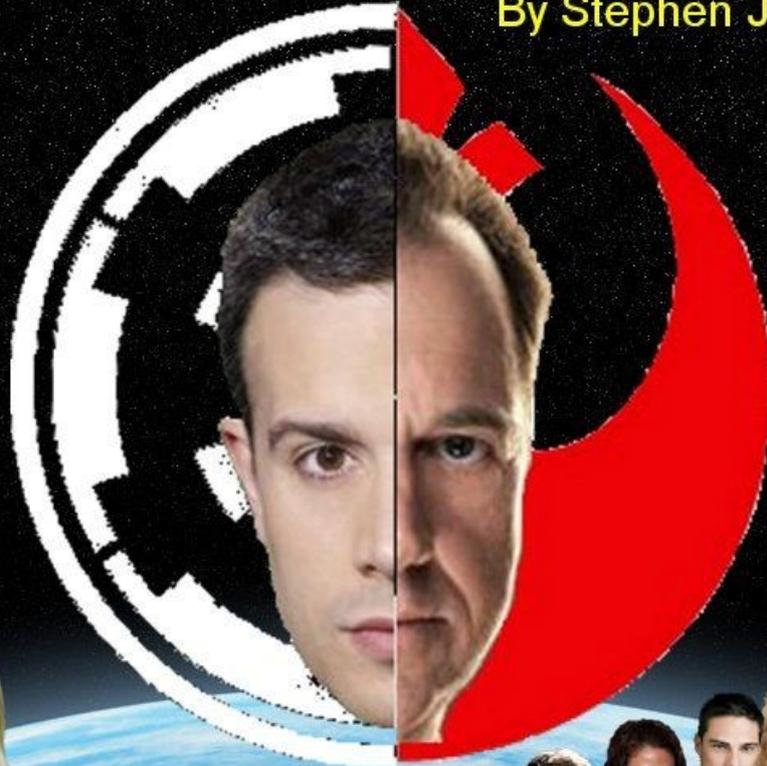


STAR WARS

4-02: The Battle of Tarlen

By Stephen J Dutton



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Civil war turns father against son

IT IS A TIME OF CRISIS. REBEL FORCES FIGHTING AGAINST THE EVIL GALACTIC EMPIRE ARE OUTNUMBERED AND OUTGUNNED BY THEIR FOES. THEY MUST INSTEAD RELY ON GUERRILLA 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...

THE BATTLE OF TARLEN

ONLY VORN AND KARA REMAIN IN IMPERIAL HANDS AND A PLAN IS SET IN MOTION TO FREE THEM. MEANWHILE IN THE SPACE AROUND TARLEN THE STAGE IS SET FOR A SHOWDOWN BETWEEN TWO FLEETS...

Original characters created and story written by Stephen J. Dutton.
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1.

As soon as the gunship touched down Agent Garm Larcus of the Imperial Security Bureau leapt out and marched towards the nearest military officer.

"Captain." He said sternly, "We're relocating the prisoners. I believe that the rebels may be planning a rescue operation."

"But sir," the officer replied, "it would take a major assault just to—"

Garm held up his hand for silence.

"I'm not interested in your opinion captain. I just want the two prisoners I spoke with earlier transferred. Now are you going to organise it or should I find someone else who can?"

"Of course sir." The officer replied quickly before dashing off.

"So what are you planning?" a woman asked Garm as she followed him off the gunship.

"I'm not sure yet Vay." Garm replied.

He'll use them as bait and thousands will die.

The voice in Vay's head called out through the Force again, still sounding as if it was deliberately holding back information.

"Bait?" Vay repeated in reaction to the voice and Garm suddenly froze.

"Why didn't I see that?" he exclaimed and in his excitement he spun around, embraced Vay and kissed her on the forehead, "Vay, you're amazing. We'll rig the transfer so that the rebels get wind of where we're taking the prisoners and ambush them when they try to release them. We'll get my father's team, plus however many others have turned up to help him."

"Err, yes of course." Vay replied, "Glad I could help."

You're not helping. He needs to give up and leave before this gets out of control.

"Now let's see," Garm said as he took out his datapad, "what's most likely to draw out the rebels?"

The interior of the transport ship *Harpoon* was not designed to hold the almost thirty individuals present and only the cargo hold was large enough for all of the rebels at the same time while they went over what they knew. In addition to the six mon calamari from the *Harpoon* the crews and rebel teams from the *Artist's Impression*, *Beauty Queen*, *Scarlet Knife* and *Silver Hawk* were present. Only two from the *Silver Hawk* were missing, these being in the custody of the Empire and the reason for the gathering.

"The Empire have swept all over this area here." Captain Mace Grayle, owner of the *Silver Hawk* said and he moved his hand across the large map that had been stuck to the wall in lieu of a more advanced holographic display.

"And we saw large numbers of troops still at the spaceport." Captain Grayce Myrell of the *Artist's Impression* added from where she sat along side her husband and pilot, Trent.

"What sort of security are we looking at?" Major Jym Shrell of the *Scarlet Knife* asked, "There were just a couple of fleet troopers in that transport carrying Major Larcus and Kara."

"Luckily." A young woman sat behind him muttered. This was Tayal Lineer, a recent addition to Jym's unit.

"I saw mainly stormtroopers in the countryside." Mace said.

"It was stormtroopers that grabbed us at the hotel as well." Major Vorn Larcus added. Vorn was the commander of the rebel unit assigned to Mace's ship and it was the capture of most of his team that had led to the other teams being summoned to help.

"Don't forget junior and stinky." The woman sat close beside Vorn said.

"Who or what are junior and stinky?" Commander Dayle Kord, leader of the unit assigned to the *Beauty Queen* asked.

"That's what Kara calls the major's son and his friend." A somewhat shorter woman sat on the other side of Vorn from Kara answered. Considerably shorter than Kara, Jaysica appeared somewhat unsettled owing to the fact that one of the team members still being held by the Empire was the *Silver Hawk's* engineer, her boyfriend Tobis Dorfus.

"By 'friend' Jaysica means the witch." Kara said, frowning as she mentioned Vay.

"I take it that the witch you are referring to is the individual named Vay Udra." Lieutenant Colonel Shintal Sallir said from his place beside the map, opposite Mace. The mon calamari officer was the most high-ranking member of the Alliance military present and had control over all of the field teams in the sector. His unit was assigned to the *Harpoon* itself. Then he went on, "For those of you who don't know, it is believed that—"

"Believed my ass." Kara interrupted, "We know she's a witch. There are still worlds out there where'd they tie her to a stake and burn her and I'm all in favour of buying her a one way ticket." Then she looked at Jaysica, "Perhaps we can get a two for one deal for your sister as well." She added.

"That's not fair." Jaysica protested, "We can't just kill Jaynie."

"She sold us out to the Empire." Kara pointed out, "So yes I can just kill her."

"I'm starting to see why they gagged her when she was arrested." The dark skinned man close to Jym said. This was Captain Anzar Deller, owner of the Scarlet Knife.

"Perhaps we should have brought it with us." The woman behind them muttered.

"As I was saying," the colonel said loudly as he tired of this, "Vay Udra is believed to be proficient in the use of the Force. Fortunately her age indicates that she is too young to equivalent to a fully trained jedi knight, but she is to be considered extremely dangerous."

"Feel free to shoot her on sight." Kara called out with a smile.

"I have discussed the situation with all of the team leaders," Colonel Sallir announced and we have concluded that in intelligence terms we need precise information about the location and security surrounding the prisoners. Then in practical terms we will require a way of reaching them.

"But aren't the Empire just holding them all where they were caught?" Anzar asked.

"So far yes." Colonel Sallir replied, "But that situation is unlikely to last much longer and we must be prepared to have to get around several thousand Imperial troops rather than the few hundred guarding them at present. I have our protocol droids looking into this, hopefully they will discover the Empire's plans for the prisoners."

"Supposing we do find all this out," a sharply dressed man said. He was one of Captain Myrell's team, a professional gambler by the name of Mack Hurnon, "I don't like the odds of five field teams taking on thousands of stormtroopers."

"Four teams." Grayce said.

"Hey just because two of us are-" Jaysica began but the colonel interrupted her.

"My team will not be taking part in the rescue operation." He said and a number of the rebels looked at one another, alarmed by this.

"How come?" an iotran male that was also part of Grayce's team asked.

Colonel Sallir stepped in front of the map and stuck a photograph over part of it. The image showed a building complex on top of a cliff. The building was constructed in the typical modular fashion of Imperial designs and was clearly military in purpose.

"This is the primary command and control centre for Tarlen." He announced, "From here instructions will be sent to militia units around the planet and we also believe that the Imperial troops present are making use of its facilities for co-ordinating with their ships in orbit. But what we are interested in is this." And he pointed to a structure built of several vertical semicircles in a line, "This is the generator for Tarlen's planetary shield and while the rest of you are freeing the prisoners, my team will destroy this."

"What for?" Kara asked, "The shield isn't up."

"Not yet no." Colonel Sallir replied, "But when Admiral Aphanar arrives with the fleet they will undoubtedly raise it. Then we will be unable to leave until it is destroyed."

"Hang on a minute," Kara said, "if the shield's going to go up, then the Imperial troops on the ground will be cut off from their ships in orbit. That means no air support since the Tarlen militia doesn't have any fighters. So why don't we wait until that happens to rescue Tharun and Tobis? We can use our ships to attack the Imperials from the air."

"Because the timing required would need to be too precise." Colonel Sallir answered, "We will send for the fleet only when you have secured the release of not only your two team members but also as many of the local resistance fighters being held as well so we can evacuate them."

"That's more than two hundred." The iotran pointed out, "Our ships will get pretty crowded with all of them aboard."

"There is a third stage to the operation." The colonel explained, "While the fleet engages the Imperial ships in space a transport carrying special forces under Colonel Collis will land on Tarlen itself. His troops will secure a perimeter and then seize as much war materiel from the militia and local warehouses as they can. The captured resistance fighters that will not fit aboard our own ships will leave on his transport."

"One transport of troops against thousands of Imperial troops and the local militia?" Mack said, "Those odds are about as bad as us making a frontal assault for the rescue."

"Since the planetary shield will be up by this point," Colonel Sallir replied, "then as Kara pointed out we will be able to fly air support."

Anzar frowned.

"Oh great," he whispered to Jym, "I gave up flying dropships because I hated flying combat missions."

"Major Larcus sir! I've done it!"

The excited pronouncement came from a golden coloured protocol droid that suddenly entered the cargo hold from the direction of the ship's bridge while two others, coloured bright red and silver followed behind.

