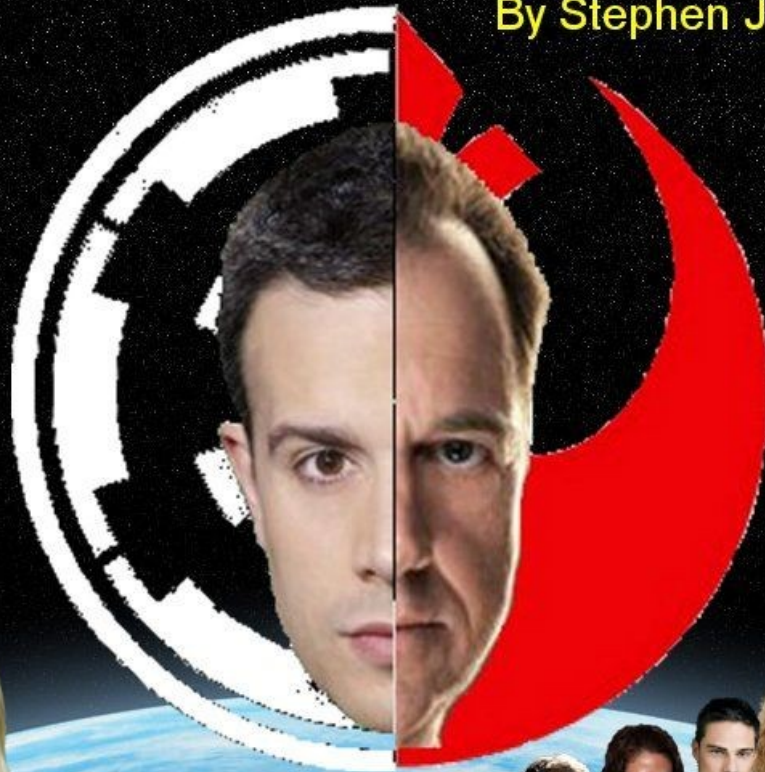


STAR WARS

9-10: Poisoning the Well

By Stephen J Dutton



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Civil war turns father against son

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

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

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

POISONING THE WELL

THE ALLIANCE INVASION OF ALLASTRA REQUIRES THE MAMMOTH TASK OF SECURING ALL OF THE WEAPONS ON THE PLANET. HOWEVER, WHEN A STASH OF DEAD NERVE GAS IS FOUND TO BE MISSING VORN LARCUS AND HIS TEAM MUST RACE TO RECOVER IT BEFORE IT CAN BE USED AGAINST THEM...

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

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1.

More than a dozen UT-60D U-wing support craft painted clearly in Alliance colours flew in close formation and at low altitude over the Allastran countryside towards their target. This was a heavily fortified facility embedded into the side of a mountain where the millions of tonnes of rock above it provided some protection against bombardment. A focused bombardment from a capital ship in orbit would undoubtedly melt through the rock and collapse the facility but the Alliance had no intention of destroying it from such a distance. Instead as the U-wings flew over the outer perimeter fence they came to a rapid halt, descended to ground level and began to disgorge the elite troops they carried.

"Move!" Colonel Max Collis yelled, "And make sure to cover all directions. Just because we've not been fired on yet doesn't mean we won't be."

The troops began to spread out, keeping their weapons held ready until they had secured the ground from their landing zone to the large heavily armoured blast doors that allowed access to the facility. These were large enough to allow three Imperial AT-ATs to walk through side by side but until opened not so much as a single Alliance infantryman would be able to enter the facility.

"Colonel Larcus," Colonel Collis said into his wrist mounted comlink as he stood in front of the massive doors and looked up at them, "we're ready for your team now."

In another U-wing that was still circling overhead Lieutenant Colonel Vorn Larcus looked at his pilot, Captain Mace Grayle.

"Think you can get us down there smoothly?" he asked.

"This thing's not the *Silver Hawk* colonel." Mace replied, "But she handles well enough."

"We're on our way Colonel Collis." Vorn replied to the head of Alliance special forces in the sector just as Mace lowered the U-wing's nose and brought the craft in to land as close to the blast doors as he could.

