aboard the *Silver Hawk* and Vorn breathed a sigh of relief.

"At least some will have made it." he said.

"Don't count the Empire out yet Vorn." Colonel Collis replied, "We still have thousands of troops stuck here on the ground." Then came another flash of light as Kara shot down another Imperial fighter. But this was followed by the launch of two further missiles aimed at the grounded transports.

"Kara! Aim for the missiles." Vorn exclaimed and then there was a steady stream of laser blasts as Kara did her best to shoot down both the missiles before they could inflict any further damage. The sustained barrage cut one of them in half and moments later it exploded harmlessly in mid air, but the second missile was just clipped towards the rear and it tumbled out of control instead. Although this meant that the weapon failed to strike any of the transports directly it landed close behind one and the resulting explosion ripped away some of its drive units.

More fire then came from the ground as a small group of rebel soldiers went against the order to get back aboard the transports and instead came rushing out with shoulder fired anti-aircraft missiles. Locking onto two of the Imperial fighters they launched their missiles and then waited to see how effective their missiles would be and they cheered as both struck their targets, destroying one totally while sending the other flying off and leaving a thick trail of smoke in its wake.

With more than half their number now lost the remaining fighters veered off, not even bothering to launch more missiles at random. However, any belief in the rebels that they had won was quickly quashed as Harvey emitted a short burst of chirps and squeals.

"Major Larcus sir!" Jeeves exclaimed, "Harvey indicates that the planetary shield has just been raised, its impossible for any of us to leave now."

"But why do that when it prevents those orbiting ships from providing support?" Mace asked, not directing the question at anyone in particular.

"I think its because the Empire doesn't think it needs orbital fire support to deal with what we've still got down here." Colonel Collis replied, "Look." and he pointed out of the cockpit canopy to where a force of AT-ATs could be seen ponderously advancing towards the rebel landing zone.

"Walkers." Vorn said, "Dozens of them."

A succession of flashes of light heralded the arrival of Admiral Hall's squadron from hyperspace.

"Admiral I have enemy vessels in sector three seven!" the comscan officer aboard the *Wave Rider* exclaimed as the Imperial reinforcements appeared on his display.

"How many?" the admiral responded.

"Eight capital ships plus ten blastboats. Admiral, I'm picking up strong gravitational distortions coming from four of the enemy cruisers. They're interdictors!"

"What's the status of our transports?" Admiral Aphanar asked.

"The last ones are almost beyond Tretor's gravity well, but there's still our armoured regiment's ships on the surface."

"We can't repel a force of this magnitude." Admiral Aphanar said, "We have to retreat with what we have. Get me the *Renegade*."

"On line for you now admiral." the comscan officer replied and then a woman's voice spoke.

"This is the *Renegade*. Go ahead admiral." she said.

"Captain Mayan we are retreating." Admiral Aphanar said.

"But what about our people on the surface?" Captain Mayan asked in response.

"Only our transports already in space will make the jump to hyperspace immediately. The rest of our ships will head for the system's gas giant before making the jump. However, I want you to conceal your vessel within the gas giant's atmosphere and do what you can to monitor and if possible provide support to our forces left on the surface."

"Yes admiral. We won't let our people down. *Renegade* out."

3.

The three venator-class ships opened their massive dorsal hangar doors as soon as they dropped back to realspace and from each of them more than three hundred fighters and bombers were launched towards the rebel task force. However, there was one major problem.

"What do you mean they're not where they're supposed to be?" Captain Yay yelled at her comscan officer. "The rebel ships are further from the planet than we were led to believe captain and some are already beyond the gravity well."

"Stang!" Captain Yay exclaimed, "Our fighters won't be able to take them down if our cruisers and destroyers can't support them as well." then she paused for thought, "How long will it take to move us into range of the rebel ships?" she asked.

"But captain, the admiral ordered us to hold position and protect the-"

"The interdictors are in no danger." Captain Yay interrupted, "In fact their gravity well projectors will just slow us down. Now how long to intercept if we just put everything into forwards shields and engines."

"Three minutes captain."

"Then do it." Captain Yay ordered, "Move us to attack position."

"Captain, I have Admiral Hall for you." the comscan officer of the *Firebrand* called out and Captain Sayla Naje frowned.

"What does he want now?" she muttered before adding, "Put him through."

"Captain, what sort of orders are you giving your ships?" the admiral demanded angrily.

For a moment Captain Naje did not know how to reply, but a quick look out of the bridge viewport showed the *Falchion* accelerating out of position, its manoeuvrability hampered by the presence of the artificial gravity wells created by the nearby interdictor cruisers.

"Dammit Louisa." she hissed.

"What was that captain? I didn't quite catch it." Admiral Hall responded.

"Sorry sir." Captain Naje told him, "I didn't give any orders to the *Falchion* to move out of position."