The golden droid was GV-3PO, known as Jeeves and belonged to Vorn while the red droid belonged to Jym and was known simply as Red because of both its colouration and designation of RD-3PO. Finally the polished silver droid, EZ-3PO belonged to Grayce and was known as Easy.

"Actually," Easy stated, "I think you will find it was I that—"

"Nonsense." Red argued, "Without me you'd both still be trying to even find the Imperial frequencies."

"How about you lot just tell us what you've found?" Vorn said, "Jeeves first."

"Well Major Larcus, I've—"

"We've." Easy interrupted.

"Easy shut up!" Mack snapped, "We don't care."

"How rude." Easy responded before Jeeves continued.

"I am pleased to say that I have located Masters Dorfus and Verser."

"Really?" Jaysica exclaimed, "You've found my Tobis?"

"Oh yes Miss Horbid. He and Sergeant Verser are being moved from the staging area near where they were caught to a hangar at the starport."

"Along with the other prisoners." Red added, "The two members of your master's team are not our only concern here."

"They're ours." Kara commented.

"We can't let them get to the starport." Trent said, "we'd never get near them with all the Empire's troops in one place."

"Actually Captain Myrell," Easy said, "the hangar in question is conveniently located near to the perimeter fence and so it may be possible to gain access from—"

"It's a trap." Colonel Sallir said.

"Obviously." Dayle agreed, "The Empire has probably figured out that we're here and they're looking to lure us all in."

"Then its like Trent said." Inra Vayne, captain of the *Beauty Queen* said, "We need to get to the prisoners before they reach the starport."

"We have a plan for that." Grayce said and then she looked from Inra back to the protocol droids, "So are the Imperials sending patrols ahead to clear the road?"

"Indeed they are Captain." Easy replied and Grayce looked at the colonel.

"Then it looks like its my show now." She said, "Well, me and the other ladies."

2.

Garm stood in the empty hangar and looked around.

"So how will you rig it?" he asked the party of Imperial Navy engineers standing behind him.

"We're using the building's environmental protection system sir. That's the system that protects the inside from the effects of nuclear, biological or chemical attack."

"Yes, I know what it does." Garm said, "How does it help?"

"Well we'll be using the alternative setting that adjusts the pressure to below that outside for use when the contaminants are inside and need to be kept there. We'll lower the internal pressure to about point eight and set up an alarm that will sound as soon as anyone creates a breach in the seals that raise the pressure to at least point nine."

"That sounds a bit over the top." Garm said, "Won't the prisoners notice?"

The engineer shrugged.

"I'm an engineer, not a doctor. We're using such coarse settings because we don't have time to properly deploy and test anything with more finesse."

"Okay, so we'll know when the rebels come to free their comrades. What then?" and he looked to an officer standing next to him.

"The *Ferocious* is holding in a geostationary orbit above us." He replied, "Captain Celtis is keeping a force of fighters and bombers in reserve, ready to support our troops on the ground as soon as the rebels reveal themselves."

"Excellent." Garm said, "So now all we need is the bait for the trap and Vay's bringing them to us now."

Looking at Grayce and Inra, Kara just shook her head.

"What?" Inra asked, the hapan woman placing her hands on her hips.

"You two stick out a mile." Kara replied.

"Kara's right." Jaysica agreed as she tried to open the covering of the speeder's engine, "People around here don't wear such fancy clothes as you two." Then in frustration she yelled out, "Oh why won't this open?"

The speeder that Mace had hired for use on Tarlen was parked near a bend in the road while the six female rebels stood around as if the vehicle had broken down.

"Here," Lannaye Curve, Anzar's first mate said, "Let me help you." And she rushed towards Jaysica.

"I wouldn't if I were you." Kara said.

"Why not?" Lannaye asked as she reached Jaysica. But as she looked back at Kara Jaysica finally located the concealed switch that released the engine covering and it suddenly sprang upwards, striking Lannaye on the chin.

"Ow!" she exclaimed, staggering backwards.

"I'm sorry!" Jaysica cried out and she turned to help Lannaye, letting go of the raised cover. Tayal had inadvertently just placed her hand under the cover and as it dropped shut again it was her turn to cry out in pain and her fingers were caught beneath it, "I'm sorry!" Jaysica repeated, "It was an accident." And as she turned back towards Tayal she bumped into Lannaye and knocked her over, prompting another, "Oh no! I'm so sorry."

"Corporal Horbid!" Grayce snapped, "Just go and stand over there." And she pointed across the road.

"Yeah." Inra added, "You can get the Imperial patrol to stop."

"How do we know they will?" Jaysica asked as she crossed the road.

"Because there are six pretty young ladies in distress here." Kara said, "Well, five pretty ones and you."

"And some of us in more distress than others." Lannaye said as Grayce helped her back to her feet.

"You know," Tayal said as she rubbed her injured hand, "I'm starting to see why people say what they say about her."

"And what do they say about me?" Jaysica snapped.

"Never mind that." Inra responded, "Just keep away from the rest of us and watch for the Imperial scouts."

"What do I do when I see them?" Jaysica asked.

"Like I said," Inra said, "get them to stop."

"But how?" Jaysica said and she stepped back into the road just as an Imperial scout vehicle drove around the corner. Jaysica froze and looked at the oncoming armoured vehicle in terror while inside the driver swore as he swerved to avoid her. The other five rebels dived aside as the scout ploughed into the stationary speeder, churning up dirt as the lighter vehicle was pushed alongside the road before both halted. Almost immediately the side door of the scout opened and an Imperial officer leapt out and stormed towards Jaysica.

"What the kriff are you playing at?" he yelled.

"I'm so sorry." Jaysica replied, gazing in surprise at the mangled remains of the speeder beneath the scout. Meanwhile, behind the officer a group of four stormtroopers began to disembark from their vehicle.

"Call this in." the officer yelled over his shoulder. "Let control know what's happening." And from within the vehicle another voice was heard.

"Patrol unit trill hert xesh one one three eight. We have been involved in a road traffic accident on route four, sector seven." And Grayce and Inra both looked at one another and grinned as they realised that they now had justification for the patrol being halted from the patrol itself.

"Papers, all of you!" the officer snapped, looking around at the rebels. Then, when none of them reacted he repeated his demand, "I said show me your papers!"

"Here." Tayal said, "I've got mine right here." And she stepped towards the officer, reaching into her jacket with her left hand. At the same time she let her right arm hang down beside her and from up her sleeve a short baton dropped into her hand. Just as she drew close to the first stormtrooper Tayal flicked the baton outwards and it extended to almost a metre in length. Before any of the Imperial troops could react she swung this at the stormtrooper, striking him at the back of his knee and he collapsed.

"You rebel scum!" the officer snapped, reaching for his sidearm. But as he did so Jaysica pulled a hold out blaster from her pocket, placed the compact weapon against the back of his head and fired.

"Move!" Grayce yelled and more concealed blasters appeared from beneath clothing as the rebels rushed at the stormtroopers before they could bring their more powerful rifles to bear.

Tayal delivered a kick into the neck of the stormtrooper at her feet at the same time as she pressed the muzzle of her own holdout blaster into the side of a second stormtrooper that stepped forwards to try and restrain her. There was a brief flash and the stormtrooper collapsed without a sound as the weapon was discharged into his chest at the weak point under his arm.

While the others concentrated on the stormtroopers outside the scout vehicle, Kara ran to the open hatchway of the vehicle itself. Inside the shocked driver was just about to reach for the communication system when the sound of Kara climbing aboard made him pause and turn around and upon seeing her he instead reached for his weapon. But Kara already had her blaster in her hand and she fired before her opponent had even had chance to draw his. At this range even if the driver had been wearing armour equivalent to the stormtroopers outside Kara's pistol would have been able to punch through and inflict a lethal wound, so given the lower level of protection that his armour offered him he stood no chance and he slumped sideways held in place only by his safety harness.

Outside one of the surviving stormtroopers was able to take aim at Jaysica, but before he could fire both Inra and Lannaye tackled him, Inra wrapping an arm around his neck while Lannaye wrestled with him for possession of his rifle. There was a sudden burst of fire from the weapon and Lannaye let go, with a yelp and clutching at her hand. She had been clutching the weapon by its barrel close to the muzzle and when the stormtrooper pulled the trigger the intense heat burned her.

Grayce dispatched the other stormtrooper with a well-placed shot into his faceplate from her sporting weapon before turning to help Inra. Tayal got there before her however, delivering a blow from, her baton to the stormtrooper's hand that caused him to release his grip on his rifle and as soon as it hit the ground she kicked it away. Then she jammed her blaster beneath his chin, angled upwards and fired.

"Score three for me." She said.

"Two and a half." Inra replied as she let go of the stormtrooper and let his body fall to the ground, "You'd never have got that last one if not for me."

"Never mind that now." Grayce said, "Contact the others and let them know we've got the uniforms they need and then get to work stripping the bodies."

The *Artist's Impression*, *Beauty Queen*, *Scarlet Knife* and *Silver Hawk* all set down within a kilometre of the ambush site, their exact landing spots and times staggered to reduce the chances that the orbiting Imperial warships would notice that anything was amiss. The *Beauty Queen* was the first to arrive and Dayle rushed to the immobilised scout vehicle, accompanied by one of his team.

"Okay Brak," he said, "see what you can make of all this."

The younger man climbed into the scout and paused when he saw the dead driver.

"Couldn't you at least have gotten rid of this guy?" he called out of the vehicle as he undid the harness and pulled the body out of the chair before taking its place.

"Sorry Brak." Inra replied, "We were busy with the bodies out here."

"So what can you tell me?" Dayle asked Brak, who began to study the communications array.

"They didn't get off a warning if that's what you're worried about commander." Kara said as she leant up against the side of the scout, "I took care of that."

"Actually specialist I'm more interest in whether the Empire has noticed that their men have stopped signalling."

"There doesn't seem to be any abnormal comms traffic." Brak replied.

"Good." Dayle said, "Can you keep them in the dark?"

"I think so. But I'd like Marse's help. He was a naval trooper after all and all of the Imperial forces here seem to be Navy."

Dayle nodded and looked back in the direction of the Beauty Queen where a trio of men were approaching.

"Marse! Get over here now and give Brak a hand." He called out and one of the three, a man wearing an armoured vest and helmet picked up his pace.

"What is it commander?" he asked.

"Get in the vehicle and help Brak hide what we've done here." Then as Marse boarded the scout Dayle turned his attention back to the last two members of his team, "Coll, Sen head that way." He said, pointing back up the road in the direction the scout had come from, "about five hundred metres and watch out for the convoy."

The next ships to arrive were the *Artist's Impression* and *Silver Hawk* and though the ships touched down separately, the different landing spots chosen meant that their occupants arrived at about the same time and they all headed for the crashed scout vehicle.

