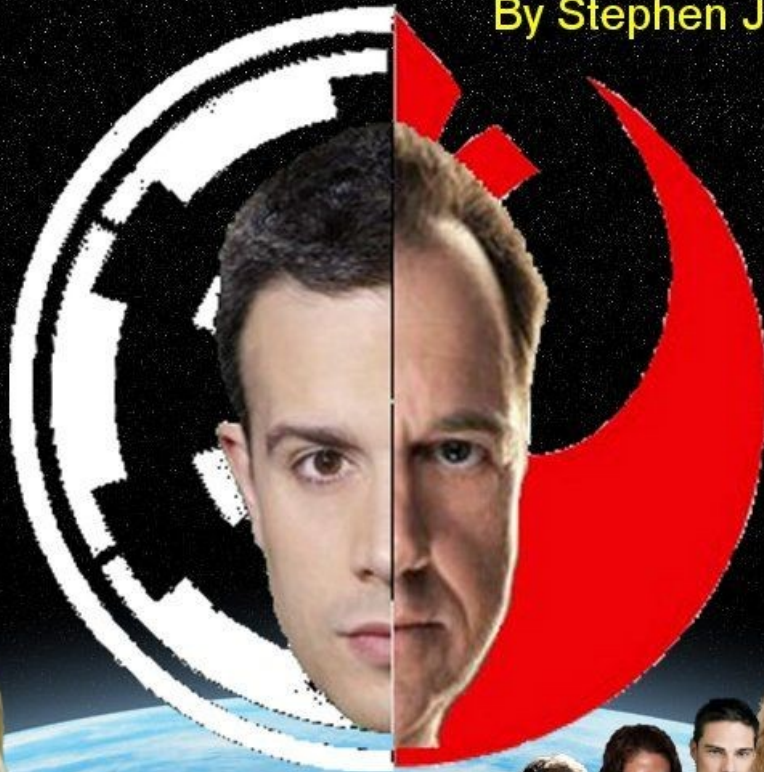


STAR WARS

2-11: My Enemy's Enemy

By Stephen J Dutton



*By JH
JH/JH*



Civil war turns father against son

IT IS A TIME OF CRISIS. REBEL FORCES FIGHTING AGAINST THE EVIL GALACTIC EMPIRE ARE OUTNUMBERED AND OUTGUNNED BY THEIR FOES. THEY MUST INSTEAD RELY ON GUERILLA WARFARE AND HIT AND FADE STRIKES BY SMALL GROUPS AGAINST STRONGER FORCES.

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

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

MY ENEMY'S ENEMY

INTERCEPTING A CALL FOR HELP THE OCCUPANTS OF THE *SILVER HAWK* RUSH TO THE AID OF ANOTHER TEAM. ONLY TO DISCOVER THAT THEY ARE HELPING SOMEONE THAT MAGE GRAYLE WOULD RATHER NOT HAVE TO...

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

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1.

A hyperspace jump directly from the Alliance's sector headquarters to the remote world selected as a new safe world was impossible. The remote planet was located high within the formation of star systems known as the Spire Worlds, a collection of systems that rose up between two protruding clouds of gas that were on the fringe of the nebula that neighbored the sector. This region was littered with obstacles that generated mass shadows in hyperspace. Most were relatively small, but enough were large enough to force a ship back to real space that wise starship crews would instead make numerous short 'hops' through hyperspace to get from one end to the other rather than risk being destroyed by an accidental collision.

So it was that the light freighter the *Silver Hawk* was now drifting while its flight crew calculated the next step of their journey.

"That's it. We can jump whenever you're ready." Major Vorn Larcus said. He commanded the rebel unit that was assigned to the ship on a permanent basis and though he was not technically one of the ship's two crewmen he often functioned as navigator given his experience in the field.

Beside Vorn sat the *Silver Hawk's* owner and captain, Mace Grayle.

"Okay then," he said, taking hold of the control column.

"So no mystery sightings this time?" Vorn asked when the ship began to accelerate. On a previous mission near to the nebula Mace and the former mercenary Tharun Verser had claimed to see an unidentified vessel briefly before it appeared to head into the nebula itself and conversations with other Alliance personnel had since revealed that they were not the only ones to have made such sightings.

"No, not this time major." Mace replied.

Then, just as the *Silver Hawk* approached the location where it was calculated it should enter hyperspace the ship's communication system came to life.

"Emergency! Emergency!" the panicked sounding voice exclaimed over the static-filled channel, "Can anyone hear me?"

"That's on the Alliance distress frequency." Mace said and he cut the power from the *Silver Hawk's* engines.

"This is Major Larcus." Vorn said, activated the transmitter in response to the distress call, "We are barely receiving you. What is your emergency?" he took care not to mention the name of the ship. According to Imperial records the *Silver Hawk* was a legitimate cargo vessel and Mace a law-abiding trader. If the Empire was listening in, using either his or his ship's name would destroy his cover.

"Under attack by Imperial forces. TIE fighters, a full squadron at least. I'm trying to shake them, the captain's missing-" then the transmission broke up completely.

"Hello? Can you hear me?" Vorn said urgently, then he looked at Mace, "We'll need Tobis." He said.

Mace activated the ship's intercom.

"Tobis, get up to the cockpit now. Bring Harvey with you as well."

Moments later a young man in overalls appeared in the cockpit doorway, behind him an R5 type astromech droid rolled along with him.

"We've just received a distress signal." Vorn said, getting up from his chair "But it was cut off. Can you see if you can get it back?"

"Err, yes of course sir." Tobis replied, taking Vorn's place behind his captain while the droid chirped and plugged itself into the ship's systems. Meanwhile Vorn sat down again in one of the cockpit's two rear seats. Almost immediately, Tobis found what he was looking for.

"The transmission was an ELEL signal." He said, "The energy output from the nebula is interfering with it."

Extremely low energy level communications were widely used in the Alliance. Though their range could be limited at times, they were harder for eavesdroppers to detect by chance.

"Can you tell where it came from?" Mace asked.

"Err." Tobis replied then he looked over his shoulder, "Harvey?" he said to his droid, "Can you tell?"

The droid let out a shrill squeal and Tobis looked back at the control panel.

"Looks like the Kelner system." Tobis said, "Based off the direction and signal strength that is. I'm guessing that we're the only ones who heard it. We're between there and headquarters."

"I'll plot the jump." Mace said, "I think you should go and let our passengers know major."

Most of the *Silver Hawk's* other passengers were in the ship's communal lounge area. Of these, three were the other members of Vorn's field unit, Tharun Verser, Kara Bilstran and Jaysica Horbid. On this occasion the ship also carried two other passengers, both bound for the safe world. One of these two was present in the lounge, Colonel Max Collis was the head of the Alliance's local special forces and he had spent much of voyage so far trying to convince Tharun to transfer to one of his units. Thankfully for Vorn, Tharun had turned down the offer.

"Shouldn't we have jumped by now?" Kara asked when Vorn appeared, "What's the hold up boss?"

"We've intercepted a distress signal." Vorn replied.

"One of ours?" Tharun asked.

"It looks that way." Vorn said, "Mace is plotting a new jump now."

"But I thought we were stood down for a week." Jaysica protested as she approached the table where the others sat with a bowl of cereal in her hand.

"Jaysica," Vorn said, "you may want to be careful, we're about to jump into-" but before he could finish his sentence the Silver Hawk lurched as it entered hyperspace. Unprepared, Jaysica toppled forwards and the bowl flew out of her grasp. It landed on Colonel Collis.

What the hell are you doing?" he yelled as the cereal ran down his tunic. Kara lent forwards and cradled her head in her hands, while Jaysica just stared back at him in horror.

The colonel leapt to his feet.

"Give me twenty!" he shouted and pointed to the floor at his feet.

"What?" Jaysica said.

"What?" Colonel Collis repeated, "Did you just say 'what'? When I give you an order the first and last words out of your mouth are 'sir'. Understand?"

"What?" Jaysica said again.

"Did she just say 'what' again?" Colonel Collis snapped, looking around at Kara and Tharun.

"Sir yes sir." Tharun replied with a smile.

"Push-ups Jaysica." Vorn said, "The colonel wants twenty push ups from you."

"Oh right. Wait, twenty?"

"I'm still not hearing 'sir' coming out of your mouth young lady! And I'm not seeing my push-ups either. Now get to it before I make it fifty!"

Jaysica glanced at Vorn who just nodded slowly.

"Sir, yes sir." Jaysica said softly and she got down onto her hands and knees.

"With each one I want you shout out 'I will keep hold of my food.' I'll be listening while I change into something that doesn't have your breakfast on it." And Colonel Collis began to head for the cabin he was sharing with Vorn and Tharun. On his way he paused and pointed at Kara, "You! Count them!"