While the craft was descending Vorn climbed down in to the transport section where the other members of his team waited. Ordinarily they travelled together aboard the YT-1300 class freighter *Silver Hawk* that Mace owned, but that craft had been heavily damaged just a few days earlier and so now they were squeeze into the U-wing instead.

"We're going down now." he told them, "You all know your roles?"

"Sure boss." Lieutenant Kara Larcus, the team's medic who was also Vorn's wife despite being more than thirty years his junior, "The klutz gets Colonel Collis and his heavy mob into this place and then we all make sure that she doesn't accidentally trigger off any of the ordnance that's inside it."

"Hey that's not fair!" another of the young women in the team protested. This was Jaysica Horbid, the teams demolitions and security expert. Her accident prone nature, that for some reason never extended as far as her handling of explosives was the cause of frequent friction between her and Kara.

"The little lady's got a point lieutenant." the former mercenary Tharun Verser said from beside the main side hatch as he checked his weapon, "She handles explosives perfectly safely."

The U-wing then touched down and the hatch was pulled open by Tobis Dorfus, the *Silver Hawk's* engineer.

"Err, we're clear." he said and Tharun then jumped down to the ground.

Jaysica was the next out of the hatch and the moment she landed Tharun suddenly scooped her up and threw her over his shoulder.

"What are you doing? Put me down!" she yelled.

"Sorry little lady." Tharun replied as he ran towards the blast door, "Can't risk you tripping over your own feet before you get to the door."

Behind them the rest of the team began to jump down from the U-wing and run after Tharun but just as the youngest member of the team stepped up to the hatchway Vorn put his hand on her shoulder.

"Not you Cass." he told her, "You go up to the cockpit with your father. If we come under fire you'll need to fly the ship while he operates the weapons."

"Sure colonel." Cass replied, smiling and she hurried to the ladder leading up to the cockpit while Vorn jumped down from the U-wing with the rest of his team and ran towards the blast door where Colonel Collis and his command section were waiting. Tharun set Jaysica down beside the control panel to the blast doors.

"There you go little lady." he told her but she just scowled at him.

"Is she going to do anything anytime soon Vorn?" Colonel Collis asked.

"Jaysica get the door open." Vorn said and she turned towards the control panel.

Taking out her datapad, she connected this to the control panel via a data port set into it and and, using codes obtained through the local resistance she tried to access the lock controls.

"Huh. That's odd." she commented.

"What's wrong Jaysica?" Vorn asked.

"She can get us in can't she?" Colonel Collis asked.

"Of course she can." Vorn answered, "You can, can't you Jaysica?"

Of course I can colonel." Jaysica replied, "It's just that-

"I knew it." Kara interrupted, "The klutz has broken the lock and now it's jammed shut.

"I have not!" Jaysica snapped at her, "In fact this door isn't even locked." and she jabbed a finger at the control panel. Almost instantly there was a rumbling as the two halves of the blast door split apart and a gap appeared between them.

"We're in. Move!" Colonel Collis yelled, "Watch for booby traps."

The Alliance commando force charged through the opening blast doors while they were still moving and as soon as they were inside the mountain facility they began to spread out, still alert for the possibility of attack. The fact that such a supposedly secure facility would have been left unguarded and unlocked stretched credibility.

"Clear!" one of the commandos called out when the first squad through the doors failed to come under attack and more of the force moved in behind them

"Okay you know what we're looking for." Colonel Collis announced to his men, "So split up by squads and find out where the hell in this place it is."

While the main force of commandos headed for the massive underground storage areas of the facility, Colonel Collis took his command section towards the control centre and Vorn's team accompanied them so that Tobis could provide technical support. The corridors of the facility were totally deserted, with not even any droids moving around. Just like the main doors to the facility the blast door to the command centre had not been sealed, in fact it had been left open and the rebels were able to enter the room unopposed where they found the control consoles still active.

"Where the hell is everybody?" Tharun commented.

"Maybe they're all on a break." Kara said as Tobis rushed to the nearest computer terminal.

"Oh." he said as he studied it.

"Tobis what have you found?" Vorn asked and he and Colonel Collis walked up behind the engineer and peered over his shoulders.