"Well get her back into position captain. Unless you'd rather Fleet Admiral Vretan review your command of your line. *Horrific* out."

Captain Naje sighed.

"Call the *Falchion*." she said, "Tell Captain Yay to get back here while she still has a commission."

"Admiral, the *Ocean Queen* reports a star destroyer changing course to intercept us." the *Wave Rider's* comscan officer reported.

"Which one?" Admiral Aphanar asked, turning her chair to face the large sensor display at the rear of the bridge. There she saw the icon representing one of the older venator-class ships breaking formation. On its own the veteran of the Clone Wars was no threat to two MC80 cruisers, but if it continued towards the rebel ships then it could cause havoc amongst the cruisers' escorts and the lumbering transports.

"Transponder suggests it is the *Falchion* admiral."

"The *Falchion*?" Admiral Aphanar repeated. The Alliance did its best to maintain intelligence on the major warships in the sector and although venators were technically regarded as heavy cruisers rather than full star destroyers as far as the order of battle was concerned, they were powerful enough to attract the attention of Alliance Intelligence and the captain of this ship was well known to them and to Admiral Aphanar. Captain Yay had fought at the battle of Tarlen a year earlier where under her command the *Falchion* had held off both the *Ocean Queen* and the *Wave Rider* alone, damaging both rebel vessels. If she acted according to what the Alliance knew of her Captain Yay would indeed barge right past the two large star cruisers to get to the smaller vessels that stood little chance against her, "Signal the *Ocean Queen*," the admiral ordered, "tell her captain to pull in closer to us and match our course. We need to prevent that star destroyer from reaching our other ships."

"Retreat?" Captain Yay yelled, causing several of her bridge crew to jump, "But those rebel scum are right there."

"Line Captain Naje insists that those are the admiral's orders ma'am." the comscan officer replied nervously, "We are to fall back to-"

"Yes I kriffing well know where we're to fall back to!" the captain shouted before the officer could finish, "Oh very well. Helm, turn us around. Apparently that bald headed nerf herder Hall doesn't want us to hurt the poor little rebels today." and she folded her arms and glared out through the viewport as she saw the rebel ships appear to slide out of the way as the *Falchion* was brought around.

Even from high altitude the Imperial walkers were large enough that they could be counted individually.

"There's too many of them." Vorn said reluctantly, "They'll over run the landing zone."

"And if the transports manage to get off the ground they'll be trapped inside the shield." Mace added.

"Get me a line to my men." Colonel Collis said, frowning.

"What are you going to tell them?" Vorn asked.

"The only thing I can." the colonel replied, "Run. Scatter and go to ground. Then we'll just have to figure out a way of getting them off the planet later."

"I have your channel for you Colonel Collis sir." Jeeves said and the colonel leant towards the communications panel.

"This is Colonel Collis." he stated clearly and he took a deep breath, "Code six. I say again, code six."

Prior to the launch of the mission a series of commands had been laid down by the Alliance, each one numbered and committed to memory by the division's command and communications personnel. The idea was a simple one, that if the Empire were to break into the rebels' communications they would not be able to issue significant orders because they would not know what code had been assigned to each one. Now though every rebel on the surface knew exactly what they were being asked to do.

Looking down at the remaining transports below the rebels in the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit saw hatches opening and rebel soldiers as well as some vehicles come swarming out. Towering over the horizon, the AT-ATs were clearly visible to the rebels and all of them headed away from the powerful war machines, making for whatever escape routes looked usable.

"I better go update the others." Vorn said, getting up from his seat and heading out of the cockpit.

With Kara in the turret and Tobis in the workshop making sure that the *Silver Hawk's* systems remained operational there were only three rebels aboard with nothing to do in the battle and they were all gathered in the ship's lounge area. The first of these was Tharun, the former mercenary's ground combat skills were of little use in the air while a pair of young women sat either side of him. Jaysica Horbid was the rebel team's demolition expert while on the other side of Tharun sat Cass Grayle, Mace's adopted daughter.

"So how are we doing major?" Tharun asked when Vorn appeared.

"Same as always." Vorn replied.

"That bad huh?" Tharun said.

"What's wrong?" Cass asked.

"The Empire had raised the planetary shield." Vorn told her, "So we've an entire regiment of troops trapped beneath it with us."

"You mean we're trapped as well?" Jaysica exclaimed.

"I'm afraid so." Vorn replied, "But the real problem is that there's a strong Imperial force approaching the landing zone beneath us. Colonel Collis has ordered his men to withdraw and go to ground. So we're going to have to figure out who's left and then find a way to get them all off the planet safely."

"Can we do that?" Cass asked.

"No problem kid." Tharun responded, "Of course, the question then is what do we do after breakfast?"

