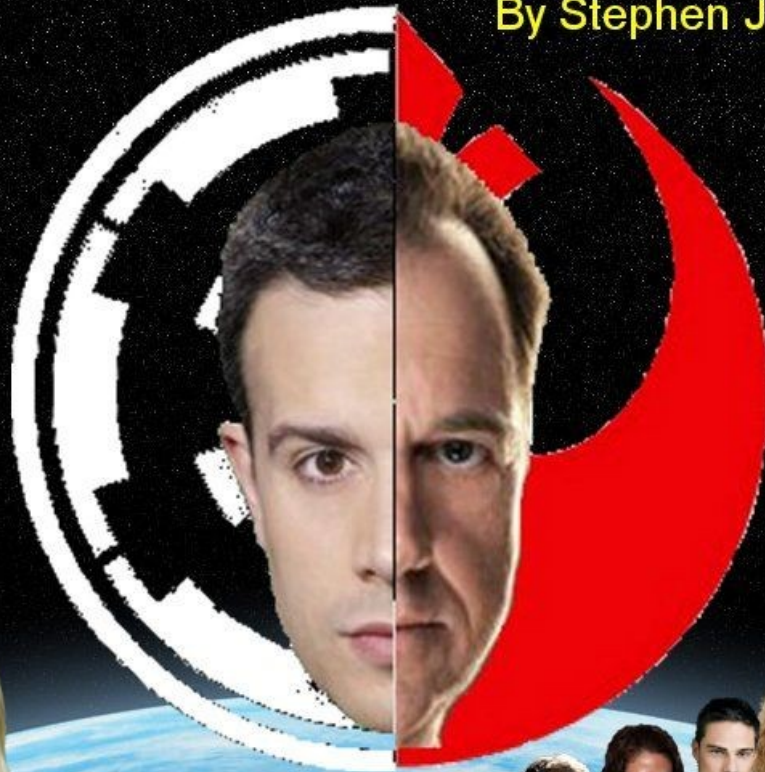


# STAR WARS

6-06: Too Good to Leave Behind

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 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 MAGE 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 LEAVE BEHIND**

THE REBEL FLEET HAS SUCCESSFULLY DISENGAGED BUT THERE ARE STILL THOUSANDS OF TROOPS TRAPPED ON THE SURFACE OF TRETOR. NOW THE ONLY HOPE OF ESCAPE IS TO SEIZE CONTROL OF AN IMPERIAL WARSHIP BEFORE THE EMPIRE CAN OVERWHELM THEM...

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

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# 1.

"I think maybe we ought to be leaving." Major Vorn Larcus the third said, looking around the Imperial command centre. He and the three female rebels accompanying him all wore stolen Imperial uniforms but he saw no sense in tempting fate by staying where they were, especially given the presence of Ibram Kellesen, the Jedi knight turned Imperial inquisitor, "Jaysica, download everything about the *Rancor's Claw* you can." "Yes sir." the seated young woman replied. Jaysica's primary role in Vorn's rebel team was demolitions, but she also had a fair knowledge of security and computer systems so when the group had infiltrated the Imperial command centre she had been the one assigned to access their computer.

The second woman accompanying Vorn was Lieutenant Kara Larcus who despite being just over thirty years old was his wife. Finally came Cass Grayle, the eighteen year old adopted daughter of Captain Mace Grayle, the owner of the ship Vorn's rebel team was assigned to, a YT-1300 class transport called the *Silver Hawk*. Right now her father was with his engineer Tobis Dorfus hunting the countryside for any signs of the Alliance regiment that had been forced to scatter following the ambush that had left them trapped on this planet, Tretor. The Empire had fooled the Alliance into believing that the sector moff, Gregor Horatian would be visiting the remote world in order to draw out a large force that could then be trapped and destroyed. The plan had almost worked, but Vorn had noticed certain irregularities in the information and had taken steps to warn the Alliance forces. He had been in time for three of the four regiments of ground troops to be evacuated along with the fleet battlegroup assigned, but the single armoured regiment deployed by the Alliance had failed to escape before Tretor's shield was raised, trapping them here. Now Vorn had to not only gather these troops together, but also find them a way off the planet and back to the Alliance. It was his intention that the *Rancor's Claw* would be that way.

"Got it." Jaysica said, unplugging a mem-stick from the terminal.

"Then let's get out of here boss." Kara said, looking round at where Ibram stood with a group of high ranking Imperial officers studying the holographic display at the centre of the room.

"Yes, I think that's a good idea." Vorn agreed, "Jaysica, copy the data into Penny. If we're caught she can take the information back to Mace on the *Silver Hawk*."

Penny was a mouse droid that Jaysica had modified with a holographic camera and built in comlink to assist her in infiltrating places like this and the tiny box shaped droid had proved its usefulness on many occasions.

"Will dad know what to do with it?" Cass asked.

"Of course he will." Kara replied, "He's known the boss long enough to know what he's thinking."

"And there's nothing else here we need?" Cass then asked, "Tharun grabbed us these uniforms from the tracking station. Maybe there's something useful we could find."

"We have what we came for." Vorn told her, "Now if we happen to come across something of use we'll see if we can grab it. But until then we need to concentrate on just getting out of here."

"All done major." Jaysica said, "Penny's got a complete copy of this." and she handed the mem-stick to Vorn.

"Then let's go." he said, turning towards the exit from the command centre.

As part of the plan to trap and destroy the Alliance forces the Empire had covertly deployed a large number of reinforcements to Tretor from other worlds and the result of this was that the Imperial guards at the command centre were used to seeing faces they did not recognise. Furthermore, their attitude to internal security was poor and the disguised rebels were not challenged once on their way back to the parking lot where their stolen landspeeder was parked.

"Door." Vorn reminded Cass as they neared the vehicle. Vorn wore rank markings that matched his Alliance rank whereas the others all wore enlisted markings. Therefore it was essential if their disguise was to be maintained that the three young women all display a respectful attitude towards him and that included opening and closing the door to the rear of the landspeeder for him.

Cass held the door open and Vorn indicated with his hand that Kara should get in first. Then he followed her and Cass closed the door behind them.

"Admit it boss," Kara said with a smile, "you're enjoying this aren't you?" and Vorn smiled in return.

"It does bring back pleasant memories of my days in Parliament and having people at my beck and call." he said just as the two front doors of the speeder opened and Cass and Jaysica got in.

"Here, take Penny." Jaysica said, handing Vorn a holdall containing the droid and then she started the engine and the landspeeder drove off.

The *Silver Hawk* was hidden in a ravine far from the command centre. The location had been selected to make the ship as difficult as possible to locate using either a ground or air based search. This was fortunate since on the ride back the rebels saw a large number of Imperial patrols. Some were in landspeeders like the one they had stolen, but most were scout troopers on speeder bikes or small groups of AT-STs forcing their

way through the wooded areas that would offer most shelter to any rebel units close by. However, when they reached the *Silver Hawk* the four rebels found although they had left the ship in the care of just a pair of droids it was not as empty now.

The first indication of this came just as Jaysica had brought the speeder to a halt a short distance away and they were disembarking. It was then that there was the sound of a blaster shot and a bright red bolt of energy whizzed past Vorn's head so close that he felt the heat singe his hair.

"Down!" he snapped, dropping to the ground and drawing his blaster. As part of their disguises each of the rebels was armed with a military issue blaster pistol and all but Cass drew theirs. Unused to the weight of the weapon and the holster, Cass fumbled with hers as she lay on the ground.

Another blaster shot passed over the rebels and Vorn looked towards the *Silver Hawk* to see its access ramp was lowered and a man in Alliance uniform was crouched at the bottom with a lightweight pistol in his hand. Just as he fired a third shot more rebel soldiers came running down the ramp with more powerful rifles.

"Cease fire!" Vorn yelled, "We're on your side."

"Yeah right, we believe you." one of the rebel soldiers replied, "Drop your weapons and get your hands in the air."

"What do you want to do boss?" Kara asked.

Vorn sighed and then threw his blaster out into the open.

"Okay I'm getting up. I'm unarmed." he said as he slowly got to his feet.

"And the rest." the rebel soldier shouted.