"Sir, yes sir!" Kara replied with glee and she got up and went to stand beside Jaysica, "One!" she called out as Jaysica shouted, "I will keep hold of my food." Between gasps.

"I'd love to stay and watch," Vorn said, "but I need to go tell someone she'll be arriving at the safe world later than expected."

Vorn walked in the same direction the Colonel Collis had gone in, but rather than turning through the open door into their cabin he stopped knocked on the closed door of the one opposite.

"Lyssa darling, its your father." He said.

A moment later the door slid open, but instead of his daughter Vorn found himself facing a golden coloured protocol droid.

"Emsee." he said, "I need to talk to Lyssa."

"Tell him I've nothing to say." A woman's voice called out from the top bunk.

"I'm sorry master Larcus." The droid said, "But Miss Larcus appears unwilling to talk to you."

"Get out of my way Emsee." He said.

"Of course sir." The droid said, unable to refuse an order from him and it stepped out of the cabin to allow him easy access.

"Go away daddy." Lyssa said without looking up from the magazine she was flicking through.

"Look, I know you're angry about having to leave headquarters and move to the safe world-" Vorn began before Lyssa interrupted him.

"I don't want to stay at that grotty old space station either!" she snapped, "But I'd rather be there than some hideous savage planet where there isn't even reliable power or water. I want to go back to Estran. I could stay with Garm."

"I doubt that." Vorn said. Garm was his son and Lyssa's older brother. As an agent in the Imperial Security Bureau he was even more hostile to Garm's involvement with the rebellion than the self-centred Lyssa, "Anyway, I just came to tell you that we're going to be delayed. We've picked up a distress signal we need to investigate. Perhaps it would be better if you didn't stay cooped up in here and sat in the lounge with the others."

Lyssa finally looked up, but only to glare at her father briefly before turning her attention back to the magazine.

"Fine. Have it your way." Vorn said and he left the cabin. When he got back to the lounge he was not surprised to discover that Jaysica and Kara were arguing.

"Six." Kara said.

"Seven." Jaysica replied.

"The last one didn't count. You didn't do it properly."

Vorn just shook his head. This was something he had no intention of interfering in.
“What the hell is going on?” Colonel Collis demanded from behind Vorn, “Where are my push-ups?”
“She won’t count them properly.” Jaysica replied before remembering to add, “Sir.”
“She’s not doing them properly.” Kara responded, folding her arms and smirking.
“Well then I suppose she needs to start again doesn’t she?” Colonel Collis said.
“Excellent idea sir.” Kara said, her smile growing.
“And you can show her how they’re done.” The colonel added.
Kara’s face fell.
“Give me twenty! Both of you!” then the colonel looked at Tharun, “Sergeant! Count them off!”
Tharun leapt to his feet and snapped to attention.
“Sir yes sir!” he shouted.
“We’ll need Kara in the turret when we drop out of hyperspace colonel.” Vorn whispered and the colonel nodded. With that Vorn headed back to the cockpit.
“The good news,” Vorn said as he sat down behind Mace and Tobis, “is that, thanks to Colonel Collis, when we arrive both Jaysica and Kara will be in top physical condition.”

Garm Larcus awoke when his comlink went off.
“What time is it?” his wife moaned as he rolled over to pick up the device. Garm looked at the chronometer beside the comlink.
“Just after five.” He said then he picked up the comlink and answered it.
“Garm!” an excited female voice exclaimed before he had a chance to say anything.
“It would be her wouldn’t it?” Jennay said from beside Garm, loud enough for the comlink to pick it up.
“Hang on Vay.” Garm said into the comlink and he got out of bed and took the comlink onto the landing, closing the bedroom door behind him, “Okay then, what is it?”
“We need to go to Kelner!” Vay said excitedly.
“Kelner? Vay do you know what time it is?”
“Yes it’s almost five in the morning. But we need to go there now.”
“Why?”
“Because the garrison there just caught a team of rebel infiltrators. One of them may be your father.”
Garm cut the link and rushed back into the bedroom.
“Got to go.” He said as he kissed his wife and grabbed his uniform.

2.

Mace brought the *Silver Hawk* out of hyperspace on the edge of the Kelner system and immediately cut power to everything he could, letting the ship drift. Beside him, Vorn had taken Tobis's place in the co-pilot's seat when the engineer left to monitor the engines directly. Behind them Colonel Collis had made his way to the cockpit to observe after seeing to it that Kara took her usual place in the *Silver Hawk*'s sole dorsally mounted gun turret.

"So where the hell are they?" the colonel asked.

"We can't be sure." Mace said, "But if they really are an Alliance vessel they'll head for this end of the system so they can try and make a clear jump in the direction of headquarters. Not directly of course."

"There! Vorn said suddenly and he pointed into space. Both Mace and the colonel turned to see what he was pointing at and they too saw the brief flashes of green light.

"Is that weapons fire?" Colonel Collis asked.

"Looks like it," Mace said, "and from the colour I'd say it was Imperial. Hang on, we're going in."

As the *Silver Hawk*'s systems came back to life Vorn activated the intercom.

"Kara get ready, we're going in. You're clear to fire at any Imperial vessels we encounter."

"What if they identify us?" Colonel Collis asked.

"No chance." Mace replied, "Right now our energy output will be fluctuating so much they won't know who we are. Trust me Colonel, Tobis is good at altering engine signatures."

"I hope so."

Mace flew the *Silver Hawk* at an oblique angle rather than heading directly for the battle raging ahead of them.

"Stand by Kara." He said over the intercom as the ship began to pass by the fighting, then he suddenly banked the *Silver Hawk* to bring it around behind the Imperial ships, "Now!" he shouted over the intercom. The *Silver Hawk* streaked past the undefended rear of the Imperial fighter formation and Kara opened fire, sending a steady stream of brilliant red energy bolts hurtling across space. Though the *Silver Hawk*'s only laser cannon was one intended for civilian vessels, Imperial TIE fighters were unshielded and so fragile in their construction that a good clean hit would vaporise one. The suddenness of the strafing run meant that Kara did not have the opportunity to get a good clear shot at any particular fighter, but her sustained fire into the densely packed formation of ships could not help but strike some of them.

One of the TIE fighters was hit centrally and exploded, while another one suffered a massive power surge through its control systems and with blue lightning flaring across its hull it spun into another of the fighters and both were consumed by the resulting fireball.

"Did you see that?" Kara exclaimed over the intercom, "I got three!"

"Don't get cocky!" Vorn replied, "That still means there's still nine of them left out there."

Sure enough, there were sufficient Imperial fighters remaining that whoever was in command of them felt confident enough to order two to break off from the pursuit of the other rebel ship and instead target the *Silver Hawk*.

"Here they come!" Kara said as she spun the turret around to point behind the ship. The targeting system of her weapon showed the two Imperial fighters clearly as they gained on the *Silver Hawk*. Mace banked again, just as the lead fighter opened fire. Though the TIE fighter's laser cannons were more powerful than the *Silver Hawk*'s, the transport ship benefited from a much stronger hull that was able to absorb much of the energy of the hit.

"That was close." Vorn said as the ship lurched.

"Too close." Mace agreed.

Unfortunately for the Imperial pilot, in carrying out his attack run he had kept his course constant for just a few seconds too long and in that time Kara acquired his ship and returned fire. The laser blasts from her cannon struck the central cockpit of the TIE fighter, incinerating its pilot and sending its twin hexagonal wings tumbling off in separate directions. The second fighter veered off to avoid the flying debris and Kara swung the turret around to follow it. She fired two short bursts that narrowly missed the fighter, but both times the pilot reacted in the same way, rolling to starboard. So when she fired her third volley she swung the cannon in that direction so that as the pilot attempted to evade her attack once more he instead flew his craft into the path of it.

"Four more coming in!" Vorn exclaimed.

"I see them." Kara replied, bringing the *Silver Hawk*'s laser cannon to bear. The leader of the TIE squadron had clearly decided that sending only two fighters was not enough and had now split his remaining ships into two roughly equal groups, with the larger going after the *Silver Hawk*.

"Can we take that many?" Colonel Collis asked.

"I doubt it." Mace replied and he activated the ship's communications system, "Attention rebel vessel," he began, "we're far enough out for a hyperspace jump here. Plot a jump of fifteen light minutes on your current heading, we'll be right behind you."

"I like it." Vorn said as he began to feed numbers into the ship's navigation computer.

"Running away?" Colonel Collis said.

"Those TIE's can't follow us." Mace reminded him, "By the time they get a hyperspace capable ship out here we'll have made a second jump and be away."

There was a sudden flash as the other rebel ship entered hyperspace.

"Got those numbers yet?" Mace asked Vorn.

