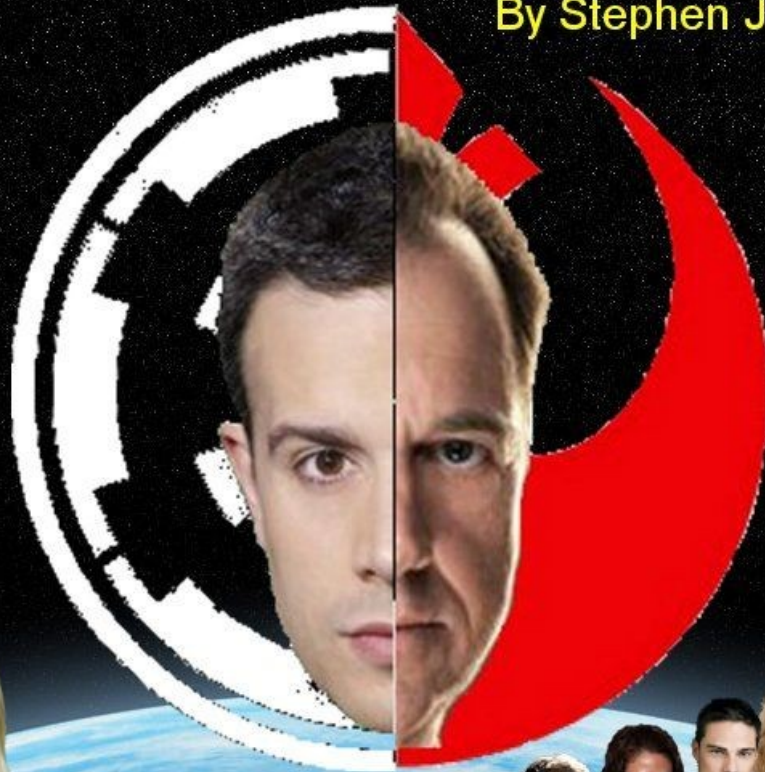


# STAR WARS

## 2-01: Hero's Return

By Stephen J Dutton



by  
by



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...

## HERO'S RETURN

THEIR LEADER BELIEVED DEAD, THE REBEL CELL LED BY VORN LARCUS III HAVE  
BEEN SPLIT UP BY THE ALLIANCE. BUT WHEN WORDS REACHES THEM THAT THEIR  
LOST LEADER IS STILL ALIVE THEY REUNITE TO STAGE A RESCUE...

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

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# 1.

*"Lyssa darling are you ready yet?" Vorn Larcus III shouted out.*

*"Coming daddy." His daughter called back as she emerged from her bedroom and descended the stairs of their grandiose home, "Is the ship here then?"*

*"They've been here an hour. All of your things are already loaded and the droids are aboard. We're just waiting for you."*

*Lyssa Larcus strode confidently past her father to the doorway that opened out into the grounds in front of the building.*

*"What is that thing?" she demanded, her face falling as soon as she saw the aging freighter landed there.*

*"Never mind that," Vorn said as he took his daughter by the elbow, "we need to get aboard now." And he began to pull her towards the ship. As he did so a tall man in combat fatigues ran down the ship's access ramp and towards him.*

*"We need to hurry your lordship." the man said, "Captain Grayle's engineer says that there are police speeders on their way."*

*"Police?" Lyssa said, "Daddy what is going on? You said we were going on holiday until all this fuss blew over."*

*"Hurry up my dear." Vorn said as he tried to pull her along faster.*

*"No daddy!" Lyssa shouted out, coming to a complete halt, "I'm not going any further until you explain what's going on."*

*"Tharun," Vorn said to the big man in front of him, "I'll need a hand here."*

*"Yes sir." Tharun replied and he wrapped an arm around Lyssa and lifted her over his shoulder before rushing back towards the waiting freighter with Vorn running beside him.*

*"Put me down!" Lyssa screamed, kicking and hitting Tharun to no effect, "Daddy I will never forgive you for this!" she added.*

*"Don't worry darling." Vorn said, "Things will be just fine, you'll see."*

Vorn woke up suddenly from the dream of his past. He was floating in a tank of pale fluid, a mask covering his nose and mouth allowing him to breathe. The fluid over his eyes made it difficult for him to focus his vision properly, but he could make out figures beyond the container in which he floated. More importantly he could make out their Imperial uniforms.

In the room outside the tube one of the figures activated her comlink.

"This is the medical bay. The prisoner is awake."

Kara waved to her three friends as soon as she entered the bar. Since she had been transferred to a medical orderly's position in the headquarters' medical unit she had resisted going out and relaxing, but tonight her friends Looane, Praynas and Tamma had convinced her to join them for drinks.

"Wow Kara, I love your hair and where did you get that dress?" Tamma asked when Kara walked up to them. Kara just smiled as she sat down at the table. Most of the people in the bar wore basic utilitarian outfits suitable for their duties in the Rebellion, but it seemed that Kara had obtained a garment that was beyond the means of most other rebels present and had added a streak of bright red to her dark hair.

"An assignment." Kara replied simply and her friends groaned. In the few weeks that Kara had been working in the medical unit they had grown tired of hearing how wonderful her time as a field operative for the rebellion had been, right up until her commanding officer had been killed and her unit disbanded.

"The idea of getting you to come out with us after work was so that you could put all of that behind you."

Praynas told her, "Now what are you having?"

"Just a fizzy-glug for me." Kara replied, "Diet. I'm on call. The last thing I need right now is to get in trouble for showing up smelling of drink if there's an emergency."

"There's not going to be an emergency Kara." Tamma said as Praynas headed for the bar, "Nothing serious has happened here for weeks. I don't know what high command is up to, but they seem to have forgotten that we're supposed to be fighting the Empire."

Kara kept quiet. She knew exactly why rebel activity had ground to a halt recently. Somewhere in the local Alliance forces was an Imperial spy that was feeding information on fleet deployments back to the Empire. Until the spy could be found any movement of military forces was risky. However the existence of the spy was being kept quiet and Kara had found out only by accident on her final mission as a field agent. The one where her commanding officer Vorn Larcus III had died.

Praynas reappeared with a tray of drinks.

"Three beers and one diet fizzy-glug." She said as she transferred the glasses from the tray to the table, then she added, "And it seems that Kara's not the only one here in a killer dress tonight."

All four of the medical orderlies looked towards the bar itself where they saw another young human woman wearing clothing not often seen in that establishment.

"Oh no." Kara said and she ducked down below the level of the table.

"What is it?" Looane asked.

"It's her." Kara replied, "Jaysica."

"The clumsy one?" Tamma asked in response, "The one you worked with?"

"That's her." Kara answered, "What's she doing here?"

"Well it is a public bar. Anyone can drink here." Looane said, "Let's call her over. I want to meet her."

"No!" Kara snapped, "Do that and we'll end up wearing our drinks."

