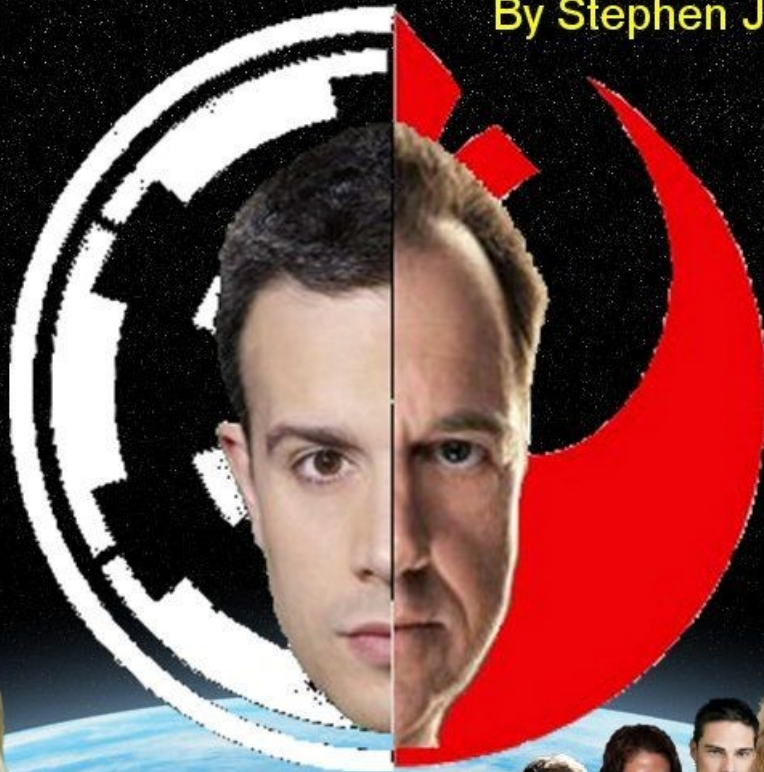


STAR WARS

3-12: Family Ties

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 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...

FAMILY TIES

A SEEMINGLY RANDOM PIECE OF INFORMATION CONCERNING A MINING PROJECT IN THE OUTER RIM TERRITORIES BRINGS THE OCCUPANTS OF THE *SILVER HAWK* TO THE SHARED HOMEWORLD OF JAYSICA AND KARA AND LEADS TO A REUNION FOR ONE OF THEM. BUT WHEN THE IMPERIAL AUTHORITIES ARE TIPPED OFF TO THEIR PRESENCE ANOTHER FAMILY REUNION BECKONS...

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

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1.

Dorvid Corol made sure to greet each every person as they arrived for what he had promised them was an event for only a select few. All of the guests were both human and male, both the laws and the bias of the Imperial system meant that such individuals were favoured when it came to dealing with the government and success came more easily when dealing exclusively with them. A quick glance at his chronometer told him that it was time to begin and he smiled as a quick look around the room told him that the majority of those invited had turned up.

“Good day gentlemen.” He said out loud as he made his way through the crowd to the centre of the room where the holographic projector was located, “And might I say what an excellent day this is. For today I am here to tell you about an exciting new opportunity.” Dorvid tapped his datapad gently and the projector came to life, creating an image of a blue-white sphere, “I present to you the subject of my offer today – Hoth.”

“What do you mean you took it apart? I’m trying to get this ship ready to get us out of here and you’re tearing it apart.” Mace Grayle, sole owner and operator of the light freighter *Silver Hawk* was less than impressed. For several weeks now the ship’s sensors had been acting erratically and in an attempt to remedy the situation his well-meaning engineer Tobis had seen fit to dismantle the entire sensor array, leaving the vessel unable to even navigate out of the hangar bay.

“Well.” Tobis replied, “It’s just that, err, well. We thought-“

“We?” Mace said, “Tobis, why did you dismantle the sensors?”

“Ah. Um. That is-“

Mace held up his hand for quiet and walked across the upper hull to the top hatch. Crouching down he stuck his head through it and called out into the ship’s interior, “Jaysica! Get topside now!”

“Having trouble with your ship Mace?” a woman’s voice called out from the deck below the *Silver Hawk* and Mace did not need to turn around to recognise the tones of Inra Vayne, captain of the *Beauty Queen*, another vessel used by the Alliance to transport one of its field teams, “I was just on my way to my ship and noticed that there seemed to be something wrong with this old bucket.”

“Not now Inra!” Mace yelled and he watched the top hatch as a young woman emerged.

“Is there something wrong?” Jaysica asked as she climbed out onto the hull and Mace just pointed at the pieces of the sensor array, “Oh that.” Jaysica said, “It was an accident.”

“An accident? How the hell does Tobis end up accidentally dismantling the sensor array?”

“Well its just that I came out to see if he needed any help trying to fix the problems you’ve been having and he had a really nice bracelet for me, so I thought it would be rude not to put it on right away.”

“You dropped it didn’t you?” Mace said to her.

“It wasn’t my fault.” Jaysica protested, “Look I’ll show you.” And she began to walk carefully across the sloping hull towards the primary sensor mounting. However, as she went she accidentally stepped on a hydrospanner and squealed as she lost her footing. Tobis dived to try and break her fall, but was in time only to help her up off the deck. But the hydrospanner flew off the hull and over the side of the ship where it promptly hurtled down and landed on Inra Vayne who was still stood watching the unfolding events with a smile on her face. All three of the rebels on top of the *Silver Hawk* dashed to the side of the ship as Inra cried out to see if she was hurt.

“You careless clod!” Inra shouted, clutching the hydrospanner in one hand and rubbing her head with the other, “Look! I’m bleeding!”

“Hey!” Mace shouted back, “This hangar deck is a safety area. Why did you approach my ship without the proper safety equipment? You said yourself you saw that it was being worked on?”

Inra scowled at him.

“Here.” She said, tossing the hydrospanner back up to Tobis and then she walked off still holding a hand to her head.

“Captain, I’m so sorry. But it was an accident.” Jaysica said.

“Oh just get the ship fit to fly.” Mace replied, doing his best not to smile at the obvious distress of Captain Vayne and he headed back to the top hatch. As he descended the ladder he was met by a golden-coloured protocol droid.

“Oh thank goodness I’ve found you Captain Grayle.” the droid said to him.

“What’s the problem Jeeves?” Mace asked as he headed into the ship’s lounge with the droid following him.

“Major Larcus needs to see you urgently captain. It seems that the Alliance has need to deploy his field team and he wants an update on the condition of the *Silver Hawk*.”

“Where is he?”

“Why I believe that he is currently meeting with General Kain sir.”

Mace stopped. General Syres Kain was the overall commander of all Alliance activities in the sector and though he was therefore, ultimately responsible for all of the field teams as well as the regular forces he did not generally meet with individual unit leaders unless it was important.
“Tell them I’ll be right there.” He said.

Counting the general himself, there were three men already in the general’s office when Mace arrived. One of the others was Vorn Larcus III, the leader of the rebel unit assigned to his ship, while the third was Lieutenant Geran Pay of Alliance Intelligence. Mace had worked with the man a few times before, mainly assisting him with his task of attempting to identify the agent that the Empire had been able to insert into the Alliance.

“Captain, thank you for coming.” The general said, “Please take a seat.”

Mace nodded and sat down.

“So what’s the assignment this time?” he asked.

Geran leant forwards and activated a compact holographic projector on the general’s desk.