"Go!" Vorn replied as he entered the final pieces of data for the hyperspace jump.

Almost as soon as the stars outside blurred into the alternative dimension of hyperspace they reappeared in a slightly different pattern as the *Silver Hawk* returned to real space again. There, right outside the cockpit was the vessel that had sent the distress signal. Like the *Silver Hawk* it was a Corellian light freighter, but rather than the near ubiquitous YT-1300 it was one of the more modern YT-2400. A YT-2400 that Mace knew well.

"On no." he said, "It can't be."

"Can't be what?" Colonel Collis asked.

"The *Beauty Queen*." Vorn told him, leaning back in the chair, "Captain Vayne's ship."

"So you know her?" Colonel Collis then asked, looking from Vorn to Mace.

"Unfortunately, yes." Mace said.

"Well the signal said that she's missing." Vorn said, "So perhaps we should find out what's happening." And he activated the *Silver Hawk*'s short range communications, "Hello *Beauty Queen* this is *Silver Hawk*." He transmitted.

"Major Larcus? Good to hear from you. It's Sen." Came the reply. Sen Verid was Inra Vayne's engineer, occupying the same position on her ship as Tobis did on the *Silver Hawk*.

"Yes, I recognised your voice." Vorn said before he added, "Look, we should be getting out of here before the Empire can find us. I suggest we fall back to the Lasten system. It's uninhabited but the fourth planet has a breathable atmosphere. When we get there follow us down."

"Copy that major." Sen replied, "Lead the way."

The fourth planet of the Lasten system had been settled only briefly. Many of the few colonists who had lived here were killed during the Clone Wars when a warship was shot down in orbit and tragically plummet to the ground right on top of the only settlement. The handful of survivors left to start new lives elsewhere. Mace chose a landing sight not far from the remains of the colony. Though the radiation levels were not dangerous, they were still sufficiently elevated to disrupt any orbital scans of the area should a ship happen to pass close by while the two rebel vessels were on the ground. As soon as the *Beauty Queen* set down Sen, accompanied by another male human emerged and approached the open access ramp of the *Silver Hawk*. "Permission to come aboard?" Sen asked when he saw Tharun standing at the top of the ramp, cradling a blaster rifle in his arms.

"Sen." Tharun replied, nodding his head once as the two men walked towards him, "The major's waiting in the lounge for you. Captain Grayle and Colonel Collis are with him."

"Did you just say 'colonel'?" Sen asked and he and his companion glanced at one another.

"I did. Colonel Collis. Specforce."

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

"We were sent to investigate the Empire's new tracking array on Kelner itself." Sen explained, "The plan was to insert a shunt that would allow us to disrupt the data feed back to their sector headquarters so we could slip past without being spotted. Lieutenant Laeven, our comms guy was supposed to take care of that. Anyway, someone triggered an alarm and the team wound up surrounded by stormtroopers. Coll here was the only one to get back to the ship."

"I take it you were with the ship the entire time?" Colonel Collis asked.

"I was. The captain doesn't like to leave it unattended." Sen answered.

"She's worried it might get scratched." Mace commented.

"I take it we're heading back to break them out then major?"

"Of course we are." Vorn said.

"Maybe not Inra." Mace added quietly.

Sen was able to provide the occupants of the *Silver Hawk* with the details of the Imperial base that the *Beauty Queen*'s occupants had used when they attempted to infiltrate the base.

"It's located on the largest of these small islands here." he explained, pointing at a cluster of dots on a map of the world of Kelner, "They're just outside the southern arctic region. They're not covered in snow or anything like that, but they're pretty cold and barren."

"Not many places to hide a ship." Mace commented.

"No." Sen agreed, "We came in low and made a controlled ditching into the ocean just off the coast and used inflatable boats to get the team ashore."

"How far did they get?" Colonel Collis asked.

"Through the fence." Sen answered, "Isn't that right?" and he looked at Coll who just nodded, "They were caught inside the complex itself."

"Getting down there unnoticed is going to be tough major." Tharun said as he looked at the map, "There's not much cover for an approaching ship."

"Try none." Mace said, "I'm guessing they'll be ready for a low altitude approach now."

Vorn looked through the available diagrams.

"Their air support is based a thousand kilometres away." He said.

"Yes, but if they're maintaining a CAP-" Mace began.

"I would be." Tharun interrupted and Mace smiled and nodded before continuing.

"A CAP would be on us as soon as we entered the atmosphere."

"Then our team needs to get from high orbit to ground level in, oh I don't know, how about two minutes or less?"

"That would do it." Colonel Collis said.

"Yeah, but neither of our ships can do that." Sen said.

"I'm not thinking about using our ships." Vorn said and he looked at Colonel Collis, "Colonel, officially I'm not officially cleared for combat duties at the moment and neither is Kara. How would you feel about leading this strike?"

"Why I'd be delighted major." Colonel Collis replied.

"Thank you." Vorn replied, "Then I suggest Kara waits here with Tobis and I'll wait on the *Beauty Queen* with Sen. That way we have two people per ship. Everyone else goes on the drop. Except Lyssa of course."

"Drop?" Sen repeated, "Major how are you planning on getting our ships to the planet?"

"Like I said," Vorn told him, "the team won't be taking the ships."

"Oh no." Tharun said, "You're kidding."

Vorn shook his head.

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

"You didn't have to come with me Lyssa dear." Vorn said as he sat in the co-pilot's seat of the *Beauty Queen* beside Sen. Lyssa sat behind him alongside Emsee. The protocol droid would monitor Imperial communications; even if it was unable to decode them it would give the rebels an idea of any change in the status of the outpost.

"What? Stay on that grotty little ship?" she replied, "Daddy, why can't you get assigned to a nice ship like this one?"

"Thank you miss." Sen said.

"See, even the crew are polite. Not like yours."

Sen grinned. Vorn activated the *Beauty Queen's* communications and signalled the *Silver Hawk*.

"Are you set to go?" he asked.

"Jeeves is ready to monitor Imperial signals at our end, so we're all fine here." Kara replied, "How are you?"

Vorn glanced at Sen.

"All set major. We're just passing behind the horizon now."

Vorn adjusted the communications to transmit not only to the *Silver Hawk*, but also throughout the *Beauty Queen*.

"Go." He said.

Immediately the *Beauty Queen* shook and Vorn watched through the cockpit's viewport as one of the ship's escape pods raced out ahead of it. Seconds later another one, this time from the *Silver Hawk* followed it.

The ion drives of the escape pods burned brightly as they propelled the tiny craft through space. The two rebel vessels had waited until they were concealed from surface tracking stations by the larger of Kelner's two moons before launching them. Now they would fly on a tangential course and slingshot around the moon itself to pick up more speed as they headed towards Kelner. By the time the tracking station the rebels were heading for spotted them it would be too late to summon an intercept before they landed.

Assuming there was not a combat air patrol, or CAP, already on station over the island.

Inside the escape pod launched from the *Silver Hawk* Jaysica screamed.

"Hey little lady!" Tharun shouted, his hands clamped over his ears, "How about relaxing?"

"We're going to die!" Jaysica exclaimed, pointing at the bleak lunar landscape zooming past beneath them, "Even if we make it past the moon we'll be shot down or caught when we crash!" Any way you look at it we're going to die!"

"I might not." Tharun said. Then he removed a hand from over an ear and clamped over Jaysica's mouth, "That's better." He said.

In the other escaped pod things were calmer. Mace and Colonel Collis sat at the front of the pod with Coll behind them.

"Get ready." Mace said, "We're approaching the point where the thrusters will fire to send us around the moon. Make sure your harnesses are secure. I'll see how the others are doing."

The escape pod had no ship-to-ship communications of its own, so Mace instead took his comlink from his belt to signal to Tharun. As soon as he activated it, all he heard were screams.

"What's going on?" Colonel Collis exclaimed.

"Jaysica just bit my hand!" Tharun replied.

"Well get ready for the thrusters firing." Mace said, "It's coming right up."

Right on cue, the escape pods' thrusters fired to send them around the moon instead of continuing straight on past it. The sudden acceleration pushed the pods' occupants into the thick padding of their seats and suddenly the dull blue-grey ball that was Kelner replaced the barren lunar landscape in their viewports.

"Everyone alright?" Mace asked as soon as he was able to breath again.

"I love doing this." Colonel Collis replied, while Coll just nodded calmly.

"I have one- no, check that, two contacts." The comscan operator reported, "Both moving on a ballistic trajectory. No identification."

"Meteors perhaps?" his officer suggested.

"Unlikely sir, there's little activity in this system."

"What about life readings?" the officer asked, wandering towards the comscan station and looking at the display for himself.