Kara peered out from under the table and all four women looked at Jaysica as she sat at the bar alone. They watched as a chiming sound prompted Jaysica to remove her comlink from her bag and hold it up to her head. After a few moments she put the comlink away again, picked up her bag and ran from the bar, bumping into another of the bar's patrons and knocking a tray of drinks from his grasp on her way.

"Something's spooked her." Tamma said, "Is she mental or something?"

Kara just watched as Jaysica disappeared through the door.

"Hello? Headquarters to Kara. Are you still with us?" Praynas said.

"Sorry everyone." Kara said, "I have to go." And she ran after Jaysica.

"Jaysica wait!" Kara called out when she caught up with her former team-mate in an otherwise deserted corridor that had glass walls looking out into space outside the space station that served as the Alliance's headquarters in the sector.

Upon hearing the familiar voice Jaysica halted and as she turned around Kara saw her eyes were red with tears.

"Jaysica, what's the matter?" Kara asked as she drew closer.

"I got stood up." Jaysica said, "I finally got a date and he calls me at the last minute to say that he only asked me out because his friends told him to. Apparently they've now told him that I'm an accident-prone freak and they were playing a joke on him. It was bad enough people playing jokes on me, but now they're using me as a joke to play on other people."

Kara suddenly felt ashamed of how she had reacted when she saw Jaysica in the bar.

"Come here." She said and she wrapped her arms around Jaysica, "What have you been doing anyway? I haven't seen you since they split us up."

"I work in droid repair." Jaysica replied, "Swapping skill chips in mouse droids."

Kara relaxed her hug and looked Jaysica in the eyes.

"Seriously?" she said, "But that's work for other droids."

"My lieutenant says it's all I'm good for. She says I break everything else. I thought it would be nice to be out with someone for a change instead of on my own." Jaysica said, "But I suppose that isn't going to be happening for a while now."

"I tell you what," Kara said, "we'll go out and party ourselves. Dressed like this how can we not get guys to buy us drinks all night?"

"Really? You mean it?"

"I promise." Kara said then her comlink chimed. "What is it?" Kara asked as she activated the device.

"Kara we need you here now." A voice said, "There are casualties coming in."

"I'll be there as soon as I can." Kara said and she put the comlink away. "I'm sorry." She said to Jaysica, "I have to go, "but I'll see you tomorrow okay?"

"In the bar at eight." Jaysica said, nodding, "I like your hair by the way."

Stopping off only to change, Kara rushed to the medical unit and arrived just as injured fleet personnel were being brought in on stretchers.

"What happened?" she asked the nearest doctor as he checked the vital signs of one of the newly arrived casualties.

"The Imperial fleet was waiting for one of our frigates when it came out of hyperspace. They just about made it back here, but they've got heavy casualties. I need you to get trauma kits, bacta gels and anything else the medical staff need. Keep them coming because this is going to be a long night."

Kara nodded as was about to fetch the medical supplies she had been told to get when the doctor added, "Nice hair by the way."

The doctor's prediction turned out to be accurate. It appeared that most of the frigates three hundred crew had suffered injury during the brief battle with an Imperial warship, mostly serious burns that left them in intense pain. Being just an orderly, Kara just had to follow the instructions of the more highly qualified doctors

and nurses. This resulted in her spending much of the night running back and forth on relatively minor errands. It was while she was on one of these errands that a doctor grabbed her arm.

"Kara we're getting overrun here so I want you to take a look at some of the more minor cases. Some of the ship's fighter pilots have been brought in with minor lacerations. Take a look at them, dress their wounds and send them away while we treat the serious cases. They're in room six."

"I'll get right on it." Kara said with a smile and she headed for the injured pilots.

Room six was separated from the main treatment ward by a short corridor. As she sprinted down it the door at the far end slid open and a familiar figure stepped into the corridor with her and Kara's face fell.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Captain Jarad Tarl asked when he saw her, "And what the hell have you done with your hair?"

Captain Tarl was Kara's former superior officer. Before working for Vorn Larcus as a field medic she had been a fighter pilot with a commission. Then one day Captain Tarl passed her over for a promotion that she knew she deserved. She confronted him about this and by the end of the conversation he had a black eye and she was being dragged off by military police.

"I've come to take a look at your pilots' injuries." She replied.

"With those?" Jarad asked, pointing at the pair of bedpans that Kara was holding. In her rush to reach the pilots she had forgotten about the errand she had been running beforehand. "Somehow," Jarad continued, "I'd feel better if we could wait for someone qualified to do more than carry bedpans about."

"Really?" Kara said. Then she swung one of the bedpans at Jarad and added, "So how does that feel then?" as he fell backwards, blood pouring from his nose.

"Do you expect this hunk of junk to be space worthy by tomorrow?" a female voice called out.

Mace Grayle, captain of the supply ship *Silver Hawk* slid out from underneath his vessel and looked up at Inra Vayne. The attractive Hapan woman was the captain of a light freighter used, as Mace's once was, as a transport for a unit of rebel field agents.

"What do you want Inra?" he asked, "I'm busy."

"Yes well I supposed flying an older model like this does tend to use up your time in repair work." She said, "That's why I prefer a twenty-four hundred myself."

"You know, I'm still not hearing why you're here." Mace said as he got to his feet and wiped some of the grease from his hands. His engineer, Tobis Dorfus, emerged from the freighter having heard the voices and stood beside his captain.

"I just came to see what you were doing." Inra said, "I'm flying my team off on an assignment and saw you down there."

"We've got a supply run to do." Mace told her, "You know that."

"Yes well I suppose that's what happens when you get your commanding officers killed."

"Why you –" Mace yelled and he leapt to his feet and lunged towards Inra, his face turning red. But before he could reach her Tobis grabbed him and pulled him back.

"No let him go." Inra said, "Let's see if he's any more reliable than your ship."

"Inra!" another voice called out across the bay and all three of the rebels looked around to see Inra's commanding officer striding towards them, "What the hell are you doing?"

"Commander Kord, I was just checking on the *Silver Hawk's* condition sir." She replied.

"Well go check on your own ship." He said, "I don't think that Sen's done any work on her since we got back from the last job."

"Of course sir." Inra said then she looked at Mace, "Until next time." She added before walking away.

"I'm sorry about that." The commander said as Tobis released his grasp on Mace.

"Yeah, well you just saved your pilot from getting her ass kicked commander." Mace said.

"More like I saved you from getting the room next door to your old friend." Commander Kord replied.

"What?" Mace asked.

"You're old team mate Bilstran. Hadn't you heard? She broke Captain Tarl's nose about an hour ago. MPs dragged her off to the brig."

Mace knocked on the desk to attract the attention of the duty guard.

"I'm here to see her." He said.

"Follow me." The guard told him and he led Mace down the corridor that was lined either side with holding cells. "Here we are." The guard said, "Cell fourteen." And he opened the door for Mace.

"Again?" Mace said as he stepped inside and looked down at Kara.

"I'm looking at being here for sixty days." She replied.

"I thought you'd get a fine."