The cockpit of his AT-AT gave General Dern an excellent view of the terrain ahead.

"Enemy transports coming into range sir." one of his pilots told him and the general smiled.

"Excellent." he replied before lifting a set of macrobinoculars to his eyes for a better look. He had hoped to see the rebels forming up to engage his force, knowing that his AT-ATs would be more than a match for the relatively lightweight and obsolete vehicles that they could muster. Alternatively it was possible that they would be in the process of trying to evacuate and loading their equipment aboard the transports that made very easy targets on the ground. However, what he actually saw was a large number of rebel infantry and vehicles heading in the opposite direction from the AT-ATs at a rate that meant that the walkers would not reach them before they escaped, "Target the transports." the general ordered, "Maximum fire power."

"But general, at this range our laser cannons-" a pilot began, but the general interrupted him.

"Just do it!" he snapped, "We need to do something before they all get away."

"Yes sir. Locking target."

The AT-AT's main laser cannons mounted beneath its head moved back and forth in time with their firing and the flashes of red light streaked towards the closest rebel transport. The hull of the ship was designed to resist the heat of entry into a planetary atmosphere, but that was mild compared to the sudden thermal distortion of the volley of laser fire that moved along its hull and punched numerous holes all along it. Had the AT-AT fired from closer range then the effect would have been far more dramatic, in all likelihood the attack would have penetrated deep enough to hit something vital and cause the transport to explode. But from this distance the barrage of fire was just about able to penetrate deep enough to reach something flammable and smoke and flames began to billow out of the ship.

General Dern lowered his targeting scope to survey the damage and was disappointed not to see any wrecked vehicles or bodies. Apparently all his attack had managed to do was set fire to an empty ship.

An honour guard of Imperial Army troopers waited for Ibram as he stepped from the speeder that had brought him to the military command centre. He would have preferred to have his shuttle land here directly, but the ruse of a visit by Moff Horatian meant that it instead had to land at a local government landing pad. To make matters worse on the speeder ride to the command centre he had received the news that the operation was not running to plan. The rebels were out gunned and out numbered, but it seemed that they had realised that they were walking into a trap and most of them had fled the planet before the shield could be raised.

"Inquisitor." the officer approaching Ibram from the far end of the honour guard said as he advanced, "I am General Krier and I welcome you to the Tretor Army Central Command." then he smiled, "We call it TAC-COM."

"I want to see how the battle is progressing general." Ibram replied and the officer's expression became more serious.

"Of course. If you'd like to come this way I'll show you the strategic command suite. Apart from the main command facilities on Estran it's the finest."

"You may dispense with your boasts general. I will form my own opinion." Ibram interrupted him.

"Of course sir." General Krier responded.

The general then led Ibram into the fortified structure and past several security checkpoints. At each of these the army troopers on duty did not check the identity of either the general or Ibram and the fallen Jedi scowled. The rebellion was a galaxy wide insurgency and here were soldiers guarding a vital installation that seemed to have little grasp of internal security. Ibram made a mental note to have Imperial Intelligence test Tretor's defences when this was all over.

Entering the main command centre Ibram found himself in a room dominated by walls lined with massive two dimensional display screens and a massive holographic display table in the centre that had numerous high-ranking officers from the Imperial Army gathered around it.

"He's moving too slow." one of the officers, a man in a colonel's uniform commented as he watched the holographic display of General Dern's AT-AT force advancing.

"Well what do you expect from walkers?" General Krier responded.

"You do not favour such weapons general?" Ibram asked as he studied the display for himself. It was clear that the rebel had received enough warning of their predicament that they were managing to withdraw before General Dern could reach them.

"I do not." General Krier said, "With a force of repulsortanks I'd have already over run that rebel landing zone and I'd be presenting you the head of their commander right now. If you ask me this entire operation is-" the general suddenly stopped speaking as he gasped for breath while Ibram just glared at him with one hand held up in front of him.

"The rebels were alerted to our presence by the squadron of fighters that you despatched general. Had you not been so impulsive then General Dern's forces would have been able to close in while they were still in the process of loading their transports. Now though you have given them the opportunity to withdraw."

"I- I'm sorry. I didn't-" General Krier gasped as he struggled for breath, but he was cut off mid sentence by a sickening 'crunch' and he collapsed in a heap.

"Apology accepted General Krier." Ibram said while around him all of the other assembled officers just looked on, afraid to make any comment that could offend Ibram's temper, "The rebels are fleeing from their ships and are trapped on the surface." Ibram then said, "Now show me what is happening in space."

4.

"How many is that?" Admiral Vretan asked as another flash of light heralded the departure of a rebel transport ship into hyperspace.

"That's all of the transports admiral." his comscan officer replied, "Though so far all of the warships have remained in the system."