"Difficult to say at this stage sir. Both objects are radiating heat that could be from warm blooded occupants."

"Or it could be drive residue." The officer said and he activated his communications headset, "Intercept command, I have two targets." He stated flatly.

3.

The view from both escape pods was obscured by flame as they raced through the upper levels of the atmosphere, slowly losing speed to friction. Next to Tharun, Jaysica was still screaming as the former mercenary began to strap his blast helmet on.

"Get ready." He said as he folded his arms across his chest.

"Ready for what?" Jaysica asked, finally stopping screaming. Then she added, "Oh no." just as the pod lurched as its parachutes deployed and moments later it crashed nose first on the surface of Kelner.

"Out, out, out!" Tharun yelled, releasing his harness and began to climb towards for the hatch at the back of the escape pod.

"There's no need to shout at me." Jaysica replied.

The pod had landed at an angle, with its rear end sticking up into the air. So when Tharun opened the hatchway he had to jump down to the ground.

"Come on little lady, I'll catch you." He said, turning around and extending out his arms. But as Jaysica stood in the hatchway instead of jumping down she tripped and fell, landing right on top of Tharun and the pair collapsed in a heap.

"Sorry." Jaysica said, "It was an accident."

"At least you're out of the pod. Now come on."

"Wait."

"What?"

"Penny. I left her inside."

"Oh great." Tharun said and he cupped his hands together to form a step for Jaysica to climb back into the escape pod, "Hurry up and get her."

Jaysica clambered back inside the pod, disappearing for a few seconds.

"Got her." She called out as she reappeared in the hatchway now holding a bulky bag. Then she tripped and fell again.

Without a word, Coll jumped down from the *Beauty Queen's* escape pod. Reaching down he drew the pair of blaster pistols holster on his legs and held them up as he watched the horizon for any signs of danger. Behind him Mace and Colonel Collis climbed out of the escape pod also.

"They landed?" the officer asked the comscan operator.

"Yes sir, both objects made landfall within ten kilometres of this facility."

"That's no coincidence." The officer said, "Get onto security. Give them the locations and have them send some people out there."

"Com on little lady," Tharun said, "the Empire can't have failed to spot us coming down. We need to move."

"I'm coming." Jaysica replied as she tugged at her leg. The mud in which she had stepped had sucked her foot down into it and was refusing to release her.

"Let me." Tharun said and he slung his rifle and wrapped his arms around Jaysica's waist before lifting her upwards. Jaysica squealed as she was pulled free of the mud and waved her arms and legs about. This caused Tharun to over balance and he fell onto his back, Jaysica landing on top of him.

"Thanks." Jaysica said as she rolled off him.

"You're welcome." Tharun groaned in reply. Then he reached out and put a hand on Jaysica's shoulder,

"Quiet." he whispered.

"What is it?" Jaysica asked.

"I said be quiet." Tharun replied and he rolled onto his stomach and pulled a pair of macrobinoculars from his webbing, "Trouble." He added, putting the macrobinoculars down and removing the rifle from his back.

"What is it?" Jaysica repeated, grabbing the macrobinoculars and looking through them for herself.

Approaching fast she saw a trio of speeder bikes, each one ridden by a figure in the unmistakable black and white armour of Imperial scout troopers.

"Biker scouts." She said softly, "Three of them."

"That's what I saw." Tharun said as he tucked the butt of his rifle into his shoulder and line up the optical sight, "Keep watch." He said, "Let me know if any more turn up."

"Are we safe here?" Jaysica asked.

The pair of rebels had already put more than a hundred metres between themselves and the crashed escape pod, but given the relatively flat terrain that would not be enough to conceal them if they stood up.

"We should be fine if we stay down," Tharun answered, "and if you can shut the kriff up for two minutes."

"No need to be nasty." Jaysica mumbled.

Unsurprisingly, the Imperial soldiers brought their speeder bikes to a halt close to the escape pod and with blasters drawn they approached it. One of the three kept watch while the other two climbed up to the exposed hatch and looked inside. They jumped down almost immediately and one of them began to gesture with his arm, waving as if to indicate directions for the three scouts to search in. All three then spread out equally around the escape pod and looked away from one another. Tharun knew that the armour these stormtroopers wore included a visor that had excellent image processing capabilities. Primarily intended to allow them to maintain control of their lightweight speeder bikes at maximum speed, they also allowed them to search an area very effectively.

"That does it." Tharun whispered and he opened fire.

The first blast from his Blastech A280 heavy blaster rifle struck the nearest scout trooper in the chest and burned its way through the armour plate without effort and roasted his internal organs. There was another flash of light as the bolt exited through the now deceased trooper's spine, still retaining enough energy to pierce the armour plate on his back.

The two surviving troopers whirled around as soon as they realised that they were under attack, searching for Tharun's location. But the former mercenary had fired only a single bolt that neither of them had seen. Without knowing the exact source of the attack all they could do was drop to the ground for cover while Tharun took aim once more.

"Gotcha." Tharun said as he saw one of the scout troopers raise his head up from behind a fern. He fired again, this time unleashing a short limited burst that went over his target's head.

"You missed." Jaysica said.

"You think?" Tharun replied.

Realising that their own compact pistols were out of range, the scout troopers held fire as Tharun fired again. Through his scope Tharun spotted one of them pulling something from his belt before hurling it in the rebels' direction.

"Is that a grenade?" Jaysica asked, "How did he expect to throw it as far as us?"

"He didn't." Tharun replied as the grenade went off not with a 'boom' but a 'fizz' and a cloud of thick white smoke began to expand around it, "Thanks to their armour's optics they can see through that, we can't."

"So what do we do?" Jaysica asked.

"This." Tharun replied and he switched his rifle to fully automatic and fired. Sweeping his blaster across the ground covered by the wall of smoke he was rewarded by a shrill sounding scream as one of the scout troopers, assuming himself to be safe was cut down as he ran towards the parked speeder bikes.

"Follow me!" Tharun snapped and he leapt upwards and rushed towards the speeder bikes himself, holding his rifle at his hip he fired one short burst after another into the cloud, knowing that he had little chance of hitting the final scout trooper, but hoping that he could at least force his opponent to keep his head down. A single blaster bolt came back out of the cloud of smoke and struck Tharun in the chest, casing him to drop his rifle and collapse.

"Tharun!" Jaysica called out before she tripped and landed beside him, "Are you alright?" she added.

"Oh just fine!" he snapped, gasping for breath. Then he glanced down at where he had been hit. The relatively low powered bolt from the scout troopers pistol had struck him where his chest was protected by the armoured vest he wore over his damage resistant combat fatigues, effectively the most heavily protected area of his body, "That was a close one." He said.

There was the sound of footsteps and both Jaysica and Tharun looked around to see the final scout trooper emerge from the cloud of smoke with his pistol trained on them.

"Hands up!" he shouted, "You're coming with me."

Tharun glanced at where his rifle had fallen, considering whether or not he would, be able to reach it before the trooper shot him. Seeing this, the scout trooper also turned his head to look at the rifle and as soon as his gaze was averted Jaysica drew her own compact pistol and shot him in the knee. The scout trooper screamed as he slumped to the floor and began to swing his weapon back towards Jaysica. But before he could return fire she shot him again and again, firing until all six of the power cell's shots were expended. "Its okay little lady." Tharun said as he got back to his feet, breathing heavily, "I think you got him."

Coll whistled and briefly raised a hand, pointing the pistol it held straight up before he lowered it again.

"What is it?" Mace asked in a hushed tone as he knelt down beside him. Coll lowered his hand and pointing his weapon towards a point on the horizon. Lifting a pair of macrobinoculars to his eyes he saw the unmistakable shapes of Imperial scout troopers approaching on speeder bikes.

"Contact north!" he exclaimed.

Colonel Collis rushed to his side and raised his own macrobinoculars.

"I count three." He said and he looked around rapidly, "We're too exposed here, we've got to move."

Coll looked around and then got up and began to run.

"He's our scout." Mace said, "I suggest we follow him."

"Well he seems to have decided for us." Colonel Collis said as he unslung his blaster rifle. Unlike the bigger and heavier weapon that Tharun carried, Max Collis use the more compact Blastech E-11 rifle that was standard issue to Imperial forces. Indeed, it was the same rifle he had carried before his defection to the Alliance.

Colonel Collis and Mace ran after Coll and soon saw that he was heading towards a low rocky outcrop. Suddenly the air was lit up as the Imperial bikers scouts opened fire. A stream of blaster bolts flew past them from the lightweight cannons mounted beneath the speeder bikes. In response Coll held out one arm and fired the pistol it held repeatedly. His attack had little chance of hitting the fast moving and distant targets but it served to spoil their own attack and the speeder bikes veered off long enough for the rebels to reach the relative safety of the rocks. As they took cover the speeder bikes came round for another run.