"The officer of the watch is recommending either sixty days confinement or a fine. I'll be choosing the sentence that doesn't involve me spending five thousand credits I don't have. Besides this gives me the chance to consider what I'm going to do now. I can't see me being welcome back in the medical unit."

Equipment is scarce enough without me putting dents in it in the shape of officer's faces and I'll never find another field unit commander to take me on."

"Well I'm taking the *Silver Hawk* off to Estran on a supply run tomorrow." Mace said, "I'll try and drop in when we get back."

"Tomorrow?" Kara said, "Are you taking Tobis with you?"

"Of course. He's my engineer."

Could you let him have this trip off for once?" Kara asked.

"What for?"

"Because Jaysica will be in the enlisted men's bar at eight all alone. She's going to be really disappointed when I stand her up. It could be his big chance with the little klutz."

"I'll tell him to take flowers." Mace replied and before he left he added, "Nice hair by the way."

"Thanks." Kara said, "Most people seem to like it."

## 2.

*"Hi boss." The young woman said with a smile as she jumped up and put out her hand to greet Vorn, "I guess we're working together."*

*Vorn stared back at the woman. She was young, younger than his daughter who was now refusing to speak to him, but taller. In fact she was almost as tall as him.*

*"Jaysica Horbid?" Vorn said.*

*"No boss. Kara Bilstran. I'm your medic."*

*"Well Kara Bilstran let me start by saying that I don't like your attitude. We are not working together; you're working for me. You salute superior officers, not try and shake their hands and you are never, ever to call me 'boss' again. Understood?"*

*"Yes sir." Kara replied, snapping to attention and saluting. Vorn returned the salute and walked up the Silver Hawks' access ramp just as Tharun was coming the other way.*

*"So you've met the major then?" he heard Tharun say to Kara.*

*"Yeah. Someone's looking to get punched in the face." Kara responded.*

Vorn's eyes snapped open again. He was no longer in the bacta tank; instead he was lying in a hospital bed. He tried to sit up but found that his wrists were tied down beside him while his ankles were also secured at the far end of the bed. He tugged at the restraints to see if he could get loose, but they held him securely. Taking a look around Vorn saw that he was in a small medical ward and that he was the only patient here. He also spotted that each of the remaining beds were equipped with restraints. Clearly this was not a standard medical ward. Three medical staff stood near the door studying a display that Vorn guessed to be a readout of his own condition.

"Well look who's awake." A doctor said when he noticed Vorn trying to move. Then he turned to one of the other doctors, "We had better let the commander know."

"Hello young lady. Are your parents at home?" asked Lord Couran Desh when the young daughter of his hosts opened the door for the evening.

The girl just looked up at him and yelled, "Mommy! There's an old man at the door."

The girl's mother, Jennay Larcus, came rushing into the hallway from another room.

"I'm so sorry," she said to Lord Desh, "do come on in out of the rain." Then she looked down at her daughter, "You shouldn't call people that Cayla." She said.

"Oh its alright." Lord Desh said, "I am old. Far too old I sometimes think."

"Nonsense." Jennay replied and she took him by the arm, "Garm's laying out the table now."

"Excellent," Lord Desh said, "I brought wine." And he handed a bottle to Jennay.

"Couran you shouldn't have." She said when she looked at the label and saw that it was over three hundred years old, "Sorry. You shouldn't have, my lord."

"Oh don't bother with all that 'my lord' stuff. I'm retired. Besides this way I know I'm not the oldest thing at the table."

"Uncle Couran." Garm said when his wife led their guest into the dining room before he too corrected himself, "My lord."

"We've been through this already." Lord Desh said, "Stick with Uncle Couran."

Couran Desh was not related to the Larcuses at all. But in the years that Garm's father had served in the Estranian Parliament he had become close enough to the family that they referred to him as if he were one of them.

"So what are we having to celebrate your promotion then?" Couran asked as he sat down.

"Gornt." Garm said, "And how did you know about my promotion?"

"Old Gregor told me himself." Lord Desh answered. The man he referred to as 'Old Gregor' was Moff Gregor Horatian, the Imperial governor for the sector. Garm, as a member of the Imperial Security Bureau was ultimately answerable to him. Garm had worked as an advisor to the Moff for a few months now, but recently it had been decided that his service to the Empire warranted an advancement in his rank even though his duties would remain to be at the Moff's beck and call.

"You're still touch with him then?" Jennay asked, "Since you retired I mean."

"Of course I am. I've kept in touch with a great many people from my days in Parliament. I kept in touch with your father for as long as I could."

"When is grandpa coming home?" Cayla interrupted, speaking with her mouth full, "Is he still on Allastra?"

"Shush dear." Jennay said, "You shouldn't talk with your mouth full."

"And you aren't to discuss your grandfather." Garm added. Lord Desh suppressed a smile and took another bite of his meal.

After dinner Lord Desh took Garm aside while Jennay and Cayla cleared the table.

"What was that about your father being on Allastra?" he asked, "I thought he was supposed to be dead."

"Why did you think that?" Garm asked in response.

"A meeting I had with Lady Sharva." Lord Desh said, referring to the woman that had replaced Vorn Larcus in the Estranian parliament, "She seemed quite happy to hear from a source that he'd been shot." The woman that Lord Desh was referring to was a member of the Estranian Parliament, having taken over Vorn Larcus's seat when he was expelled for his so-called treasonous behaviour. While many of Vorn's enemies had hoped to see him caught, she had instead hoped for his permanent demise.

"Well her source was only partially right. He was shot, but he survived and has been undergoing treatment."

"Well that is interesting to hear." Lord Desh said.

When Couran returned home he went straight to his personal computer and activated it. The transfer of information between him and Vorn had not been all one way and one of the things that Couran had learned was the identity of the man who transported Vorn and his people, along with the name of his ship. Of course he knew that the man was inclined to use false names for both himself and his ship, but Couran knew what he looked like. He also knew that Mace used conventional starports. Each of these places recorded who landed there and were required to make the data accessible to the public.

"Okay then mister Grayle," he said to himself, "let's see where you're hiding."

Mace watched as the crates were being loaded onto his ship by the starport droids.

"Ninety eight tonnes of boots." He said to himself, shaking his head in dismay. A few weeks earlier his vessel had been used to infiltrate rebels into populated areas. Now the limits of his use to the Alliance seemed to be buying footwear. He still had a couple of tonnes of cargo space left for other items, luxuries that Alliance members needed to keep up morale, but it was not the same.

"You're a difficult man to locate Captain Grayle."

Mace spun around, his hand reaching for the blaster on his hip. He had landed the ship under a false name and transponder. No one was supposed to know that he was here.

"Is that any way to greet a friend?" the robed figure standing in front of him asked and Mace tried to recall where he had heard his voice before.

"Do friends hide their faces?" Mace asked in reply.

"They do when they don't want to be recognised by starport surveillance cameras." The man replied, "May we go aboard your ship?"