"Of course they have." Admiral Vretan said, "They're happy to trade fire with us so long as their transports escape. The warships will be next."

"Admiral the rebel capital ships and starfighters are coming about." another comscan operator called out.

"What?" the fleet admiral exclaimed, "You don't mean that they're moving to attack?"

"No sir. They appear to be heading for the outer system at sublight speed."

"Take us after them." Admiral Vretan ordered.

"We can't follow sir. The gravity well generators from our interditors are limiting our-"

"You mean they're still active?" Admiral Vretan interrupted in amazement, "Get me the *Horrific* now. I need to speak with admiral Hall." and moments later a holographic image of Admiral Hall appeared beside Fleet Admiral Vretan.

"Ah, fleet admiral-" Admiral Hall began.

"What the hell are your ships doing Hall?" Admiral Vretan interrupted.

"My squadron has formed the perimeter your orders called for sir. Meanwhile I'm brining the *Horrific* and my pursuit line to join up with the *Iron Warrior*."

"The plan called for your ships to blockade the rebels against Tretor!" Admiral Vretan snapped and the hologram of Admiral Hall flinched briefly, "The moment you saw that the rebels were out of position you should have sent your ships after them. The only people you're blockading right now is my squadron. Now get rid of those gravity wells so we can go after them. In the mean time Captain Naje's line looks to be in position to try harrying the rebels. Send them out now."

"Of course sir. I'll do it immediately." Admiral Hall replied and his hologram faded.

On the bridge of the *Falchion* Captain Yay scowled as she watched the rebel capital ships moving away from Tretor, out of range of her weapons.

"Captain, a message from Admiral Hall. We are to break formation and go after the rebels."

"Are you kidding me?" Captain demanded angrily.

Meanwhile on the *Ferocious* Captain Jayan Celtis was less enthusiastic about her new orders.

"What about our fighters?" she asked.

"They're all still within the zones of effect of the gravity wells captain. They can't get back to us until the projectors are fully off line."

"And what's the rest of the line doing?" Captain Celtis asked.

"The *Firebrand* and *Falchion* are both turning to pursue."

"Without fighters." Captain Celtis muttered, "That's just great. Sending out carriers without their fighter group." then in a raised voice she added, "Bring us around and lay in a pursuit course. Follow the *Falchion*, this is Captain Yay's sort of fighting."

There were occasional flashes of light from the sky as the battle between the two fleets in orbit continued raging on. Right now though General Dern was more interested in the transport ships on the ground in front of him. When the AT-ATs had come within a hundred metres of the transports and with no weapons fire coming from any of them he had ordered the deployment of the stormtroopers carried aboard the vehicles to investigate them further. Then when they had been confirmed to be free of booby traps the general had also disembarked to see them for himself. These were not the efficiently designed landing vehicles that the Empire possessed, instead they were a motley collection of civilian and obsolete military craft that had been pressed into service for the simple reason that the rebellion had nothing better available. It occurred to the general that if the rebels had had access to something more suitable then the armoured regiment that had been landed in these ships would have been able to leave with the infantry regiments that were able to escape before Tretor's planetary shield was raised.

"General!" a voice called out and General Dern turned to see an officer approaching and he recognised the man as being the commander of one of the stormtrooper companies.

"Yes captain?" General Dern replied.

"My men have completed their sweep of the transports sir and there are no rebels aboard any of them.

However, it appears that their withdrawal was so quick that they left a great deal of their equipment behind."

"Walk with me." General Dern said, beckoning the officer to follow as he walked between the transports and lifted his macrobinoculars to survey the terrain on the far side, "So the rebels are all out there then?" he said. "Yes sir. They'd all gone by the time we arrived."

"Then we need to find them. Deploy our scouts captain. I want the rebels found and when we know where they are we're going to go and wipe them out. All of them."

Mace found a narrow ravine in which to set the *Silver Hawk* down while the rebels aboard planned their next move. Thankfully the Empire's tracking station was still out of action and so he did not need to worry about them detecting the ship as it slipped away.

"Okay boss, you've got to have some bright idea." Kara said as she squeezed up against him in the ship's lounge.

"So far no." Vorn replied.

"We don't even know how many escaped the Empire's trap." Mace added.

"That's got to be our first move." Colonel Collis said, "I need to know how many of my men are left."

"That's going to take time." Tharun commented, "It's not like we can just send out a message and ask them all to check in. The Empire will detect the signals."

Oh, err, we probably won't be able to reach many places from in the ravine anyway." Tobis added, "The minerals in the rock face around us-

"Yes Tobis, that's why I picked this place to hide." Mace interrupted him, "The Empire are bound to send out scouts looking for us and I want to make sure that they can't just use portable sensor arrays to locate us."

"Oh. Right." Tobis said.