“Are you familiar with the Hoth system captain?” he asked.

“I know a little.” Mace replied, “Its on the rim. Not much there though, not enough life to fill a star cruiser.

From what I know it’s devoid of intelligent life entirely. What’s the rebellion’s interest?”

“I asked that.” Vorn said.

“That’s classified.” General Kain replied.

“They told me that too.” Vorn added, “Apparently its need to know stuff and we don’t need to know.”

“Well you’re going to have to tell us a bit more if you’re sending us out there. Its a pretty long trip after all.”

Mace said.

“You’re not going there.” Geran said, “You’re going to the Tarlen system in the Heart.” The Heart that Geran was referring to was the collection of systems located centrally within the sector, offset from the Trade Corridor that held the primary shipping lanes through it, as well as the sector’s capital of Estran.

“Tarlen?” Mace repeated, looking at Vorn, “isn’t that where-“

“Yes.” Vorn replied, “It’s Jaysica and Kara’s home world.”

“That’s why we picked your team.” The general said, “Hopefully their familiarity with the planet and its customs will make things easier.”

“So what’s the job then?” Mace asked, “What does a backwater world like Tarlen have to do with an insignificant world like Hoth?”

“Because someone on Tarlen is offering shares in a company that is about set up operations on Hoth,” Geran said, “and that could cause problems for the Alliance. Big problems.”

“Tarlen?” Jaysica asked with glee, “Did you hear that Kara? We get to go home.”

Sat across the table from Jaysica in the *Silver Hawk’s* lounge Kara just snorted.

“Took me more than twenty years to get away from that mud ball.” She commented.

“High command hopes that your knowledge will give us a boost.” Vorn said to her.

“Yes sir Major Larcus sir.” Kara replied, raising a hand to her forehead in a mockery of a salute and Vorn frowned. Standing beside Vorn Mace leant closer and whispered to him.

“I think she’s still mad at you.” He said quietly.

“I know.” Vorn replied, still frowning.

“So what’s the op then major?” the final member of Vorn’s rebel unit asked. This was Tharun Verser, a former mercenary and the only professional soldier amongst the group.

“The local resistance got wind of some guy selling shares in a mining company that could cause problems to the Alliance. We’re to go to Tarlen and find out the extent of this company’s operations and report back.”

“Do we get know what the problem is?” Tharun asked, “Just in case it comes up?”

“No.” Vorn told him, “Even Mace and I don’t know.”

“Are we ready to leave?” Mace then said, looking at Tobis.

“Oh. Err, yes captain.” The engineer replied, “But the sensors still aren’t working. I’ve got Harvey hooked up to them to stabilise the data.”

“So we’re still trusting our detection capability to an astromech droid?” Kara asked.

“Better that than Jaysica’s mouse droid.” Tharun said, “Or the major’s protocol droid.”

“Well since we’re ready to leave I suggest we don’t waste any time.” Vorn said.

2.

Tarlen was a lightly settled agricultural world and the effect of this was obvious as it hung in space in front of the *Silver Hawk*. Most of the landmass remained green, apart from the small equatorial deserts and an area in the southern hemisphere that showed the scars of battle from when the Republic and Separatists had fought over it during the Clone Wars.

Though centrally located in the sector, Tarlen did not receive anywhere near the same level of interstellar traffic as systems such as Estran and its facilities were correspondingly fewer. This actually presented the rebels with their first obstacle. Tarlen lacked extensive starports and had only a small Imperial customs presence. Rather than spreading this thinly around the assorted landing facilities the Empire based them centrally and deployed a small number of patrol ships in orbit to intercept incoming vessels.

"So any ideas about how we get past them?" Vorn asked as he observed the tiny spot of light moving against the starfield that was the customs ship they had detected.

"Well they're not heading this way." Mace replied, "So if we just keep flying the way we are they'll probably ignore us."

"And if they don't?"

"Trust me major. I was doing this long before we joined the rebellion and if that patrol boat was going to stop us they'd have set themselves up on an intercept course by now."

"Okay then, just keep flying casual." Vorn said.

Mace was correct about the customs vessel and the *Silver Hawk* slipped between the orbiting sentries without being challenged and into Tarlen's atmosphere. They were descending over the night side of the planet into one of the many massive rural areas far from any of the starport beacons available.

"Keep an eye out." Vorn said, "Our contact is supposed to be sending a signal."

"What sort?" Mace asked.

"I'm not sure." Vorn replied, "So watch for everything."

Mace cut kept the *Silver Hawk's* speed to just a few hundred kilometres per hour as he flew low over the darkened terrain and he and Vorn searched the darkness for any signs of a signal from the ground. It came just as the *Silver Hawk* passed over it and the two men in the cockpit barely had time to register it before it vanished beneath the ship.

"I saw it." Mace said before Vorn could say anything and he turned the *Silver Hawk* about, reducing its speed even further. The signal was now clearly visible, a flashing light in the shape of the Alliance badge and as Mace turned on the *Silver Hawk's* external lights to illuminate the ground below he and Vorn saw a repulsorlift vehicle with a spotlight mounted to its roof. The *Silver Hawk* hovered above the otherwise empty field for a few seconds and then brought the ship in to land.

"Well, we've arrived." He said to Vorn.

"Indeed. Shall we go meet our hosts?"

There were three of the locals waiting by their vehicle when the rebels disembarked from the *Silver Hawk*. Though the three individuals were believed to be representatives of a native Alliance cell Vorn wanted no chances taken, his unit had been targeted by Imperial agents attempting to pass themselves off as rebels before and all of his people were armed as they approached the locals.

"That's a lot of firepower for a first meeting." One of them commented as she looked at the assortment of blasters on display.

"Not when you're not sure who you're meeting." Vorn replied.

"The password's 'mynock'." The woman said.

"Bantha." Vorn replied and with the correct countersigns given both groups relaxed.

"Major Vorn Larcus." Vorn said, holding out his hand, "And these are my people; Captain Mace Grayle, Sergeant Tharun Verser, Tobis Dorfus, Kara Bilstran and Jaysica Horbid."

"Corporal." Jaysica said and Kara scowled at her.

"Leyan." The local woman said to Vorn, "And these two are my boys Del and Wedge. Come with us and we'll introduce you to the man who asked for you to come here."

The local rebel group was based in a cluster of buildings in the woodland beside a meat processing plant and there were two more of them waiting here for the *Silver Hawk's* occupants, though it appeared from the equipment stored here that the entire cell was considerably larger.

"We found them Greg." Leyan said, "Right where they were supposed to be."

"Come on in." the man she had just addressed as Greg said to Vorn's unit, "Sit down and take a look at this."

Vorn sat in one of the seats laid out and picked up a datapad offered to him. Beside him Mace sat down also and looked over at the datapad.

"Anoat Mining?" Vorn said as he saw the title of the first page of data, one that included a stylised logo and an image of several planets.

"That's right. I run a business here and I got sent that amongst all the other investment messages I get. I've been told to keep an eye out for anything to do with things that are happening in the outer rim so I went to the presentation and reported in what the guy said."

Vorn scrolled through the pages of data that summarised the operations of a new mining company being set up in the outer rim Anoat sector and centred on the Hoth system.

"I've reported stuff like this before." Greg said, "But this is the first time high command's ever sent someone to follow it up. That I know of anyway. What's so special about the Anoat sector?"

"Nothing." Vorn lied, even mentioning that it was classified risked exposing Alliance operations if this cell was captured by the Empire, "What can you tell me about the man you met?"