"Do it." Vorn ordered and the three women with him also threw their weapons away and got to their feet with their hands in the air. Then the rebel soldiers all rushed forwards to surround them.

"Okay, get them in the ship and search them properly." the squad leader ordered his men.

"I call this one." one of his men commented, placing a hand on Kara's shoulder.

"He's going to regret that sergeant." Vorn told the squad leader, "My name is Major Vorn Larcus."

"Sure it is." the sergeant replied, "Now get in the ship, all of you."

"Do as he says." Vorn said and watched closely by the soldiers Vorn and his team headed up the access ramp into the *Silver Hawk*.

In the lounge area they were met by yet more rebel soldiers and also a gold coloured protocol droid.

"Oh Major Larcus sir!" the droid exclaimed, "Thank goodness you're back safely."

"Thanks Jeeves." Vorn replied, lowering his hands and he looked at the sergeant, "See?" he said.

"I'm sorry sir." the sergeant replied, "But we thought-

"Never mind now." Vorn interrupted, "Just tell me who you are and how you got here."

"We're second company's recon platoon sir. When the order came to abandon ship and scatter we headed this way looking for shelter and a water source. That's when we came across the ship and the droids let us in. We didn't realise that you'd procured enemy uniforms."

"With respect Major Larcus sir it was actually Harvey that admitted them to the ship." Jeeves responded.

"As I said, never mind that now sergeant." Vorn said, ignoring his protocol droid, "We may have a way off this planet."

"There is just one thing boss." Kara said and she looked at the soldier who had put his hand on her shoulder, "I'm Lieutenant Larcus and what you did constitutes striking an officer." and then she brought her knee up sharply between the man's legs.

"I told you he'd regret that." Vorn commented as the soldier collapsed, "Now my team and I are going to get out of these uniforms and I want you and your men to cover that speeder before anyone else mistakes it for a vehicle still under Imperial control."

"Yes sir." the sergeant replied, snapping to attention and saluting. Vorn return the salute and as the soldiers were leaving the ship he noticed Kara grinning at him.

"What now?" he asked.

"Oh just that I bet he didn't expect to be saluting anyone in that uniform." she replied.

"Let's just get changed." Vorn said, heading for his cabin.

"Can I at least keep this outfit boss?" Kara asked, "There are things I want us to try."

"Do I want to know what those things are?" Cass asked, looking at Jaysica.

"Probably not." she answered, "I'm not sure I want to."

"Oh like you and Tobis haven't done anything like that." Kara hissed as she followed Vorn towards the cabins.

It was around sundown that two pairs of men returned to the *Silver Hawk*. The first pair was Mace and Tobis and their return was eagerly greeted by Cass and Jaysica. Then a short while afterwards the final member of Vorn's team, the former mercenary Tharun Verser returned in the company of Colonel Max Collis. The colonel was the head of Alliance special forces, or SpecForce, in the sector and had been assigned to command the abortive ground assault on Tretor.

"So how did it go?" Vorn asked as the four men sat down at the table in the *Silver Hawk's* lounge.

"We found about a company's worth hiding all along a river to the north." Mace said, "Most were on foot, but

there were a few vehicles.”

“Operational?” Colonel Collis asked.

“Oh, err, yes. At least I think so.” Tobis replied, “That is, we didn’t see them in action but their engines were all running.”

“And we found another two companies worth west of here.” Colonel Collis added, “All mobile.”

“So from the regiment we had when we landed it looks like we’ve lost about a quarter.” Vorn commented.

“Maybe not as many as that major.” Tharun replied, “There could still be small groups like the one that found the *Silver Hawk*.”

“How long until we can be sure?” Vorn asked.

“We’ll never be entirely sure.” the colonel said, “Not unless we can find every last one of them or their bodies. I’m guessing that you’ve got a plan that has to meet a tight schedule then?”

“Sort of.” Vorn replied and he looked around to where an R5 astromech droid waited patiently in the corner of the lounge, “Harvey, would you please show them the file I gave you?” and the droid let out a short burst of chirps and squeals before projecting a holographic image into the air in the middle of the lounge. The image showed a starship with the wedge-shaped design common to many types of modern Imperial capital ship. Unlike the infamous triangular Imperial-class star destroyers this vessel had a relatively wide prow that was dominated by a hangar bay positioned between two forward facing arms, while at the back of the ship the command and control tower was much squatter.

“The *Rancor’s Claw*.” Vorn announced, “Gladiator-class. Five hundred metres long, armed with six turbolaser batteries, two laser cannons, two missile launchers and three tractor beams. Not to mention a hangar bay large enough to carry two full squadrons of fighters. Right now this ship is orbiting Tretor while the remainder of the Imperial squadrons are being redeployed back to their regular duties.”

“So that’s all that’s standing between us and getting away then?” Mace asked, “What about our fleet?”

“It withdrew.” Vorn answered, “Or at least most of it did. I think that there’s still a ship waiting out there, a corvette probably.”

“A Corellian corvette’s no match for a medium cruiser major.” Colonel Collis pointed out.

“No. I know that, but I think you all misunderstand me.” Vorn said, “I’m not looking for a way to prevent the *Rancor’s Claw* from blocking our escape, I intend for us to use it to escape.

The rebels at the table glared at him.

“Oh, err, that does make sense.” Tobis said.

“What?” the colonel asked, “Are you insane?”

“Well, ah, it’s big enough to hold a full regiment of troops and the hangar would allow us to just drive vehicles straight into it.”

“Yes lad, but there’s the slight issue of it being in orbit. Which means that it’s outside the planetary shield and too far up for any of the replusorlift vehicles our troops have got to reach it.” Tharun said.

“But not for much longer.” Vorn responded with a grin, “You see the *Rancor’s Claw* suffered damage to its ion drive in the battle with our fleet. Not enough to completely immobilise it, but enough to make it too slow to keep up with the rest of Fleet Admiral Vretan’s squadron. The Empire have decided that they’re going to carry out the repairs here on Tretor, so they’ll be opening up the shield to bring it inside and that’s when we’ll seize it.”

“We’re going to seize an Imperial cruiser?” Mace said.

“We’ve captured starships before captain.” Tharun pointed out.

“Yes, but the *Ocean Queen* wasn’t an Imperial navy vessel and on the *Primarch* we had the support of its commanding officer and as it turned out most of the crew.” Mace replied, “Here we’ll be storming an Imperial Navy base and then trying to get aboard that ship with hundreds of troops before they can seal it up tight.”

“Oh we’ll have already taken the ship by the time our army units start their attack.” Vorn said, “My plan is for a small number of us to capture it and then hold it while our troops get aboard through the hangar.”

At that point Kara, who had been watching from by the kitchen unit smiled and stepped forwards.

“Tell them the best bit boss.” she said, “The bit about where we get our pilot from.”

“Ah, err, yes, none of us are qualified to fly a ship like that.” Tobis said, looking at both Kara and Mace who were skilled fighter and transport pilots respectively, but not capital ship pilots.

“Exactly.” Kara added, “I can fly it once we’re in space and if you don’t ask me to do anything fancy with it, but taking off from the surface and getting us into orbit is going to be a lot different than in an X-wing.”

“The corvette.” Vorn said, “That ship will have a trained flight crew aboard.”

“The corvette?” Colonel Collis repeated, “Vorn, am I to take it that your plan involves us getting a pilot from a ship that may or may not even be in the system down through the planetary shield and then capturing an Imperial capital ship from on the landing pad of one of their own bases before we load three companies of troops aboard it before flying away?”

“Yes colonel.” Vorn replied, “And we have to do it in between the ship being landed and the ion drives being taken off line for repair or to get beyond Tretor’s mass shadow we’d have to rely on our momentum from launch and that would take too long. The Empire would easily be able to call in more ships to stop us.”

Trust me, the Empire will never suspect this.”

“No, they expect plans that have some element of sanity to them.” Kara added.

“I take it that you have a plan then?” Colonel Collis said, leaning forwards towards Vorn.