"Hey boss!" Kara called out, waving at Vorn, "Look what I've got for you!" and she held up the uniform taken from the Imperial officer.

"I'm the one that shot him." Jaysica protested, but Kara ignored her.

"Thanks." Vorn said as he took the uniform and he immediately put the officer's cap on his head, whereupon he suddenly paused and winced, "You could have warned me to check for bits of the previous owner's brains in the hat." He said as he removed the cap and shook it.

"Don't blame me." Kara said, "It was Jaysica that shot him."

"We've got three sets of stormtrooper armour as well." Dayle said to the newly arrived rebels, "We would have had four but Grayce put a blaster bolt into the face of one of them."

"It'll just have to do." Mace said as he picked up one of the helmets set out beside the scout.

"So where do you want us then?" Trent asked, looking around, "There aren't many places to hide."

"Coll's off watching for the convoy, but I want the rest of our medics over there in case any of the prisoners need attention." Dayle replied and he pointed to a low hedge that divided two fields from one another,

"They're to keep out of site and not engage the enemy unless absolutely necessary. I don't know where the *Scarlet Knife* is, so you can take one of the sets of stormtrooper armour while Mace and I take the others."

Then he looked at the alien members of Grayce's unit, "Combrowda the only way we can keep you close to the action is for you to be inside the scout when the enemy gets here." The wookie growled and climbed aboard the vehicle while Dayle continued explaining his plan of attack, "You two others can head over there and keep watch with Coll and Sen. Tell, I want you to give us covering fire with that repeating blaster of yours. If the *Scarlet Knife* makes it here on schedule I'll send them to where everyone else will be in the gully over there. While we're engaging the front of the convoy and Tell's firing on the rear guard they'll hopefully be able to rush the flank while the Imperial troops are distracted."

When the three rebels wearing the captured stormtrooper armour had changed into their disguises they immediately found a nearby patch of dirt and rolled in it to smear mud on the spotless armour. This looked like the soldiers had simply fallen and had yet to clean their armour, but in reality it was intended to mark them out to the other rebels and reduce the chances of friendly fire deaths. It was crude, but still the best choice open to them.

It was just after this that the remaining crew of the *Scarlet Knife* arrived, running along the road.

"What too you so long?" Dayle called out, his voice distorted by the stormtrooper's helmet.

"Kriffing repulsors gave out again." Jym replied, "You're lucky we got here at all."

"Well Devid needs to get over there with Kara and Mack. The rest of you into that gully. Grayce can explain the plan. Just hurry."

3.

Located at the top of a hill Coll lay flat and watched for the approaching Imperial convoy while the other rebels remained hidden behind him. Sen, the Beauty Queen's engineer sniffed and looked at Tell as the iotran laid out spare power packs on a plastic sheet.

"How many of those do you think you'll need exactly?" he asked.

"The drawback with this weapon," Tell replied, tapping his repeating blaster where it lay stood its integral bipod, "is that it tends to use up ammunition at an accelerated rate. These power packs give me just over two hundred rounds. How much I need will depend on how many guards the convoy has."

"Oh yeah?" Sen replied and he drew his blaster pistol, "Well for your information I've got that many shots for this and I only have one spare clip. Oh and no, you can't have it if you run short." Then he holstered the pistol again.

"Mister Verid," Druvvon said, "are you always so charitable?"

It was then that Coll snapped his fingers and when the others looked at him he pointed over the top of the hill. Sen scabbled forwards and crouched beside him.

"Okay guys," he said, "this is it. They're coming."

The convoy was made up mainly of unarmoured prisoner transports with a pair of armoured personnel carriers positioned at the front and rear. Even these armoured vehicles were of limited use in combat however, their only armament the repeating blasters located in pintle mounts on their roofs manned by stormtroopers whose torsos were exposed. However, they still represented a threat that the rebels could not afford to ignore.

"Obstruction ahead." The driver of the front troop carrier said and Vay leant over his shoulder to peer out of his viewport where she saw the scout vehicle and wrecked landspeeder still blocking the road.

"What's going on?" she said.

"The patrol called this in." the driver replied, "Some traffic accident they got into. Shall I take us around?"

"No." Vay replied, "The road ahead hasn't been cleared yet. Open the door and I'll go find out what the patrol is playing at."

There was a hiss as the heavy rear door dropped open and Vay strode out of the transport and immediately headed towards the scout vehicle. As she approached she saw the scout's commanding officer standing beside his vehicle with his back to her and three of his men stood nearby, all looking as if they had been rolling around in the mud and one a little shorter than she was used to.

"Captain, what's going on here?" she demanded as she walked up to the officer and when he did not reply she grabbed hold of his arm and spun him around, "Captain I said-" she said loudly before she found herself looking into Vorn's face.

"Stang." She said and her hand reached for the lightsaber at her waist.

"Actually its major." Vorn said, drawing his blaster.

Vay plucked the lightsaber from her belt while Vorn was still in the process of drawing his weapon, but as she raised it there was a sudden roar and a fur covered arm reached out of the scout and grabbed hold of her hair. Before Vay could react to this new threat Combrowda slammed her head against the hull of the vehicle and everything went black for her.

Vorn raised his pistol towards the stormtrooper manning the forward vehicle's repeating blaster and fired a single shot that sent him sprawling backwards.

"Go!" he yelled.

As soon as the blaster shot rang out the entire convoy was alerted to the fact that they were under attack and the squad leaders in both troop carriers reacted by ordering their troops out of the armoured vehicles, only their drivers and the surviving gunner remaining in place. However, as soon as the rear guard carrier dropped its rear door Tell was ready with his repeating blaster and he fired a sustained burst of energy bolts in through the open hatchway. From inside the transport there were screams as with nowhere to go to escape the blaster fire half of the stormtroopers there were shot down. Tell ceased fire only when his weapon ran out of ammunition.

"Change!" he snapped as he ejected the spent power pack and Druvvon lent over to insert a fresh one. But in this brief respite the gunner brought his own blaster to bear and returned fire, using the near limitless energy reserve offered by his vehicle's fuel cells to lat down a heavy curtain of fire that covered the disembarkation of the remaining passengers.

"Now you've kriffing done it!" Sen exclaimed as he scabbled backwards, further from the ground being ripped up by the blaster fire, "Come on Coll, I say we get out of here." Then he stopped and looked around, "Coll?" he asked when the scout was nowhere to be seen, "Coll, where are you mate?"

"I believe your friend is down there." Druvvon said, pointing in the direction of the armoured personnel carrier where Coll was crawling towards it.

The vehicle's gunner continued to lay down cover for the now disembarked stormtroopers as they advanced over open country towards the position where Tell had set up his own weapon. Coll remained hidden from these troops, staying motionless as they marched past him. He then crawled forwards once more until he found himself below the point that the roof mounted gun could be depressed to fire at and he leapt to his feet and ran headlong towards the vehicle as the gunner continued to lay down cover obliviously. He did not halt when he reached the troop carrier's open hatchway, instead drawing the pair of blaster pistols he carried at his waist and rushing into the vehicle firing as he ran. Taken by surprise by this turn of events neither the driver nor the gunner had time to react. The driver died in his chair, a blaster bolt through the back of his head while the gunner jerked wildly and cried out as one shot after another was fired into his legs and abdomen Coll returned the blasters to his waist and dragged the gunner's body from his position before climbing up to take his place. Then he lowered the gun and began to fire into the backs of the advancing stormtroopers.

"Way to go Coll." Sen said with a grin and at the same time Tell opened fire once more. Caught between the fire of the two automatic weapons the already undersized squad was wiped out in seconds.

Inside the scout vehicle at the head of the convoy Brak jabbed at the control console.

"It's done." He said, looking around at Marse, "That should block their comms to the rest of the Imperial forces here and in space."

"Good." Marse replied and he handed Brak the weapon that had belonged to the vehicle's late driver, "Now let's go lend a hand out there."

The driver of the leading troop carrier responded to the sudden rebel assault with the nearest thing to a weapon he had at his disposal and there was a rapid succession of 'pops' as a volley of canisters was launched, bursting open to lay down a thick curtain of smoke.

This smoke had no effect on the stormtroopers as they rushed from the back of the troop carrier, the advanced multi-frequency targeting systems and air filters built into their helmets allowing them to see and breathe unimpeded. Most of the rebels on the other hand were forced back by the cloud, taking cover behind the scout vehicle and directing their fire to the parts of the cloud where they saw blaster bolts coming from. However, wearing the three sets of captured stormtrooper armour themselves Dayle, Mace and Trent were able to advance through the cloud and get right up to the front of the troop carrier where they were out of sight of the Imperial troops.

"Help me up." Dayle said as he folded the stock of his rifle and slipped it into the holster on his thigh. Momentarily slinging their own rifles over their shoulders and held out their hands so that Dayle could climb up onto the roof of the troop carrier. Crouched on top of the stationary vehicle he pulled a grenade from his belt and armed it. Then after shoving the body of the dead gunner aside he tossed it down into the vehicle's interior.

"Move!" he snapped, leaping back down to the road and all three disguised rebels ran back towards the scout vehicle, hurling themselves to the ground just before the grenade detonated. The blast ripped through the stormtroopers close to the troop carrier and several chunks of debris were hurled backwards where they tore into the first of the prisoner transports, killing the driver and guard sat in the cab and causing the repulsorlift vehicle to sudden drop to the ground with a crash.

"Medics!" Vorn yelled, waving towards the hedge where he knew the rebels bets trained in medicine were concealed, "Get the medics I to check on the prisoners in that vehicle." And he began to run around the cloud of smoke now made thicker by the burning troop carrier, firing his blaster at the crew of the next vehicle he saw.

In a transport roughly half way along the convoy an Imperial Navy officer sat next to the driver rather than a fleet trooper guard and as soon as the troop carrier at the front exploded he realised that he could not count on the stormtroopers in the convoy to protect it.

"Everybody out." He ordered using his comlink to broadcast the order to the rest of the convoy, but in response there was just an electronic squeal, "Those kriffing rebels are jamming us." He exclaimed as he opened the cab door. Then he looked at the driver and added, "Come on man! Get out here and help me get the men organised."

"There." Jym said to the man next to him in the gully and he pointed to the officer making his way along the convoy and ordering its guards to disembark and engage the rebels, "Take him out Travis."

"Consider it done." The man replied and with a single shot from his blaster rifle he sent the officer sprawling over the road.

"That's it, now everyone." Jym said, "Open fire!"

Lifting themselves up from the gully the remaining rebels opened fire on the fleet troopers now climbing out of the transports before they could get organised. At the same time the two teams of rebels at the front and rear of the convoy began to make their way along it, driving the guards into an ever smaller area.