"We can't stay here long!" mace shouted over the sound of the cannon fire as blaster bolts began to tear apart the rocks. Colonel Collis leant over the rocks just long enough to fire a burst from his rifle before the Imperial counter fire forced him to duck down again.

"You got a better place to be?" he asked.

"Coll? Any ideas?" Mace asked, trusting in the scout to have a solution, but the man just shook his head then flinched as a blaster bolt blew a chunk of rock from near his head.

There was the sound of more repulsorlift engines approaching.

"Oh great," Mace aid, "they've got friends."

"Maybe not." Coll said quietly and he smiled.

Mace and Colonel Collis looked towards the new pair of speeder bikes heading towards them and both smiled when they saw that scout troopers did not ride them.

"It's Tharun and Jaysica!" Mace exclaimed and he waved.

Tharun hunched over the controls of his stolen speeder bike and guided it towards the three buzzing over the rebels on the ground. He squeezed the trigger for his bike's cannon and grinned as a stream of bright red blaster bolts flew towards the Imperial bikers. Jaysica joined him and two streams of blaster bolts targeted the Imperial troops.

Neither attack found any of the available targets, but again the Imperial biker scouts were forced to break off from their attack runs to avoid being hit. One of them swung his vehicle around and came back in at a low altitude and speed. Seeing this, Colonel Collis took aim and shot the rider from the speeder bike, which ditched into the boggy ground below.

Tharun fired again and this time his attack hit one of the speeder bikes centrally and blew it apart. Its rider screamed briefly as he flew through the air without the benefit of his speeder bike until he struck the ground and lay still.

The final speeder bike zoomed in low towards the rebels behind the rocks once more, but this time Mace was ready. He had unslung a bulky weapon with a flared barrel; it was a deck clearing blaster intended for ship-to-ship boarding actions. Though it fired only a disabling stun blast, it used an expanding cone of energy instead of tightly packed energy bolts to inflict damage. As soon as the speeder bike passed overhead he fired the weapon straight up.

The rider slumped over the controls of his speeder bike and sent it spinning downwards. In a moment the vehicle ploughed into the ground at full speed and exploded.

"Where did you get those?" Mace asked as Jaysica and Tharun brought their speeder bikes to a halt nearby.

"The Empire was having a yard sale." Tharun replied. Then he looked towards the speeder bike that had ditched when Colonel Collis had killed its rider, "Do you think that one's still working?" he asked.

"You thinking we use these to get close to the Imperial base?" Colonel Collis asked.

"And fly right over the perimeter fence if necessary." Tharun said.

"Sergeant," Colonel Collis replied, "I like your thinking."

4.

"Sir! Sir I need to speak with you!"

Captain Mexin looked around when the voice called out to him in the corridor.

"What is it lieutenant?" he asked.

"I'm sorry sir, but I think we may have a security problem."

"Problem? What sort of problem?"

"Well we tracked two contacts that entered the atmosphere and landed not far from here—"

"Then send someone to check it out." The captain interrupted.

"I did sir." The lieutenant replied, "Biker scout patrols reported that the contacts were escape pods of some type. They also reported coming under fire at both crash sites. Then we lost contact."

"Lost contact?" the colonel repeated, "Look, I've got a pair of VIPs flying in from Estran right now. We can't afford to have any problems with security. Increase patrols and guard strengths if you have to, but make sure this facility remains secure until they're gone. Got it?"

"What about the shield?"

"What about it?"

"Do I have your permission to raise it sir?"

"Of course not! Raise the shield and our guests won't be able to land will they? How would I explain that we're leaving them sat in orbit while we rush about looking for a few rebels that had to abandon ship?"

In the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk* Kara and Tobis waited in silence when a shrill squeal came from the corridor outside where an R5 astromech droid was linked into the ship's systems.

"Excuse me," Jeeves, Vorn's own protocol droid said from the seat behind the two rebels, "but I believe that Harvey has detected a ship approaching us."

Both Kara and Tobis sat up straight and looked at the sensor display on the control panel.

"Err, It looks like a shuttle." Tobis said.

"Yeah, an Imperial shuttle." Kara said, "that things got more firepower than us."

From outside the door Harvey chirped again.

"Harvey's right Miss Bilstran." Jeeves commented, "The shuttle does not appear to be on an intercept course with us."

"No," Tobis agreed, "it looks like its heading for the outpost. From its position I don't think the major will have seen it, the *Beauty Queen's* too far around the planet."

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

On the surface the rescue team parked their speeders just beyond a low hill before crawling to the crest and using their macrobinoculars to look down at the Imperial outpost. The collection of structures had the typical appearance of all prefabricated Imperial buildings, while the centre of the compound was dominated by the massive sensor array that was the reason for the outpost's existence. Nearer to the perimeter fence the ground had been levelled to provide room for vehicle parking and along one side a landing pad large enough to take a small starship. Right now a large crowd of the base's personnel was lined up here.

"That's a lot of soldiers." Colonel Collis said as he saw the rows of army troopers and stormtroopers lined beside the landing pad.

"That's a bloody awful lot of soldiers." Tharun said, "Wonder what they're waiting for?"

"I'm guessing whoever this is." Mace said when the sound of a repulsorlift engine filled the air and the rebels all looked skywards to see the familiar if ominous shape of an Imperial Lambda-class shuttle as it descended through the clouds.

As the ship neared the ground its wings folded up and its landing gear was lowered. Gently, as if the ship was weightless, the repulsorlift engines brought the ship into land. From amongst the assembled ranks of soldiers an Imperial officer stepped forwards just as from beneath the shuttle a ramp was lowered and a figure strode down towards the waiting officer who snapped to attention.

"Well, well." Tharun said, "It's Garm."

"Garm?" Colonel Collis asked, "Who's he?"

"Agent Garm Larcus. The major's son." Tharun told him, "The last time I saw him he was tied to a nice little blonde. Literally, the major tied them together himself."

Colonel Collis's face became a puzzled frown.

"And there's the blonde in question." Tharun added as Vay walked down the ramp behind Garm, "I see she got another bodyglove like the one Kara stole."

"What do you lot do on your missions?" Colonel Collis asked.

"Good afternoon sir," Captain Mexin said, "was your trip a good one?"

"Dispense with the pleasantries captain." Vay said, "You know why we're here."

"The prisoners." Garm said, "Where are they?"

"In our detention section." Captain Mexin replied, "I have details here." And he handed a datapad to Garm. Garm took the datapad and looked at the display. The screen was split into four and each quarter was filled with a headshot of one of the prisoners.

"Who the hell are they supposed to be?" Garm snapped and he held the datapad so that Vay could see the images.

"Beats me." Vay said and she looked at Captain Mexin, "Captain? Any ideas?"

"I, I don't understand." Captain Mexin replied, "These are the rebels who surrendered to us. They deny it but I suspect there may be more. If these are not the ones you are after then perhaps the others are."

"Why don't we go find out?" Garm asked.

"Good idea Agent Larcus." Vay said, "I've got a good feeling about this."

In the detention section Garm looked at the displays that showed the feeds from the cells occupied by the suspected rebel prisoners. Each of the four sat in a cell on their own with their wrists bound behind their backs. Clearly the local commander was taking no chances with security. Garm had to admit that despite the mistakes concerning their identity, he was impressed.

"So who do you want to start with?" Vay asked Garm, "The woman perhaps? Maybe you can charm information out of her."

Garm looked at the image of the only female among the four rebels.

"Really? Her?" he asked, "You think I could charm her?"

"I find you incredibly charming." Vay replied and the two army troopers on duty looked at one another and smiled before turning back to their duty stations and trying to look busy when she glared at them.

"We don't really have much information on any of them." Garm said, "Height weight, blood groups, tattoos..." Garm suddenly trailed off.

"What is it?" Vay asked.

"This man." He said, pointing to the image of one of the male prisoners, a tall powerfully built man, "When he was searched the guards found a tattoo."

"So? I have one too. Bet you can't guess where."

"But is yours an Imperial Naval unit badge?" Garm asked, ignoring the final part of her statement and he held out the report from the guards that showed the location of the prisoner's tattoo and a brief description of it.

"So we start with him?" Vay asked.

"We start with him." Garm replied, "But not just yet."

"Hello Mister Horkin." Garm said as the prisoner was brought into the interrogation room and sat down on the opposite side of the table, "Or should I say Chief Petty Officer Marse Horkin? That's who you are isn't it? You were a trooper aboard the frigate *Crown Sovereign*. Now of course you are a mutineer, a deserter, a member of the rebel alliance and a traitor. So how about you do yourself a favour and tell us where the rest of your friends are?"