“Yes sir.” Vorn answered, “First we need to assemble our team. That will be my field team, plus as many of your men as you see fit and we can obtain uniforms for and finally the flight crew that we’ll bring down here. Then we’ll infiltrate the naval base and from there board the *Rancor’s Claw*. Once aboard we’ll assess how many Imperial personnel are aboard. If we time it right there’ll only be a handful and we can overpower them. Otherwise we’ll have to just concentrate on preventing them from disabling the ship’s key systems or sealing it up before our troops arrive to completely secure the vessel. Then with the ship under our control we’ll be free to launch.”

“And what about the planetary shield?” Colonel Collis asked, “How will we be able to get through it? Because the moment we take off in that thing the shield will go straight back up.”

“That’s actually the easy part. We’ll be flying a warship inside the atmosphere.” Vorn said, “We simply use its weapons to take out as many of the generators as we have to.”

“That all sounds too easy to me.” Mace replied.

“It is.” Kara said, “We still need to get ourselves a pilot to fly the thing.”

## 2.

Tobis sat in the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit with Harvey, studying the feed from Tretor's civilian tracking system in search of the ship Vorn believed had been left behind by the retreating rebel fleet.

"Any luck?" Mace asked as he entered the cockpit and handed his engineer a mug of caf. In return Harvey emitted an extended rude sounding noise, "I'll take that as a 'no' then." Mace added.

"Ah, its just that being stuck in this ravine limits our input from the outside world captain." Tobis said as Mace sat in his usual seat, "I'm trying to get into the satellite system directly rather than via the ground stations that the rock walls are blocking. The planetary shield has been deactivated but I'm still having trouble locking onto any of the satellites."

"So you're saying that you need to get a better line of sight?" Mace asked.

"Err, yes captain." Tobis replied and Mace activated the *Silver Hawk's* intercom, "Major Larcus, could you come to the cockpit?" he said and then he waited for Vorn to appear.

"Problem?" he asked from the doorway.

"You could say that." Mace said, "Tobis can't get into the planetary tracking system from in the ravine and our own sensors won't be any use down here either. We need to get out of here."

"If we take off the Empire will see us." Vorn pointed out.

"Ah, err, the local tracking station is still out of action." Tobis responded, "That, err, that's making it harder to access the network. If it was online I could probably get a reflection even from down here."

"But there are still several regiments of Imperial troops scouring the countryside looking for any signs of us."

Vorn reminded him, "Even if their sensor arrays don't pick us up, their ground troops will be able to see us with their own eyes."

"What about the colonel's men?" Mace suggested and Vorn turned towards him.

"What are you suggesting captain?" he asked.

"Well surely at least one of the groups we located will have a long range transmitter we can use. If they bring it to us then we could load it onto that speeder you captured and set it up somewhere we can get a better signal from." Mace said.

"Good thinking captain." Vorn replied, "I'll go and speak to the colonel. In the meantime you and Tobis get changed."

"Oh, err, changed?" Tobis asked.

"Well its an Imperial army speeder so you'll both look out of place if you're not wearing Imperial uniforms."

Vorn reminded him, "Oh and take Jaysica and Tharun with you as well Mace. Jaysica and Tobis can get the transmitter set up while you and Tharun keep watch."

The rebels in the speeder did their best to avoid any of the Imperial patrols. Though their uniforms and vehicle made them appear to be members of the Imperial military they were unwilling to risk the possibility that the speeder would be recognised as having been stolen and so decided against letting any of the Imperial troops in the area get more than just a brief glimpse at them. Under direction from Tobis, Jaysica drove the speeder to high ground where she and Tobis then set up the communications equipment provided by Colonel Collis.

"Any joy lad?" Tharun asked when he heard the 'hum' of the communicator powering up.

"Err." Tobis responded as he looked at his datapad.

"Doesn't sound too good to me captain." Tharun said to Mace.

"Tobis will do it." Jaysica said, "Won't you Tobis?"

"What? Oh, err, ah. Yes, here it is, I'm in the system now."

"Well?" Mace asked, "Any signs of our ship?"

"Err, no sir. In fact there are no ships near the system's gas giant at all."

"Captain, if the Empire suspected there was a rebel ship still around they'd have left someone there to watch for them." Tharun said quietly, "Maybe the major's idea was-" but then before Tharun could finish Mace strode up to the communicator and studied it closely.

"Okay Tobis how do I send a narrow field subspace signal that the Empire won't pick up?" he asked, "I want a transmission angle just enough to get the whole of the gas giant's subsystem of moons."

"Err, one moment." Tobis replied as he began to adjust the unit's controls, "Ah, there you go." he added and he passed the handset to Mace.

"This is Captain Grayle calling Alliance fleet vessel." Mace said into the handset, "We require urgent assistance. I repeat we require urgent assistance."

Captain Malia Mayan of the Corellian corvette *Renegade* was resting in her cabin when someone knocked

on the door. Sighing, she got up from her bunk and opened the door to see her navigator standing in the hallway.

"Krisa." she said to the young woman, "What's wrong?"

"Captain there's a signal coming in from the surface of Tretor." Krisa replied, "I think it's Mace."

"Mace?" Malia said, her eyes widening slightly at the mention of her fiancée's name, "Is he okay?"

"I'm not sure. He's asking for help." Krisa said.

"Wait right there." Malia said as she retreated back into her cabin and then reappeared pulling on her uniform tunic, "Okay, let's go." she added and the two women hurried through the corridors of the ship to the bridge.

"Captain on the bridge." the ship's first officer called out as Malia appeared and the man vacated the captain's chair so that Malia could sit down.

"Thanks." Malia said as she took the seat, "Now let's hear this transmission."

The *Renegade's* comscan operator activated the ship's communications and over the bridge speakers Malia heard the sound of Mace's voice.

"-require urgent assistance."

"Mace!" Malia exclaimed, "Mace it's me."

"Malia?" Mace asked, "The admiral left you here?"

"That's right honey. I guess she figured I'd have the motive to make sure you get back safe for our wedding."

Malia replied, "Now what's going on down there?"

"It's pretty bad." Mace told her, "We've got about three companies spread out in hiding from the Empire who seem to have called in every spare volunteer and clone in the sector to hunt for us. The major's got a plan to get us all off the planet but we'll need your help to carry it out."

"Mace honey, you do realise that there's an Imperial cruiser orbiting Tretor don't you? The *Renegade's* no match for that."

"Yeah, we know." Mace replied, "But the cruiser's been damaged and is slated for repairs planet side. The major plans to seize the ship when it lands and use it to get us off world. But there's one slight problem, no one down here can fly it."

"Oh that's your only problem is it?" Malia exclaimed.

"Yeah, I know it sounds crazy but can you help us? You're our only hope." Mace said and Malia sighed.

"What exactly do you want Mace?" she asked.

"We need a pilot." Mace replied, "Someone who can get the ship off the ground and out of the gravity well."

Malia looked at her comscan officer.

"What's the status of the enemy detection grid?" she asked.

"Ground based tracking over the target area is still down captain." the officer told her.

"Okay Mace." Malia said, "I'll be there in a couple of hours. But you better be ready for me."

"I'll have a bottle of wine waiting." Mace said and Malia smiled.

"And it better be good." she said, "*Renegade* out." and she shut off the communications system.

"Captain are you really going through with this?" Krisa asked from behind her.

"Yes I am." Malia replied, "But I won't be alone. I want you there with me as back up."

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Krisa commented.

The *Renegade* dropped out of hyperspace as close to Tretor as was possible, appearing in the sensor blind spot created by the rebels' sabotaging of a key ground based tracking station. However, rather than head towards the planet the corvette abruptly altered course to maintain its distance. All of a sudden a hull panel was blown clear by prepared charges and from behind it a tiny cylindrical craft shot free of the larger ship. This vessel's engines flared briefly to turn it towards the planet and then fired again to accelerate it away from what its onboard computer believed was a stricken vessel.

On the bridge of the *Renegade* the ship's first officer watched the escape pod's descent on a visual display.

"Report." he said.

"Pod now entering the atmosphere sir." the comscan operator replied, "No signs of either them or us having been detected yet."

"Helm get us out of here." the first officer ordered, "Take us back to the gas giant."