"After you." Mace said to the man and he kept his hand on his blaster as the figure walked up the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp ahead of him.

"Now who are you?" Mace demanded as soon as they were both inside.

The figure lowered the hood of its cloak and turned around. Mace recognised the man immediately, they had met only once before when Vorn had met with the man to take delivery of data he collected for Mace's former superior officer.

"I'm sorry, I didn't recognise you." He said to Lord Couran Desh and he took his hand away from his blaster.

"No matter my boy." Lord Desh replied, "What I have to tell you is of much greater importance."

"What?" Mace asked guardedly.

"It's Vorn." Lord Desh said.

"He's dead." Mace replied before Lord Desh could say anything more, "I saw him die."

"You saw him shot."

"Yes and he died."

"No he didn't. I heard it from his son not five hours ago."

"His son is the one that shot him." Mace said, "Still, Kara put a bolt into him too."

"Well he's healed quite nicely and from what I've heard Vorn is healing also. Though I think that he'll take a turn for the worse when the Empire starts to interrogate him."

Moff Gregor Horatian was familiar enough with the sound of arguing to know it when he heard it and he heard it as soon as he stepped out of the turbolift car on his way to his office. He also knew exactly who it was that were having the disagreement. Corvin Helieos, director of operations for the Imperial Security Bureau and Gayal Tharr, head of Imperial Intelligence embodied the rivalry that existed between their respective organisations. Moff Horatian found it all rather tiresome, especially since it was he who often wound up having to settle things between them, often to nobody's satisfaction and it seemed that today was going to be no different.

"Just what do you think you are doing?" he demanded as he strode up to the pair, "Its bad enough you arguing in closed meetings without carrying on like this in a public area of the building. Have you considered what classified information you may be yelling out?"

"I'm sorry sir." Director Helieos replied, bowing his head slightly to his superior, "But Gayal –"



"That's Ms Tharr to you." Gayal interrupted.

"Whatever. Sir she is trying to interfere with an ongoing operation."

"Nonsense." Gayal responded as Moff Horatian turned towards her, "There is no operation."

"The man is an ISB prisoner." Director Helieos stated, "You can't have him."

"I take it that this is about that Larcus fellow." Moff Horatian said after looking around to make sure that no one other than his own personal stormtrooper guards was present.

"Yes sir." Gayal said, "He's regained consciousness and the ISB refuses to turn him over to Imperial Intelligence."

"He was caught by us." Director Helieos said.

"Rubbish." Gayal replied, "The man's son who put a blaster bolt into him may be an ISB agent, but he was taken into custody by stormtroopers. Your man was in no fit state to arrest a Jawa. Besides the relationship between the prisoner and Helieos's man presents a clear conflict of interest."

"Nevertheless," Director Helieos, "he is our prisoner."

"As I understand it," Moff Horatian interjected, "he was taken into custody by stormtroopers and is still being held in the secure medical unit at the command complex on Allastra. Is that correct?"

"It is." Director Helios answered and Gayal also nodded in agreement.

"Then he is the army's prisoner." Moff Horatian said, "And the ISB has no authority to insist on his release to them. Intelligence does however. Plus she's right about Garm's conflict in this case."

"I'm not suggesting that Agent Larcus would have anything to do with the interrogation." Director Helieos protested.

"But he would be aware of how his father was being treated wouldn't he?" Moff Horatian replied, "That sort of knowledge could present him with something of a dilemma."

"Thank you sir. That was my point exactly." Gayal said.

"Then we are in agreement?" Moff Horatian said, directing his gaze towards Director Helieos.

"We are sir." He answered reluctantly.

"Good. Ms Tharr you may send a team to collect him."

"I'll handle this one myself." She replied, smiling at Director Helieos.

### 3.

*"Hello? Is anyone there?" a high-pitched voice called out from outside the ship.*

*"In here." Vorn replied, heading towards the access ramp.*

*At the bottom he saw a young woman. For a split second she reminded him of his daughter, she was a similar height and was laden down with bags. Though instead of shopping bags from expensive clothing stores these were the battered holdalls typical of rebel personnel transporting all of their worldly belongings. Under one arm she held a deactivated mouse droid while she was dragging a trunk behind her with the other. She juggled with them and the other bags for a moment as she tried to salute.*

*"I'm specialist Jaysica Horbid sir." The young woman said as she was finally able to bring a hand up to her forehead. As she did so the mouse droid slipped from beneath her arm and slid across the floor.*

*"Penny!" she cried out and dropped her bags as she rushed to see that the droid was not damaged.*

*Smiling, Vorn walked down the ramp towards her to help with her with her belongings.*

*"I'm Major Larcus." He said, "I'll be your CO." he added as he bent down to pick up some of her bags.*

*"Oh thank you." Jaysica replied, "I'm sorry about this. It was an accident. It won't happen again. I promise."*

*Then she turned around. Both Jaysica and Vorn were still bent over and Jaysica's head slammed into Vorn's with a 'crack'. Both rebels staggered backwards in surprise.*

*"Oh no!" Jaysica exclaimed as she realised what she had just done, "I'm so sorry. It was an accident.*

*Honest."*

*"Never mind," Vorn said to her as he rubbed his head, "I'm sure you're just having a bad day."*

The light shining in his eyes snapped Vorn back to the real world. A doctor was leaning over him conducting an examination. He flexed his limbs to see if he could move them, but discovered that he was still tied down. "I'd save my strength if I were you." The doctor said, "We've just heard that Imperial Intelligence is coming to take you from us. If you think you've had it bad so far, you've not seen anything yet."

The two women stood side by side in the docking bay as they watched the *Silver Hawk* approach the atmosphere shield.

"Okay Krissa, how do I look?" Captain Mallia Mayan asked.

"Fine captain," her junior replied, "he won't be able to keep his hands off you. Shall I leave now?"

"No, stay and say hello. Besides I think you'd like his engineer."

The *Silver Hawk* was closer now, poised to enter the bay.

"Is he coming in rather fast?" the lieutenant asked.

"People do seem rather excited about it." Mallia said looking in the direction of the control booth and seeing its occupants gesticulating wildly.

Suddenly the *Silver Hawk* burst through the atmosphere shield and the noise of its replusorlift drives filled the docking bay. Generally ships entered the bay under minimal power, but Mace was piloting his ship at a much faster speed than normal. The *Silver Hawk* pivoted violently as Mace aligned the ship to the docking slot it always occupied before cutting power and bringing it down to the deck with a resounding 'thump' that echoed around the bay.

"He's really in a hurry to see you isn't he captain?" Krissa said.

"Makes a girl feel needed." Mallia replied, "If slightly deaf as well."

The *Silver Hawk's* access ramp began to open and before it was lowered fully Mace Grayle came rushing down and leapt to the deck.

"Hi Mace." Mallia said, "This is Krissa Dall. She's my –"

Mallia was interrupted as Mace grabbed her and kissed her.

"He's alive!" he yelled out and Mallia drew back, "What time is it?" he then asked.