Marse looked back at Garm, then he glanced at Vay.

"The big bad ISB agent needs a little girl to hold his hand?" he said, snarling.

Mace rode the speeder bike over the perimeter fence at high speed before dropping down to a lower altitude and racing towards the cluster of buildings. Immediately alarms began to sound and he saw Imperial personnel rush for cover. Keeping his speed high, though not as high as he had during his approach he flew between dull grey structures. Glancing around he determined that he was not being watched and brought the speeder bike to a sudden halt. He reached into the bag slung over his shoulder and from it he pulled out Penny. Lowering the droid to the ground he let it go before he powered up the speeder bike's engine again and flew back towards the perimeter fence.

With her comlink connected to a datapad, Jaysica looked at the feed from the tiny camera built into Penny's chassis.

"Okay girl." she said, "Now find a way inside."

The man now sat opposite Garm and Vay looked a similar age to Garm's father, but unlike Vorn Larcus this man had lost much of his hair.

"I'm guessing you're the leader of your particular little band of terrorists." Garm said calmly, "Which hopefully means your manners will be better than those of your man Horkin."

Vay smiled as she noticed the man twitch slightly at the mention of his companion's name. She took a deep breath and cleared her mind.

"He was quite helpful eventually though." Vay said, "He gave us your name."

Garm glanced at Vay as the prisoner's eyes widened for a moment.

"I doubt that." The man said.

"You are Commander Dayle Kord." Vay said and Garm smiled, realising what she had done. Garm was well aware of Vay's abilities with the force, in spite of the Empire's official doctrine concerning the legitimacy of belief in it. As soon as she had suggested that she knew Dayle Kord's name the man had immediately thought of it himself and she had plucked it from his mind, "See, we know everything."

"You know only what I think of." Dayle replied, "You're Vay aren't you? Vay Udra. Which would make you Garm Larcus. I've met your father. He warned me about you, both of you."

Dayle grinned as Vay's face fell and Garm scowled at him.

"Guard!" Garm called out and the door to the interrogation room slid open, "Take him back to his cell."

The guard stepped forwards and lifted Dayle from his chair before escorting him out of the room and down the corridor. Garm walked over to the door and closed it behind them. He paid no attention to the mouse droid that rolled after Dayle and the guard.

"This isn't working." Garm said.

"I noticed." Vay said, "I'm sorry Garm."

"Sorry for what?"

"I said it was your father and it wasn't. Plus now the prisoners seem to know more about us than we do about them. I gave us away."

"Maybe, but we've kept them isolated from each other. Only Kord knows who we are."

"So what do you want to do know? Shall we question the last two?"

"We may as well. But leave the talking to me; you just watch how they react. Plus whatever else you do."

"Then what?" Vay asked.

"Then we head back to Estran. Kelner doesn't have the facilities we need. I want those rebels handing over to the Interrogation branch. We'll let their droids rip whatever they can from them."

The rescue team watched the feed from Penny's camera as it showed Dayle being led back to his cell.

"Two guards." Mace said, "We can take those."

"Yes, but we still need to get inside." Tharun pointed out, "The little lady has an Imperial uniform in that backpack, but the rest of us will stick out rather a lot."

"What's that over there?" Mace asked, pointing to a small metal structure several hundred metres from the rebels' position.

"Looks like a weather station." Jaysica said.

"Automated right?" Mace asked.

"If it wasn't I think we'd be up to our asses in stormtroopers by now." Colonel Collis said, "What's your idea captain?"

"Well I was thinking that perhaps we could ambush a technical crew that came out to fix the weather station." Mace replied.

"But why would they come out to fix it?" Jaysica asked, "It doesn't look broken to me and if we damage it won't they send soldiers to check it out? They know we're out here somewhere."

"But they won't be coming out to fix damage we inflict will they?" Tharun said, "They'll be responding to the work order you insert into their system."

"Me? But how do I get inside to do that?"

"You don't need to." Mace said and he tapped the datapad, "You use Penny to do it."

"Why do these things always break down when I'm about to go off shift?" the technician asked as he climbed into the landspeeder.

"How should I know?" the other one replied as he too got into the vehicle, "But the system says we've got to go and fix it now, so we go and fix it now."

The first technician just grunted as he started up the landspeeder and headed for the main gate. Both of the technicians held their passes up for the guards to see. The guards were regular army troopers and had little interest in who was leaving the base so they just waved the speeder through.

Accelerating away, the landspeeder soon reached the weather station where the driver parked the vehicle and both men climbed out.

"What the hell?" the driver said as he reached the door of the weather station and found it unlocked, "What idiot left this open?" and he opened the door and stepped inside, "Who the hell are you?" he snapped when he saw Jaysica standing in front of him wearing an Imperial uniform.

"Oh hi guys." She said as the second technician followed the first into the weather station, "Would you two mind doing me a big favour and taking off your clothes?"

Puzzled, the two technicians looked at one another. Then there was a flash of blue light as Mace fired his deksweeper and they both collapsed.

"Back already?" the guard asked as Mace pulled the landspeeder up at the gate.

"False alarm. Kriffing rat chewed through a wire and control thought the power converter had packed up." Mace replied as he held out the identity card taken from one of the stunned technicians. The guard glanced down at the card, but did not take it from Mace so he did not notice that the picture that Mace was covering with his thumb was not his own face. Beside him Coll sat silently.

"Move along." The guard said and he waved the landspeeder through the gates.

Mace just smiled as he steered the vehicle towards a row of similar ones and parked alongside them.

"Let me know when the coast's clear." He said to Coll as he got out of the speeder and walked around to the back of the sealed cargo compartment.

Also stepping out of the landspeeder, Coll looked around.

"Clear." He said when he saw that there were no Imperial personnel looking their way and Mace opened up the back of the speeder.

"At last!" Jaysica exclaimed as she rolled out onto the ground. Behind her, Colonel Collis and Tharun climbed out more carefully.

"You were in there for less than ten minutes." Colonel Collis said, staring at Jaysica in disbelief.

"That's not the point." Jaysica protested, "I'd just rather not be shut in a tiny space like that."

"Odd." Tharun replied, "Given that you seem to wind up in quite a lot."

Jaysica frowned.

"If we're quite finished." Colonel Collis said, "We do have a job to do."

Coll whistled suddenly and both Colonel Collis and Tharun ducked down behind the landspeeder as a pair of Imperial soldiers approached.

"How do they look?" Colonel Collis whispered.

"Just fine." Mace replied softly. Then he called out to the two soldiers, "Hey over there! Can you give us a hand with this?" and he waved to them.

The soldiers glanced at one another briefly before walking over to the rebels without suspecting anything.

"What is it?" one of the soldiers asked.

Without anyone saying anything, Tharun reached up from behind the speeder and grabbed the man by his collar. Then, before either he or his companion could react, he slammed the man's head into one of the landspeeder's externally mounted engine blocks. There was a 'crack' and the soldier collapsed in a heap. His companion looked on in horror for a moment before Coll wrapped an arm around his neck from behind and tightened his grip. The soldier's face went bright red as Coll cut off the flow of air to his lungs. After a few seconds of this the soldier went limp and Coll dropped him to the ground beside the first one.

"Okay sergeant," Colonel Collis said to Tharun, "let's get into these uniforms. Then you take your young lady friend here and get to the sensor array while the rest of us head for the detention section. Meet us there when you've done your part. Got it?"

"Yes sir." Tharun replied.

5.

"You're not baseline human are you?" Garm said to the only woman among the prisoners, "Its amazing what even a few short millennia can do to a planetary population that's isolated from the larger gene pool. I'm guessing you're from Hapan. Am I right?"

The woman just stared back at him.

"Let's find out." Garm said and he glanced towards Vay. Unlike before, Vay was not sitting beside him while he conducted the questioning. Instead Garm's partner was watching from beside the door and when Garm glanced in her direction she reached out for the light switch at her side. With a single push of a button she deactivated the light emitting panels in the ceiling and the room was instantly plunged into total darkness. Garm heard a sharp intake of breath from the prisoner as soon as the lights went out.

"So I'm right." He said, "Strange how your people don't like the dark. Now how about you give me your name and we can turn the lights back on again."

"Kriff off!" the woman screamed, "I'll tell you nothing!"

"What about the names of your friends?"

"I said I'm telling you nothing!" she cried out. Then Garm listened while her breathing became heavy as she desperately tried to control her discomfort.

Carefully Garm stood up. With the lights out he was as blind as the hapan woman. But unlike her, he had no fear of the dark. He sidestepped towards the door, keeping one hand against the wall to keep him on track. When he reached it he knelt down.

"What do you have?" he whispered to Vay.

"Inra. Inra Vayne." Vay whispered back, "The last one is called Brak Laeven. She thought of all their names as soon as you asked."