"Oh Dorvid. I've never met him before. He's not a local I can tell you that. He gave a promotional presentation at the Tarlen Grand Hotel last week."

"Nice place?" Mace asked.

"The name is a bit of an overstatement." Greg said, "But for Tarlen it is pretty up market. He handed out those at the presentation. I haven't actually looked at it myself."

"Ah, here's what I'm after." Vorn said, "Contact details for Dorvid Corol." Then Vorn turned his attention from the datapad to Greg, "Can I take this?" he asked, holding up the datapad.

"Sure. But don't you want to know what he said at the meeting?"

"Why?" Vorn asked, "I'm sure he'll tell me himself when I introduce myself as someone looking to invest a few million credits in his business."

The description of the Tarlen Grand Hotel given to Vorn's team was accurate. For an establishment on a backwater world like Tarlen it was impressive but by galactic standards it was somewhat basic. However, Vorn had felt it prudent to instruct his team to dress more formally than they normally did so they could blend in with the executives who made up most of the guests.

"So where is this guy major?" Tharun asked.

"He's expecting Mace and I to meet him in the restaurant." Vorn replied, "the rest of you can go and wait in the bar."

Tharun grinned.

"But I need you alert just in case." Vorn went on, "So no alcohol." And Tharun's face fell.

"Busted." Mace commented and then he and Vorn headed in the direction of the restaurant, leaving the other rebels standing in the lobby.

"Well you heard the officer." Tharun said quietly, "Let's retire to the bar for refreshments." Then as the other began to walk away he placed a hand on Kara's shoulder, "I know you've got a flask under that jacket." He whispered.

"Don't worry." she replied just as quietly, "I'll split it with you."

Mace and Vorn were shown to Dorvid's table and the man got up to greet them.

"So which of you is Mister Larcus?" Dorvid asked.

"That would be me." Vorn replied, "Call me Vorn. And this is my lawyer, Mace Grayle."

"Nice to meet you." Mace said as he shook hands with Dorvid and they all sat down.

"So how did you hear about me?" Dorvid asked.

"Oh we were given your brochure by a client of mine." Vorn said, "He knows how much I like to invest in new ventures like this. I can smell opportunity Mister Corol-"

"Dorvid please."

"Of course, I can smell opportunity Corol and this reeks of it. Tell me more. Start with the basics."

"Well what I'm really looking to do is set up a line of supply for the new mining facilities in the Hoth system," Dorvid said, "and that line is going to come right through here."

"Why not the Trade Corridor?" Mace asked.

Dorvid shook his head.

"Too costly." He said, "Docking fees on the busier spaceports along that route are more than five times as much as Tarlen. By saving on those fees I can guarantee you a return on your investment more than five months earlier than if I used the larger spaceports."

"Fascinating." Vorn replied, smiling, "Tell me more."

While Jaysica and Tobis found them a table in a quiet corner where they could drink undisturbed Kara and Tharun went to the bar and ordered a round of drinks from the soft drink menu. As they were waiting for them to be prepared Kara suddenly noticed that Tharun was staring past her with his eyes wide.

"What's wrong?" she asked, well aware that only Jaysica and Vorn had brought weapons since none of the others had blasters that were easily concealable. If they were about to be ambushed they had no other options than surrender or flee.

"If I said short, brown eyed and long blonde hair who would you think I was talking about?" Tharun asked and Kara winced.

"Oh no, what's the klutz done this time?" she asked.

"No, not Jaysica. Not quite anyway." And Tharun placed a hand on Kara's shoulder and turned her around so she could see through the window behind her to the outdoor section of the bar that given the dull weather currently had no customers making use of it.

"Stang!" Kara exclaimed when she saw the young woman cleaning tables while they were unused. They both rushed to the window and stared through it, a move that attracted the attention of Jaysica and Tobis and they came over to investigate.

"What's happening?" Jaysica asked and then she let out a soft squeal as Tharun grabbed hold of her and pushed her close to the window, angling her head so that she was looking directly at the woman outside for herself. Her eyes widened and her mouth opened.

"Jaynie!" she exclaimed suddenly, but not so loud that the woman outside heard her, "What's she doing here?"

"My guess would be cleaning tables." Kara replied.

"So you do know her then." Tharun added.

"Well of course, she's my sister. But I don't get why she's not at university. She's really smart. I'll go ask her."

"Whoa there." Tharun said and he kept his grip on Jaysica, preventing her from moving, "You can't just go blundering out there."

"Why not?"

"Because she knows who you are." Kara pointed out, "And more to the point she knows what you do doesn't she? Which means if she gives you away, she gives us away too."

"But I haven't seen her in over a year. Tobis, you want to meet her don't you?"

"What?" Tobis replied, surprised at being consulted, "Well, err." He then added, noticing that both Kara and Tharun were shaking their heads slowly as they stared at him.

"Look," Tharun said, "I'm in charge here so I say we just get our drinks, go back to our table and hope she doesn't come in here. What could possibly go wrong with that?"

"I don't know." Kara said, "Two people with DNA like Jaysica's in one place? More destructive than a proton torpedo down an exhaust port if you ask me."

It was then that Jaynie looked up from the table she had been cleaning and directly at Jaysica.

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Tharun said and as he did so he relaxed his grip on Jaysica who darted out of the bar and up to her sister.

"Jaynie!" she said, "It's so good to see you."

"Leave me alone." Jaynie replied without making eye contact and Jaysica looked puzzled.

"Jaynie what's wrong?" she asked, "I mean why aren't you at university?"

Jaynie set down the tray she was holding and looked Jaysica in the eyes.

"Don't you know what happened after you left? To mom and dad and me?"

Jaysica just stared back at her.

"Dad lost his job." Jaynie went on, "The company didn't like the idea of all those government security people poking around and have you ever tried getting a scholarship when your sister's a traitor? So now I have to clean tables for a living while you get to run around the galaxy causing trouble."

Jaysica continued staring at her sister as the other rebels approached.

"I think we should get out of here." Tharun said to her softly.

"Wait no." Jaysica replied, glancing at Tharun and then back towards Jaynie, "Look, we can help you."

"Help me? How?"

"Yes, do tell." Kara commented from behind Jaysica.

"We can take you off world." Jaysica said, "We've got places where you can live safely without the Empire looking over your shoulder. You could even join us yourself."

"You know that bad feeling you've got Tharun?" Kara said, looking up at him, "Well I think I'm getting one too. A very bad feeling."

3.

"So gentlemen, do we have a deal?" Dorvid asked.

"I think so." Vorn replied, "Though I would like to look into a few details further, then I'll make a decision about how much I invest."

"Of course, though I should warn you that there is a small window of opportunity here and a speedy decision will be in your advantage. Even a slight change in property values when the news is announced could have drastic financial effects."

"Of course." Vorn said, "You're staying here aren't you?"

"Yes, in the north wing. Room six fourteen."

"Well then," Vorn said, "I think it prudent for me to check in also while we finalise details. So much better than travelling to Estran only to have to rush back. Does that meet with your agreement Mister Grayle?"

"Well actually," Mace replied, "I already have accommodation booked elsewhere. However, I think your personal assistant Miss Bilstran should be booked in with you."

"Miss Bilstran?" Vorn asked, unsure of the wisdom of working alone with Kara given her current mood.

"Well I'll leave you to sort things out." Dorvid said to the two rebel officers, "Call me as soon as you come to a decision."

Mace and Vorn then watched him leave the restaurant before Vorn looked at Mace directly.