Devid was the first to reach the damaged prisoner transport and he rushed straight to the rear hatchway.

"It's not locked." He said as he slammed his hand on the control to open the hatch.

"Devid, wait no!" Mack called out, but it was too late. The hatchway slid open and from inside the vehicle a single blaster shot rang out. Devid staggered back, clutching at his chest and collapse in the road.

"Devid no!" Tayal screamed from the gully and it was only Anzar pulling her back that stopped her from running to try and help him.

"What the hell's going on back there?" Vorn shouted as he heard Kara and Mack yelling.

"Devid's down." Mace replied, "There must be an active guard in that first transport."

"Trent, Combrowda, go back and check it out." Dayle ordered, "Take care of that guard."

Kara drew her blaster and aimed it at Trent when he first appeared, but rapidly relaxed.

"You're just lucky you're a little short for a stormtrooper." She said as she turned her attention back to Devid.

"What's happening?" Trent asked, pulling the helmet from his head.

"There's a bloody guard inside that transport with a blaster that's what." Mack replied, "He got Devid."

Trent looked down and saw the rebel staring upwards with his eyes wide open.

"Is he?" he asked and Kara nodded.

"His heart and lungs were cooked." She said, "He didn't stand a chance."

Trent turned to Combrowda.

"Deal with him." he said and the wookie growled before rushing at the open transport hatchway. Another shot rang out, but it narrowly missed Combrowda and he leapt up into the transport. The next sound that came from inside the vehicle was another growl, louder than Combrowda's first and this was followed by a blood curdling scream.

4.

Dayle and Mace both pulled their helmets off when they met up with the four rebels advancing from the rear of the convoy.

"Don't shoot its us!" Mace snapped.

"Close one there captain." Sen replied and then he looked at Dayle, "What's our status commander?" he asked.

"I think the guards are done with." Dayle replied, "So we need to get these transports opened up. But be careful, there could still be some guards hidden inside. There was one at the front of the convoy."

"Anyone hurt?" Druvvon asked.

"Devid we think." Vorn said.

"We've no time for this now." Dayle said and he waved towards the rebels still positioned in the gully, "This is it!" he shouted, "Let's starting freeing our people."

"Tobis! Where's Tobis!" Jaysica shouted as she ran up to Vorn.

"We don't know yet." He replied, "We're only just starting to check out the transports."

Then there was a shout from near the front of the convoy.

"Hey little lady!" and Jaysica turned around to see a pair of men walking towards her, the larger one waving at her, "Did you lose something?" he added.

"Tobis!" Jaysica exclaimed as she ran towards the shorter of the pair who was just smiling at her and she wrapped her arms around him.

"Mission accomplished major?" Mace said.

"I think so." Vorn replied, "We've got Tharun and Tobis back and the other prisoners are free as well."

"I'm guessing it's just too bad about Devid then?" Jym suddenly said as he approached them both, "Or does he not count?"

"Don't be so stupid." Vorn replied, scowling, "He was just unlucky."

"There's a lot of that about it seems." Travis muttered from beside Jym.

"Something to say?" Dayle sudden interrupted, having overheard this and staring at Jym and Travis but neither man answered, "Thought not. So let get these vehicles moving, we need to get our people to the rendezvous." Then he looked around and in a raised voice he added, "Brak, make the call."

The arrival from hyperspace of the *Night Raven* was detected immediately by the Imperial vessels orbiting Tarlen. But it was aboard the *Firebrand*, the nearest Imperial ship that the sixteen hundred long metre vessel attracted most attention.

"Captain," the comscan technician announced, "contact to stern. Captain, its big. Bigger than us."

"Can you identify it?" Captain Naje asked.

The comscan operators all busily checked their instruments.

"Captain its one of ours." One of them announced, "An Imperial-class ship."

"Another star destroyer?" Captain Naje said with a puzzled frown, "Have they attempted to make contact?"

"No captain. Their comms are silent, but its definitely one of ours, the transponder confirms its part of our sector group."

"Yes, but which ship is it specialist?" Captain Naje asked.

Meanwhile on the bridge of the *Night Raven* Captain Kase watched the *Firebrand* growing through the viewport.

"We're in attack position now sir." Someone called out to him, though he did not look around to see who exactly. Instead he looked past the *Firebrand* at the significantly smaller interdictor cruiser that was in a somewhat lower orbit than the older venator-class star destroyer.

"Captain your orders?" another voice called out.

Captain Kase sighed.

"Get me the ships in the hangar." He announced.

"You're on now sir."

"This is the captain. Launch and attack."

Aboard the *Firebrand* the comscan operators saw that the single sensor return of the *Night Raven* had now become three.

"Captain, I'm detecting a launch. Two ships coming from the star destroyer's main hangar."

"Shuttles?" Captain Naje said.

"No captain, err-"

"What is it specialist?"

"Err, well they look like Corellian gunships ma'am."

It was at that moment that a klaxon sounded as the ship's systems detected that it was being targeted.

"Shields!" Captain Naje yelled, but it was too late as the turbolaser salvo from the *Night Raven* slammed into the *Firebrand's* dorsal hangar bay doors and tore through them.

"Again!" Captain Kase snapped, "Hit them again before they can get their shields up." And another salvo of turbolaser blasts streaked across the space between the two mighty vessels, this one ripping apart the row of heavy turrets facing the *Night Raven*.

At the same time as the *Night Raven* was engaged in this somewhat one-sided duel with the *Firebrand* the two ninety-metre long Corellian gunships were accelerating towards the interdicator cruiser beyond it. Though armed with multiple turrets, the cruiser's prime purpose was to project artificial gravity wells from the four massive gravity generators it carried. Possessing a strength far beyond the normal internal artificial gravity fields or tractor beams that many ship's carried these fooled ships' hyperdrives into believing they were in danger of passing through a massive solid object and shutting down, leaving them stuck in realspace. However, not only did they consume vast amounts of power to run but they also created a gravitational pull that the interdicator itself would have to fight against if it wished to move. So as the two gunships closed in from behind, their target was helpless.

"Shut down the gravity wells!" the ship's captain bellowed as soon as he realised they were under attack, "And get our shields up."

"Gravity wells will be powered down in forty-five seconds captain." One of the crew called out before one of the comscan operators called out a warning.

"They've got a missile lock." he shouted

"Do it quicker." The captain ordered, "I don't care if they're damaged, turn us around before-"

The entire ship rocked as the first of the four concussion missiles struck home, turning one of its ion drives into a gaping hole and filling the engineering section with flames that were then sucked out into space.

Already crippled and slowly spinning around the interdicator was then hit by the remaining three missiles almost simultaneously. The three explosions consumed the ship, twisting its hull and tearing massive sections of its structure from it. In moments all that was left was a burning hulk that shed escape pods and debris as it tumbled towards Tarlen. Without pausing to witness the final death of the interdicator, the two gunships lined up on the next such vessel and headed straight towards it.

"Can someone please tell me what the hell is happening?" Captain Yay of the *Falchion* demanded while the sound of alert sirens sounded throughout her ship.

"It's the *Firebrand*," he first officer replied, "she's coming under fire from – from-"

"From what?" Captain Yay snapped.

"Captain," the first officer said hesitantly, "it looks like the *Firebrand* is under attack from one of our own ships. An Imperial-class star destroyer."

"That' impossible." Captain Yay responded, but then she was interrupted by one of the comscan operators.

"Contacts to starboard." He said, "Multiple capital ships exiting hyperspace. Captain, they're rebels."

Captain Yay scowled.

"Lay in an intercept course." She ordered, "We'll show those rebel scum who rules this galaxy."

"What have we got?" Captain Celtis of the *Ferocious* asked as she rushed onto the bridge. She had been off duty when the alert sounded and in her haste she was still fastening her tunic.

"Captain, the *Firebrand* is under attack and sustaining heavy damage." one of her officers told her from the crew pits, "We've also confirmed that the *Irresistible* is down – wait, check that, both the *Irresistible* and the *Kingmaker* are down. Looks like a pair of Corellian gunships using close range missile strikes while the interdicators are immobilised by their own gravity well projectors."

"Warn the other interdicators, tell them to shut down their projectors and engage."

"Yes captain, what about us?"

"Launch all attack craft, tell them to target those gunships. Then take us to help the *Firebrand*."

Fire blossomed against the shields of the Imperial-class vessel that was pounding the *Firebrand* as the older ship desperately returned fire. But this was a battle in which the venator-class ship was badly outmatched. It carried far fewer of the heavy guns it needed and lacked the mass of armour and shielding necessary to resist the bigger Imperial-class ship's turbolasers for long.

"What's our status?" Captain Naje shouted over the sound of multiple alarms.

"Casualty reports coming in from all sections captain. The main hangar is destroyed and our engines are operating at half strength. But captain, we've just detected a large flotilla of rebel ship's exiting hyperspace. Three heavy vessels, plus more than a dozen support ships and a large number of fighters."

"Are our long range comms still working?" Captain Naje asked.

"Partially. We have subspace, but no holonet."

"That's good enough." Captain Naje said, "Send a signal to fleet command on Estran. Tell them to send help and tell them to send it quickly."

5.

As soon as the *Wave Rider* dropped out of hyperspace Admiral Aphanar saw the flashes of light from the battle that had already begun. Just as planned the *Night Raven* was trading blows with a venator-class star destroyer while the two Corellian gunships she had carried in close to the Imperial fleet were now racing away from a second ruined interdicator cruiser and towards a third.

The other two venator-class star destroyers were not just sitting idly by however, a cloud of fighters was emerging from one of them and linking up with the squadrons that had been launched as part of the blockade while the second star destroyer was turning ominously towards the rebel fleet.

"*Wave Rider* to all ships," the admiral signalled, "fire at will."

Understandably the Imperial defenders of Tarlen were concentrating their attention on the massive rebel capital ships and the squadrons of fighters that swarmed around them. But amongst all these vessels a transport ship less than a hundred metres in length accelerated directly towards Tarlen, slipping through the gap in the blockade left by the destruction of the two interdicator cruisers. Inside this ship more than a hundred rebel soldiers prepared themselves for battle, while in the cramped flight deck mounted above the main hull Colonel Max Collis watched as the crew steered through the atmosphere towards a location identified as being close not only to a militia armoury but also several large goods warehouses.

From a location on the outskirts of the city ahead a bolt of pale blue lightning suddenly shot into the air. This continued and from other places further away the colonel saw similar beams being projected skywards as well.

"That's their shield." The ship's pilot said, "They've just cut themselves off from the fleet in orbit."