Mace, Tharun, Vorn and Colonel Collis sat at the top of the ravine, all searching the sky with macrobinoculars for any signs of Malia's arrival. Mace and Tharun both wore their stolen Imperial uniforms while Vorn and the colonel wore their regular clothing, an Alliance uniform in Colonel Collis' case and civilian clothing in Vorn's.

"There!" Tharun exclaimed all of a sudden and he pointed to where a white trail could be seen streaking across the sky at high altitude.

"Are you certain sergeant?" the colonel asked, "We don't want to go running after an Imperial scout ship after all."

"Oh it's an escape pod all right." Vorn added as he studied the trail, "It's dropping almost straight down. It's



replusorlift braking system ought to kick in at any moment.” and right on queue the escape pod began to slow down and its trajectory flattened out as its computer located a suitable landing spot.

“Tharun, with me.” Mace said, lowering his macrobinoculars and he turned for the path leading down towards the Silver Hawk. The Imperial landspeeder was still parked next to the light freighter but now the camouflage netting placed over it by the Alliance troops had been pulled back and Cass stood leaning on the back of the vehicle, also wearing a stolen uniform.

“Get in kid. We’re off.” Tharun said as he and Mace rushed up to the speeder.

“Mom’s here?” Cass asked with a grin.

“Her escape pod came down over there.” Mace said, waving as he got into the back of the speeder, “About twenty or thirty kilometres away so we better hurry.”

“What’s happening?” Kellesen asked as he entered the command centre.

“Sir I have General Dern for you.” an Imperial army officer replied and she stepped aside to reveal the hologram of an Imperial general in field armour.

“Report general.” Kellesen said.

“My scouts report seeing a small craft descending from orbit.” General Dern replied, “But with the tracking station still down I can’t get an ID on it. Do you have any ships in my area?”

Kellesen glanced towards another officer, a man he knew to have responsibility for military air traffic and the man shook his head.

“None general.” Kellesen said, “The rebels must be receiving reinforcements. Tell your men to locate that ship and find out who the rebels have brought in.”

“Of course.” General Dern replied and he began to turn away.

“In fact general-” Kellesen suddenly added.

“Yes?” the general said.

“I will join you personally.” Kellesen finished and General Dern frowned briefly, the change in expression barely noticeable to anyone but the inquisitor.

“Of course inquisitor.” he said and then his hologram faded away.

“Prepare a shuttle.” Kellesen ordered without needing to look at anyone in particular.

### 3.

The escape pod had landed in marshland, skimming across the surface of the water until coming to a complete stop when the front end embedded itself in the mud of the bank on the far side. Before hitting the surface of the water the escape pod smashed through several trees and the searing heat of its exhaust ignited some of the vegetation. The fire did not last long enough in the damp conditions to spread and pose a danger to the pod's occupants, but it did create a plume of smoke that allowed a unit of biker scouts to successfully track the pod to its point of impact.

"Spread out." the squad leader ordered as he climbed off his speeder bike and drew his pistol. Behind him the rest of his squad did the same and they began to form a perimeter around the pod. They maintained a distance of about twenty metres from it, close enough to be able to keep visual contact through the undergrowth but not so close as to give away their presence to anyone inside before they were ready to move in.

One of the biker scouts that had positioned himself on the edge of the water aimed his pistol towards the pod when all of a sudden he heard a sharp 'crack' from behind him.

"Stang!" Tharun exclaimed as the scout trooper whirled around to face the rebel caught trying to sneak up on him. The biker scout saw the Imperial army uniform and for a moment thought that Tharun was a genuine Imperial soldier come to investigate the pod's landing as well. But then he noticed his rifle. The Imperial army used the same Blastech E-11 as stormtroopers for their standard rifle whereas Tharun was armed with the much heavier Blastech A-280.

"What the-" the biker scout began before there was a flash and the simultaneous sound of a blaster shot as Tharun fired and blew a hole right through the biker scout's armour as well as the trooper inside. Then he swung the rifle around and fired a sustained burst into two other nearby scouts before diving for cover to avoid the return fire from the next closest.

"Base this is squad one one three eight." the squad leader began, activating the comlink built into his helmet but he gave up when all he heard was static, "They're jamming our frequency!" he exclaimed before he noticed a shadow moving and turned to see what was happening.

"Surprise." Mace said, shooting the squad leader in the chest, then ducking out of sight before anyone saw him.

Moving from tree to tree and just about keeping ahead of where the bikers scouts were aiming, Tharun fired on the move making use of short bursts to pick off another scout trooper while keeping the rest pinned down as he ran. But he failed to notice one of the scouts until he ran right into him and the pair collapsed in a heap in the mud around a narrow stream, both soldiers dropping their weapons as they fell. Tharun went for his knife rather than his sidearm but the biker scout kicked it from his grip and lunged forwards. Tharun rolled as the biker scout slammed into him, forcing the other man down into the stream where Tharun held his head under the surface of the water. Normally this would be enough to stop a man from defending himself properly as he tried to focus on not drowning, but all forms of stormtrooper armour including the lightweight scout armour were sealed and included internal life support. Therefore as soon as the supply of oxygen in the air was cut off the biker scout's armour switched over to its internal supply and the man wearing it continued to fight.

"Freeze!" a voice yelled from close by and Tharun felt a blaster pressed to the side of his head. He was just about to let go of the biker scout he still had pinned beneath the water when he heard a sudden blaster shot and the weapon pressed to his head dropped into the stream as its owner fell dead, a smoking hole punched in the side of his armour. Glancing around he spotted Cass standing well back where Mace had ordered her to remain and the young woman was aiming her blaster to where the biker scout had been stood moments earlier.

"Thanks kid." Tharun said, "Now get over here and give me a hand with this guy."

Cass ran towards Tharun as he continued to hold the biker scout down in the water.

"What should I do?" she asked.

"Grab my knife." Tharun told her, "It's over there." and he nodded towards the weapon. Cass quickly scooped it up and held it out towards Tharun, "I've got my hands full here kid." he said.

"What do I do?" Cass asked.

"Stab him of course. Under the chest plate and angle it up." Tharun told her.

Wincing Cass dropped to her knees and clutched the knife in both hands. Then slowly she held the tip of the blade at the very bottom of the bikers scout's chest plate.

"Do it. Do it now." Tharun said and Cass closed her eyes as she pushed the knife down, "Okay let's go."

Tharun said, suddenly grabbing hold of Cass' arm in one hand and pulling his knife from the biker scout with the other. Then he paused just long enough to scoop up his rifle before dragging Cass into cover.

Mace held his pistol around the tree he was hiding behind and fired repeatedly. He knew that there were two biker scouts in the undergrowth there but could not risk revealing himself to aim properly. Fortunately the tough wood of the tree trunk was far more resistant to the hold out blasters carried by the biker scouts than the bushes they were concealed behind were to the far more powerful blasts from his larger weapon. This was actually an occasion when the standard military issue DH-17 he was carrying was a better choice than the more powerful DL-44 he usually carried was. That weapon had more hitting power but it came at the expense of range and more significantly in this situation, ammunition capacity. With a hundred shots worth of energy on a full charge he had plenty of ammunition to spare as he fired randomly until he heard a cry as he hit one of the biker scouts.

"Fall back!" he heard the other call out and breaking from cover Mace saw the other biker scout now running towards where the squad had left their speeder bikes. Mace fired one, putting an energy bolt right between the fleeing trooper's shoulder blades and then he turned, hunting for what was the final member of the squad.

This last trooper made it to the speeder bikes and leapt onto the nearest one, not caring that it was not the one assigned to him. Right now getting away from the rebels to warn his superiors was all that mattered. Quickly he engaged the engine and accelerated, but he was unaware if Tharun lurking just behind a tree just ahead of where the speeder bike was parked and as the lightweight vehicle began to move off the rebel held out his rifle, gripping it by the barrel. Unable to stop in time, the biker scout was knocked from the speeder bike by the impact of the rifle and the bike sped onwards uncontrolled until it struck a tree and exploded while Tharun's rifle was once more knocked from his grip.

"Kriff that hurt." Tharun muttered, shaking his hands as he went to recover his weapon for a second time.

Then he turned to face the dazed scout trooper and shot him before he could draw his own blaster,

"Captain!" Tharun yelled, "Captain where are you?"