"Err, ah." he began.

"Come on sergeant, spit it out." Colonel Collis said impatiently.

"Well, it's just that someone deliberately shut down all of the droids. Including all of the security droids." Tobis said, "Err, every single one was given orders to report to maintenance."

"How many droids are we talking about Tobis?" Vorn asked.

"Err, about fifty service and maintenance droids and err, about four hundred security droids." Tobis replied.

"Four hundred? Are you sure about that lad?" Tharun asked, joining the other three rebels beside the control console.

"Err, yes. It, err, it's right here. Four hundred KX-series security droids." Tobis said.

"Those could have caused us some major problems if they were walking about." Vorn said and Colonel Collis nodded as he activated his raised his arm to his mouth and comlink again.

"All team leaders report in. Is there any activity in this place?" he broadcast to his men.

"This is team aurek. Negative on activity in the storage section colonel, it's just us down here." one of the team leaders reported, "Wait, hang on a moment."

"Lieutenant, what's wrong down there? Are you under attack?" the colonel said when the channel went quiet.

"Negative colonel, it's still just us down here. But there's something you need to see." the lieutenant told him.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this boss." Kara said when she heard this.

Although the entire facility was supposed to be a high security storage warehouse, even within this place there were some areas that were more secure than others and Vorn's team stood outside one of them with Colonel Collis and his command section.

"Intelligence said that this should have been full." Colonel Collis said, walking inside the empty unit and Vorn followed him.

"I take it that there have been no reports of anything from here being found elsewhere by our forces?" he asked.

"What was in here?" Jaysica asked.

"FEX-M-three nerve gas." Vorn replied and Jaysica's eyes widened.

"Nerve gas? Why did we come here if there was supposed to be gas here?" she said.

"To secure it of course." Colonel Collis replied.

"Before the Empire could move it." Vorn added.

"Too late." Kara commented, "So boss, what now?"

"How much gas are we talking about here?" Tharun said.

"Several tonnes if intelligence was right." Vorn told him.

"Stang." Tharun exclaimed, "That's enough to kill thousands."

"Oh, err, even a gram of FEX-M-three will kill more than a hundred people." Tobis pointed out.

"That doesn't make me feel any better." Kara said.

"I need to alert General Kain that the gas is missing." Colonel Collis said and Vorn nodded.

"And Tobis, perhaps you can figure out where it's gone. The Imperial Army isn't going to move nerve gas around without leaving a data trail that we can follow."

"Oh, err, yes. Of course Colonel." Tobis replied.

Leaving his men to compile a full list of the armaments that were still present Colonel Collis took his command section back outside to report in while Vorn took his team back to the command centre so that Tobis could attempt to access the facility's records.

"So how long before you can tell us what happened to the gas?" Kara asked as Tobis began to search through the records.

"Oh, err. I'm not sure." he replied, "This would be easier if I had Harvey here." Harvey was an R5 astromech droid that belonged to Tobis, but like the protocol droid Jeeves that belonged to Vorn and Jaysica's mouse droid penny, the astromech had been left at headquarters when the team left for this mission.

"Can't we send Mace back for him?" Jaysica suggested.

"Send me back for who?" Mace asked as he and Cass entered the command centre, "Colonel Collis told me you were all in here." he continued, "Something about a missing weapon of mass destruction."

"Someone got to the gas before we could." Vorn said.

"Stang." Mace hissed, "Is that stuff going to be deployed?"

"So far no-one's reported any signs of the remaining Imperial forces using it." Vorn said.

"Our troops are equipped to handle a chemical attack anyway." Kara added.

"Our troops, yes." Tharun added, "But supposing whatever Imperial commander has the stuff decides to punish the locals for rising up by releasing it over a civilian area?"

"What does this gas do anyway?" Cass asked.

"Err, ah. It causes the brain to release stored energy." Tobis replied.

"Basically your brain boils itself inside your skull and comes leaking out your ears, nose and mouth." Tharun explained and Cass grimaced.

"That's horrible." she said.

"Chemical warfare often is." Vorn said, "That's why the Alliance avoids it wherever it's possible."