"So what do you think?" he asked.

"Scam." Mace replied bluntly.

"You're certain?"

"Ninety percent. Look, he's right about increased docking fees along the Trade Corridor, but those are easily offset by the availability of resources. The costs of setting up a new starport here, combined with shipping in replacement parts and fuel for transports will easily swallow up any savings. Plus there's the customs issue."

"Customs issue? But Tarlen has hardly any presence. Imperial Customs are all over the Trade Corridor."

"Yes, but we're talking about moving goods through the sector without offloading it into the local market.

Customs will probably just nod it through unless they've reason to believe someone's sneaking something else in with the stated cargo. But when you've got the situation we have here with customs ships stopping people in orbit at random then they're going to stop one of your ships by chance pretty regularly and that will just hold things up."

Vorn smiled.

"I knew it was a good idea to get a smuggler's point of view." He said.

"Would someone like to fill me in?" Vorn asked. After leaving the restaurant he had proceeded directly to the bar to meet up with the rest of his team and had been somewhat surprised to discover Jaynie with them.

"She's my sister." Jaysica said, "She's coming with us."

Vorn looked at Tharun.

"Would you like to fill me in?" he asked.

"I'm not entirely sure." Tharun replied, "But apparently this is Jaysica's sister and things haven't been too good for her around here since the little lady left to join us. So now she wants her family moved to a safe world."

"Well you'll have to take that up with Mace, it's his ship after all. In the meantime I'm staying here to keep an eye on this Dorvid Corol guy. Mace is booking a room right now. He smells a rat with the deal so we need to figure out who the guy really is and what he's up to."

"Who are you Vorn Larcus?"

Dorvid Corol was alone in his room. With the help of a discrete payment to a hotel employee he had been able to obtain an image of Vorn Larcus taken using the hotel security system and now he was doing his best to identify him properly. He began using the name that Vorn had given him. The galaxy was a large place and there would be thousands of people with that name in this sector alone, hence it was quite possible for someone to conceal their true identity while still using their own name. It even made some things easier, when someone called out a name from a distance it was easier to tell if you should respond or not.

The fact that Vorn had approached him suggested to Dorvid that he warranted investigation. Dorvid was careful to target individuals who he could manipulate into making rash decisions without attempting to dig deep into his story. If someone was approaching him Dorvid suspected one of two things; either the individual was a law enforcement agent, local or Imperial, or they were like him. A con man.

During their meeting Vorn had claimed to be from Estran, the sector's capital world and he ran the name through a simple search engine. Dorvid was new to the sector and knew little of its politics, so what he found

surprised him greatly. Vorn Larcus was neither a conman nor a officer of the law. Vorn Larcus was a traitor with a massive price on his head.

Mace stared at Jaysica as he passed the room key to Vorn.

"South wing. Should let you keep tabs on Dorvid across the gap." He said without looking away from Jaysica. "Well as much as I'd like to see how this pans out," Vorn said, taking the key, "I'll be heading up to the room while you sort this out."

"Thanks." Mace replied, still staring at Jaysica. Then as Vorn walked away he spoke directly to her, "So tell me again why you're inviting people onto my ship without asking me first?"

"Hey look," Jaynie said as she returned from changing out of her hotel uniform, "I don't want to cause any trouble."

"Oh you're not the problem here." Kara told her.

"No you're not." Mace added, "But I will be going over the correct protocol for asking people onto my ship with Jaysica sometime later. In the mean time everyone get in the speeder." Then he glanced at Kara,

"Except you."

"Huh?" she responded.

"You know the way this works." Mace said, "We need two people to keep a constant watch on this guy, so I've booked you in with the major."

"Me! Why?"

Mace pulled her aside from the group.

"Because you're pissing me off that's why. The major left, but now he's back and you need to accept it. Now you'll be in that room together so I suggest you use the opportunity to sort things out with him. Now get after him now and that's an order."

"Yes sir." She replied, standing up straight and saluting briefly.

Mace sighed and shook his head as he watched Kara leave, then he looked back at the other rebels.

"Come on, let's get out of here."

Agent Garm Larcus of the Imperial Security Bureau had been summoned to the office of Director Helios, the highest-ranking ISB officer in the sector. Though his position as an advisor and trouble-shooter for the sector moff meant that he frequently interacted with the director it was less common for him to receive such a direct summons.

He found the director standing outside his office, going over documents with his assistant.

"Ah, Agent Larcus, do come in." Director Helios told Garm as he looked around and he walked into his office. Garm followed him in and took a seat.

"So might I ask why you've asked me here sir?" he asked.

Director Helios smiled and rotated the desk-mounted computer display so that it was visible to Garm.

"Where did this come from?" Garm asked when he saw the image of his father on the screen.

"This was recorded by a hotel security camera on Tarlen." The director replied, "A concerned citizen identified him and forwarded it to us. We've run a check and it seems that a Vorn Larcus is on their guest list, sharing a suite with a Miss Kara Bilstran. Wasn't she the one—"

"She's the one that we tried to trick into giving my father up." Garm replied, "Without much success."

"That's an understatement. You spent sixteen hours taped to a chair."

"Yeah, well that's not going to happen again." Garm said, "How soon can I leave?"

"As soon as you can arrange transport. There are several COMPNOR vessels available—"

"Actually sir, I'd like your support in obtaining a naval asset."

"A naval asset?"

"Yes sir. Tarlen has only a light Imperial presence and no local armed forces to speak of. I want to cut off my father's escape and to do that I'll need the navy's help."

"You'll have to speak to the moff about that." Director Helios said, "Though I'm guessing you'll be asking him to supply more than just a few warships."

"Indeed sir."

"How do you think he'll react when you tell him you want to run off across the sector with his girlfriend? The one he caught you with."

Garm grinned.

"I don't think he holds a grudge about that sir."

"You better hope not. Now get going."

When Vorn opened the door to the hotel suite Kara just pushed past him.

"Specialist Kara Bilstran reporting as ordered Major Larcus sir." She said without looking at him.

"Look Kara can't we get past this?" Vorn replied as he shut the door.

"Get past what exactly sir?"

"Look I know my leaving may be unexpected but I was only thinking about your interests. Now we used to be—"

"What?" Kara interrupted, "We used to be what? Colleagues? Friends maybe? Something else? I seem to remember that the day we first met you made it perfectly clear that you were in charge. So what are your orders major? I believe that we're here to observe a Mister Dorvid Corol."

Vorn frowned.

"Yes specialist we are." He said sternly and he walked to the balcony from where the northern wing of the hotel could be seen, "He's in a room on the sixth floor over there. I've used the floor plan the hotel provides to plot where his balcony is and marked it here." And he held out a datapad showing a crude sketch of the northern wing, "Now Mace will be back with some macrobinoculars so that we can try and get a look inside his room, but until then we'll just have to watch and see if we can make anything out without them. Even knowing that he's in there or not could give us something to go on. Now take a seat because I'm giving you the first watch."

"And what will the major being doing?" Kara asked in a formal tone.

Vorn reached into his jacket and removed both his blaster and comlink and set them down on the table.

"I'll be in the bar." He replied, "Having a drink. A strong one, because the gods know I deserve it."

"So you mean you're leaving again? Becoming a bit of a habit that Major Larcus sir." Kara called out after him.