"Here." Mace replied as he stepped out into the open and then Cass appeared as well.

"Is that all of them then?" she asked.

"Yeah, looks that way." Tharun replied, "Thanks in part to you kid." and he looked at Mace and smiled, "She nailed two of them." he told him and Mace frowned.

"I thought I told you to stay put." he said sternly.

"But dad-" Cass began.

"Don't but dad me young lady. Getting me to bring you along has been tough enough and if you get hurt the major will freak." Mace interrupted.

"Well she saved my life." Tharun said, "If the major gives you any grief about Cass getting involved in a blaster fight then just remind him about how angry his daughter would be if I died."

Mace sighed.

"Yeah, that'll probably work." he said and then he turned towards the escape pod, "Okay, let's go get Malia out of that thing."

The three rebels then ran to the escape pod and Mace banged on the hatch.

"Malia!" he yelled, hoping that the sound of his voice would carry through the hull, "Malia you can come out now." and he banged on the hatch again but there was no response. Concerned, Mace looked at Tharun.

"The landing could have been pretty heavy captain." Tharun pointed out, "Maybe she's been knocked out."

"Okay stand back." Mace responded and he reached for a heavy handle that was clearly labelled 'EMERGENCY RELEASE – DANGER, EXPLOSIVE BOLTS. 30 SECOND FUSE.'

"Get back kid." Tharun said, pulling Cass away as Mace pulled the handle and then ran after them.

The emergency charges went off right on schedule and the escape pod hatch was hurled into the water.

Then Mace leapt back into the open and ran back towards the escape pod. But when he reached it he just stared inside silently.

"Dad, what's wrong?" Cass asked as she ran to him, followed by Tharun and they too both looked into the escape pod.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Tharun said as he saw that there was no one inside at all.

"Where did they go?" Cass said, looking around frantically.

"Maybe those biker scouts weren't the first here." Tharun suggested, "Maybe they were just laying a trap for us."

"No." Mace said and he turned around and waded deeper into the water, "Malia!" he yelled, "Malia where are you?"

For a few moments there was no reply and Tharun was about to suggest leaving when Malia's voice suddenly called out.

"I say, are you looking for us?" she asked as she and Krissa emerged from the undergrowth on the other side of the water, the condition of their uniforms suggesting that they had waded across it.

"Mom!" Cass yelled.

"Hi Cass. What the hell are you wearing?" Malia said as she and Krissa now walked around the edge of the water to meet up with the other rebels.

"The uniforms go with our new speeder." Mace told her, "Now why weren't you both in the pod?"

"We opened the hatch and waited inside for you." Krissa began, "Then we heard the approach of speeder bikes and decided to hide over there until we knew who it was that was coming."

"And neither of you thought to help us out in the battle?" Tharun asked.

"You were all moving about too quick." Malia commented, "If we'd tried opening fire we'd probably have hit one of you by mistake."

"Well so long as it would have been an accident." Mace said as Malia reached him and they embraced before he kissed her.

"Gross." Cass commented, "Can we go now? I need to change into some clothes that aren't covered in dirty water."

"What about us?" Krissa asked, "We don't have any disguises at all."

"No problem." Mace replied, "We've got spares in the speeder."

"*Rancor's Claw* this is surface control, you are cleared for landing. Follow beacon one one three eight."

The ship's captain smiled when he heard this.

"About time too." he said, "Helm, take us down. Keep it nice and slow though, the rebels have done enough damage without us overloading what drive capability we've got left."

"Confirmed captain, plotting atmospheric entry vector." the helmsman responded and the captain activated the ship's intercom as he watched Tretor come into view through the bridge viewports as the *Rancor's Claw* slowly pivoted round to face the planet.

"All hands this is the captain. Stand by for atmospheric entry and landing. Shore leave will be available to all personnel not required for repair duties." and with a grin he added, "Make the most of it. We won't be here long."

## 4.

"That's a good look for you captain." Kara said as Malia walked up the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp in one of the stolen Imperial uniforms.

"Oh kriff off." Malia responded.

"That's kriff off ma'am crewman." Kara said and when Malia looked at her puzzled she added, "You're uniform is for an enlisted tech, not an officer."

Malia turned and glared at Mace whose uniform bore captain's markings to match his own rank.

"Hey don't look at me." he said, "It was Sergeant Verser over there that stole them all."

"In my defence it was all Jaysica's fault for getting stuck naked inside that artoo unit." Tharun added as he too walked back into the ship.

"What do you lot do on these missions?" Malia asked, "Oh wait no, I remember when Mace took me on one and gave Cass so much beer she was sick."

"Oh please don't remind me of that." Cass said.

"Well you better get inside anyway." Kara said, "The boss is about to reveal the rest of his master plan."

Vorn was waiting in the lounge and he smiled when he saw Malia and Krissa.

"Captain Mayan, Lieutenant Dall. We're honoured that you could join us." he said.

Malia looked at Mace.

"Mace honey, do all his briefings start out as disturbing as this?" she asked.

"Only ones for really dangerous missions." Mace replied.

"Harvey if you wouldn't mind." Vorn said and Tobis' R5 droid responded with a rude sounding noise.

"Yes Harvey, the major knows that you've already shown us the image. But now he's asking you to show it again." Jeeves said and the protocol droid slapped the smaller droid on the top of its conical head. Almost immediately after the holographic image of the *Rancor's Claw* reappeared in the middle of the lounge.

"This image highlights the damage done to the *Rancor's Claw's* ion drive." Vorn explained, "As you can see it limits the acceleration of the ship but will not prevent it from being flown."

"Looks like a straight forward fix." Krissa commented when she saw the damaged portions of the Imperial cruiser marked in red, "Once we get it back to headquarters of course."

"It ought to be, yes." Vorn replied, "But of course we need to get it there first and for that we need to mix subterfuge with pure brute force."

"Ooh, can I do the second bit boss?" Kara exclaimed, raising her hand and waving it.

Vorn frowned.

"To begin with we'll infiltrate the starport and then the cruiser using a small team disguised as Imperial personnel." he went on, ignoring Kara's comment, "Once aboard we will assess whether we can seize the ship with the personnel available or if we need to wait for reinforcements. Either way we need to make certain that the engines all remain on line."

"So who's going?" Mace asked, "I assume we'll be using the speeder and that will only take six."

"We will be using the speeder, yes." Vorn replied, "But we have a second vehicle available as well." and he looked at Colonel Collis.

"Some of the armoured vehicles used by the Alliance regiment here on Tretor are Imperial types." he said, "This includes an armoured personnel carrier that matches a pattern we've witnessed in use by the forces searching for us. My men have been making it look like an Imperial vehicle and we'll be using that to smuggle in an extra eight people."

"That's all we have uniforms for." Vorn said, "So the strike team will consist of my field team, Mace and Tobis, Captain Mayan and Lieutenant Dall, Colonel Collis and four of his SpecForce space ops troopers."

"I've picked men experienced not only in starship boarding actions but also in starship gunnery." Colonel Collis added, "Seeing as how part of your plan relies on using the ship's weapons I thought they'd come in useful."

"No one mentioned anything about taking that ship into battle with a skeleton crew of amateurs." Malia said, "I can't be a helmsman, captain and instructor all at once."

"You shouldn't need to be." Vorn told her, "But when we launch the Empire may well raise the planetary shield again so we'll need to be able to take out the generator."

"And when do we start all this?" Mace asked.

"Tobis?" Vorn said, looking to the engineer who had been stood quietly at the end of the corridor leading to the cockpit with his arm around Jaysica.

"Oh, err, well the *Rancor's Claw* has been given clearance to land." he replied, looking around the room, "So we probably have less than three hours before the crew shut down the engines to repair them."

"That's it then." Vorn said, "We need to go within the hour."

"Tell me what happened here general." Ibram said and General Dern felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end as the inquisitor approached him from behind. Around him small groups of stormtroopers searched the marsh for any evidence left behind by the rebels who had ambushed the scout trooper squad, but so far it seemed that they had left little behind but bodies.