"Too easy." Garm replied, still keeping his voice to a whisper.

"I like things quicker and easier." Vay said.

Garm felt for the light switch and turned the lights back on. As soon as he did, Inra gasped.

"Thank you that will be all for now." Garm said to Inra and he opened the door. The guard outside turned to face him and snapped to attention, "Take her back to her cell." Garm ordered.

"Yes sir." The guard replied and as soon as Garm stepped out of his way he strode towards Inra, pulled her up from the chair and led her back out of the room.

"Is that it?" Vay asked, standing up to look at Garm face to face, "Aren't you going to ask her any more than that? She was terrified when you turned out the light. Worse than most hapans even. I could feel it pouring out of her."

"I know." Garm replied, "Even I picked up on that." And he pulled out his comlink, "Detention this is agent Larcus."

"Detention section here sir. How may I help you?"

"The female prisoner is being brought back to detention."

"Of course sir, her cell is waiting."

"Good. When she gets there make sure the lights are turned out."

"Sir? I'm not sure I understand."

"Of course you don't. But fortunately you don't need to. Just turn out the lights as soon as you've locked her back in her cell. Under no circumstances are they to be turned back on without my permission. Do you at least understand that order?"

"Yes sir."

Garm shut off his comlink and looked at Vay.

"We'll give her a couple of hours." He said, "In the meantime how about some dinner?"

Vay smiled.

Jaysica halted ahead of Tharun when a mouse droid rolled around the corner in front of them.

"Penny?" she said quietly, taking a quick look around just in case they were not alone in the corridor. Though both she and Tharun wore Imperial uniforms it was not normal for Imperial personnel to speak to mouse droids.

Jaysica smiled when the droid halted and emitted a series of rapid, high-pitched bleeps.

"I take that it's her." Tharun said, also keeping his voice low.

"It's her." Jaysica replied then she looked down at her droid, "Penny, we need to find the sensor array." She said to it.

The droid chirped again and rolled off back down the corridor.

"I guess we follow her then." Tharun said.

With the route taken by Penny copied to his datapad, Colonel Collis led the other group of rebels towards the base's detention section. Coll and Mace followed close behind. Given that most of the weapons carried by the rebels were not standard Imperial issue, they had been placed inside a holdall taken from the technicians' landspeeder. Even the Imperial issue weapons had been hidden from sight so as not to attract attention from the largely unarmed base staff.

"Should be this one." He said and he pointed towards a large door, "Give me the bag and you go in first."

Mace handed the holdall to the colonel and stepped up to the door.

"Here goes." Mace said to himself and he opened the door.

"Who are you?" the guard at the duty station immediately inside demanded.

"Tech section." Mace replied, pointing at the insignia on his uniform, "Someone report a reactor leak? Large leak, very dangerous."

"There's no leak here." The guard replied, sneering at Mace as he walked closer and Coll and Colonel Collis followed him into the room.

Mace walked right up to the duty station, looking around the room. By the time he reached the guard and leant on the edge of his control interface he knew the exact location of every surveillance camera in the room.

"Look buddy-" he began.

"I'm not your buddy!" the guard snapped, "I outrank you. You will address me properly!"

"Sorry sir. But someone logged an error with your local reactor. If you could just show me where it is we can get this sorted." Mace said, tapping his fingers on the console.

The guard turned around and as soon as his gaze was averted Mace moved his hand from the edge of the control panel to the interface area itself and tapped at some very specific locations.

"Corporal Lexer, show them." The guard said to his subordinate standing at the end of a row of cells. By the time he turned back around Mace had removed his hand from the control panel entirely.

"This way." The guard named Lexer said and he began to walk down the row of cells. Mace looked at the two rebels behind him and nodded, then all three followed the guard.

"What's that sound?" Colonel Collis said to Lexer. The rebels had all heard it and they knew exactly what it was; it was the sound of someone screaming.

"It's one of the rebels." Lexer replied, grinning, "Apparently the poor little dear's afraid of the dar-"

The guard was cut off suddenly as Mace slide a screwdriver from up his sleeve and drove it into his back.

"Cameras out of action?" Colonel Collis asked as Mace lowered the guard's body to the floor quietly.

"All of them." Mace replied.

"Good." Colonel Collis said and he put down the holdall, removed a blaster and returned to the control station with the weapon concealed behind his back, "You've got a leak alright." He said to the guard from the end of the corridor.

"Where?" the guard asked.

"Here." Colonel Collis replied and bringing the blaster from behind his back he shot the guard in the chest.

Rushing to the duty station, the colonel was just dragging the body away when a voice called out from beside him.

"Hold it right there!" and he looked around to see two guards that had not been on the feed from Penny's camera standing there. Both of them were aiming blasters at him. Before the colonel could react there were two shots in rapid succession and both guards fell, their weapons clattering across the floor.

"Thanks." Colonel Collis said when he saw Coll standing behind him with a blaster in each hand. Coll just nodded, "Get these bodies out of sight," the colonel continued, "and I'll find our people."

The duty station included camera feeds from all of the cells. Five of them were occupied, two by Imperial personnel obviously detained for some breach of regulations and three by Commander Kord, Lieutenant Laeven and Marse Horkin. Of Captain Vayne there was no sign and Colonel Collis considered the possibility that she had been taken for questioning. But he noticed that one of the feeds was dark and knowing that Inra was hapian he guessed that the Empire was attempting to use her fear of the dark against them.

"Got them!" he called out, "Corridor two, cells six through nine."

"Be right there!" Mace shouted back and followed by Coll he rushed down the corridor where the cells were located.

Corridor two was the source of the noise that the rescue team had heard as soon as they had entered the detention section. Specifically whoever was inside cell number eight was hammering on the inside of the door and screaming to be let out. Mace headed for that one first. He slammed his hand down on the door release and it slid upwards rapidly. He was about to speak to the cell's occupant when a foot emerged from the darkness and kicked him in the groin. Mace collapsed to the floor and curled up into a ball.

"Let me the kriff out of here!" Inra shouted as she dragged herself into the corridor.

"Captain!" Coll called out as he rushed towards her.

"Coll?" Inra replied and she took a look at Mace, "Him? You brought that vagabond to rescue us?"

"Perhaps you'd prefer it back in your cell?" Mace gasped as he slowly uncurled and got back to his feet.

"Just shut up and get these binders off me." Inra snapped.

"Go release the others." Mace said to Coll, "I've got this." And he produced a key to the binders he had taken from one of the dead guards.

As Coll rushed from one door to another, opening all of the cells that held the rebels Mace used the key to unlock Inra's binders.

"Take this." He said to her, holding out the key, "I need to sit down for a while." And as soon as she took the key he sat against a wall, breathing heavily.

"What the hell happened to you?" Colonel Collis asked when he saw Mace stagger from the corridor behind the other rebels.

"Case of mistaken identity." Inra replied.

"I'll not ask." Colonel Collis said and then he pulled his comlink from a pocket, "Sergeant, what's your status?"

"Jaysica's done with the sensor array sir." Tharun replied, "We've located a junction box for communications system and Jaysica's got it opened up, but we've got nowhere with patching into the Empire's comms."

Dayle looked around.

"Brak," he said to his lieutenant, "sounds like a job for you."

"Just get me there." Brak responded.

"Where are you sergeant?" Colonel Collis asked Tharun.

"Level two, a chamber off west corridor three."

"Stay put. We're on our way."

6.

Following their meal Garm and Vay headed back to the detention section, intending to question Inra again. As soon as they opened the door they saw that the duty station was unmanned and realised that something was wrong. Garm rushed to the duty station and checked the displays.

"They're gone!" he exclaimed when he saw that the cells that had previously held the rebel prisoners were now empty.

"Contact security." Vay said, "I'll find them." And she turned around and stormed out of the room.

In the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk* the communication system produced a sudden stream of unintelligible sound.

"Jeeves," Kara said, looking at the droid behind her, "what did they just say?"

"Well I can't be certain Miss Bilstran," the droid replied, "after all my programming in deciphering Imperial codes is limited at best."

"Jeeves," Kara said, "tell me."

"Well it appears that the outpost has gone on high alert."

Kara reached for the communication system herself.

"Boss-" she signalled.

"We heard." Vorn responded, "Emsee just told us. Get ready. That means I want you in the turret."

"Gotcha boss." Kara said excitedly, "Ooh Tobis did you hear that?" she added, "I get to shoot something."

And after giving Tobis a gentle kiss on his cheek she ran from the cockpit.

Harvey let out a harsh noise.

"I totally agree," Jeeves said, "and you don't want to know what else I've seen her do. Your insides would melt."