Under orders from the sector moff, the Navy had agreed to provide Garm with two lines of ships. The first of these was a trio of venator-class star destroyers that were now in orbit around Tarlen. Venators were older vessels that did not quite meet with current naval theory that relied on the massed firepower of capital ships instead of carriers like them. However, since Garm's plan called for a blockade of Tarlen to prevent his father from fleeing into space the three ships with more than a thousand fighters between them allowed the blockade to be created without the need for a much larger number of capital ships to be deployed here. The second part to the blockade had not yet arrived however, a second line consisting of half a dozen interdicator-class ships had yet to complete the journey here from Estran. These smaller and more modern ships were equipped with the Empire's latest gravity well projectors and were designed specifically to prevent ships from fleeing into hyperspace. If the rebels led by his father did attempt to flee into space then they would be in for a nasty shock.

Both local traffic control and the customs ships in orbit had of course challenged them when they arrived, but in both cases the only response to the questions was a suggestion that the body asking should mind its own business. Garm did not want to risk anyone tipping off his father to the reason for their presence.

Garm looked out of the shuttle's cockpit canopy as it left the massive hangar bay of the *Ferocious*, the lead ship of the venator-class attack line and he saw the squadrons of fighters being launched by all three ship to establish the perimeter. After a few seconds he returned to his seat in the back of the shuttle and sat down. "Excited?"

The question came from a young blonde woman in a black body glove who was sat opposite him. This was Vay Udra, the woman Director Helios had referred to as the moff's girlfriend. Officially she was an intern studying under Moff Horatian, but with no official documents to back this up many suspected them of having an affair. Garm was one of a handful that knew this be untrue. He was also one of a handful to be aware of the abilities that made her so useful.

"Why ask the question when you already know the answer?" he replied and she smiled at him.

"Because I like to hear you say it for yourself." She said to him.

"Then yes, I am excited." Garm told her, "By the end of today my father will be in custody. Along with his associates."

"Remember what you promised me." Vay said.

"Yes I know. Kara is yours. Though why you want to be the one that interrogates her I don't know."

Vay got out of her seat, approached Garm and kissed him gently.

"I have my reasons." She said and she sat back down again.

Looking towards the front of the shuttle again, Garm watched as the sky turned from black to blue as they entered the atmosphere of Tarlen.

The shuttle set down at what passed for the planet's primary starport, located just outside the capital city. As Garm and Vay disembarked the air was filled with the sound of powerful repulsorlift engines as the other shuttles launched from the *Ferocious* came into land. These were larger than the lambda-class vessel that the two agents had taken and were filled with not only stormtroopers drawn from the marine complement of the *Ferocious* but also a force of supporting armoured vehicles.

"Come on!" Garm called out to Vay over the noise and he rushed towards the nearest transport shuttle just as an armoured personnel carrier was being offloaded. Then as he got closer he approached a man in an

Imperial officer uniform, "Captain," he said, "remain here and set up the cordon around the city. I'm taking this vehicle and a unit of your men to apprehend the primary target now."
"Yes sir." The captain replied, snapping to attention. Technically the ISB had no authority over the military at all, but for the duration of this mission Garm had been granted tactical command. The captain then waved at a nearby squad of stormtroopers and they instantly followed Garm and Vay into the waiting vehicle.

4.

Aboard the *Silver Hawk* Mace was stuffing equipment into a holdall. There was Kara's blaster pistol as well as several other items that he thought would come in useful to her and Vorn while they observed Dorvid Corol. Hearing footsteps from behind him he looked over his shoulder to see Jaysica and Jaynie coming back into the lounge from the part of the ship where the crew and passenger cabins were located.

"Finished giving her the tour?" Mace asked.

"I was about to show her the hold." Jaysica replied, "I wanted her to see my clothes. I told her she could have some."

On some previous assignments both Jaysica and Kara had been tasked with infiltrating places where their normal practical and hard wearing clothing would stand out and so the Alliance had allowed them access to the stocks of more expensive clothing it had come by and placed in storage. Both women had picked out far more than was needed for the assignment and the surplus was still in the *Silver Hawk's* cargo hold.

"Well if it frees up some space on my ship I'm all in favour." Mace said and he turned back to the bag he packing.

"Done packing yet?" Tharun suddenly asked Mace as he emerged from the cockpit with Tobis.

"Just about." Mace replied, "We can be off now."

"You're all going?" Jaysica asked.

"That's right little lady." Tharun said, "So behave while we're gone."

Jaysica embraced Tobis who smiled nervously.

"How long will you be gone?" she asked him.

"Well, err, I'm not sure." He replied.

"The locals have asked if we can take a look at some of their gear." Tharun said, "a lot of it is pretty old and beat up it seems, so your boyfriend's going to be seeing what he can fix for them."

"But you're not a mechanic." Jaysica responded.

"No, but it never hurts for these farm boys to get a refresher course in blaster handling by a professional soldier." Tharun told her, "Now how about you hand me that pack?"

"Oh sure." Jaysica said and she strained as she tried to pick up the bulky backpack leant up against the wall.

"Let me give you hand." Jaynie said, stepping in to help her sister.

"Don't worry." Tharun said, "I've got it." And he effortlessly picked up the pack and put it on his back.

"What about the secondary target?" Garm asked the vehicle commander.

"Comscan says that they've picked it up but that it's in motion. Its still outside the area of the cordon for now so the captain's holding the units in that area back until he can be sure that its not going to double back and spot them before they're ready."

"Good." Garm replied, "The secondary target is just a bonus. I want the primary, so we can't afford to have him warned."

"Target location ahead sir." The driver interrupted, "What are your instructions?"

The vehicle commander looked at Garm.

"Take us round the back." Garm replied, "We need to do this quietly."

The driver brought the personnel carrier into a loading bay beneath the main structure of the hotel and startled employees watched the rear hatch dropped as Garm and Vay led the stormtrooper squad it carried disembarked and rushed into the hotel.

"Can I help you sir?" one of the hotel staff asked Garm as she recovered his senses.

"Yes young lady you can." Garm replied, "Have your staff stay out of the way and don't interfere. Now which way is your security office?"

The woman pointed and Garm turned to the squad leader.

"Sergeant, take one of your men and secure it. I want us to be the only ones getting information from the camera feeds. The young lady will show you the way."

"Yes sir." The stormtrooper replied curtly and with the hotel employee moving ahead nervously the pair of stormtroopers headed away.

Garm then spotted a man in hotel maintenance overalls and he grabbed him.

"You come with us." He said and accompanied by Vay and the remainder of the stormtroopers he headed for the nearest turbolift.

They took the turbolift up to the sixth floor, overriding stops on intervening floors and to more startled looks from both staff and guests they proceeded towards the suite registered in Vorn's name with weapons drawn. They paused at the end of the corridor where the suite was located and Garm waved a pair of stormtroopers

forward. The troops darted down the corridor and took up flanking positions either side of the door and then Garm and Vay followed, bringing the still confused hotel maintenance man with them.

"Get them to open the door." Garm whispered.

"How?" the hotel employee asked.

Garm frowned, shoved the man in front of the door, knocked and stood back.

Until Mace returned with proper macrobinoculars Kara was limited to using the more limited optics of her video recording rod. Though small enough to fit in the palm of her hand it at least allowed her to see into Dorvid Corol's room on the far side of the hotel. Unfortunately it was not quite good enough for her to be able to tell what he was doing and so far aside from a brief time when he had emerged onto his balcony the most she had seen was the occasional movement in his room. But still, at least she knew he was there.

A knock at the door startled her and Kara smiled as she thought that maybe Vorn had forgotten his key and locked himself out.