"Which if the Empire is cornered like they are now probably isn't." Kara said.

"Err." Tobis said, frowning as he looked at the console in front of him.

"What's wrong?" Mace asked.

"Well, err, it's just that there are no records at all of anyone removing anything from here." Tobis answered.

"Poodoo. The Empire isn't going to send nerve gas anywhere unless there are authorisation datapads handed over in triplicate." Kara said, "The Empire may be oppressive but they sure do love their procedures."

"Kara's right colonel." Tharun added and Kara smiled and nodded.,

"Yes I am. Again." she commented.

"Imperial officers certainly aren't known for showing a great deal of initiative." Vorn agreed, "Tobis, are you sure that no-one ordered the gas to be moved.

"Oh, err, I don't mean that no-one ordered the gas to be moved colonel. I, err, I mean that according to the computer there have been no orders at all to move anything in the last year." Tobis explained.

"That can't be right." Mace said, "If the gas is gone-

"Tobis knows what he's doing." Jaysica interrupted.

"No-one's saying that he doesn't Jaysica." Vorn said, "But our intelligence was clear. There was supposed to be a major stockpile of one of the deadliest nerve agents in history stored here and someone has already taken it."

"It's not like someone could just walk out of the door with it." Mace said, "The facility security would stop them." and Vorn groaned.

"Oh no." he said, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"About what colonel?" Mace asked.

"Someone stood down the facility's security droids." Kara said.

"Yes they did." Vorn added, "And I think that they did it so that they could take the nerve gas."

"They stole it? But why?" Jaysica said.

"Nothing good." Tharun said.

"Quite." Vorn agreed, "Perhaps the base's commanding officer thought he could use it to beat us and make himself a hero."

"That's certainly preferable to the obvious alternative." Mace said.

"What's that?" Jaysica asked.

"They took it to sell on the black market." Tharun said and he looked at Vorn before adding, "Right colonel?"

"Correct sergeant." Vorn said, "Somewhere out there is someone with several tonnes of poison gas for sale to the highest bidder."

"Err, I may have good news." Tobis said.

"The gas canisters are tagged?" Vorn said hopefully.

"No. Err, or at least not as far as I can tell." Tobis replied, "But, err, but the gas is incomplete."

"Incomplete? What does that mean?" Cass asked.

"Lots of chemical weapons are stored in a binary form kid." Tharun told her, "Two different compound that need to be mixed together before it becomes dangerous. Without that then both halves are pretty much harmless."

"Define pretty much." Kara said.

"They're inert." Vorn said, "It's meant to be a safety precaution against accidental spills."

"It doesn't really help us if whoever took the gas took both parts though." Mace commented.

"Oh, err, no." Tobis said, "Only one part of the gas was kept here. The other is somewhere else."

"So what they stolen is an inert mass?" Kara said and Tobis nodded.

"Err, yes." he said.

Vorn smiled.

"Excellent work Tobis." he said, "Now I need to know exactly what it is that they took and what it is that they're missing. Then we can work on tracking down the other part of the gas. If we're quick enough then we may just be able to catch whoever has the part that was stored here."

"You're thinking of springing a trap?" Mace said.

"Can you think of a better way?" Vorn responded.

"No. It's just that I'm not used to using nerve gas as bait in one." Mace said.

2.

"There's a rebel patrol up ahead." one of General Kinnerman's men told him as he walked back towards the speeder that the general was sat in.

"Does it look like they're looking for us?" he asked.

"No sir, there's no road block. What little traffic I saw was just being waved past."

"We still can't risk taking the skiffs through it though." General Kinnerman said as he reached out for a large datapad and called up a map of the local area.

"We need to reach the store at Teller's point." he said, "I had intended for us to head straight through the mining district of Kronnervale but the rebels are all over that area."

"Perhaps we should lay low for a while sir." the other soldier suggested.

"Or perhaps you should stop demonstrating why a nerf herder like you got stuck fixing service droids in a reserve military base and leave the planning to me." the general said without bothering to look up from his datapad, "The rebels will take the storehouse soon. What little remained of our front to the east had already collapsed and they were advancing towards us. It won't take them long to figure out that the gas is missing and they'll be hunting for it. We need to have the activator in our hands and get to a starship to take us off this worthless cesspool of a world before they can catch up with us."