"The squad located the escape pod." the general replied, looking to where a row of body bags was laid out in a row, "But it seems that the rebels arrived at about the same time and ambushed them, wiping them out."

"And when did this happen?" Ibram asked.

"Not long." General Dern answered, "An hour or two at the most. But there are signs over there of a replusorlift vehicle being used so they could be more than a hundred kilometres away by now." and he pointed through the trees.

"But they are still on this planet general." Ibram said, "And it is up to us to see to it that they do not leave here alive."

The two Imperial appearing vehicles headed towards the Imperial starport at a speed higher than that technically allowed by local law, but the drivers were unconcerned by issues such as speeding tickets and investigation by Imperial military police. By the time the footage from the few traffic cameras they passed was forwarded to the Imperial Navy the *Rancor's Claw* would be off world and no one would care about a few minor traffic violations.

The sentries at the gate approached by the two vehicles prepared themselves when they saw them approaching at such a rate, but then relaxed as they slowed down more as they came nearer before halting. Then as the black uniformed naval troopers held their distance an armoured droid approached the landspeeder. Driven by Krissa, this also had Kara and Tharun in the front while Malia, Mace and Vorn sat in the back.

"Your vehicles are not registered to this installation." the droid said flatly, "State the reason for your visit."

"Transfer of personnel and equipment for the refit of the *Rancor's Claw*." Kara replied.

"Yeah, apparently the navy boys can't manage it without the help of the army's technical corps." Tharun added, smirking as he glared at one of the nearby troopers. This was a deliberate ploy, irritate the living guards so that they would be eager to get rid of the speeder, while the presence of several people in officers' uniforms would dissuade them from trying to search the vehicle and it worked.

"Just get going." a senior non-commissioned officer replied as he walked up behind the droid, "And I suggest you watch your tongue trooper. There are high ranking officers around who'd happily transfer you to the navy so you can give them the benefit of your skills if you're not careful."

"Move along driver." Vorn said from the back seat, not making eye contact with the guard commander and Krissa nodded before pressing her foot down on the accelerator the moment the barrier in front of the speeder dropped down into the ground.

The *Rancor's Claw* itself was impossible to miss even amongst the massive hangar structures designed to take a wide assortment of small naval craft from TIE fighters to corvettes. The gladiator-class cruiser was longer, wider and taller than even the largest of the hangar entrances and so it remained on an open air landing pad while servicing equipment was brought to it.

"Where do I park?" Krissa asked as she drove towards the ship.

"Near the back." Vorn said, "We need to take engineering and the bridge." and Krissa nodded.

As she brought the speeder to a halt near the back of the cruiser the members of Vorn's usual group in the speeder were watching the various hatches from which ladders, ramps and stairs now extended down to the ground.

"What's wrong Mace?" Malia asked.

"Nothing." Mace replied, "We're just counting, that's all."

"Counting what?" Malia responded.

"How many in and out." Kara answered before Mace.

"In plain basic for us poor fleet officers?" Malia said.

"There could be up to about two and a half thousand people aboard that ship." Mace explained, "We're checking to see if there are more disembarking now it's landed than the number going aboard to help with the repairs."

"Look there." Vorn said, nodding towards a set of stairs close to the rear of the ship. There was a cluster of officers around the base of them and they all suddenly snapped to attention and saluted as two others descended the stairs towards them, "That looks like the captain to me." Vorn added, "Plus an assistant." Malia frowned.

"The last thing I do when the *Renegade's* about to be swarmed with techs that don't know her is leave them alone." she said.

"I know, I'd do the same." Mace agreed, "I don't think that the repairs are due to start just yet and the crew are getting off for some leave while they can."

There was another speeder parked close to the gathered officers and the captain got straight into it before being driven away, at which point the officers began to disperse.

"Head there." Vorn told Krissa, "We'll use those stairs."

Turning the speeder again Krissa drove up to the bottom of the stairs and parked nearby while behind them the armoured personnel carrier also came to a halt. All disguised as Imperial personnel the rebels in both vehicles then disembarked and gathered in approximately the same place as the Imperial officers had gathered just moments earlier.

"So how do we play this major?" Tharun asked.

"Well technically I think that the colonel should take charge here." Vorn replied and he looked at Colonel Collis who was disguised in the uniform of a regular army trooper, as were the four Space Ops troopers.

"While we're out in public I think you should give the orders." the colonel replied, looking around at the various droids and technicians moving equipment aboard and Vorn smiled.

"Very well," he said, "Tobis and Jaysica need to head for engineering to determine the condition of the drives. I think that the colonel's men should go with them as well while the rest of us head for the bridge." then he looked at Colonel Collis, "How does that sound?"

"Good to me." the colonel replied, nodding and in turn he looked at his men, "Okay, you heard the major. Escort Sergeant Dorfus and Corporal Horbid to engineering. No harm is to come to them under any circumstances. Understood?"

"Yes sir." the troopers said in unison and then two of them began to head up the stairs.

"After you." another said to Jaysica and Tobis and after they began to climb the stairs the remaining troopers followed them, forming a barrier in front and behind them.

"Okay," Vorn said as the team heading for engineering disappeared into the ship, "who knows the way to the bridge?"

## 5.

Main engineering and the corridors and compartments surrounding it were hives of activity as both members of the *Rancor's Claw's* crew and ground staff hurried to prepare the ship for repair as quickly as they could. There were also a handful of stormtroopers still aboard the ship and the four Space Ops troopers watched them closely, noting their locations and whether they seemed to be patrolling an area or assigned to guard a specific point. If assigned as guards the special forces troopers also did their best to determine what it was. Meanwhile Tobis was more interested in the engines of the *Rancor's Claw* and when they entered the massive main engineering compartment itself he halted and looked up at them. A gladiator-class cruiser possessed two ion drive units, one of which aboard the *Rancor's Claw* had been damaged by a turbolaser strike. Safety considerations demanded that in order to carry out the necessary work on this unit the functional drive also needed to shut down completely, but from the various displays as well as the rhythmic pounding coming from the functional engine indicated that this had not happened yet.

"What do we do now Tobis?" Jaysica asked quietly.

"What? Oh, err, we go- we go-" Tobis said as he searched for what he wanted, "Up there." and he looked up at a control room that overlooked the engineering chamber. From their position the rebels could see two figures moving around inside, but there was no clue as to whether they were the only ones up there.

"Stay behind us." one of the troopers said and they headed for the stairs that led up to the control room.

Despite the rebels wearing army uniforms rather than navy ones the crewmen in the engineering section did not think twice about their presence, having been warned to expect help. In fact it proved helpful when the Space Ops troopers reached the engineering control room and found a total of three engineers on duty there, including an officer. The Space Ops troopers moved towards the back of the room, furthest from the window through which they could be seen from below and they began to whisper amongst themselves.

"Is there a problem?" the officer asked, frowning.

"I'm sorry sir." one of the troopers replied, "But we are unfamiliar with these systems. Could you explain them to us?"

The officers sighed.

"What sort of personnel have they sent us?" he said and he beckoned his men to join him as he approached the disguised troopers. As soon as all of the Imperials were within reach and out of sight of the window the troopers struck, reaching out and grabbing them by their throats. They gripped the engineers tightly, choking them and preventing them from calling out for help until one by one each of them stopped moving. Lowering them to the deck, the troopers made certain that each was dead by breaking their necks and from just outside the door Jaysica winced at the sound.

"Clear." one of the troopers said and then Tobis stepped inside.

"What should I do now?" Jaysica asked as she followed him.

"Oh, err, you can just wait over there until I've checked everything really is on line." Tobis replied and Jaysica smiled before backing up and resting herself on the edge of a control console.

At which point a shrill alarm began to sound and her eyes widened.

"It's not my fault!" she cried out.

Unlike engineering, the command and control sections of the *Rancor's Claw* were almost deserted. The systems here were undamaged and not relevant to most of the work that needed to be carried out so the crew normally stationed here had instead been assigned shore leave.

A single junior officer had been left to oversee the handful of crewmen left on the bridge itself along with a pair of stormtrooper marine guards and he frowned when he looked around and saw the rebels entering the bridge.

"What's going on here?" he demanded, irrespective of the fact that Mace and Vorn both wore uniforms that suggested they outranked him.