"Colonel perhaps you should take Sergeant Verser and try to locate the survivors." Vorn suggested and Colonel Collis nodded.

"Good idea." he said as Vorn then looked at Mace.

"Mace, perhaps you and Tobis should do the same." he said.

"Can I go with Tobis?" Jaysica asked.

"No." Vorn told her, "I want you with me. Kara and Cass as well."

"What's your plan major?" Mace asked, glancing at his daughter.

"As well as finding out how many people we need to evacuate we need to find out about the Empire's strategy." Vorn replied, "To do that I think I need to try and get inside their main command and control centre just outside the capital. I'll take Cass, Jaysica and Kara with me."

"And how do you intend to get inside?" Colonel Collis asked, "Walk up to the door and ask if their air conditioning is broken?"

"What if we pretend to be delivering food?" Cass suggested.

"Not going to work kid." Tharun replied, "Not unless you're taking enough food for an entire divisional command."

"No it won't." Vorn agreed, "That's why we'll be taking advantage of what Tharun managed to do at the tracking station."

"We're going to strip Jaysica naked and stuff her in a droid shell?" Kara asked, "Sounds cool."

"No it doesn't." Tobis replied.

"Nice to see you supporting your girlfriend there lad." Tharun said, "But I don't think you or she needs to worry. The major's talking about the uniforms I grabbed."

"Indeed I am." Vorn said, "Jaysica and I already have uniforms and with any luck Tharun will have been correct when he tried to grab extra ones in our sizes."

"Your still overlooking the fact that the main military command centre for Tretor is more than forty kilometres from here." Colonel Collis said.

"Shouldn't be a problem." Vorn replied, "With the Empire out looking for us anyway there ought to be plenty of vehicles around. We'll just steal one of them." then he looked at Kara, "Think you can get one to stop for us?" he asked her.

"Oh I think so boss." she said, "But only if you promise not to freak out."

"Here comes one now." Vorn said as he watched the road through his macrobinoculars from the top of a nearby hill and then he swapped them for his rifle, instead using its built in scope to watch the approaching landspeeder.

"So they'll stop then will they?" Cass asked from just behind him.

"Of course they'll stop." Jaysica told her, "Kara's down there to make them."

"But will she be okay?" Cass asked, "She'll be right out in the open without even a blaster."

"If she had a blaster this wouldn't work." Vorn said, "And don't worry. I'll be covering her the whole time. Whoever's in that speeder won't get the chance to hurt her."

"Okay." Cass responded, "Though I'm not sure that 'covering' is the right word to use for what she's doing."

The speeder contained four enlisted army troopers. Carrying specialist sensor equipment in the back of their vehicle they were under orders to set it up on high ground to assist in the search for the escaped rebels. However as he drove along a remote country road the driver saw something ahead that he did not expect. "Holy kriff guys!" he exclaimed, "Look at this." and a smile spread across his face.

Beside him one of his passengers also grinned.

"I don't believe it." he said as he too smiled, "But are we supposed to stop for this?"

"What do you suggest then Benni?" the driver asked, "Are we to leave this damsel in distress?" and he began to slow the speeder down, allowing it to come to a complete halt in the road right where a soaking wet Kara stood with just a towel wrapped around her.

"Oh thank the gods!" she exclaimed, "You have to help me."

"What seems to be the problem miss?" Benni asked as he got out of the speeder, followed by the two rear passengers.

"I was just swimming in the lake over there," Kara said, pointing to where a large body of water could just about be seen, "and all of a sudden these three men came rushing out of the woods and stole my speeder and started just driving it around the lake. It has my money, my communicator and all of my clothes in it. If I hadn't taken this towel to the shore with me I'd be stood here naked right now."

"Okay calm down miss." Benni replied, looking around and nodding at the driver who then also got out of the vehicle, "Now you say there are three of them?" he asked.

"Yes three. I don't think they're armed." Kara said, nodding.

"Okay we'll take care of this. Trust us, we're professionals." Benni said and the four Imperial troopers began to head for the lake, drawing their blasters.

What they had no way of knowing was that all the time they had been talking to Kara, Vorn had been watching through his rifle scope and was just waiting for them to start following the narrow path that led to the lake. This was so narrow that to stay on it they could only move single file and they all had their backs to Vorn. Lining his sights up on the trooper bringing up the rear Vorn pulled his trigger with his rifle set to fully automatic.

The trooper struck first had no time to cry out as he fell dead, the first blaster bolt striking him between the shoulder blades. But Vorn was not done yet, he held his finger down on the trigger and continued firing a sustained burst into the backs of the next two troopers. Only the final one was able to realise that they were under attack before being hit and he threw himself aside.

"Stang!" Vorn snapped as he suddenly lost sight of the trooper, "If he gets away then this will never work."

"And what about Kara?" Cass asked, "She's still down there."