"You can stay there all day for all I care Major nerf-herder." She muttered to herself.

Then there was another knock, this time accompanied by a shout.

"Hotel maintenance. I need to check your power sockets."

Kara frowned and set down the recording rod. She walked to the door and checked the tiny display beside it that showed a view from the camera set above the other side. Sure enough she saw a man wearing hotel-issue overalls and she hit the switch to open the door.

"Make this quick-" she began before Vay suddenly emerged from beside the door, pushed the hotel employee out of the way and dived at her.

Initially surprised by the sudden assault Kara recovered quickly enough to deliver a blow that slowed Vay down long enough for her to break away from the Imperial agent and move towards the table where Vorn's blaster still sat. Seeing this, Vay reached out a hand and the blaster suddenly flew from the table right past Kara and into Vay's grasp.

"Don't move!" Vay shouted and Kara came to halt and raised her hands and the room began to fill with stormtroopers.

Garm marched up to Kara and used a pair of binders to tie her hands in front of her.

"Kara Bilstran, you are under arrest for high treason, murder, assault, theft and an assortment of other offences." He said.

"Ooh I am a bad girl aren't I junior?" she replied.

"Where is he?" Garm asked.

"Where's who junior?"

Garm slapped her.

"Tell me." He said, snarling.

"Why not just ask stinky over there?" Kara asked, nodding towards Vay, "Or isn't hunting your father part of the pillow talk?"

Garm looked at the stormtrooper squad's second in command.

"Have your men conceal themselves." he ordered, "We'll wait here for him to return. I doubt he's far away."

"What about me?" the hotel maintenance man asked from the doorway.

"Get out," Garm said as the nervous, "and you'll tell no one of what has happened here."

Nodding the man fled and Garm looked back at Vay.

"Okay then, she's yours." He said and he stepped away from Kara.

"Hey stinky." Kara said as Vay came nearer, "Not so long time no see huh?"

Vay smiled.

"Remember what I said I was going to do to you when we next met?" Vay asked as she opened a pouch on her belt.

"Oh you have got to be-" Kara began, but was cut off as Vay pushed a ball into her mouth.

Moments later Kara was sat on a couch with her hands bound in her lap and a pair of armed stormtroopers standing behind her.

"Well what do you think?" Vay asked Garm

"You're right Vay." He answered as he looked at Kara, "She does look like she's bitten the nose off a clown."

Behind her gag, Kara just grunted and began to rise from the couch before the stormtroopers pushed her back down.

The label suggested that the bottle of wine was a local brand he had never heard of and not very old. But it was the best that the hotel bar had to offer and besides, Vorn was not certain about how well it would go down with Kara as a peace offering. Pausing outside the hotel room door he took a deep breath and held his key up against the lock scanner.

The door slid open and he walked calmly into the room.

"Kara I'm back." he called out and looking down at the bottle of wine in his hands he added, "I think we really

ought to-“ then, attracted by an unusual humming sound he looked upwards to see Kara sat bound and gagged on the couch with both Garm and Vay sat beside her and a pair of stormtroopers behind them. The hum came from Vay’s lightsaber that she held next to Kara’s throat. Hearing footsteps behind him, Vorn looked around to see more stormtroopers now blocking his retreat. Sighing, Vorn just raised his hands.

Vay shut off her lightsaber and returned it to her belt while with a smile on his face Garm got up and approached his father.

“Nice to see you have chosen to make this easy.” Garm said, taking the bottle of wine from Vorn’s grip and looking at the label. Then he looked at Vay, “I hear that this is actually quite good.” He said and then he turned back to Vorn, “Vorn Larcus the third, in the name of the Empire you are under arrest for high treason.” “Is that all?” Vorn asked.

“Come on!” Vay said suddenly and she pulled Kara from the couch and towards Vorn, “Don’t you want to be reunited with him?” then after lifting Kara’s arms over Vorn’s head she produced another set of binders and tied Vorn’s arms around Kara’s waist, “Feel at all familiar?” Vay then asked and there was a ‘pop’ as Garm opened the bottle of wine.

5.

Driving the hired speeder around the back of the hotel, Mace spotted the APC and its Imperial markings and so pulled up in a quiet corner from where he could watch what was going on. He considered using his comlink to try and warn Kara and Vorn, but realising that such an action could give away his presence he opted to maintain communications silence.

Shortly after a second armoured vehicle arrived, this one a prisoner transport and a squad of stormtroopers emerged from the hotel loading bay to drag Kara and Vorn, who it was clear had been tied together to the newly arrived vehicle. Looking back at the hotel again Mace then saw Garm and Vay striding confidently out of it.

Knowing he could not help Kara and Vorn alone, Mace waited for the two armoured vehicles to move off and then headed for the nearest entrance to the hotel.

He made his way up to the sixth floor of the north wing and from there to room six fourteen. Standing outside the door he reached up and placed a hand over the camera set into the wall there. Then he knocked.

"Maintenance." He called out, "We've some reports of system failures on this floor."

"One moment." A man's voice replied from inside the room and Mace waited tensely as he heard footsteps approaching from the other side of the door, "I can't see you on the display." Dorvid called out.

"There must be something wrong with the camera." Mace said, "I'll need to take a look at it."

There was a hiss and the door suddenly slid upwards to reveal Dorvid standing just inside the room. Taking his hand from over the camera, Mace stepped forwards and head butted him.

Crying out in surprise, Dorvid clutched at his bleeding face and staggered backwards far enough to allow Mace fully through the door, where upon he reached out and closed it behind him, not wanting anyone who happened to wander past to see what was happening.

The first thing that Mace noticed was the pair of suitcases on the bed that Dorvid had obviously been packing when he had arrived.

"Leaving so soon?" Mace asked sarcastically, "But we haven't even decided about our investment yet." And he delivered a punch strong enough to push Dorvid back onto the bed, "You sold us out you sleemo!" Mace yelled, reaching into his jacket and producing the heavy blaster pistol concealed there, "How much did they pay you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about!" Dorvid cried out, "I haven't spoken to anyone about you."

"So how come you're in such a hurry to leave?" Mace demanded, pressing the blaster against Dorvid's temple, "Think the force is with you today nerf-herder?" he added.

"I looked up Vorn Larcus that's all." Dorvid said, "I found out that you're rebels and I wanted to get as far away from you as I could."

"Why?"

"Because you're more trouble than I'm looking for. There's no mining in the Hoth system and I'm not going to be building any starports here. Look, I've got money. I scammed more than a hundred thousand from these farmers, I'll cut you in for half if you just let me go."

Mace relaxed his grip.

"So if you didn't sell us out to the Empire, then who did?" he said as he put his blaster away.

"How the hell should I know?" Dorvid responded, wiping blood from his face, "Maybe they just tracked my online query and came looking."

"No." Mace replied, shaking his head, "I recognised two of the agents. They came here all the way from Estran and they wouldn't just do that on a hunch." Then his eyes widened as he realised that there was only one other person outside of the rebellion who knew that his team was on Tarlen and who they were.

Jaynie set down the two mugs of caf on the table.

"Have things really been that bad since I left?" Jaysica asked her sister as she took the nearest mug.

"Well what did you expect?" Jaynie replied, "It was bad enough when you got arrested for insubordination during your national service, but running off and joining the rebellion? The government thought we were all traitors. I nearly got kicked out of school in addition to dad losing his job."

"Well there's no need to worry now is there?" Jaysica asked and she sipped at her drink, "The Alliance will find you a place on a safe world and that'll be the end of it."