"It looks pretty standard stuff." Brak said as he studied the circuitry behind the open panel of the communications junction. Then he looked at Jaysica, "could you hand me a probe?"

Jaysica held out a narrow electronic probe.

"I've tried that." She said, "It didn't work."

"Yes, but that's because you didn't know what you were doing." Brak replied as he inserted the probe into the circuit, "Now a flow monitor."

"Why am I the only one being bossed around?" Jaysica asked as she handed over the tool.

"Because he's the one doing the work and you're the one holding the tools little lady." Tharun said.

"Well it's still not fair." Jaysica replied quietly.

"Shush, someone's coming." Dayle whispered suddenly. Then he looked at Coll, "Go check it out." He whispered. Coll replied with a nod and headed towards the door of the chamber while the remaining rebels took cover.

As Coll stepped through the doorway he almost walked right into Vay. Both shocked by the sudden appearance of one another, they reacted by just staring at each other. Despite his Imperial uniform, Vay could sense that he was not one of the outpost's staff and as he brought the pair of blasters he held to bear on her she reached out her hand and gave him a shove through the force.

Coll cried out in alarm as he was thrown back through the door before landing heavily in the centre of the room. Then there was a snap-hiss and a red glow from the corridor before Vay stepped into the doorway with her lightsaber ignited.

Tharun fired first; sending a well aimed shot from his heavy rifle towards her stomach. Under normal circumstances the shot would have cut Vay in half, but with lightning fast reactions she twisted the blade of her lightsaber around and parried the bolt, instead sending it into the wall just behind Tharun.

"Stang!" he exclaimed as he ducked for cover against his own blaster bolt.

More of the rebels fired, but with fluid graceful movements, Vay either sidestepped or deflected each blaster bolt that came near her. Then she spun around, passing back through the doorway and pressed herself up against the wall beside it. She pulled the comlink from her belt and activated.

"Garm, I've got them trapped. Level two, corridor west three. The escaped prisoners plus more. I'll need back up to bring them in."

"Excellent." Garm replied, "I'm on my way."

Vay returned the comlink to her belt then shouted into the room.

"There's no way out. Throw out your weapons and surrender."

"No chance!" Tharun shouted defiantly and just to emphasis his point he fired his rifle again, sending a blaster bolt into the wall on the far side of the corridor, "How about you give up and we can tie you to the major's son again?" he then added.

Outside in the corridor Vay scowled, the anger in her growing.

Concealed behind a large piece of machinery, Mace opened up the bag that contained his own weapons and reached inside.

"Hey little girl!" he called out, "If the major's son isn't enough for you we've plenty of real men in here."

That was all Vay could stand and she whirled around, standing in the doorway brandishing her lightsaber.

Looking inside she saw Mace leaning out from around the machinery. In his hands was the deck-clearing stunner.

"Parry this." He said a split second before he pulled the trigger.

Vay squealed as she fell backwards and her lightsaber fell from her grasp, unable to deflect the expanding cone of energy with her lightsaber as she had done with the more precisely targeted blaster shots. She put every bit of effort she could into remaining conscious, reaching out and trying to use the force to call the weapon back to her. But then Mace fired again and she blacked out.

Inra rushed over to Vay, kicking the lightsaber further away just in case.

"Now what do we do with her?" she asked.

"She'll be out for ages." Mace said, "We'd best just do what we need to and get out of here before Garm turns up with reinforcements.

"Brak, you heard the man." Dayle said, "Get to it."

Brak rushed back to the panel and inserted the probe again while Tharun and Marse dragged the unconscious Vay into the room and dumped her in the corner.

"That's it!" Brak yelled, "We're in. Somebody give me a comlink."

Jaysica handed him hers and he adjusted the frequency and encoding to match the Imperial system.

"*Beauty Queen, Beauty Queen*, are you there?" he said into the device.

"This is the *Beauty Queen*." Vorn's voice replied, "Go ahead."

"Why is he on my ship?" Inra said suddenly, staring at Mace with her arms folded, "He should be on that mynock magnet you fly."

"Your buddy Sen needed help flying her." Mace replied.

"Well he better not get rust on her from your ship." Inra snapped back.

Brak ignored the exchange between the two rival starship captains and continued.

"Situation critical. Urgent extraction required. Note that area may be hot."

"Understood. On our way. *Beauty Queen* out."

"Okay people." Colonel Collis shouted, "let's move. Sergeant you're on point. Marse, the rear. Now let's go!"

The rebels dashed from the room and down the corridor. As they neared the end a voice familiar to them sounded.

"Stay right there!" Garm shouted.

Marse turned on the spot and took aim with a blaster taken from a dead guard. Garm ducked back behind the corner he had just come around as Marse fired twice. When Garm looked round the corner again he saw that rebels had gone. He set off after them, followed by a squad of stormtroopers. But when he reached the door to the room that the rebels had emerged from he caught sight of Vay slumped against a wall.

"Get after them!" he shouted at the stormtrooper squad leader.

"Yes sir." The armoured soldier replied, "Men, with me." And as they continued to run after the rebels Garm rushed to Vay's side. He placed a hand against her neck and breathed a sigh of relief when he found a pulse. Then he took out his comlink.

"This is agent Larcus." He snapped, "I need a medic here now."

The rebels burst from a side door to the main building and rushed across the area used as a vehicle park. Moments later the pursuing squad of stormtroopers appeared.

"Halt!" the leader called out, but the rebels kept on running, "Okay men," he added, "open fire!"

The air was lit up with blaster fire. Initially just from the stormtroopers, but after the rebels sought cover amongst the parked vehicles and began to return fire the guards on the perimeter fence realised what was happening and joined in.

"I think we could do with a distraction right now!" Colonel Collis shouted.

Jaysica fumbled with her comlink and activated it, pressing the transmit button.

"What?" she said, looking at the device when nothing happened.

"The frequency!" Brak shouted, "I changed it remember?"

Jaysica frowned and adjusted the frequency of the comlink before activating it again. This time she got the result she wanted. Now that the device was set to operate on the same frequency as the remote detonators on the charges she had set around the sensor array, sending a signal from the device activated them all at once.

There was a series of dull thumps as the sound from the explosion reached the rebels at slightly different times, followed by silence.

"Is that it?" Inra asked, "How is that supposed to help?"

"Just wait." Mace said and he looked at Jaysica and smiled.

Suddenly there was a groaning sound that filled the air as the massive structure of the sensor array began to lean over as the supports on the side where Jaysica had not laid any charges struggled to keep the tower upright. As the weight of the array shifted, the remaining supports finally gave way and the groaning became a tearing as the tower fell over and crashed to the ground, sending flaming debris in all directions.

"Down!" Tharun yelled as some of the debris flew over the heads of the rebels.

The explosion had the desired effect and many of the guards who had been firing at the rebels instead rushed towards the burning wreckage to see if they could help any of the injured who could be heard crying out.

"Go!" Colonel Collis shouted and the rebels began to retreat away from the main building they had come from, the stormtroopers following them.

Just then there was a roaring from overhead and the saucer shaped hull of the *Silver Hawk* passed above them.

"Now that's a sight for sore eyes!" Mace shouted.

"It's a piece of junk!" Inra snapped.

The *Silver Hawk* circled back around with Tobis at the controls and he angled the ship downwards. As it passed overhead again, Tobis span the ship along its length. This had the effect of keeping the parking area permanently within the field of fire of the turret mounted laser cannon that had Kara at the controls.

Powerful energy blasts tore through the parked vehicles, scattering the stormtroopers. Some aimed upwards and returned fire, but the attacks were a futile gesture. The hull of the *Silver Hawk* was far too heavily armoured for their hand held blasters to harm it.

There was another roaring sound as the *Beauty Queen* came into view. Unlike the *Silver Hawk*, this ship did not make a swift pass over the outpost. Rather Sen slowed the ship and hovered it nearby where the rebels on the ground were located. At the moment the *Beauty Queen's* access ramp lowered and the rebels saw Vorn standing on it, waving them towards him.

Blaster in hand, Garm burst out of the doorway. Ahead of him he saw a chaotic scene. Fires raged everywhere and most of the uninjured base personnel were more concerned with escaping the flames than with engaging the retreating rebels. Garm saw two rebel ships over the outpost compound. One was an old YT-1300 that was conducting strafing runs, while the other ship was a much newer YT-2400. This second ship hovered motionless as the rebels rushed aboard and there, standing clearly on the ramp he saw his father. Vorn glanced back in Garm's direction and recognised his son immediately. He smiled and gave him a wave just before the access ramp was raised and both rebel ships zoomed off into the sky.

Behind Garm Captain Mexin appeared from out of the doorway. Before the man could say anything Garm turned towards him and spoke.

"You're in a lot of trouble captain."