"We've been transferred to assist with the repair work." Vorn replied.

"Transferred by who?" the bridge officer replied, "I wasn't notified about any transfer. All the repairs are being carried out below."

Vorn frowned.

"That's strange." he said, "Our orders said to report to the bridge, not engineering."

"What orders? Let me see them." the bridge officer said.

"Of course." Vorn said, "I have them right here." and he reached into his tunic as if he was about to take out a mem-stick or datapad with his orders written on them. But instead he suddenly produced a compact blaster meant for concealed personal defence and he shot the officer in the chest.

Startled by this unexpected turn of events the bridge crew looked on horrified as the officer fell back into the



crew pit, but the two stormtroopers instead reacted by raising their weapons to return fire. However, Colonel Collis, Kara, Mace and Tharun had known exactly what was about happen when Vorn reached into his tunic and they had all subtly moved their hands closer to their own sidearms and as the stormtroopers were still raising their weapons as the rebels drew theirs and fired. The sudden volley of blaster fire took the stormtroopers by surprise and both were hit, collapsing where they stood and dropping their rifles.

"Get the door and get those blasters!" Vorn snapped before he turned towards the crew pit and pointed his blaster at the crewmen in it, "And you lot get your hands up." he added sternly. Though small, his blaster was more than any of the bridge crew had now and they all slowly raised their hands, "Thank you gentlemen." Vorn told them, "You may now consider yourselves prisoners of the Alliance to Restore the Republic." Mace noticed Cass, Krissa and Malia all standing wide eyed.

"What's wrong?" he asked Malia.

"Could you do that again? But maybe a bit slower this time?" she asked in reply, "It was all a bit quick for me to follow." and just then there was a sudden hiss and Tharun closed the blast door to seal the bridge.

"Okay you lot, get out of there and line up along that wall." Vorn ordered the bridge crew, directing them towards the bulkhead towards the back of the bridge. But as they began to file out of the crew pit there was a sudden and unexpected wailing sound.

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

"What the kriff is it?" Mace exclaimed.

"Mace. Language." Malia said sternly, looking at Cass.

"What? I know what it means." Cass commented.

Meanwhile Krissa rushed down the steps into the crew pit and to one of the consoles.

"It's a fire alarm." she said, "There's a fire in main engineering."

"Stang no." Vorn said, "If the engines are on fire we'll never get the ship off the ground." and he rushed to join Krissa, leaving Colonel Collis and Tharun to watch over the prisoners.

"Oh so stang is alright is it?" Mace said to Malia as he went to join Vorn in investigating the alarm.

Hurriedly Vorn pulled the comlink from his belt and activated it.

"Tobis are you in engineering yet?" he transmitted.

"Ah, err, yes sir." Tobis responded, "But we've got a bit of a problem at the moment."

"Jaysica." Kara hissed, "The klutz did this. I swear we should have left her stuck naked in that droid shell. The galaxy was safer."

"Now, now, we don't know that Jaysica is responsible." Vorn said and then he lifted the comlink to his mouth again, "Tobis, what's happening?"

"Well, err, Jaysica accidentally sat on the fire alarm sir."

"I knew it!" Kara yelled.

"Wait." Mace said suddenly, "Krissa, do these look like evacuation alerts to you?" and he pointed to another control console where a display showed the internal sections of the ship changing colour one by one.

"That's right." Krissa replied, "That's the damage control panel and this display is indicating the extent to which the work crews are evacuating."

Mace smiled.

"Major, I think that the ship is ours." he said, "According to this there won't be a single Imperial crewman left aboard in about five minutes."

"Colonel, perhaps you ought to signal your troops." Vorn said, "Tell them that we'll be leaving in under an hour."

The line of AT-STs forced a path through the woodland, trampling the undergrowth that got in the way while several speeder bikes scouted ahead of the main force. However, this scouting group was bypassed by a small group of rebel light armoured vehicles. The Ultra-Light Assault Vehicles, or ULAVs struck the centre of the AT-ST column, firing blasters and grenade launchers as they raced towards the heavier walkers. Then as the Imperial commander realised that his force was under attack and ordered the walkers to turn towards the enemy and return fire. But although the AT-STs were relatively agile for battlefield walkers the ULAVs were still far faster and more manoeuvrable and before the first volley of cannon fire from the AT-STs was fired they were already swinging around to present the heavier blaster cannons mounted on their rear towards the Imperial machines. Then with another brief volley of weapon fire the ULAVs retreated, dodging past the undergrowth that their repulsorlifts lacked the power to pass over.

In the lead AT-ST the unit commander activated his communicator.

"General we have sighted a large rebel armoured force twenty kilometres west of the capital. The rebels are fleeing into the woods but we need more forces to continue the pursuit."

Then after a brief delay General Dern responded and on the display inside the AT-ST Ibram was visible behind him.

"Confirmed captain. All forces will converge on your position." the general told him, "Until then you are to maintain your pursuit."

The rebel forces hiding wherever they could monitored the Imperial forces as they suddenly changed from sweeping through the countryside and forcing the rebels to continuously changing their positions, heading for a rendezvous to the west.

On particular observer activated his bulky backpack mounted comlink.

“This is observer Besh Seven,” he signalled, “diversion achieved. All units to head for primary target at full speed, the way is clear.”

## 6.

"Okay they're on their way." Colonel Collis said when he heard the signal.

"Excellent." Vorn said, "What's our status?" and he looked at Malia.

"Well these controls look pretty standard." she replied, "Flying this crate should be no problem even with only one sublight engine."

"This crate will make a fine addition to our fleet once it's fully repaired." Vorn said, "Not to mention the two squadrons of fighters that are still in its hangar. They'll help protect our headquarters if the need arises."

"All the hatches are wide open for our troops as well major." Krissa added, "The benefits of someone triggering the fire alarm. The computer made sure that everyone could get out."

Just then a bleeping sound attracted the attention of Mace and he turned to the comscan console.

"I think someone better answer that before they get suspicious." he said and he sat down and turned on the ship's communications, "*Rancor's Claw*." he said simply.

"What the hell is going on over there?" an angry sounding voice demanded, "We've had crewmen reporting fires, but there's nothing from you at all. Is this a false alarm?"

"Don't let them find out it is." Vorn said softly so that the communications system would not pick up his voice, "They'll send the crew back in."

"No, we have a fire here." Mace said.

"Confirmed *Rancor's Claw*. Damage control teams are on their way." the voice at the other end of the channel said.

"Negative, we have the fire contained but it could spread if people start opening the internal doors. This is a large fire, very dangerous." Mace said.

"And damage control will handle it." the voice said.

"No, I say again do not send further personnel aboard." Mace insisted.

"Who is this?" What's your operator number?" the voice demanded and Mace shut off the channel.

"Boring conversation anyway." he muttered before turning to Vorn, "Company's coming." he said.

"What do we do now?" Cass asked, "They know we're here."

"Kill that alarm." Vorn ordered, "Then seal the ship."

"Seal the ship? Boss are you insane? How will our troops get in?" Kara asked.

"Through the main hangar of course." Vorn replied, "We'll open it up when they get here, but in the mean time we need to hold this ship." then he looked around at the other rebels, "Malia, you and Krissa get this ship ready to launch. Cass, Kara, you and I will help them. Mace, Tharun, I want you in the hangar bay to help keep out the Imperials when we open it up again."

"I think I better go give them a hand as well." Colonel Collis added and Vorn nodded.

"Yes sir, oh and I think it may be an idea if your men find gun turrets to man. The Empire is going to be pretty keen to get in here and I'd rather we did more than just hope that they can't force any of the locks."

"We're about ten minutes from the target area now." General Dern said when Ibram entered the cockpit of the AT-AT behind him.

"Is there any further word on the rebel strength?" Ibram asked.

"None yet inquisitor. Aside from the initial contact I haven't heard anything." the general replied, "But this is the only confirmed sighting we have so far and-"

"I sense deception." Ibram said, ignoring what the general had to say, "The rebels want us here. What were the vehicles your men encountered?"

"They didn't say." General Dern said and he looked at one of the AT-AT's pilots, "Get me Captain Brodo."