"About eight." Krissa said before Mace turned towards her.

"Hello there. Nice to meet you." He said before he ran from the docking bay.

"Well he did seem happy to see you." Krissa said, "But is he normally in such a rush?"

"No not normally." Mallia answered, "I get worried when he is. People die. Come on, we better go and see what's so important."

Garm was not very surprised to be summoned to see Director Helieos. After all the man was in charge of the organisation which Garm worked for in this sector. However, even though he worked directly with Moff Horatian Garm was much further down the ISB's chain of command than the director and was not directly answerable to him.

"Garm I want to discuss the situation with your father." The director said as he indicated to Garm to take a seat.

"I heard we'll be able to question him soon sir." Garm replied.

"He will be questioned," Director Helieos answered, "but unfortunately not by us."

"Then who?"

"Intelligence. Gayal Tharr has convinced the moff that he's an intelligence asset and as such they have the better claim."

Garm frowned.

"I hunted him for months," He said, "and now intelligence swoops in and takes him from me."

"Indeed. But I've managed to convince the moff that he should send someone to keep an eye on things during the transfer. Just to make sure that Intelligence and the Army get things sorted out efficiently. You know how difficult inter-agency work can be."

"I can be ready in fifteen minutes sir." Garm said and he began to get to his feet.

"No, not you agent Larcus." Director Helieos said and Garm looked him in the eyes, "you're part of the reason the moff is handing this to Intelligence. You have a conflict of interest in this case."

"Then who?"

"Your young friend and occasional partner, Vay Udra." Director Helieos said, "Do you think she would be willing to do us a small favour?"

"Surely you're not thinking of helping him to escape?"

"Of course not. That would be treason. But I'm sure that if things went badly then the moff may be convinced that Intelligence isn't the right group to be handling all of this."

Tobis had stood in the doorway for a full ten minutes, staring at the bar. Jaysica had been sat there all the time he had been stood here, but even though she had looked in his direction several times she had failed to notice him. Jaysica on the other hand stood out. She had obviously picked out a dress she obtained when she and Kara had been assigned to go undercover with Vorn at an expensive hotel. Though Tobis would have still stared at Jaysica if she were wearing the more typical work clothes of the bar's other patrons he had to admit that he liked her in what she was wearing more.

He had pretended not to be interested when Mace had told him that she would be here at this time all alone. As far as he was concerned his feelings for Jaysica were a secret, even though the others in what had been his unit often referred to her as his 'girlfriend'. He had accepted Mace's offer of a day off however and he had spent the day planning how he would approach Jaysica now he finally had a chance to.

Grasping the bunch of flowers he had with him in both hands Tobis took a deep breath and walked across the bar to where Jaysica sat.

"Err. Oh. Err." He said when he got to her.

"Hi Tobis." Jaysica replied without looking at him, "I'm waiting for Kara."

Disappointed, Tobis was about to tell Jaysica that Kara was not coming when he remembered the flowers and held them out, "Mace said I should give you these." He blurted out.

"Oh that's so sweet of him." Jaysica said, smiling as she took the flowers and smelt them, "Ooh, they're real too, not plastic. Tell Mace thank you for me won't you."

Tobis' shoulders slumped. Then he decided to change his approach.

"C-Can I get you a drink?" he asked.

"I have one." Jaysica said, lifting her still half full glass up in front of him.

"Oh. Yes. Of course you do."

Then Jaysica suddenly smiled and she got to her feet.

"Look!" she said, "There's Mace now." And she waved towards the doorway, "Mace! Over here!"

Tobis sat down and sighed. He waved to the bartender who just walked straight past him.

Mace was out of breath when he reached the bar.

"He's alive." He gasped as Mallia and Krissa arrived behind him, still unsure what the fuss was about.

"Who?" Jaysica asked as Mace continued to take in deep gulps of air.

"Vorn." He said, hoarsely.

"Who?" Jaysica asked, not hearing what he said.

"It sounded like Vorn." Krissa said.

Tobis spun around in his seat and all of the rebels stared at Mace.

"Vorn? The major?" Jaysica said, her eyes opening wide.

Mace nodded.

"He's still being held on Allastra." He said, "I was met by his contact on Estran who got it straight from an ISB agent."

"That agent wouldn't be the major's son would it?" Jaysica asked, "The one that shot him in the first place."

"That's not important." Mace said, "What is important is that he's alive and we have to go and rescue him."

The *Trading Dream* was a massive Lucrehulk-class ship that was older than many of its occupants. Originally built as a peaceful trading ship it had been refitted by its Trade Federation owners as a battleship and served

in their force until captured by the Republic in the early days of the Clone Wars. Stolen from an Imperial depot after the war it had served the Alliance as a fighter carrier since for nearly two decades. Now however it was home to several thousand refugees.

Following the loss of the Alliance's only safe world in the sector it was the only ship capable of housing the beings left homeless by the attack and a town made up of crude improvised dwellings had been constructed within its cavernous landing bays. Still accompanied by Mallia and Krissa, Mace had brought Jaysica and Tobis here to find their other former team mate Tharun Vercer.

The former mercenary had been transferred here to recruit and train soldiers for the Alliance from amongst the refugees. The loss of their homes had done much to encourage many of them to volunteer for the Alliance's armed forces.

Since it was getting late, they found him drinking with several other recruiters all gathered around an improvised still.

"I'd offer you all one," Tharun said, "but I don't want any of you going blind." And he tipped his drink into a bucket. "So what brings you all here anyway?"

"The major's alive." Jaysica said excitedly, "We're going to rescue him."

"Why do I get the feeling that this mission doesn't have official approval?" Tharun asked.

"Because it doesn't." Mace replied, "I've only just found out from Vorn's source on Estran."

"Wouldn't it be a good idea to report this?" Krissa asked.

"The major's one of us." Mace replied, "We're not an official unit any more so if we report it someone else will get the assignment. Knowing my luck it would be Inra too. She'd love that."

"So there's just the six of us with no support?" Krissa said.

"Seven." Jaysica said. Then something occurred to her, "Hang on," she added, "where's Kara?"

"Prison." Tobis said.

"What did she do now?" Tharun asked.

"Hit Captain Tarl." Mace replied.

"Again?" Tharun said, "That girl has issues."

"She'd want to be with us." Jaysica said.

"Well unless we can come up with five grand she's out of the picture." Mace said.

"What if we could get Captain Tarl not to press charges?" Mallia suggested.

"Have you ever met Jarad Tarl?" Mace asked her, "He's a stuck up nerfherder. He won't help us."

"Then we'll just have to do this without her." Mace said. Then when he saw that the others were about to protest he held up his hand and added, "I'm sorry but that's just the way it is. Now let's all get a good night's rest and we'll meet up at the *Silver Hawk* at ten tomorrow. Bring anything you think may be useful. Agreed?"

The six rebels all gathered in the lounge of the *Silver Hawk* to discuss their strategy. Everything they had in the way of weaponry and equipment was piled up in a corner.