Vorn swung his rifle towards his wife so he could use the scope to check on her condition and what he saw was not what he expected. Still clutching the towel around her Kara was running for the three dead Imperial soldiers.

"Major look!" Jaysica snapped, pointing to the undergrowth where the remaining trooper had disappeared and as Vorn pointed his rifle back in that direction he saw the trooper re-emerging. But before Vorn could take aim properly there was the distinctive sound of a blaster shot and a bright red bolt of energy struck the trooper in his chest as Kara shot him with a weapon dropped by one of his late comrades. Then she turned towards where she knew the other rebels were hiding and waved.

"Hey boss!" she called out, "How about coming down here with my clothes?"

5.

"Shouldn't we wait for Kara to get dressed first?" Jaysica asked as she adjusted the driver's seat in the landspeeder to suit her much smaller stature than the previous driver.

"This way will save time." Vorn replied as he climbed into the back and Cass got into the front.

"That's right." Kara added as she joined Vorn, "Don't worry. I've had to get dressed in a hurry in the back of a speeder before."

"When?" Vorn asked, frowning.

"Oh don't worry boss it was before we met. I was fifteen and my brothers had just found me and my date together."

All of a sudden the speeder lurched into motion and Kara fell into Vorn's lap.

"Of course then I didn't need to worry about the klutz's driving." she added.

The speeder reached the entrance to the TAC-COM building soon after and Kara was only just finishing off fastening her tunic. Jaysica slowed the vehicle to an almost complete stop at the perimeter checkpoint but when the guards saw what they took to be an Imperial officer along with a driver and two staff they just waved her through.

"Move along, move along." the guard called out as he waved and did not bother closely examining any of the occupants.

"Well that seemed easy." Cass commented, looking back at the army troopers.

"It wouldn't have been if they'd been stormtroopers." Vorn replied, "If we encounter any of them just leave the talking to me."

There was a row of vehicles similar to the rebels' stolen speeder ahead and Jaysica pulled up alongside them.

"Okay everyone remember where we parked." Vorn said as he watched Cass and Jaysica get out of the speeder. Then after taking a few steps away they both looked back at the vehicle they had just got out of.

"Why are you still sat there?" Cass asked.

"Get the door." Vorn replied quietly.

"Huh?" Jaysica said.

"Officers don't open doors for themselves." Kara said, leaning across Vorn and grinning.

Cass returned to the speeder and opened the door on Vorn's side.

"Like this?" she asked as he climbed out, followed by Kara.

"Exactly." Vorn replied, "How's the blaster feel?" he asked her, looking down at the weapon now holstered to Cass' hip. To complete their disguises the rebels had taken the military issue blaster pistols from the speeder's original occupants while their own personal weapons were now instead inside a holdall that Kara carried along with the towel she had used when flagging down the vehicle in the first place.

"A bit heavy." Cass replied. Though she had been taught to use all of the small arms that the team had access to she generally carried a lightweight sporting pistol or sometimes a short carbine. So to have the weight of the military issue pistol one one side all the time was something that she was not used to.

"Juts try not to slouch while you walk." Kara commented, "You need to move like you're used to the feel of a weapon by your side."

"Indeed." Vorn added, "Now Jaysica, I think we could do with Penny's help from here on in."

"Yes sir." Jaysica replied and she opened up a second holdall that she carried and took out what appeared to be a standard Imperial mouse droid. In fact it was a modified version that she had stolen and reprogrammed to assist her. As soon as she set the droid down and activated it, it began to chirp, "Come with us Penny." she said and then as the rebels started walking towards the entrance to the building the droid chirped again and rolled after them.

Like the guards at the gate, those on the main door just allowed the rebels to walk right past them, apparently satisfied by the sight of their uniforms. When they saw Vorn's major's rank markings they snapped to attention and saluted before opening the door for him.

"That's how it's supposed to be done." Kara whispered to Cass.

Once inside the rebels paused and looked around.

"Okay," Vorn said, "we need the main control centre."

"Sign says that way boss." Kara said.

"Very well, let's go." Vorn replied and they began to walk in the direction indicated by the sign.

As they walked through the corridors of the command centre it became obvious that there were more Imperial soldiers here than was typical for the facility, with the corridors frequently crowded as reinforcements from off world crowded together with elements of the local garrison.

"Half these people don't seem like they know where they're going." Cass commented.

"We don't know where we're going." Kara replied.

"I thought we were going to the command centre." Jaysica said and Kara sighed.

"Just follow the signs." she said.

When they reached the large doors leading to the command centre Penny was the first to go through and the droid suddenly reappeared, backing up out of the room and chirping in an agitated fashion.

"What's wrong Penny?" Jaysica asked as the rebels stepped past the droid.

"Look at the central holographic display." Vorn muttered, glancing at the large display in the middle of the room.