"This is it men." He announced over the intercom, "We're going in."

Technically speaking an Incom A-24 sleuth was not a starfighter, but the speed and handling of the ship were on a par with some older types and so since the Alliance fleet was likely going to need every weapon it had Colonel Harris Ergard had volunteered to pilot his compact scoutship into battle. For this engagement he would be leading a squadron of obsolete Z-95 headhunters. Unlike most variants of Z-95 these ships were equipped with the hyperdrives that they needed to reach Tarlen without being carried all the way there in a capital ship's hangar and, more importantly leave without needing to land aboard a carrier first.

The primary purpose of the Alliance fighter squadrons was naturally enough to protect the bigger vessels from the Imperial TIE fighters. The Imperial capital ships in the system were in theory capable of launching more than a thousand fighters against the Alliance vessels. With the hangars of the three venator-class ships only partially filled with fighters and that of the *Firebrand* already destroyed less than a third of this number were available for this engagement, but this still meant that the Alliance fighters would be heavily outnumbered and a low whistle came from the astromech droid behind the colonel in his cockpit.

"I know Sparky." Colonel Ergard said as he spotted the cloud of Imperial fighters heading towards the two Corellian gunships deployed by the *Night Raven*, "I can see them." Then he activated the communications to the squadron under his command, "Accelerate to attack speed and follow me in. Looks like there's plenty for everyone."

On the surface of Tarlen only a handful of its citizens noticed the flashes of light coming from above the clouds as the battle began. But all that changed when the air was filled with the constant wailing of sirens that had not sounded since the Clone Wars almost two decades earlier.

At the same time all commercial wireless broadcasts across the planet were interrupted without warning.

"Attention all citizens! This is not a drill. A major rebel task force has entered the system and is attacking the planet. All citizens should take shelter immediately. Clear the streets and do not attempt to reach loved ones or recover possessions. All militia reservists are ordered to report for immediate duty. We repeat this is not a drill."

The message was then repeated over and over again, with just a brief disruption from the energy wave as Tarlen's planetary shields were activated.

"What's happening?" Garm demanded as he entered the command centre set up at the starport.

"Sir it's the rebels." a technician replied, "A large task force of ships has just dropped out of hyperspace and are engaging our ships in orbit."

"They must be here to cover a rescue attempt." Garm said, "Where's our convoy?"

"I don't know sir. They haven't responded."

"The rebels must have hit them in transit. Get men to the gunships and signal the *Ferocious* for support."

"That's not possible sir." Another technician responded, "The local government has activated the planetary shield, we can't get fighter or orbital fire support from our ships in space."

"Stang." Garm exclaimed, "Then just get me whatever men we've got to the gunships, I've got a feeling the convoy's in trouble."

The crew of the interdicator-class cruiser *Impassable* were frantically trying to shut down their ship's gravity well projectors when the two Corellian gunships opened fire, sending a salvo of missiles in their direction this time. The captain of the Imperial cruiser realised immediately that his ship was a sitting duck for the missiles, but he also saw that the rebels had not waited until closing to short range before launching their missiles. There was not enough time for his crew to safely shut down the gravity well projectors, but the *Impassable* carried other weapons.

"Weapons! Target those missiles!" he yelled, pointing through the bridge viewport at the trails of fire coming from the exhausts of the incoming missiles.

The turrets carried by interdicator-class vessels such as the *Impassable* were relatively weak as capital ship armaments went, nowhere near as powerful as the heavier turbolasers carried by most similar sized vessels. But this was not a battle of broadside against broadside and against the smaller and more agile missile the *Impassable's* quad gun emplacements were ideally suited to protect the ship.

The captain counted first one and then a second flash of light as his ship's batteries shot the first two missiles out of the sky. But that still left two more and the captain found himself subconsciously stepping back away from the viewport as they closed in. There was another explosion as a third missile was hit and detonated prematurely before the fourth struck his ship.

The captain closed his eyes as he saw the flash of the impact, waiting for the explosion to follow. But instead he opened his eyes again to find that nothing had happened – the missile had not gone off.

"It's a dud!" someone yelled as the captain stared at the scorch mark left by the missile as it was vaporised by the *Impassable's* particle shields. He guessed that it was more likely that the missile had been damaged by the *Impassable's* defensive fire rather than it simply being a dud.

"Sir, gravity well projector's off line." Another crewman called out, "We have full manoeuvrability at your command."

"Bring us around." He ordered, "Take us after those gunships."

The gallofree yards medium transport touched down, startling the militiamen who had already reported to the armoury. Unmarked, there was no indication of who owned the starship and it was only when hatches at several points burst open and rebel troops rushed out firing that the militia realised they were under attack.

"Secure the perimeter!" Colonel Max Collis of Alliance special forces ordered. Though he could have remained aboard the transport to direct operations from its bridge he preferred to lead from the front, "And get those E-webs set up on the approaches. The Empire's going to realise we're here sooner or later and we need to be ready for them."

With a diameter of more than three thousand metres the *Trading Dream* was easily the biggest vessel involved in the battle and its neimoidian captain Kav Kaaro had considerable experience fighting against venator-class ships such as the one bearing down on him now.

"All batteries fire, fire, fire!" he ordered.

The two titanic vessels began to trade blows as a pair of rebel frigates sought to manoeuvre themselves into a better position against the star destroyer while it was distracted. But aboard the *Falchion* Captain Yay had other ideas.

"Full speed ahead." She ordered, get us past that glorified transport. I want the flagship."

"Captain, we haven't identified the rebel flagship yet." Her first officer pointed out.

"It'll be one of those mon calamari star cruisers won't it?" she replied, "So take us right in between them and open fire."

"But captain, there are two frigates between us and those cruisers." One of the bridge officers warned her.

"Don't worry, they'll get out of our way." Captain Yay replied, "If they don't then we'll just have to ram them."

In the cargo hold of the *Silver Hawk* Jaynie Horbid, Jaysica's younger sister was still securely tied to one of the four narrow columns around the cargo elevator hatch. She had learned to remain still and quiet, this being the only way to prevent the bad tempered astromech droid left to watch over her from jabbing her with something either sharp or hot. But she still looked around when she heard a door slid open and she saw Vorn and his team enter, Vorn himself now wearing an Imperial military uniform. Of Mace and Tobis there was no sign, but when she heard the ship's engines start up Jaynie guessed that they were in the cockpit and getting ready for take off.

"Hello again." Kara said to Jaynie with an evil grin, "Miss me?"

"What are you going to do with me?" Jaynie asked, looking at Jaysica who in return avoided making eye contact.

"You're a collaborator and an informer." Vorn said, "Because of you a member of another rebel team is already dead and a whole lot more people are about to die."

"I only did what I had to." Jaynie said, still looking at Jaysica, "She ruined my life when she joined you."

"Some of us think we should just kill you." Vorn said.

"That's me and her by the way." Tharun said, indicating himself and Kara.

"Then just do it." Jaynie said.

"Your sister on the other hand asked for us to spare your life." Vorn said, "And I have agreed."

"What? So you're dragging me off to some prison cell somewhere?"

"Oh no." Vorn replied, "In fact we're letting you go."

At that moment Tobis entered the hold.

"Ahh, err, we're in position." He said as he stood beside Jaysica and she took hold of his hand.

"Good." Vorn said, "Tharun, "Be a gentleman and open the door for the young lady and cut her loose."

Tharun smiled and went to the controls for the cargo elevator, opening the hatch in the floor. Glancing around as Tharun then began to cut through the plastic ties binding her wrists and ankles Jaynie saw that the *Silver Hawk* was already airborne.

"No!" she yelled and she tried to move away from the opening but was stopped by Tharun.

"Oh don't be such a baby." Kara snapped at her.

"Yeah," Tharun added, "we've picked somewhere nice and soft for you to land. Isn't that right lad?" and he looked at Tobis.

"Err, yes that's right. We're hovering in place right now."

"What do you mean?" Jaynie asked.

"This is farmland." Vorn said, "Lots of bantha herds."

"And since you landed us right in it we thought we'd return the favour." Tharun said.

Then, before Jaynie could react Kara stepped forwards.

"I still hope you die bitch." She said and she pushed Jaynie out of the hatch.

Jaynie screamed as she fell through the air and it was only at the last moment that she saw that positioned directly below her on the ground was one of the places where bantha farmers gathered together the manure from their herds into large piles to be collected later and used for fertilising crops. Jaynie continued to scream as she realised she had no way of avoiding it.

Through the open hatchway the rebels watched as Jaynie landed and briefly vanished into the pile.

"Think she's dead?" Kara asked, looking up at Tharun and smiling.

"No look, there she is." Jaysica said, pointing as she saw her sister crawling out of the base of the pile, her hair and clothing covered in manure.

"Okay that's enough." Vorn said, "Kara get to the turret and the rest of you stand ready. I'm going to join Mace in the cockpit. We're not quite done here today."

"Our passenger taken care of?" Mace asked as Vorn sat in the co-pilot's seat beside him.

"All done." Vorn replied, "Though I'm not sure she appreciates the piloting skill needed to position the cargo hatch over a nice soft landing spot."

"There's just no satisfying some people."

"No. Now what about the others?"

"Heading for Colonel Collis now."

"Then perhaps we should join them."

The gunship set down beside the still burning troop carrier.

"Vay!" Garm yelled as he jumped out ahead of the squad it carried, "Vay where are you?"

All around were the bodies of both the fleet troopers and stormtroopers assigned to guard the convoy of now missing transports. But of Vay there was no sign.

"Sir over here!" a stormtrooper suddenly called out from near a wrecked scout vehicle and Garm rushed over to him.

There he found Vay lying on the ground beside the vehicle and he skidded to a halt. Dropping to his knees Garm cradled Vay's head and felt something wet. Removing one of his hands he saw the blood on it was fresh.

"She's still alive." He said, "Get a medical capsule."

6.

Fleet Admiral Praus Vretan found the bridge of his star destroyer, the Imperial-class *Iron Warrior* to be a hive of activity when he arrived. The ship was moored in spacedock above the sector's capital world of Estran and its crew were hurrying to get the ship ready to launch. Rather than simply stand at the front of the bridge and stare out of the viewport at the other ships docked alongside his own the admiral made his way to the tactical station nearer the back.

"What do we have?" he asked the officers clustered about the displays, all of whom snapped to attention the moment they became aware of his presence.

"Sir, the rebels have launched a major assault on Tarlen." One replied, "Four major vessels, including what looks like one of our own Imperial-class ships."

"The *Night Raven*." Admiral Vretan said with a frown, "The rebels must have recovered her, damn them. What else?"

"More than a dozen frigates, corvettes and gunships in supporting roles, plus at least a hundred hyperspace capable starfighters of various classes."