"So this is what we've got then is it?" Tharun said as he looked at the pile.

"I agree it's not much," Mace said, "but it's all we've got."

"Here," Jaysica called out, "I'm done. This is all I can remember about what I saw." And she placed a sheet of paper on the table with several others on which she had drawn some crude maps showing parts of an Imperial base.

"Are you certain he's still being held in this place?" Mallia asked as she looked at one of the maps.

"The source said that he was still on Allastra." Mace replied, "And this is the place where we were when he was shot."

"If you've been here before," Krissa began as she too looked at some of the maps, "does that mean you know a way in."

The four members of Vorn's group looked at one another in silence.

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Mallia said, "You don't know how to get in do you? Mace, I love you but you really need to plan ahead more."

"I thought that was what we were doing." Jaysica said.

"In my experience," Tharun whispered to Mace, "when women talk about making plans it's time to run."

"Is this a private meeting?" a voice suddenly called out from the door nearest the access ramp. Turning to face the sound the assembled rebels saw a tall, bald man wearing the uniform of a rebel colonel standing there.

"Colonel Ergard." Mace said in surprise, "What brings you here?"

Colonel Ergard walked across the room to the table and picked up one of the sketches made by Jaysica.

"Planning a heist?" he asked.

No one spoke.

"I heard that Sergeant Verser didn't show up for his shift this morning." The colonel said, "And when I contacted Lieutenant Lerner in droid maintenance she said that one of her staff was missing too," at this point he looked at Jaysica, "though she did say that things were running quite smoothly without her." and

Jaysica frowned as the colonel went on, "Added to the fact that someone who almost crashed their ship on final approach last night was shortly after yelling about how a certain major may still be alive in a bar full of people, I figured that you were all up to something stupid." Then he turned towards Mallia, "And that better not include taking a ship of the line out without permission."

"This is down to me sir," Mace replied, "I'm taking some volunteers in my ship to get the major back."

"So it's six of you against an entire garrison is it? I notice there's one of you missing, the brunette who attends briefings in a bikini." Colonel Ergard said, making reference to what Kara had been wearing when he had first met her, "I take it she had more sense than to join in this fools errand?"

"She's in the brig." Mallia said, "She hit Captain Tarl."

"Again?" Colonel Ergard responded, then he grinned, "You'd think he'd learn to duck."

"She'll be there for a couple of months." Mace said, "We don't have the money to pay her fine, even between us."

"And you don't have a way in to this place either do you?" Colonel Ergard said, holding up the map in his hand.

"Not this time." Mace admitted, "We had help from that slicer last time."

"Lieutenant Pay?" the colonel asked.

"That's the one."

"Wait here, all of you." Colonel Ergard said as he put the sketch back on the table, "I'm going to try and sort this out and I'll be back as soon as I can."

"What are you doing here?" Gayal Tharr demanded when she found Vay Udra waiting for her on the shuttle's landing platform.

Vay was an assistant to Moff Horratan. Aged twenty, he introduced her to others as an intern sent by the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order, or COMPNOR as it was known. However the local head of COMPNOR admitted no knowledge of her assignment and Imperial Intelligence shared the general view that the moff was having an affair with her.

"Gregor sent me to keep an eye on things." The young woman answered, "He doesn't want any mistakes being made. The capture of Vorn Larcus represents a massive breakthrough in the sector for our fight against the rebellion, much more beneficially than the spy you planted with them. I'm to make sure that things go smoothly."

"Now look here young lady," Gayal snapped, "I don't care who you think you are, but I am a senior member of Imperial Intelligence and I don't take orders from the likes of you."

"No," Vay interrupted, "but you do take orders from Gregor and he's ordering you to take me with you."

"Well until he turns up here personally to give me that order I'm not going to let you aboard this ship. It is after all the property of Imperial Intelligence, not whatever branch of COMPNOR provides courtesans to moffs." And Gayal stormed past Vay onto the shuttle.

Vay stood and watched as the shuttle's boarding ramp was sealed and the ship rose into the air. She waited as the shuttle's wings unfolded and it flew off before she turned and headed inside.

In a tower overlooking the landing platform two figures stood watching through macrobinoculars.

"You're friend handled that rather nicely." Director Helieos said, "How did you know she could do it?"

"Vay has a way of manipulating people." Garm replied, "She'll have told Gayal that the moff ordered her to accompany Gayal to Allastra. But she'll still have put the idea into Gayal's head not to take her."

"Now if anything goes wrong it all blows back on her for not taking the moff's agent with her. Even though an intern couldn't possibly make any difference to the outcome. Even if nothing goes wrong Gayal's still ignored an order from the moff."

"There is one thing that worries me sir." Garm said.

"Really? What's that?"

"Well what is Vay going to ask for in return for doing me this favour?"

"I wouldn't worry about that." Director Helieos said, "What can she prove?"

"I don't know sir. But I've still got a bad feeling about this."

Garm met Vay in a deserted corridor.

"It's done." She said.

"Thank you." Garm replied and he started to walk past her.

"So why did you want me to do it?" she asked, grabbing his arm, "You took a big risk even asking me."

"Director Helieos wanted-"

"That's not it." Vay interrupted, "I can feel it. You don't want things to go to plan. You want that woman from Intelligence to fail don't you? But why?"

"That's nonsense." Garm said as he shook his arm free and continued on his way.

"It's because of your father isn't it?" Vay called after him, "Your feelings are clear to me, I can sense the conflict in you. You don't want him broken do you? You want, you want him-"

“Alright!” Garm shouted, spinning around to face Vay, “I don’t want him to be made to break. I want him to repent. I want him to admit he was wrong. I want him back home, along with my sister. I want my family back.” And he continued on his way.

“Be careful Garm.” Vay said, “There are people who could use that against you.” Then she whispered to herself, “Including me.”

## 4.

When the colonel returned he was not alone. Accompanying him were the slicer Geran Pay and more surprisingly, Kara.

"What's going on?" Mace asked when the trio walked onto his ship.

"The colonel told me about your major," Geran replied, "and I figured that I owed you. It was my mission that got him shot after all."

"And he got my fine paid." Kara added.

"You had five thousand credits handy?" Tharun asked.

"Not me," the colonel replied.

"Lyssa." Kara interrupted, "He went to the boss's daughter. She got all his stuff after all and that included the credits he still had stashed away."

"Good job there are no dress shops nearby," Tharun said, "or she'd have spent the lot. And I don't think a fine can be paid in fancy clothing."

"I could have paid it myself if it worked that way." Kara replied.

"So the major's little princess just stumped up the cash to pay your fine then?" Jaysica asked.

"I told her about him still being alive and how we needed Kara's help to rescue him." Colonel Ergard said.

"So she's not such an ice queen after all." Mace said.

"Oh she got something out of it too." Colonel Ergard said, grinning.

"I had to say 'please'." Kara said and she shuddered, "And 'thank you'. To her. I feel so dirty."

"I'll help scrub you." Tharun said.