"Why? What's wrong?" Cass asked.

"Inquisitor." Kara told her as she saw Ibram stood amongst the high ranking Imperial officers monitoring the state of the operation to destroy the rebel forces in the system.

"Just stick to the outer edge of the room." Vorn said, "We'll head for that empty console in the corner and see what Jaysica can find for us."

"So keep our distance from the crazy old wizard?" Kara asked.

"Exactly, Just try not to look like someone keeping their distance." Vorn replied.

"Got it boss. Act natural." Kara said.

Ibram did not like what he was seeing. On the ground the rebels had successfully disengaged from General Dern's forces and although there were a handful of reports of the biker scouts despatched in pursuit so far there had been no clear targets to be engaged. Meanwhile in space the slow moving rebel transports had been able to escape into hyperspace while their warships were moving towards the outer edge of the system. Fleet Admiral Vretan was sending his ships after them of course, but the slavish adherence to a plan that had been shown to be flawed by Admiral Hall had left the Imperial ships trailing far behind the rebels. The few vessels fast enough to catch them lacked the fire power necessary to destroy the largest rebel vessels. Losses on both sides in the space battle had been light so far. Two Imperial corvettes had been lost, along with a dozen or so TIE fighters while the rebels had lost only a handful of obsolete Y-wings. However, one of the Empire's gladiator class ships had suffered damage to its ion drives and rather than follow the withdrawing rebel ships it had remained in orbit around Tretor. As soon as the shield was lowered it would be brought down to the surface for repairs but in the meantime it made a useful sentry ship to prevent the rebels from launching any further sudden attacks on the planet.

"The rebels appear to be heading for the system's main gas giant." a hologram of the fleet admiral said and the main display focused in on that planet, showing the rings and subsystem of more than thirty moons that surrounded it.

"But what could be there that the rebels want?" an army colonel asked, "Are they after the mining platforms maybe?"

"Don't be so foolish." Ibram hissed, "If the rebels wanted the mining platforms they would have dropped part of their fleet out of hyperspace near them."

"I believe that the rebels are counting on the rings and moons to negate the advantage we have in our larger ships. Amongst them the battle will turn into a short ranged brawl that their vessels are better suited for. What's more we won't be able to use our interditors to block any retreat because any use of the gravity well projectors could pull the cruisers too close to any of the larger planetary bodies in the area. Even if a collision was avoided the rebels could easily get around the mass shadows by using the moons for cover."

"So what is your plan admiral?" Ibram asked.

"I have fourteen capital ships and four corvettes that I will need to deploy around the gas giant's subsystem and attempt to form a blockade while using the fighters and Admiral Hall's blastboat line to flush the rebels out to where our big guns can deal with them." Admiral Vretan replied, "The problem is that eighteen ships is no where near enough to maintain a proper blockade. Some of the rebels are bound to escape unless I can have reinforcements." Admiral Vretan explained.

"Admiral I will not allow the defences elsewhere in the sector to be reduced further for just a handful of rebel ships." Ibram said, "You must make do with what you have."

"Very well." the hologram of Admiral Vretan replied and then it faded away as the fleet admiral himself went to issue orders to his ships.

Fear.

Ibram felt a sudden tremor in the Force and he looked around. First he looked at the senior officers around him who had witnessed his execution of General Krier. These were the men with most reason to fear the inquisitor, but on the other hand they could reasonably assume that Ibram was not about to kill them for no reason and after he had dealt with the general's failure he had given no indication of being displeased or angry with any of them. So then Ibram turned his attention further out to the various controllers and technicians monitoring the command and control systems and monitoring all the communications coming in from General Dern and Fleet Admiral Vretan's forces.

"Is something wrong sir?" a nearby officer asked nervously when he saw Ibram looking around.

“No.” Ibram told him, “For a moment I just sensed something odd, that is all. However it is gone now.” and he turned back to the central display.

6.

"That guy gives me the creeps." Kara muttered as she turned back to the console Jaysica was sat at, "So what do we have?"

"There are a lot of Imperial soldiers on the planet." Jaysica replied.

"What about the fleet?" Vorn asked.

"It's not in orbit any more major. Neither of them are."

"What does that mean?" Cass said, leaning closer to Jaysica as she spoke.

"Deep space sensors indicate that most of the capital ships that were in orbit are now closing in on the system's main gas giant." Jaysica replied.

"Admiral Aphanar must be hoping to engage the Imperial fleet amongst its moons." Vorn said.

"Will that work?" Cass asked.

"Depends on how good the Imperial admiral is." Kara replied.

"It's Praus Vretan." Vorn said, "He's good."

"Major I think there's a second Imperial squadron up there." Jaysica added, "One Imperial or tector-class ship and three venators plus several smaller ships."