"And what do we have there?"

"Three venators and up to six interdictors. Plus fighters and whatever customs ships are there."

"What do you mean up to six interdictors?" Admiral Vretan asked, "Don't you know?"

"Ah," the officer replied, "well its just that – well–"

"Come on man, spit it out!" the admiral snapped.

"Well, it's just that the rebels seem to have destroyed at least two of the interdictors already."

"Two ships lost so soon?" Admiral Vretan replied in amazement and then he looked back at the tactical displays, focusing on the one that showed the sector as a whole, "What's that group at Allastra?" he asked.

"Admiral Trell's heavy squadron."

A slight smile appeared on Admiral Vretan's face and without turning he called out.

"Get me Admiral Trell immediately." He ordered and moments later the translucent image of a woman in an Imperial uniform appeared in front of him.

"Yes admiral?" she said.

"Admiral Trell," Admiral Vretan said sternly as he turned to face the hologram, "Tarlen's come under heavy rebel attack."

"Tarlen? You're kidding."

"No admiral, this is a major assault. Your victory-class ships can be there in less than half the time we can. I want you to redeploy your entire squadron there right now. Take command until I get there."

"Confirmed admiral, we'll be there in under half an hour." The hologram replied before it faded away.

"Sir, I have Captain Sayer for you." A comscan operator called out.

"Who?" one of the officers standing with the admiral asked.

"Lorn Sayer." Admiral Vretan replied, "Frigate captain, commands a line of escort ships." And then he looked back towards the comscan operator, "Put him through."

His ship lacking the more advanced holographic communications of a star destroyer, Captain Sayer's image instead appeared as part of a flat rectangular projection.

"Admiral," he said, "is it true? Have the rebels hit Tarlen?"

"Its true." Admiral Vretan answered.

"Admiral my line is escorting a convoy less than three parsecs away, I'm requesting permission to lead four of my ships to Tarlen immediately. I'll leave the other two to protect the convoy."

"Do it." Admiral Vretan said, "With the rebels concentrating on Tarlen I doubt the convoy will need your entire line."

"Thank you sir." Captain Sayer replied and he was seen nodding at someone out of shot just before the image disappeared.

Admiral Vretan then looked back towards the crewmen preparing his own ship for action.

"Come on!" he yelled, "You've heard all that, do you want them to get all the rebels before we can get there?"

The pair of nebulon-B frigates fired on the *Falchion* as it rushed headlong towards them. Given the star destroyer's straight course the two rebel ships were able to concentrate their fire against a single location and came close to overpowering its shields before realising that the ship was not going to stop before it rammed them. Immediately both vessels ceased fire and began to break off. One got away cleanly, delivering a few more tubolaser shots into the star destroyer's flank before it shot past but the second ship was not quite so lucky.

Aboard both the frigate *Outrider* and the *Falchion* klaxons sounded as the two ships' collided with one another. The tower hanging below the forwards module of the frigate scraped against the side of the star destroyer, ripping hull plating from both vessels and bursting pressurised lines before the frigate was finally able to pull away.

Trailing fire behind it the *Outrider* limped onwards while the *Falchion* sped between the *Wave Rider* and *Ocean Queen*, its turbolasers blasting away at the two heavily shielded mon calamari star cruisers. In reply the two rebel ships turned their own turrets towards the star destroyer, but faced with the possibility that they could hit their own vessel by mistake they held their fire long enough for the Imperial ship to zoom past them. "Target that star destroyer." Admiral Aphanar ordered, "Have the *Ocean Queen* support us and tell our smaller vessels to break that blockade."

The two Corellian gunships blasted their way through a swarm of TIE fighters on their way towards the next interdicator cruiser orbiting Tarlen. The lightweight but agile fighters scattered at the sight of the heavily armed ships, but this was not enough to save them all and over twenty were reduced to tiny fragments by the multitude of anti-starfighter guns they carried. Three more were destroyed when their pilots dived towards Tarlen but failed to pull up in time to avoid the planet's defence shield.

Meanwhile the interdicator cruiser itself had been able to shut off its gravity well projectors and was turning to face the gunships even as they fired their missiles. The cruiser's gun crews spread their fire, creating a region of space where anything entering would be attacked and this shot down two of the four missiles as well as causing the forwards shields of the gunships to flare brightly as they came under attack before the other two missiles struck the cruiser.

Neither missile did enough damage to destroy the cruiser outright, but the squat command tower was blown wide open, decompressing the bridge and sending its flight crew tumbling into space as the helpless vessel continued to spin out of control.

But even as the two gunships were setting their sights on the fifth interdicator cruiser the *Impassable* was coming up behind them.

"Watch that corvette Blue squadron." Captain Jarad Tarl warned his squadron as flashes of turbolaser fire erupted from the customs vessel ahead. The customs corvettes were designed to take on smuggling ships and other common outlaw traffic, but their ranks of long ranged turrets also made them effective anti-starfighter ships, "Hammer squadron where are you?"

"Coming in on your six Blue leader." Came the reply, "We're not as fast as you."

"I don't care, so long as you get that corvette out of my way."

From behind Jarad's squadron of X-wings, a flight element of four heavy B-wing strike fighters lined themselves up on the corvette and launched proton torpedoes. They followed these up with a sustained barrage of fire from the ion cannons mounted on their wingtips. Lightning arced across the hull of the corvette as the blasts of highly charged particles overwhelmed its systems and shut down just engines and defences just long enough for the torpedoes to find their target and tear the corvette apart.

"Your sky is clear Blue leader, call us any time you need our help."

In the cockpit of his X-wing, Jarad just scowled.

As the *Night Raven* grew larger in the forward viewport of the *Ferocious* Captain Celtis gave the order to open fire in support of the badly damaged *Firebrand*. The initial blast caught the *Night Raven* off guard, but the massive vessel was struck in a forward section normally used for housing ground assault vehicles and the prefabricated garrison structure that had never been put in place before the Alliance captured it.

"Again! Quickly. Don't give them chance to realign their shields." Captain Celtis ordered, well aware that the powerful *Night Raven* was capable of engaging both venator-class ships simultaneously.

"Engines full ahead." Captain Kase ordered as he steadied himself following the unexpected attack by the *Ferocious*. Had the *Night Raven*'s crew, including himself he thought, then he would likely have been able to predict the intervention of this second star destroyer and his ship would not have been damaged. As far as Captain Kase was concerned it was pure luck that the blasts had struck an empty section of his ship and he was not willing to put his trust in the possibility that he would keep on being so lucky without dealing with this new threat first.

"Sir, enemy vessel to port is still firing." One of the bridge crew called out, referring to the *Firebrand* that the *Night Raven* had been duelling with since the start of the battle.

"I can see that lieutenant." Captain Kase replied, "But since I've got a better view from up here than down in that pit I suggest we focus on the fully functional star destroyer firing on us than the burning wreck alongside. We can come back later to deal with her."

The sound of the *Night Raven*'s engines changed pitch as more power was diverted to them and the star destroyer swung around to directly face the oncoming *Ferocious*. Behind the sharp dagger-shaped venator-

class star destroyer Captain Kase spotted the massive bulk of the *Trading Dream* and he realised that between them the two rebel ships had the Imperial vessel trapped.
“Open fire.” He ordered.

Thankful that despite the massive barrage of fire from the Imperial-class star destroyer the bridge of the *Firebrand* had escaped being hit, Captain Naje watched the enemy ship as it ceased firing at her ship and pulled away.

“Thank you *Ferocious*.” She muttered, “Just in the nick of time.” And then she turned towards the crew pit behind her, “Status report.” She snapped.

“Not good captain.” An officer replied, “Hangar bay is out of action, the fighters we launched for the blockade will have to land elsewhere. Engines operating at fifty percent efficiency and our hyperdrive is offline. Shields are holding for now but most of our weapons are offline. We couldn’t have taken much more of that.”

Captain Naje sighed.

“Pull back.” She ordered reluctantly, “Get us away from Tarlen and concentrate on damage control. If we’re lucky we may be able to get back into this fight yet.”

“Target their aft missile launchers.” The captain of the *Impassable* ordered and his ship’s gunners opened fire on the two gunships they were chasing. Like many warships the rear quarter of Corellian gunships was more lightly armed than other facings and so if he could keep the *Impassable* behind the two rebel ships then the captain knew that he had the advantage, especially if he could disable the only weapons they had covering that arc.

One of the gunships attempted to return fire, launching a pair of concussion missiles that got caught up in the barrage of laser fire and exploded before getting anywhere near the *Impassable*. However, fortunately for the gunships they were not the only alliance vessels close by.

Led by the *Renegade*, four Corellian corvettes closed in on the *Impassable* from a higher orbital plane. The vessels were barely a quarter of the size of the Imperial heavy cruiser and mounted only a handful of guns each, but those they did have were designed to deliver blows from well beyond the range of the *Impassable*’s quad cannons. In an attempt to disrupt their charge several squadrons of TIE fighters, including a handful of heavily armed bombers swooped in at the corvettes. But between the corvettes were a dozen Y-wing fighters. The two seat strike craft were older, slower and less manoeuvrable than the modern TIEs, but they were sturdy, well shielded and packed an impressive punch. As they raced headlong at the incoming Imperial fighters it was the Imperial ships that were forced to break off with the Y-wings in pursuit.

“Keep going.” Captain Malian Mayan aboard the *Renegade* ordered, “Protect those gunships. Oh and see if there are any more fighter squadrons available anywhere, I don’t want us hit by any more of those TIEs without backup.” Then as her crew acted on her orders, remaining above the *Impassable* and firing on it from beyond its effective range Malia looked at the blue-green world of Tarlen, “Come on Mace,” she muttered, “hurry up and get out of there.”

“Don’t worry captain.” Her navigator Krissa said, having overheard her comment, “I’m sure they’ll be just fine.”

The *Ferocious* rocked violently and Captain Celtis almost lost her footing.

“What the hell was that?” Captain Celtis exclaimed, knowing that the hits her ship was taking from the Imperial-class star destroyer ahead of them would not have caused such a disturbance.

“Captain, enemy ship to stern. Lucrehulk-class.”

“Damn it!” the captain snapped, “What’s the status of our fighters?”

“Engaging the enemy captain. They’re attempting to reach the rebel gunships like you ordered, but they’ve been joined by more ships and our fighters are under heavy fire.”

“Recall them.” Captain Celtis ordered, “Tell them we’re under heavy attack and they are to engage that Lucrehulk behind us. With any luck they’ll be able to draw it off.”

“Incoming!”