"Yes general." the pilot replied and an image of the captain appeared in front of General Dern and Ibram.

"Brodo here." he said.

"Captain, could you identify the class of vehicles used by the rebels who attacked your force?" General Dern asked.

"Yes sir. They were using ULAVs." Captain Brodo answered.

"And what else captain" the general asked.

"Nothing. The entire force was made up of them."

"You fool!" Ibram exclaimed suddenly, "No one would attack a force such as yours with ancient ULAVs alone. You wanted you to call in the attack, they're just drawing us away from their real target."

"Sir!" one of the pilots exclaimed, "TAC-COM is calling us, the Navy base just outside the capital is under attack by a large rebel force and someone is trying to hijack the *Rancor's Claw*."

"Turn us around!" General Dern snapped, "All units are to proceed to the Navy base as fast as possible and tell TAC-COM to raise the planetary shield, I don't want the rebels escaping with that ship."

The perimeter fence disintegrated under the combined fire of more than a dozen rebel tanks that then came rushing through the breach opened up and raced towards the *Rancor's Claw*. All around the cruiser Imperial troops were attempting to get close enough to board the ship and reclaim it from the rebels now in control. "Here they come." Cass said as she watched the events taking place outside from the bridge viewport and she pointed to the column of tanks heading towards the ship. "Mace, open the doors. They're here." Vorn said into his comlink.

"Copy that major." Mace replied from the hangar control room and he slammed his hand down on the console in front of him. A klaxon sounded to warn the occupants of the hangar that the heavy door was about to open while the magnetic field designed to retain the atmosphere while in space was not operating. Being on the ground the door swung downwards rather than sliding back into the hull to form a ramp that was supposed to allow access for service vehicles. But on this occasion the first to make use of it was a squad of stormtroopers who had been able to position themselves out of the firing arcs of any of the turrets now manned by rebel gunners.

From a preprepared position in the hangar not far from the control room Colonel Collis and Tharun opened fire on the stormtroopers, cutting half down before they even knew the rebels were there. But that was only the first squad and as Mace joined his fellow rebels a group of black uniformed naval troopers came up the ramp after the stormtroopers.

"They seem keen to get their ship back." Mace commented as he ducked to avoid the shrapnel created when a blaster shot ripped apart a nearby packing crate.

"Tough." Colonel Collis said, "I've already moved my stuff aboard." and then he fired another sustained burst at the naval troopers.

"They're spreading out." Tharun said when he saw the naval troopers split into two groups that headed for opposite sides of the bay while the remaining stormtroopers lay prone and slowly crawled forwards, pausing only to fire at the rebels.

"They're trying to surround us." Colonel Collis said.

"And they'll succeed if-" Mace began, but before he could finish there was the roar of a repulsorlift engine as a rebel tank drove up the ramp and into the hangar. The vehicle did not stop and instead drove straight along the hangar until it reached the far end and rotated on the spot to face the main door. Had the vehicle been a more primitive wheeled or tracked one it would have flattened the stormtroopers as it drove over them but being a modern repulsorlift it had instead floated straight over them, thankfully moving too quickly for them to attack the more lightly armoured underside. But now the vehicle opened fire with its auxiliary weapons designed specifically for eliminating infantry targets like the stormtroopers and when more tanks raced into the bay there were only corpses ahead of them.

The numbers of Imperial troops trying to get aboard the cruiser now slackened off but some stormtrooper units still attempted the charge up the ramp, trying to use the rebel vehicles now swarming aboard as cover. However, the rebels had anticipated this and when rebel troop carriers drove into the hangar bay their passengers leapt out and took up positions just inside the door. Now attempting to board the *Rancor's Claw* using the ramp meant a charge across open ground under fire from a platoon of rebel soldiers and not one more stormtrooper made it.

"That's it." Colonel Collis exclaimed as he saw the last of the armoured regiment's vehicles enter the hangar bay, "Tell Larcus we can go."

Mace took out his comlink and held it to his lips.

"Major, we're all set here. We've a bay full of tanks and not a single stormtrooper in sight." he signalled.

"Copy that captain." Vorn replied, "Time for you and Tharun to be leaving us."

"Yes sir." Mace said and when he shut off his comlink he and Tharun ran for the main doors.

"Where the hell are you going?" Colonel Collis yelled at them as they ran from the ship but neither man replied.

"What's dad doing?" Cass asked, looking round from the viewport.

"What do you mean?" Kara asked in return as she went to look for herself and she saw both Mace and Tharun running across the landing zone towards the breach in the perimeter fence, their Imperial uniforms apparently still fooling the troops surrounding the *Rancor's Claw*.

"There's no time to explain now." Vorn said, "Captain Mayan, get us out of here."

"Yes sir." Malia replied as she transferred power to the ship's repulsorlifts, "But you better have a good explanation for where my fiancée has just run off to."

The *Rancor's Claw* suddenly rose up off the ground and flew off towards the horizon, leaving behind it several hundred confused Imperial troopers wondering how the loss of the cruiser would be explained. Rather than gain altitude to leave the atmosphere Malia flew the cruiser towards the nearest shield generator station that appeared as a large dish aimed upwards.

"Now we see how good the colonel's people are." Vorn said right before there were flashes of green light as the *Rancor's Claw's* forward turbolasers came to life.

The shield generator was heavily armoured, but against the guns of a capital ship this only meant that it took a few volleys of fire to destroy the dish in a ball of flame rather than it happening with the first hit.

"Now! Get us out of here!" Vorn yelled and Malia pulled back on the helm controls to send the *Rancor's Claw* almost straight up and as Vorn watched the sky darken, turning from pale blue to star filled black in mere minutes.

"We've got company." Krissa warned, "Twelve marks at seven o'clock."

"TIE fighters!" Kara exclaimed as she saw the first of the ship launched in pursuit of the cruiser race past on a strafing run.

"Colonel we need more of your men to man the guns." Vorn said into his comlink.

"Give us five minutes." the colonel responded.

"I've got four more squadrons closing fast." Krissa called out.

"Colonel, I don't think we've got that long." Vorn said.

All of a sudden there was a flash of light from ahead of the *Rancor's Claw* and the familiar shape of a Corellian corvette surrounded by flashes of red light appeared as the *Renegade* dropped out of hyperspace and began firing. Straight away Vorn saw three TIE fighters vanish in balls of flame.

"Renegade to *Rancor's Claw*," the *Renegade's* first officer transmitted, "just keep going and leave the eyeballs to us."

"Thirty seconds until we're clear of the gravity well." Krissa said, "Jump co-ordinates locked in."

Vorn held his breath, expecting an Imperial capital ship to make an appearance at any moment to kill their hopes of getting away at the last moment. But then he heard Krissa counting down.

"Five. Four. Three. Two. One. Clear!"

"Do it!" Vorn snapped and outside the viewport the star field stretched and distorted into the familiar shining tunnel of hyperspace.

Vorn sighed.

"We're clear." Krissa said, "No signs of pursuit."

"So what are Mace and Tharun up to boss?" Kara asked, walking towards him and Vorn turned to face the other rebels.

"All of this was a trap." he said, "The Empire fed us information to get a significant part of our fleet and army here so they could destroy it."

"Yeah and they failed." Cass said, "We even stole this cruiser out from under their noses."

"Yes, but the Empire still came close to dealing us a terrible blow." Vorn said, "And to do that they needed inside help."

"Inside help?" Malia said from the helm position.

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

"Someone in the local resistance must have been working for the Empire to make sure we got all of the information we needed to commit to the attack."

"Merret." Kara hissed, "That shifty little nerf herder. He made sure everything was right where he could have picked it up himself."

"Probably because he put it there to begin with." Vorn said, "So the droids won't be flying the Silver Hawk back to headquarters because Mace and Tharun are going to need it. If possible they'll be bringing Merret back alive so Alliance Intelligence can find out how long he's been working for the Empire and how much damage he's done. But if they can't manage that I've ordered them to make sure that Merret is left in no position to give away any more of our secrets."

"Do you mean-" Cass began.

"They're going to kill him?" Kara interrupted, "Oh yeah, that's exactly what the boss is saying."