"What matters now," Colonel Ergard said, ignoring Tharun's remark, "is that there are now eight of us instead of five and we have a way of getting into the place where Vorn is being held. Would you like to explain your idea Lieutenant?"

Geran stepped forwards.

"I'm sure those of you who are part of Major Larcus's unit are aware of the virus left in the base's computer network." He began and the rebels nodded, "Well I've been monitoring the reports that it has been sending at regular intervals," he continued, "and it has allowed me to accurately plot the supply schedule for the base. Including the point of origin of each regular shipment."

"So we pretend to be a supply ship like last time?" Tharun asked.

"No, I doubt that will work again." Geran replied, "We need to actually be a supply ship. Or more precisely, we're going to steal one."

"Stealing a shuttle's not that complicated," Mace said, "after all there are thousands of them sat on landing pads all over the sector. But won't you still have to create false landing instructions for us?"

"No, you misunderstand me." Geran said, "We won't be pretending to be in a supply ship – we'll actually be in one of the base's already scheduled ships. That way we don't need to worry about faking codes, we'll just fly in as the ship is meant to."

"Sounds complicated to me." Colonel Ergard said, folding his arms, "Not the stealing the shuttle bit, I've done that myself before now and I'm sure Vorn's team has as well. But how do we do it without the Empire noticing and pulling the ship from the duty roster?"

"While its being loaded." Tobis said quietly.

"Exactly." Geran said, "Full marks to the quiet one who can't lie very well. We infiltrate one of the bases that supplies our target and then we sneak onto the ship and take out its crew. Then we just do what air traffic control tells us to and land where we suspect the major's being held."

"Will it really be that easy?" Krissa asked, "I mean won't there be security at this other base? And how will we know which ship to take?"

Geran held up his datapad.

"I've got six weeks worth of supply orders here." He said, "Plus the schedule for the next two. We pick out a weakly protected base and watch which ship is getting the right cargo loaded onto it."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Colonel Ergard said, "Which is more than you had two hours ago."

Captain Larman of the Imperial Army watched the lambda-class shuttle as its wings folded upwards immediately before landing.

"Guard!" he shouted as the shuttle's ramp lowered, "Attention!"

In unison the soldiers and stormtroopers lined up on each side of the walkway leading from the building behind Captain Larman stood up straight and still. Those carrying rifles held them at their shoulders. Captain Larman himself stood at attention and brought his hand up to his forehead in salute.

Momentarily a woman in a black Imperial uniform disembarked from the shuttle, followed by a pair of armed men.

"Captain Larman ma'am." He said as the woman approached him.

"At ease captain." Gayal Tharr replied without returning his salute. Disappointed, the captain lowered his hand.

"At ease." He called out and the assembled troops adjusted their posture. Then Captain Larman spoke to Gayal, "I'm honoured you could join us." He said.

"I don't care about your opinions captain," she replied as she walked towards the building and Captain Larman turned to follow her, "I'm just here to take custody of Vorn Larcus. Here is my authorisation." And she handed him a datapad. He took the device without bothering to look at it. He did not want to appear as if he did not believe that she was telling the truth.

"Of course. His doctors are confident that he will be fit to travel in twenty-four hours, forty-eight at the most."



## 5.

The primary spaceport on Allastra handled hundreds of bulk freighters every day, including support ships for the Imperial armed forces. These vessels were far too large and cumbersome for it to be practical for them to deliver small fractions of their cargoes to each of the bases they carried supplies for. Instead they deposited their entire cargo here at the civilian spaceport where it was transferred to shuttles and repulsor trucks to be sent to its final destination. Since the starport was a civilian facility, the local authorities instead of the Imperial military protected it. So long as someone was wearing an Imperial uniform and not acting suspiciously the guards did not even ask for identification as they waved them through the gates to the Imperial freight terminal.

"Okay, I'm in." Jaysica whispered into her comlink after walking right past a pair of bored looking Allastran security guards.

"Great." Geran replied, "Now you're looking for a shipment of power converters. Find the ship and get back to us without getting caught."

"Don't worry about that." Jaysica replied, "I look terrible in orange."

Jaysica paused as she slipped the comlink back into the pocket of her Imperial uniform. She was the only one of the group that had such a disguise on hand and so had been chosen to infiltrate the base ahead of the rest.

The landing area was easy to pick out from the gate; the tall vertical tail wings of the Imperial shuttles were clearly visible over the intervening buildings and Jaysica headed directly towards them. All of the workers she saw wore local uniforms rather than Imperial ones. They ignored her and she did likewise, not wanting to draw attention to herself. Then she saw what she was looking for.

Crates marked with the six-spoked seal of the Galactic Empire surrounded the Imperial shuttle. Cautiously Jaysica approached the crates, halting only when she could see the holoseals that had been placed on them. She looked around quickly until she saw a datapad resting on one of the crates and she walked over and picked it up. Activating the device, she held it against one of the seals and looked at the display. There she saw that the cargo had originated in the Estran system and had come here directly. Unfortunately as was all too common, the Imperial customs agent who had processed the cargo had failed to upload its contents to the shipping database.

Jaysica put down the datapad and pulled a small multi purpose tool from her pocket. She unfolded the short knife blade it contained at the same time as she crouched down behind the crate and then began to scrape at the seal, trying to prise it off.

Suddenly the crate rose up in front of her as a loading droid picked it up and Jaysica fell backwards, landing in the mud on the ground.

"Who the hell are you?" a man called out as Jaysica was exposed, "And what the hell are you doing?"

Jaysica looked up to see a man in the uniform of an Imperial pilot staring at her. She smiled at the pilot and got back to her feet.

"Well?" the pilot said, "Who are you?"

"Never mind who I am lieutenant." Jaysica snapped back at the officer as she positioned the hand that held her blade where he could not see it and wiping mud from her uniform with the other, "Why are you transporting goods that aren't registered on the shipping database?"

The pilot was taken aback by Jaysica's sudden verbal assault.

"What gives you the right to ask that question?" he demanded, "Can't you see I outrank you?"

"What I see *sir*," she said putting the emphasis on the 'sir', "is that you are in the process of loading crates onto an official military flight that are unregistered."

"They have holoseals on them don't they? Now tell me who you are before I call security."

"I've already called them." Jaysica lied, "I called them as soon as I saw what had been done to that crate."

And she pointed to a crate behind the officer. As she expected he turned around to look at it.

"What? I don't see any-" and that was when Jaysica struck. She jabbed her knife into his ribs and twisted it. There was a 'snap' as the blade broke off, but the damage was done and the pilot fell forwards onto the ground unable to cry out because of the hole in his chest cavity. Instead he lay on the ground convulsing. He attempted to reach for his comlink but before he could pull it from his pocket Jaysica brought the heel of her boot down on the back of his throat and he lay still. Jaysica looked at the broken tool she still held in her hand.

"That was brand new as well." She said to herself.