"Yes general." the soldier said just as the general put down his datapad and looked at the driver of his speeder.

"Take us north." he said, "There's a small starport about forty kilometres from here that has a freight terminal. We'll stash the gas there while we go for the activator. Then we'll grab a ship when we get back."

"Yes sir." the driver replied as the speeder accelerated forwards and behind it the cargo skiffs on which the gas canisters lay on covered cargo decks began to follow.

"Lieutenant Pay." Tharun said when a man disembarked from a small shuttle that had just arrived from orbit.

"Sergeant Verser." the new arrival replied, "Where is Colonel Larcus?"

"He's in the command centre sir. Come with me and I'll show you." Tharun said before turning around and leading the officer into the storage facility. From there he led him to the command centre where Tobis was still reviewing the facility records while the other members of Vorn's team were gathered around him.

"Ah Geran." Vorn said when he saw Tharun leading the new arrival into the room.

"Colonel." Geran said, "I believe you've managed to upset all of our intelligence assessments."

"To be honest that's not very difficult." Kara commented.

"Geran someone's taken the gas. It was gone when we arrived." Vorn said.

"Yes, I was briefed about that." Geran said, "Do you have any ideas?"

"We think it was the base staff themselves." Mace told him, "They shut down the security droids that would have acted to stop them from taking the gas."

"According to Colonel Collis's men, the only things missing are the gas and some small arms." Vorn added, "Presumably the small arms are for their own protection. On the bright side the Force has been with us and they don't have everything they need to make the gas usable."

Ah, it's a binary compound." Geran said and Vorn nodded.

"Yes and thanks to Tobis we know that the other half wasn't kept here. The problem is that we can't tell exactly where the other half is kept." he said.

"It's a fair bet that the sleemos who took the gas know though." Kara added.

"We thought that intelligence might be able to point us in the right direction of the activating part of the gas." Vorn said and Geran smiled.

"Let me take a look at my database." Geran said as he set the portable computer he had brought to the facility with him down on a nearby bench and turned it on. As soon as he entered his password the computer brought up a full list of every Imperial known installation on Allastra. Many of these had been local defence facilities before the Empire disbanded Allastra's own military, having grown tired of the planetwide corruption that made them more a liability than an asset. Many weapons belonging to the planetary defence forces had fallen into the hands of outlaws, including the Rebel Alliance and it had been decided that the only way to put a stop to this was for the Empire to seize control of the weapons for itself.

"And what a great job they've done of keeping their weapons under control." Kara said.

"So does intelligence have any data on where the other part of the gas could be?" Mace asked as Geran read through the list of Imperial weapon storage facilities on Allastra.

"No, there's nothing." he replied, "We managed to get a list of facilities that we thought was complete but this is the only place that had chemical weapons in its manifest."

"What if it's not on Allastra at all?" Cass suggested, "Maybe the Empire thought it was a bad idea keeping the

other part of the gas on the same planet as this one.”

“No.” Geran said, shaking his head, “Though that would make the gas more secure it would drastically increase the time taken to get it deployed in the field. Wherever the activator is, it's here on Allastra.”

“So how would the activator be combined with what was stored here?” Kara asked.

“That's a good point.” Mace said, “If it needs special equipment then all we need to do is figure out where that would be.”

“Sadly all of the pumping and mixing gear used to transfer both parts of the nerve agent in the correct quantities into their shells was located right here.” Geran replied, “If what I've been told it true, that is all gone.”

Then Vorn smiled.

“I know that look.” Kara said, also smiling, “The boss has an idea. Don't you boss?”

“I do.” Vorn replied as he looked at Geran, Supposing the activator agent wasn't stored in an armoury. Maybe it's not in a military facility at all.”

“But where else would it be?” Jaysica asked.

“Where else is designed to store dangerous chemicals safely and securely? In fact what other sort of facility regularly distributes potential lethal chemicals on a daily basis?” Vorn responded.

“A hospital.” Mace said.