"Then there's no way that Admiral Aphanar can take them on in a broadside to broadside engagement." Vorn said, "And I doubt that Praus will want to engage her within the gas giant's subsystem. He'll try and flush her ships out into the open so his destroyers can take them out."

"Some will get away though." Kara said, "Won't they?"

"Probably." Vorn replied, "But not many."

"Why don't they just jump to hyperspace?" Cass asked.

"That's a good question boss." Kara added.

"Yes it is." Vorn said, "Jaysica, how many of our troop transports are still remaining?"

"None sir. The Imperial sensor records indicate that they all made the jump to hyperspace just after breaking orbit." Jaysica said and then she frowned.

"What's wrong?" Vorn asked.

"Sir, I think that either the *Ocean Queen* or the *Wave Rider* just jumped into hyperspace."

The *Ocean Queen* vanished in a flash of light as it accelerated far too fast to be noticeable and jumped to hyperspace.

"Admiral the *Ocean Queen* is away." the *Wave Rider's* comscan operator confirmed.

"Excellent." Admiral Aphanar replied, "Continue the sequence, I want all ships away as we approach the gas giant. Oh and get me Captain Mayan"

"Captain Mayan here admiral." the *Renegade's* captain said.

"Captain, our ships are beginning the jump sequence. The *Wave Rider* will be the last to leave in eight minutes. Will you be in position?"

"Affirmative admiral. We'll be just within the gravity well of the gas giant itself and eclipsed from the Imperial fleet. We'll trigger the hyperdrive at the same time as you and then duck into the atmosphere so they'll think we've gone as well."

"Excellent work captain." Admiral Aphanar said, "And may the Force be with you. *Wave Rider* out."

"Admiral the rebel fleet is withdrawing." the *Iron Warrior's* comscan operator called out as Admiral Vretan saw more flashes of light ahead of his ships.

"Stang." he hissed, "They must have been trying to draw us away from Tretor. What's the condition of their shield?"

"Planetary shield is still raised sir." the comscan operator said and the admiral smiled.

"Then at least the troops they still have on the surface are stuck there." he said, "General Dern can deal with them I think. Signal all ships, keep after the rebels but be advised that they seem to be withdrawing. When the last of them is gone I want all fighters recovered and refuelled. Then take us back to Tretor."

"We're ready captain." the *Renegade's* navigator reported and Captain Mayan nodded.

"Thanks Krissa." she said, "Okay everyone stand by. Engage hyperdrive and come about in three, two, one. Now!"

There was a klaxon as the ship's helmsman attempted to engage the hyperdrive. However, caught with the gas giant's mass shadow the safety systems kicked in and the jump was aborted, the massive energy field that would have pushed the corvette into hyperspace instead dispersing into space around the ship. At the same time the helmsman fired the corvette's powerful sublight engines and propelled it down into the stormy

atmosphere of the gas giant. To the following Imperial fleet it appeared that the Renegade had just joined the rest of the Alliance fleet in hyperspace when in fact it was now hidden right under their noses.

"Manoeuvre complete captain." the helmsman said as the ship was buffeted by the storms outside, "No signs of Imperial sensor activity. I think we've lost them."

"That's it. They're gone." Jaysica said, looking up at Vorn.

"So we're all alone here now?" Cass asked.

"Maybe not." Vorn replied, "Look, the admiral knew that there are still troops trapped here on Tretor and she wouldn't want to abandon them. But she couldn't face an Imperial fleet as big as the one she was facing. If she was just going to withdraw she could have done it a lot quicker than running for the gas giant. I think that we're not quite alone. I think that there's an Alliance ship still out there somewhere, a corvette or a gunship, but there's definitely help out there."

"But how does that help us here on the surface boss?" Kara asked, "Even if we could get that ship down here we can't fit an entire regiment of troops aboard a corvette and the *Silver Hawk*."

"What's that?" Vorn asked, pointing to an icon on the sensor display Jaysica had called up on the console. Unlike the other Imperial vessels it had remained in orbit when they went after the fleeing rebel battlegroup.

"That's the *Rancor's Claw*. A gladiator-class cruiser." Jaysica replied, "According to this she's suffered damage to her drive systems. She's been allocated a repair slot at a naval base here on Tretor."

"On the surface?" Vorn asked.

"Yes sir." Jaysica replied, nodding and Vorn smiled.

"We can fit a regiment of troops aboard that ship." he said.

"But who's going to fly it boss? You?" Kara asked.

"I thought you were a pilot." Cass commented.

"A starfighter pilot." Kara pointed out, "And neither Mace nor Tobis is qualified to pilot a cruiser."

"No, but there'll be someone aboard that ship that the admiral left behind who can." Vorn said, "Ladies, we're going to steal an Imperial cruiser. That's our way home."

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