The single word was broadcast over the rebel communications net at the captured militia base. Colonel Collis still had most of his troops there, but a smaller group had been despatched in seized militia transports to loot the warehouses located close by.

“This is Collis, what do we have?” the colonel responded as he began to run towards the main gate where the message had originated.

“Looks like three AT-STs plus at least a platoon of infantry.”

“Copy that.” Colonel Collis signalled, “Concentrate on the infantry with the E-Webs. Maybe those walkers will back off after we take out their support.”

“Understood colonel. Will fire as soon as they’re in range.”

The heavy repeating blasters set up in fortified bunkers to protect the main gate opened fire just as Colonel Collis came close enough to see them, streams of powerful energy bolts blasting out of the bunkers and at the leading troop carrier. The armoured vehicle responded by deploying a smoke screen, but the rebel gunners continued to fire into the cloud, almost assured of hitting something.

Pursued by the pair of mon calamari vessels Captain Yay knew that it was only a matter of time before the star destroyer's shields failed. However, she did not intend to continue running while the rebel ships hammered her own from behind.

"Dead stop!" she yelled, "Then about turn and full ahead. Take us back between those fish men!"

The *Falchion* lurched as her order was followed, the massive ship coming to a sudden and complete halt before spinning around and accelerating suddenly towards the mon calamari cruisers and their shocked crews. Once again as the star destroyer passed between the two rebel ships the heavy turbolasers mounted on each side opened fire, pummeling them both and blasting a tower that had until recently been a luxury observation deck from the *Ocean Queen*.

As soon as the *Falchion* had passed between the two rebel cruisers Captain Yay noticed the *Ferocious*. Like her own vessel the *Ferocious* was coming under fire from two of the rebels' major capital ships, with no sign of the *Firebrand* to back her up.

"Torpedoes!" she shouted, "Get me a firing solution on that damn lucrehulk and fire. Full salvo!"

There was a flash of light from the *Falchion's* prow and four globes of light sped from the ship's torpedo launchers towards the rebel battleship. Punching through the *Trading Dream's* shields the four torpedoes all struck the battleship on the upper part of one of the cavernous hollow 'arms' that extended forwards around the central command hub. Explosions rocked the ship around the impacts and the landing bay within was torn open. Fortunately it was many years since the *Trading Dream* had carried the many hundreds of fighters and landing craft it was designed for and so the highly volatile fuel and ammunition for those ships was not present. Had it been then it was possible that the secondary explosions would have destroyed the entire ship, but as it was the *Trading Dream* continued firing on the *Ferocious* unabated while the *Wave Rider* and *Ocean Queen* circled around to face the *Falchion* once more.

As the AT-ST strode out of the cloud of smoke it launched a grenade at one of the bunkers that caused the rebel gun crew inside to cease fire briefly as they ducked for cover. Then, just as they opened fire again the walker responded with a blast from its main cannon that demolished the bunker.

"Get those men out!" Colonel Collis yelled and a small party of his soldiers ran to the ruined bunker and began to drag the injured rebel troops out of it.

A second AT-ST walked out of the smoke behind the first and both began to fire at the rebel troops spread out either side of the gate. The surviving E-Web crew shifted their fire at the walkers, but even though they were considered scout vehicles the AT-ST's possessed enough armour to withstand the assault for long enough that they were both able to line up their own weapons on the bunker. Seeing this reaction the gunners ceased fire and evacuated the bunker just before the Imperial walkers opened fire and destroyed it. Now all that stood between the advancing Imperial forces and the militia base was a platoon of rebel soldiers armed with little more than rifles.

But as the two walkers advanced ahead of the stormtroopers who had disembarked from their carriers there was the sound of powerful replusorlift engines from overhead. The Imperial forces did not react, assuming that this was their own air support arriving but instead the *Artist's Impression* and *Beauty Queen* flew over them and opened fire.

Both AT-STs exploded and the stormtroopers scattered.

"*Beauty Queen* to Colonel Collis, what is your status?" Dayle signalled.

"Perimeter still secure thanks to you *Beauty Queen*." The colonel replied, "Any signs of enemy air activity?"

"Negative. Nothing on the scopes so far but we're hanging around anyway."

Forced to break away from the gunships because of the intervention of the corvettes, the captain of the *Impassable* was relieved to see that none of the rebel ships were following his own. Instead, apparently concerned by the threat posed by the massive number of TIE fighters in the space around Tarlen the four corvettes had joined up with the pair of gunships and the vessels were now providing cover for one another as they sought out another victim. The *Impassable's* captain decided that this plan made a great deal of sense and he looked towards the nearby tactical display, searching for a location where he could find more Imperial vessels. He found it in the space above Tarlen's southern polar region. Here one of the other two surviving interdictor-class heavy cruisers had joined up with a trio of customs corvettes and several TIE fighter squadrons to make a stand. The cruiser and corvettes were concentrating their fire against one rebel ship at a time to drive them away while the fighters harassed other rebel ships and intercepted any missiles fired at them from long range.

"Take us there." He ordered, pointing at the display and without replying the helmsman steered towards the pole.

"Good to see you *Impassable*." A voice said as the captain of the other interdicator, the *Wary*, "Concentrate your fire on the frigate in sector four. Leave the other ships to the fighters."

"Copy that *Wary*." The *Impassable*'s captain replied, nodding at his crew to indicate that they should follow the order. But just as his ship took up a position alongside the other cruiser his comscan operator called out a warning.

"Captain! I've got a rebel ship closing at high speed."

The captain looked at the display showing the approaching vessel and his jaw dropped as he recognised it. Clearly of mon calamari construction the ship was not much smaller than the *Impassable* and as the nearby TIE fighters swooped in to engage it the rebel ship unleashed a hail of fire that cut through several of them.

"*Wary* look out for that ship!" the *Impassable*'s captain tried to warn the other cruiser before he looked towards his own crew and yelled, "Fire everything at that ship!"

"*Impassable* what the hell are you playing at? Fire on the ship in sector four, leave the others to the fighters."

"No! We have to stop that ship."

"*Impassable*, you are ordered to-" the *Wary*'s captain began, but before he could finish the mon calamari frigate broke through the screen of TIE fighters and for a brief moment it looked as if the ship had just burst open.

"Oh no." the *Impassable*'s captain said, resigned to his fate as the cloud of mines ejected by the rebel ship spread out and detonated, sending the wreckage of three corvettes, two heavy cruisers and numerous TIE fighters tumbling towards Tarlen's planetary shield.

"Commander we need to mobilise your force." Garm said to the officer who met him at the starport.

"It's already being done sir." The Navy officer replied, "But the rebels are using several armed freighters to hold us back."

"What?" Garm asked, "What are you talking about. We need to locate the missing convoy transports."

"Then you haven't heard? A rebel force was able to land before the planetary shield went up and seized one the largest militia bases on the planet. A second force has broken out of the base and appears to be seizing the contents of several warehouses. I diverted some of our troops there as quickly as I could but they've been driven back with heavy loses. Quite frankly we don't have anything designed for air-to-air combat. Even our gunships are better suited to ground attack."

"What about the militia?"

"No fighters at all sir. The locals rely on the customs corvettes stationed here for air defence and all of them are outside the shield."

"Not even any ground based weapons?"

"Yes sir, they have those. But right now they're packed in crates that are most likely being loaded aboard the ship that brought the rebel assault force here."

"Stang." Garm exclaimed, aware that he was out of his depth. He was an ISB agent, not a soldier, "Just do what you can commander." He said, "Use any of the forces available, as far as I'm concerned my mission is on hold until Tarlen can be secured."

7.

Aboard the badly damaged *Outrider* the crew worked frantically to repair the damage inflicted by the collision with the *Falchion*. Most of the damage control parties were involved in fighting the numerous fires burning throughout the ship, while others were working to reinforce the ship's structure for the jump the hyperspace. Amongst this a single figure wandered ignored by the crew. The droid made it's way to the airlock located near the ship's fighter hangar, opened the inner door and stepped inside. After closing the inner door the droid approached a brightly coloured panel marked 'EMERGENCY USE ONLY'. As soon as this panel was opened to reveal a lever, a klaxon began to sound. But before anyone on the ship could come to investigate the droid pulled the lever sharply and the outer door suddenly slid open. There was a rush of escaping air and the droid let go of the lever to allow itself to be blown into space.

Tumbling out of control the droid watched the *Outrider* grow smaller as it continued on its course away from the battle, its crew still unaware that the droid was missing.

First the *Wave Rider* and then the *Ocean Queen* opened fire on the *Falchion* as the star destroyer pulled away from Tarlen and began turning to bring its heavy turbolasers to bear on the mon calamari ships. But with the two star cruisers approaching from the same side the *Falchion* was forced to divide its fire and despite the power of the turbolasers they could do nothing but hammer at their shields, leaving the vessels beneath unscathed.

In return the forward mounted turbolasers and ion cannons of the mon calamari star cruisers subjected the star destroyer to a hail of fire. Able to penetrate the shields of the Imperial ship the ion cannons began to massively disrupt it's electronics and the lights coming from within began to flicker. On the bridge of the *Falchion* Captain Yay and her bridge crew looked to the ceiling lighting panels as they too flickered and then instinctively grabbed hold of whatever was to hand as they felt the gravity fail. Then the power failures began to spread to more important systems and the fire from the *Falchion's* turbolasers halted.

"Ahead full!" Captain Yay ordered, "Get us out of the way of those ion cannons."

Despite being lightly armed civilian craft, the four rebel vessels providing air cover to Colonel Collis' force was keeping the Empire's troops well back from the occupied militia base and now only small groups of infiltrators could approach without attracting the attention of these ships. But there was no sign that the Empire was giving up trying to retake the base even without adequate air support and the colonel brought his rifle back to his shoulder when he heard the sound of repulsorlift engines approaching the main gate.

"Get ready men." He said, "Here they come again." And he activated his comlink, "This is Colonel Collis, I have enemy armour approaching the main gate. Bring me fire from the sky."

"This is *Silver Hawk* to Colonel Collis," Vorn responded as the ship flew overhead, "Approaching units are not Empire. It's the convoy." And sure enough when the first vehicle came into view the colonel recognised it as a prisoner transport rather than a troop carrier.

"They're here!" he yelled, "Open the gates and get them inside. Contact the raiding party and tell them if they don't want to be left behind they need to get their asses back here ASAP."

With flashes of light heralding their exit from hyperspace the ships of Admiral Trell's squadron arrived in the Tarlen system well beyond the battleground of orbital space. In the space around Tarlen the admiral saw a pair of venator-class ships under the concentrated fire from two of the rebels' heavy ships each while further away from the planet a third venator drifted, burning but intact. Of the other Imperial warships she had been told to expect only a few now remained and all were under attack by groups of rebel vessels. As far as she could tell only a single rebel frigate had been forced from battle, now limping off in the opposite direction.