“A hospital.” Vorn repeated.

“It makes sense in a perverse sort of way.” Geran said, “The Empire also knows that the Alliance would never attack a civilian medical facility.”

“The problem is that we still don't know which hospital they'd pick to keep the activator in.” Vorn said.

“Moving all those chemicals and the equipment that goes with it can't be easy though.” Mace pointed out, “They must have vehicles of some sort. Maybe we should focus on tracking them instead.”

The starport was designed with small transport vessels in mind and consisted of numerous sunken circular docking bays, each one able to house a vessel up to about seventy metres long. However, as General Kinnerman had told the soldier under his command the starport did still have a dedicated freight terminal where cargoes could be stored before loading aboard a transport or, if it was the cargo from an incoming vessel while customs examined it. Imperial Customs could potentially have caused General Kinnerman some trouble at this point. There was no hiding what was inside the unmarked containers aboard the skiffs that his men drove up to the gates of the terminal and how willing they would be to co-operate was an unknown factor. However, fortune smiled on the general and as his vehicles approached the freight terminal the customs office was dark and obviously empty.

“Pull over here.” he told his driver and as the speeder came to a halt the general got out and walked towards a man in overalls he noticed just within the terminal directing a loading droid, “You there!” the general called out and the man turned around. General Kinnerman was not wearing his uniform and neither were any of his men. In addition they had made sure that all of the Imperial markings on their vehicles had been painted over before they left the underground storage facility so that they could not be identified easily.

“Who are you? What do you want?” the man responded.

“What's going on here? Where are the customs agents?” the general asked. If the customs agents were only gone temporarily then the last thing he wanted to do was risk leaving skiffs loaded with components of deadly nerve gas where customs agents would find them on their return.

“Gone.” the man said, “A rumour went round that the rebels were on their way here and were arresting or executing every Imperial agent they found. The customs guys ditched their uniforms, took a speeder and left as quick as they could.”

General Kinnerman nodded. With no customs agents to take an interest in his illicit cargo he would not have to risk bringing anyone else into his confidence or chance killing someone who might be missed. However, the lack of customs agents at the freight terminal also meant that it would be unguarded and General Kinnerman did not want to take the risk of having the cargo he had already stolen himself being stolen from him as well.

“What's going on now that they've gone?” he asked the man.

“Not much.” he replied, “Mind you there wasn't much going on before either. There was a bit of a rush when the riots began as people tried to get off world, but the moment the rebels brought their fleet into orbit everything went quiet. None of the ships here are getting past that blockade.”

The general nodded.

“I have a cargo I want to store safely.” he said.

“Bring it in.” the man told him.

“How do I know it will be safe?”

“You don't. You can stay with it if it's that valuable. But you might want to make sure you've moved it by the time the rebels get here. Who knows what they'll do with it?” the man said and General Kinnerman smiled, knowing exactly what the consequences of the gas, even in its current inert state being discovered by the

Alliance.

"Thanks." he said before returned to his speeder and picking up the comlink handset from the dashboard, putting him in communication with all of his men.

"We'll leave the skiffs here." he told them, "Also I want four volunteers to stay behind and guard them. We've come too far now to lose out because of pure bad luck."

3.

"The, err, the vehicle inventory wasn't wiped before the base personnel left." Tobis said as the rebels made their way into the base's large vehicle garage. In here they found an assortment of transport, utility and military vehicles. These included several armoured repulsorlift vehicles that were armed with blaster cannons and automatic grenade launchers that could have been used to great effect against the rebel force that had been deployed to take control of the facility.

"We found evidence of several missing vehicles." Geran added, "A mix of ordinary landspeeders and cargo skiffs."

"Why not take the tanks?" Cass asked.

"Too conspicuous." Tharun replied, "Those things would be detectable even from orbit. But there are far too many speeders on Allastra for us to track them all."

"Exactly." Geran agreed, "They also didn't take any of the conventional heavy weapons from the arsenal. Obviously they had a specific purpose in mind and planned their departure carefully. However, because they failed to wipe the facility records we can estimate how far they can have got. Then combining this with our theory that they're heading for a hospital we can target all the hospitals in a particular radius."