"What are they like? The safe worlds I mean."

Jaysica yawned.

"Well they're a bit primitive, but you won't have government spies looking over your shoulder all –all – "

"Are you okay?" Jaynie asked, looking into Jaysica's eyes.

"Oh what? I'm fine. I'm just, just a little sleepy that's all." And then the mug clattered to the floor as Jaysica slumped forwards over the table.

The interior of the prisoner transport was subdivided into tiny cells that ran along each side of the vehicle. These were designed to hold a single prisoner with their arms raised above their heads and tied to a bracket in the ceiling. Still tied together, Kara and Vorn had been forced into one of these cramped holding cells, although because of how they were bound their captors could not make use of the bracket and they had instead been left in their forced embrace. A tiny window near the top of the external wall was the only light source, and in the gloom Vorn looked at Kara.

"I'm sorry." He said, "I know I shouldn't have just left the way I did, but you have to realise that I needed to do something about the people who killed my wife."

Unable to talk, Kara just grunted.

"You have to believe me when I say that I wanted to ask for your help right from the start, you and the others. But I wasn't sure about how long it would take to discover what happened and even then I didn't know if I'd be able to do anything about it. For all I knew I was going to be on the run by myself forever."

Kara just looked away.

"I missed you." Vorn said, "I missed you all of course and not a day went by without me wishing I had asked you to come along with me. I was wrong. Can you forgive me?"

Kara looked at him directly without making any noise or giving any indication of how she felt.

"And I promise I didn't have Jaysica promoted over you." Vorn added, "I don't have a clue who did, but I wouldn't have let it happen if I'd known about it."

Kara tried to smile, but her gag got the way. Instead she closed her eyes and leant forwards to rest her head on Vorn's shoulder.

"And I'm sorry," Vorn then said, "but that gag makes you look like you bit the nose off a clown."

Kara suddenly lifted her head off his shoulder, glared at him directly and with what little movement she had available to her she stamped on his foot.

When Jaysica came to she found that she was lying on the floor of the *Silver Hawk's* lounge and was unable to move. Her wrists and ankles had been bound with plastic ties taken from the ship's workshop. Sat in one of the seats she could see Jeeves, his eyes dim and indicating that someone had turned him off.

"Jaynie?" she called out as she looked around for her sister, "Janie what's happening?"

There was a frustrated shriek from the cockpit and Jaynie came storming from there and crouched down beside Jaysica.

"What's the code to bring the ship's systems on line?" she snapped, "Give it to me."

"Jaynie what's wrong? Untie me."

Jaynie laughed.

"No chance. Now I need the access code so I can use the ship's communications to send a message to the Imperial authorities."

"But why?"

"Because unlike you I'm not a traitor. I told the Empire about you being here as soon as I could, when I slipped away to change out of my uniform. I even sent them an image of you all in the hotel lobby. Now when I hand you over to them dad can get his job back, I can go to university and we can all go back to pretending you never existed. Now give me the code."

"Never."

"Fine. In that case I'll bet that your boyfriend or the captain have it written down somewhere. I just need to find it." And with that Jaynie got up and hurried off towards the cabins. She paused by the door and looked back at Jaysica as she lay helpless on the floor, "Oh and I wouldn't count on your boyfriend to come back and rescue you either. The only reason I need to access your ship's communications is that I used my communicator to make sure they could be tracked. The Empire's probably got them already."

The local rebels were pretty much what Tharun expected them to be. They were keen to fight the Empire and several of them were accomplished hunters, but they had little idea when it came to infantry tactics and he was relieved that knowing this for themselves they had avoided battle with the handful of Imperial troops and militia on the planet. Had they tried to fight they would have been soundly beaten and the Empire would likely have reinforced the planet.

It was during a break from training that he returned to his pack to fetch his canteen and as he was drinking he heard a bizarre chirping sound coming from inside the pack. Puzzled he opened it up to take a look. Inside he found what looked like a civilian communications device, a point-to-point link that could receive and transmit both voice signals and data by means of a network of local beacons. He did not own such a device

and how it had come to be there was a mystery to him. Picking it up he saw that on the compact display a simple warning was displayed as it chirped.

'LOW BATTERY'.

"Hey Tobis!" Tharun called out as he carried the device to where Tobis was looking at an old armoured vehicle and trying to figure out why its engine would not function, "Is this yours?"

Tobis took the PTP link and inspected it.

"What? Oh, err, well no. Why?"

"Because it was in my pack and I sure as hell didn't put it there. Look like it needs recharging, whoever's it is."

"Ah. Well yes." Tobis said, "The power consumption from constantly transmitting has drained the battery quicker than if it was in standby."

"Did you just say constantly transmitting?" Tharun asked.

"Err, yes. Look." And he pointed to a tiny symbol in the corner of the display that indicated it was continuously sending a signal to the network."

"Oh kriff." Tharun said and then he looked towards where the local rebels were now sat, "The Empire's on its way!" he yelled, "Everybody get out of here!"

The rebels grabbed what they could and rushed from the building just as a roaring from overhead signalled he passing of an Imperial fighter.

"Scatter!" Tharun yelled, "Into the trees!" then he grabbed hold of Tobis and said, "With me lad."

A mechanical clanking sound came from through the trees and a voice cried out.

"Walkers!"

Then there was a volley of blaster fire followed by brief screams that were silenced as quickly as they began.

"Over there! Look!" Tobis called out and he pointed through the trees. Turning around Tharun saw the unmistakable shape of an Imperial scout walker, or AT-ST as it approached, spitting fire at anything that moved.

Nearby a rebel soldier came to a halt, bracing himself against a tree. He carried a bulky weapon consisting of four tubes arranged in a square. He lifted it onto his shoulder and took aim at the oncoming AT-ST and fired. A bright blue flash erupted from one of the tubes as a bolt of highly charged particles was fired at the walker. The bolt burst across its hull, spreading lightning all across it. But although some of the rebels cheered, Tharun knew that the ion cannon would only immobilise the walker for a short time before its crew could regain control of their vehicle. Before this could even happen a second AT-ST appeared from behind the first and began firing, sending a grenade into a cluster of rebels who not an hour earlier Tharun had been warning about making themselves targets by clumping together.

"Wish I had my A-280." Tharun muttered, referring to his powerful rifle that was quite capable of inflicting damage even to the moderately armoured AT-STs.

There was another scream as the rebel with the ion cannon died and Tharun and Tobis saw that in addition to the AT-STs there were now white-armoured stormtroopers making their way through the woods, picking off the rebels who managed to escape the walkers' heavy guns.

"Wait here a minute." Tharun said to Tobis.

"What? Oh err, okay." Tobis replied and he drew his blaster and fired a shot towards the advancing Imperial troops that went wide.

"Nice try lad." Tharun said as he took hold of the bulky shoulder-fired ion cannon and came rushing back,

"Now let's get out of here while we still can."

6.

Garm and Vay stood at the side of one of the gunships. With Vorn and Kara secure Garm was now keen to finish wrapping things up and return to Estran. This of course meant dealing with the rest of Vorn's unit and from the reports coming in it seemed that they were working with a local resistance force also. As soon as he had received this information Garm had summoned one of the troop transport gunships to take him and Vay to take part in the destruction of this force.

"You're enjoying this aren't you?" Vay asked and Garm looked towards her, "I can feel it."

Garm smiled.