"Comscan, lock onto the rebels' heavy vessels." Admiral Trell ordered, "I want a firing solution for our missiles. Spread the word to our other ships."

"But admiral," one of her bridge officers protested, "at this range the rebels will be able to intercept our missiles easily."

"I know that!" the admiral snapped, "But if they're having to shoot down our missiles then they won't be firing at our ships so much will they? Now get me a missile lock and order the squadron to attack."

"Admiral I have enemy ships in sector fourteen!"

Admiral Aphanar whirled around in her seat to stare at the officer delivering the warning.

"Identify them." She ordered.

"I'm reading twelve victory-class star destroyers and eight Corellian corvettes."

"A full heavy squadron." Admiral Aphanar stated.

"Admiral, they're launching missiles." The officer added and he activated a display that showed fire blossoming from along the upper hulls of the star destroyers as missiles burst out of the silos mounted there and arced towards the rebel ships.

"Put me through to Captain Kaaro." The admiral ordered and moments later an image of the neimoidian appeared in front of her.

"Yes admiral?"

"Captain I take you have seen the Imperial squadron that has just arrived."

"Indeed admiral, our sensors indicate they have launched a missile barrage, but from this range—"

"Captain I want you to intercept those missiles, take all of our frigates and gunships and establish a cordon. Those star destroyers are too slow to reach us quickly and the admiral in charge does not appear to be sending any of his faster ships at us without them."

"But admiral, the venators—"

"Leave them to us captain. Right now I need you to keep those missiles from reaching us."

"Yes admiral."

The image of Captain Kaaro vanished and Admiral Aphanar turned once again to look out into space at the *Falchion* as its crew struggled to get their ship back under control and able to return fire. But then there were sudden flashes of light as four nebulon-B frigates emerged from hyperspace. Unlike the identically built ships that made up part of the rebel fleet these still had the wheel-like emblem of the Empire painted across their dark grey hulls and from out of their hangar bays almost a hundred TIE fighters took to space.

The newly arrived TIE fighters raced towards the *Wave Rider* and *Ocean Queen*, using their impressive speed and manoeuvrability to evade the fire from the cruisers' heavy guns while firing as many shots as they could at them. The fighters' guns were far weaker than those carried by the Imperial capital ships, but they forced the mon calamari crews to spread their shields over their entire vessels rather than concentrating them in the direction of the *Falchion* and making them more vulnerable to the handful of shots that the star destroyer was able to get off.

At the same time the four frigates of Captain Sayer's line turned gracefully away from the mon calamari cruisers, leaving it to their fighters to engage the pair of massive ships while they instead made for the *Night Raven*. Where just a few moments before the Imperial-class star destroyer had been facing the *Ferocious* with a second ship for support, it now found itself facing five Imperial ships all on its own. Though the *Night Raven* still possessed more firepower than all five combined, the Imperial ships would be able to surround the star destroyer and keep ships in its blind spots no matter which one Captain Kase had it face.

"Stabilise our shields." Captain Kase ordered when he saw that he was coming under attack from two different directions again, "Turbolasers concentrate on that star destroyer. Ion cannons target the frigates. And someone see if there's anyone out there to back us up."

In the cockpit of the *Harpoon* Captain Nassar Ghal and Colonel Sallir both looked at one another as the message they had been patiently waiting for.

"This is the *Beauty Queen*," Dayle signalled from the *Beauty Queen*, "prisoners have reached the airfield and the transport is loaded. We need an exit."

"Surface." Colonel Sallir ordered and as Nassar activated the *Harpoon's* sub aquatic engines the colonel activated the intercom, "Rhac, standby to fire."

The mon calamari built freighter breached the surface of the ocean just enough that its dorsal turret was clear of the water. Sat inside the turret Rhac Gysal rotated the weapon to face the installation built into the cliff side juts over a kilometre away. He waited until the targeting system indicated that it had acquired the main power generator and without pause for thought he opened fire.

The brief volley of fire found its mark and there was a brilliant flash as the reactor exploded, sending a fireball hundreds of metres into the sky.

"It's done!" Colonel Sallir snapped as he recoiled from the bright light, "Get us out of here."

"We're leaving." Nassar replied, switching to the *Harpoon's* replusorlift engines and lifting off from the water.

"This is *Harpoon* to all ships," Colonel Sallir broadcast, "the shield generator is destroyed. Immediate launch."

"Admiral the planetary shield is collapsing."

"Show me." Admiral Aphanar ordered before a representation of energy patterns surrounding the planet below appeared. Where not long ago this would have shown an impenetrable barrier now it seemed that the planet had no shield at all. Looking out of the viewport at Tarlen the admiral saw the bright flare of ion drives as the transport ship deployed to raid the surface now fled into space. Ahead of this and clearing a path through any Imperial fighters that happened to get in their way were the *Silver Hawk*, *Beauty Queen* and *Artist's Impression* while the *Scarlet Knife* limped alongside the larger vessel on its remaining engines. Finally, the *Harpoon* was accelerating up from behind these ships, "Signal the fleet, all ships prepare to retreat. We're done here for today."

Then the crewman who had alerted Admiral Aphanar to the change in the planetary shield's status delivered another urgent warning.

"Enemy vessels exiting hyperspace. Looks like one hundred plus."

The *Iron Warrior* was the first ship to return to realspace from the relief force, this was rapidly followed by four other Imperial-class ships and the tector-class *Horrific*, along with all the ships of their squadrons not already engaged in the Tarlen system.

Aboard the *Horrific* Admiral Hall flinched as the first thing he saw when the ship exited hyperspace was the rebel frigate *Outrider* almost directly ahead of his ship

"Weapons fire!" he yelled as he gazed at the already battered vessel.

Immediately several bright blue energy blasts erupted from the *Horrific's* turbolasers and struck the *Outrider*, ripping several control vanes and antenna arrays from its hull. But before a second salvo could be fired at the rebel vessel it was consumed by a brilliant flash of light.

"Report! Did we destroy it?" the admiral called out, unsure as to whether the flash had been from an explosion.

"Negative admiral," an officer in the crew pits replied, "Enemy ship escaped to hyperspace."

"Stang." Admiral Hall cursed, "What's the location of the nearest rebel ship still present Lieutenant Halowan?"

"Err, difficult to say sir, it appears that all of the rebels are retreating to hyperspace. I'm afraid we got here too late sir."

Jaynie shivered as she walked along the side of the road heading in what she hoped was the direction of the nearest settlement. It had begun to rain and now water was soaking into her clothing along with the filth she had landed in. She paused when she heard the sound of an aircraft and looked up to see a gunship descending over her. As the vehicle touched down the side door slid open and Garm looked out at her.

"Get in." he said.

Moff Gregor Horatian looked around the room at the advisors he had gathered together. Most of these were military officers, Admirals Hall, Trel and Vretan and General Julius Dern who commanded the army forces here on Estran. But also present were Director Corvin Helios of the ISB, Gayal Tharr, chief of Imperial Intelligence in the sector and Rodge Larrs, the local head of the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order, COMPNOR. They had gathered here to hear testimony from those who had seen most of the events at Tarlen that although COMPNOR was spinning as a major victory in which the Imperial Navy drove off a major rebel attack on a peaceful world was in reality a tactical disaster that had left three star destroyers damaged, two of them severely and five heavy cruisers as well as a host of smaller ships destroyed.

"Well? Moff Horatian said as he looked at the three people facing him, "Who's first?"

Garm glanced at Captain Naje while she looked directly ahead and Jaynie stared downwards. He wished Vay was here as well, but her injuries had not yet healed.

"We were able to capture four of the rebels." Garm said, "But two of them evaded capture long enough to summon reinforcements."

"The rebels had a massive force and the element of surprise." Captain Naje added, "We couldn't have foreseen them using one of our own star destroyers against us."

"She's right of course." Admiral Vretan said, looking at the moff, "if we'd suspected that they'd found the *Night Wraith* we could have warned our fleet units to be on the lookout for her. Who knows how many times she's been used to slip rebels through our lines?"

"A pity our spies couldn't have determined that." Director Helios said and he glared at Gayal Tharr, aware that Imperial Intelligence had inserted an agent into the Alliance in the sector but had since lost contact with them.

"It was a trap." Gayal said.

"What?" General Dern asked.

"It was a trap." She repeated, "The rebels allowed us to know of their presence specifically to draw out a small naval task force that they could then attack."

"How do you know this?" Rodge Larrs asked.

"Its simple young lady," Gayal replied, "unlike everyone else here who's just been wondering how this debacle happened, Imperial Intelligence has actually been investigating what happened. Now Captain Naje, I believe that you detected a coded transmission from the surface of Tarlen before the rebel fleet launched its attack."

"That's correct." The captain replied, "A brief data burst."

"Well Imperial Intelligence tracked that to its point of origin, a civilian transmitter located in a commercial sector. We went to that location and the people there gave us a positive identification of who sent the signal."

"Who?" Garm asked.

"Her." Gayal replied, staring at Jaynie.

"No!" Jaynie replied and she looked at Garm, "It wasn't me. I told you they tied me up and-

"You were seen." Gayal said, "Your employers recognised you."

"It wasn't me!" Jaynie screamed and she leapt to her feet.

Moff Horatian nodded to the stormtroopers standing guard and they stepped forwards and grabbed hold of Jaynie.

"No, let me go!" she yelled as they dragged her from the room.

"Don't worry Agent Larcus," Gayal said with a grin, "You weren't the only one taken in by her. The entire ISB fell for her little story."

As the meeting broke up Admiral Vretan approached Gayal.

"Miss Tharr, I'd like a word." He said quietly.

"What is it?"

"I think you should come with me."

The admiral took Gayal to a workshop located in the Navy's orbital spacedock where normally technicians would be at work on the damaged equipment arrayed around the room. Right now however the room was abandoned and Gayal could not help but notice that they had walked past a pair of stormtrooper marines guarding the door. Admiral Vretan walked over to a workbench covered in a sheet and pulled it back to reveal a droid lay beneath it.

"A droid?" Gayal said, "Is this what you wanted me to see? It's not even a modern type."

"This was found by our battlefield recovery teams in the Tarlen system." The admiral said, "It seems that it just walked off a rebel ship in the middle of the battle."

"But why?"

Admiral Vretan just smiled, reached down and reactivated the droid. Suddenly sitting upright the droid looked directly at Gayal.

"Good day mistress." It said, "I have been commanded to bring you important data."

"It looks like your spy has found a way to re-establish contact Miss Tharr." The admiral said.