Crouching down beside the body of the pilot Jaysica rummaged through his pockets and laid out the contents on the ground beside him. Of most interest to her was his datapad. She activated the device as

soon as she found it and looked up his orders. She smiled as she recognised the listed cargo and destination as the one she was looking for and she turned the datapad off again.

"You, droid." She called out to the nearest loading droid. The machines had continued to move the crates from where they sat onto the shuttle in front of her, completely oblivious to the fact that she had just killed its pilot. The droid turned towards her and halted, awaiting further instructions.

"Take some of these crates to the fence." She told the droid, "Stack them in a pyramid beside it."

Still without saying anything, the droid picked up another crate and headed directly for the perimeter fence.

Jaysica pulled out her comlink as she watched it begin to construct the stack that she had ordered it to.

"I've found the ship." She signalled, "I've got a droid building us a staircase over the fence now."

"We see it." Colonel Ergard replied, "We'll be there in five minutes."

The perimeter fence was a simple metal mesh running all the way around the Imperial freight terminal.

Though it was not electrified, a series of horizontal wires ran around the entire length of the fence. These were designed to monitor for breaks or distortions in the fence, so anyone trying to cut through or climb over it would find themselves face to face with a squad of Allastran Defence Force soldiers before they were done.

However, by lying on the crate at the top of the pyramid that Jaysica had ordered the droid to build just inside the fence allowed her to reach over without touching any of the security wires and lift first Krissa and then Mallia over the fence. From that point they were able to help the larger members of the team over the fence also.

"We need to get rid of these crates before the shuttle crew spot them." Geran said.

"Don't worry." Jaysica replied, "I killed the pilot when he found me messing with them."

"A ship like that has three crew though." Tobis pointed out.

"Oh no." Mallia said.

"Captain Grayle, Sergeant Verser," Colonel Ergard said, drawing his blaster, "with me. The rest of you do something about those crates and keep out of sight."

The three men ran towards the shuttle, using the crates yet to be loaded to keep themselves hidden from the two Imperial crewmen still believed to be on board. They came to a halt at the bottom of the loading ramp.

"Got that deck sweeper handy captain?" Colonel Ergard asked and Mace put away his pistol and instead unslung a bulky carbine from over his shoulder and nodded, "Alright then," the colonel continued, "we follow the next droid. Captain Grayle, you've got the lead."

The rebels waited while one of the loading droids picked up another crate and brought it to the shuttle. As soon as it began to walk up the ramp with its cargo they leapt up and ran up after it, using the noise of the large machine to cover their own footsteps.

"Cover me." Mace whispered when they reached the top of the ramp and found themselves in the vessel's cargo hold, "I'm heading for the cockpit."

Mace heard voices as he crept closer to the shuttle's cockpit. It appeared that the two remaining flight crew had not noticed that their pilot was missing. Instead they seemed to be taking advantage of the absence of their commanding officer to conduct a private conversation about landspeeders. Keeping his weapon at his shoulder, Mace moved closer.

Unexpectedly one of the Imperial crewmen suddenly appeared in the doorway to the cockpit. Unarmed, he was no physical threat to Mace, but that did not mean that he could not raise the alarm. Mace fired.

The deckswEEPing blaster emitted a low energy pulse designed to stun rather than kill an opponent. Unlike a standard blaster bolt it was totally unfocused and the pulse spread out to cover a wide arc. This made it an excellent, if short ranged weapon suitable for use in boarding actions.

The crewman in the doorway was totally enveloped by the bright blue energy pulse and he collapsed in a heap on the deck. But a combination of the man's body and the reinforced structure of the cockpit seat in which he sat shielded the second crewman from the blast enough for him to be unharmed by the attack. One drawback to the deckswEEPer that Mace carried was that it took some time for its action to complete a recharge cycle and Mace knew that by the time it was ready to fire again the final crewman would have alerted the freight terminal's control tower.

Dropping the deckswEEPer, Mace dived through the cockpit door and grabbed hold of the final crewman. The man lashed out at Mace as the smuggler pulled him from his seat and out of reach of the communication system. A lucky blow caught Mace in the eye and he released his grip just enough for the man to break free. But before he could get back to the shuttle's control panel Tharun dived into him and knocked him to the deck.

"Stay down!" Tharun yelled at the man.

The crewman lashed out again until Tharun brought the butt of his rifle down on the back of the man's head and he lay still.

"Take their uniforms and stash these two somewhere." Colonel Ergard said as he entered the cockpit and sat down, looking at the control panel for any sign that the communication system had been activated to warn the control tower. Satisfied that they remained undiscovered, Colonel Ergard activated his own comlink. "The

way is clear," he said, "everyone get onboard and bring that body with you. We can't have anyone finding him."

Shortly after there was the sound of footsteps on the loading ramp and the remaining rebels dashed aboard the shuttle, dragging the body of the pilot between them.

"What do we do with him?" Jaysica asked.

"First we take his uniform." Colonel Ergard said, "I know its got a hole in it and a large blood stain, but that's all at the back and we don't have enough to go around anyway. Captain Mayan, you take this uniform. Lieutenants Pay and Dall should fit the other two we've got."

"That still leaves five of us without." Kara said, "And it's not like the four with them look much better. Two don't fit properly, one has a massive bloodstain and the last one is covered in mud."

"Yes well we'll just have to hope we can find something to fit everyone when we get where we're going then." Colonel Ergard replied.

"But what about the body?" Jaysica repeated, "Are we just going to keep him here stinking the place up?"

"It's a long flight." Mace commented, "We'll just throw him out somewhere on the way."

The compact shuttle was capable of travelling rapidly between star systems while operated by only its single occupant. It lifted up from the private landing pad on the outskirts of the Estranian capital and headed into the upper atmosphere. The local air defences rapidly detected the vessel, but immediately stood down when they received a priority override signal from it.

Effortlessly the small vessel avoided contact with other air and space traffic until it was outside of Estran's gravity well. Then, with a brilliant flash of light it made the jump to hyperspace.

The rebels waited for the loading droids to complete their work before they did anything more. "Well let's see how well they know the crew's voices then." Geran said as the loading ramp slammed shut and he activated the shuttle's communications system. "Tower from flight nine, our cargo is loaded and we are ready for take off. Requesting launch instructions."

"Flight nine please hold." A controller in the tower replied.

"What if they don't go for this?" Krissa asked from one of the other flight stations.

"So long as they don't ask to send anyone aboard we'll be fine," Mallia said from the pilot's seat, "A delay is fine providing that we're still listed as an official flight."

Before Krissa could speak again the communication system came to life.

"Flight nine you are cleared for take off. Climb to sixteen thousand metres and take heading two forty. Be aware of poor weather over destination, though it is expected to clear before your arrival."

"Thanks tower." Geran said, "Flight nine out."

Before Geran could even turn off the communication system Mallia had engaged the shuttle's engines and the ship was raising itself up into the air.

"Good afternoon everybody, this is your pilot speaking," Mallia said into the intercom, "we've just been given clearance to take off and we're on our way."