"Of course I am." He replied, "Today has already seen the end of my father's rampage through the sector and now it seems that it will also see the end of the rebellion itself in this region. Maybe even on all of Tarlen if we're lucky. I've got a good feeling about all this Vay."

"There's some turbulence up ahead." The gunship pilot suddenly called out from the front of the vehicle.

"You heard him." Garm said to Vay as he took hold of a handhold and gripped it firmly, "You better hang on."

Vay smiled and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"No more wine for you today." He said, smirking.

The gunships could not accurately target the rebels through the trees. But if they spotted movement they could hover just long enough to either drop another platoon of stormtroopers into the battle or direct forces that were already on the ground. It was just as one of the gunships came to a halt that Tharun saw an opportunity.

"Hang on a moment lad," He said, "and keep an eye out for any of those plastic troopers." And he began to ready the ion cannon.

He took aim at a gunship that had paused to deploy its complement of stormtroopers. Tharun could see synthrope lines being thrown from the vehicle and the troops inside getting ready to rappel down through the trees. He took a deep breath, exhaled and squeezed the trigger. There was another flash of blue light and the ion blast struck one of the gunship's engines. The effect of this was immediate and dramatic. The engine suddenly began to fire at random as the ionised controls gave it contradictory commands. The entire vehicle went into a spin, throwing two stormtroopers out immediately. Their arms and legs flailing, they plummeted to the ground below. Whether or not they survived was something neither Tharun nor Tobis could tell, but as the gunship itself collided with a second one it was easy to tell that the resulting explosion claimed the lives of all aboard both vehicles.

"Okay, let's move." Tharun said.

"Err, right." Tobis replied.

"Set us down!" Garm shouted at the pilot, "Signal all units to set down and disembark. I don't want to lose any more troops that way."

"Yes sir." The pilot replied and he guided the gunship towards the nearest clearing where Garm and Vay jumped out, followed by the stormtrooper platoon it carried. Behind them the gunship lifted off again and began to gain enough altitude to hopefully take it out of range of the ion cannon.

Garm looked at Vay who had ignited her lightsaber.

"Which way?" he asked. There were sounds of blaster fire from all around them as the stormtroopers and AT-STs continued to exact a heavy toll on the poorly equipped and barely trained rebels, but Garm wanted to know where Vorn's team was located.

"I don't know." She replied, "I can sense people all around us, but I can't tell who's who."

"In that case we go this way." Garm said, "Follow me."

"Why this way?" Vay asked as she began to follow him.

"Because that's where the ion cannon blast came from." He replied, "And with nothing better to go on I'm going to assume that it's one of my father's team that's causing us trouble."

Tharun helped Tobis up the rock face beside a river and then held up the ion cannon.

"Hurry up lad." He said, "Those stormies aren't far behind."

"I know." Tobis replied as he tossed the ion cannon behind him and then lowered his hand to assist Tharun up behind him. It was as Tharun was scrabbling up the rocks that Tobis lifted his head and spotted a flash of white from further downstream, "Stormtroopers!" he hissed. Tharun looked around and spotted the same flash of white as Tobis and hurriedly finished climbing the rock before lying flat on the ground beside Tobis.

"Well spotted lad." He said, "Now let's just hope they don't come this way."

The stormtrooper unit remained in place, looking back into the tree behind them.

"Looks like they're waiting for something." Tobis said.

"Probably us." Tharun said, "they may think that they've cut us off and are waiting for us to come blundering out of the woods."

There was a sudden burst of blaster fire from the stormtroopers and Tobis covered his head with his hands. "That's not heading towards us." Tharun told him, "It seems that someone else made a break this way." And as he watched the stormtrooper squad headed back into the trees in pursuit of the rebels who were now doubling back.

"Can't we help them?" Tobis asked.

"Afraid not." Tharun replied, "There's just too many of those boys in white around. Right now we need to concentrate on getting away. Hopefully the local boys will know the land well enough to avoid the Empire long enough to go to ground."

"So what should we do?" Tobis asked.

"Well I think there's a bridge further upstream. We can shelter there for a while and get across the river if we want."

Tharun then picked up the ion cannon and he and Tobis headed upstream.

So far about a dozen prisoners had been taken, with about twice that number confirmed killed. The latest batch had been trapped near the river and Garm had hoped that members of his father's team would have been amongst them. However, none of them were familiar to Garm and he resolved to keep on hunting them. "They must have come this way." He said as he looked up and down the river.

"Downstream would lead them back towards the encampment and the bulk of our forces." Vay said, "They must have gone upstream."

"Agreed." Garm replied, then he looked towards the nearest stormtrooper and called out to him, "Sergeant, have the scouts search upstream. Tell them we're moving that way."

The bridge was a simple concrete construction that had clearly stood for many years. Sat in the tunnel beneath with the river flowing past them Tharun and Tobis listened to the sound of repulsorlifts.

"Those aren't gunships." Tobis said, "The pitch is too high."

"I know." Tharun said, "They seem to be reluctant to come in low now anyway, they're too afraid of this." And he patted the ion cannon, "No, it looks like they've called out the speeder bikes to hunt us. They must really want us."

"I wonder why?" Tobis commented, "Are we really that important?"

Tharun looked downstream and spotted several figures walking along the riverbank. Most of them wore the familiar white armour of stormtroopers, but amongst them he also spotted one in a pale grey uniform and another in a black bodyglove.

"We are to some people." Tharun said, pointing towards Garm and Vay, "Them for example."

There was a distant clanking sound and the bridge trembled enough for pieces of dirt to be shaken loose and fall on the rebels.

"Those are the walkers aren't they?" Tobis asked.

"Yeah. They must be coming down the road that runs right over us."

"So how do we get out of here?"

Tharun looked downriver again at the approaching Imperial troops and weighed up their options.

"Sorry lad." He said, "But unless you want to go down in a blaze of glory or get shot in the back while we run upstream I think there's only one choice."

"Surrender?" Tobis asked and reluctantly Tharun nodded.

"The others may still be free." Tobis said, "They'll come for us won't they?"

"I'm sure they will lad. I'm sure they will."

Tharun then drew his blaster pistol and tossed it along with the ion cannon into the river. He then looked at Tobis who promptly discarded his own blaster in the same way. The two rebels then got to their feet and with Tharun leading the way they walked out from beneath the bridge with their hands held high.

Mace held the macrobinoculars to his eyes and surveyed the land ahead. Airborne gunships and AT-ST patrols criss-crossed the area in a search pattern while in a forest clearing he saw stormtroopers gathering prisoners together in one place.

A large explosion drew his attention and Mace directed the macrobinoculars to where the cluster of buildings that served as the local rebel base and saw that they had just been destroyed. From the way the damage was contained Mace guessed that the Empire had brought in engineers to demolish them rather than someone having triggered a booby trap.

Looking back towards the clearing his face fell as he saw four familiar figures enter it. The first two were Garm and Vay, who he was not surprised to see. However, behind them a squad of stormtroopers escorted Tharun and Tobis into the clearing and placed them with the other prisoners.

"*Silver Hawk* do you read me?" Mace signalled again. He knew it was risky using his comlink with Imperial forces about, but he had to try and determine whether or not his ship was secure. Unfortunately this attempt to make contact was no more successful than any of his previous ones, when he had been trying to warn Jaysica about her sister's betrayal. The one saving grace was that each attempt to signal the *Silver Hawk* had resulted in an automated reply that suggested he systems were still secured. For now at least the Empire did not have control of his ship.

They did however, have everyone else from his team as their prisoners.