"But we don't know when they left. Do we?" Cass asked.

"We can't be one hundred percent certain, no." Vorn replied, "But given that everything else was meticulously planned except for wiping the facility records we can guess that they left in a hurry. Most likely because they detected our approach and didn't want us to see them leaving. If they'd had longer to prepare then I'd expect them to have deleted the records and reactivated the security droids to slow us down."

"That also gives us a rough direction of travel. At least for the initial part of their escape." Mace pointed out, "We know that nothing passed underneath us from here when we were on approach."

"Yes," Geran said, nodding, "and that helps narrow things down further. I suggest that we leave Colonel Collis and his men here to make sure that nothing else goes missing and take your ship to track the missing gas. I'll inform General Kain of what we're doing and I'm sure he'll send troops to the local hospitals."

General Kinnerman looked out of his speeder as it passed by the hospital in the settlement where the activator for the gas was stored. In addition to the numerous emergency response vehicles lined up in front of the building as well as on its rooftop landing pad there was an old and battered shuttle of a type used by the Republic during the Clone Wars present and a pair of Alliance soldiers stood guard outside the main entrance.

"Full face breath masks." the general commented when he noticed the masks hanging from the equipment harnesses the two soldiers wore, "Too bad for them that FEX-M-three can also be absorbed through the skin. Though inhalation is a far better means of delivery."

"Do you think they know about the gas general?" one of the two soldiers sat in the back of the speeder asked and General Kinnerman smiled.

"Undoubtedly." he answered, "I'm guessing that they know that it is currently inert. They may also have deduced that the activator is not stored in an overtly military facility."

"Your orders sir?" the driver said.

"Keep going. As long as those troops are here they aren't at our real objective." General Kinnerman ordered and the driver nodded as he continued to drive past the hospital, followed by two more identical vehicles, each one carrying four more Imperial troopers.

The small convoy drove most of the way through the settlement until they came to a squat structure that sat within a power fence. The building itself bore no markings to indicate its function but a large sign posted just within the main gate read 'Tovern Veterinary Supplies.' The driver of the vehicle carrying General Kinnerman drove right up to the gate and a uniformed security guard armed with a blaster pistol emerged from the tiny gatehouse beside the gate itself.

"You'll have to keep on going." the guard said, "We're not open to-" but before he could finish General Kinnerman produced a datapad and handed it over.

"The key word of the day is bantha." he said and the guard frowned before taking the datapad and activating it. This produced a scandoc that confirmed the general's identity and position and the guard waved to a comrade still inside the gatehouse.

"They're cleared." he called out.

"What's the situation here?" General Kinnerman asked as the gate still blocking the way towards the building retracted.

"We're on lock down sir." the guard replied, "The rebels haven't attempted to breach the perimeter but for all we know they could be planning an assault right now."

"Yes, we saw them at the local hospital." General Kinnerman replied, "If any unauthorised beings attempt to get past the perimeter then don't hesitate to use force to stop them. But I suggest you try and keep it quiet. We don't want to attract any unwanted attention."

"Yes sir." the guard said, nodding and stepping back as the speeder began to move now that the gate was open and the small convoy drove towards the structure ahead of them. As the speeders neared the main entrance a pair of individuals, a man wearing a uniform identical to the security guard at the gate and a woman in civilian garb emerged to meet them.

"General." the woman said as he emerged from the speeder, "What brings you here?"

"In case it has escaped your notice Major Sovan this world has been invaded by the rebellion and unless we do something to stop it, they will soon control the entire planet." General Kinnerman said sternly.

"You're here for the activator?" Major Sovan responded.

"Indeed I am. All of it."

"But general, this is most improper. My orders are to release the activator to no-one without proper authorisation." Major Sovan said.

"My rank is my authorisation major and I am ordering you to hand it over." the general told her.

"I'm sorry general but that's not good enough. Only the governor or Moff Horatian can authorise me to release it." she insisted and General Kinnerman sighed.

"Oh well." he said as he drew the blaster that, despite him being dressed in civilian clothes, he still had holstered on his leg and he shot Major Sovan in the chest, "Boring conversation anyway."

As Major Sovan fell dead beside him, the uniformed security guard reached for his blaster at the same time as he activated the comlink built into his collar.

"Condition red! We're under-" he began but before he could finish and before his sidearm was even out of its holster he was struck by a close range burst of fire from the blaster rifle carried by one of the soldiers who had ridden with him. After this a klaxon started to sound and there followed two more rapid bursts of blaster fire as the remaining troopers hurriedly disembarked from their landspeeders as well and fired on the guards emerging from the gatehouse in response to the shooting they had just heard.

In a tiny room inside the building a pair of Imperial technicians watched the security footage of their commanding officer being murdered right outside.

"What do we do?" one asked and after a moment's hesitation the other uttered a simple reply.

"Call the cops." he said.

4.

“Quickly! Get inside before they can seal the blast doors.” General Kinnerman yelled and he and his men charged towards the main entrance just as a reinforced blast door was sliding shut behind the ordinary transparent one. The first trooper to dive through the narrowing gap between the segments of the blast door was struck by a blaster bolt fired by the security guard on duty behind the main desk just inside the building and lacking the body armour he would normally wear as part of his uniform he fell dead just as the next two troopers as well as General Kinnerman made it inside ahead of the blast door sealing and the general himself gunned down the security guard as he desperately tried to summon help. Rushing up to the desk the general leapt over it and quickly located the release for the blast door. While the two troopers inside with him took up positions to cover the approaches to the reception area they occupied, General Kinnerman triggered the release and watched as the blast door began to slide open once more.

“Come on.” he shouted to the soldiers waiting outside and he waved them towards him, “We need to locate the vault.”

As the raiding party started to press inwards from the reception area they were met by more blaster fire from another security guard that had concealed himself during the initial stages of the attack. Although the facility's defenders had the appearance of mundane private security guards General Kinnerman knew that they were in reality highly trained Imperial soldiers, placed here to guard the secret vault that contained the valuable chemical he had come to take control of. General Kinnerman's men were just as well trained, however and rather than charge headlong down a corridor while being shot at, one of them produced a concussion grenade that he armed and hurled it towards the partially concealed guard. The grenade bounced off a wall as the attacking soldiers took cover and then exploded. Designed to produce minimal shrapnel, the explosive instead created a powerful blast wave that smashed against the surrounding walls as well as the hidden security guard who was too slow get out of the lethal radius and his body was hurled sideways by the force of the blast. Knowing that their opponent was dead, the attacking troops dashed forwards as far as a sealed door that now blocked their path. To maintain the facade of a civilian veterinary supply company there were few visible defences and so the internal doors were standard types, although they could be locked remotely and that was just what the facility staff had done to try and delay the intruders. However, General Kinnerman had anticipated this and he signalled for one of his men who was proficient in overriding security systems to open up the control panel beside the door and override the lock.

The door slid open to reveal a pair of security guards as well as another man wearing a white lab coat piling furniture across the corridor to try and form a defensible position. Caught by surprise, the guards both reached for their blasters but one was shot before he could even lay a hand on his weapon. The second guard managed to draw his sidearm and got off a single shot that hit one of General Kinnerman's men in the arm and he cried out as he dropped his rifle. As the second guard was also gunned down the lab technician tried to hide behind the barrier but General Kinnerman saw where he went and with both guards now dead he strode up to the barrier and pointed his blaster around it.

“Get up!” he snapped and the man slowly got his feet.

“Don't shoot. I'm unarmed.” he said and the general smiled at him.

“I'm not going to shoot you.” he replied, “I need you to lead me to the vault.”

“The vault? I don't know what you're talking about.” the man said and General Kinnerman scowled before striking him in the face with the butt of his blaster pistol so that blood came pouring from his nose.

“Poodoo. I know exactly what this place really is and it's not a pharmaceutical company for banthas and gornts. Now tell me where the vault is or you're no good to me.” the general shouted and then he glanced down at the dead guards by his feet, “Just like they weren't.”

“Okay, okay.” the man exclaimed, “I'll take you. Follow me.”

“Good, that's better. Oh but if you're thinking about leading us into a trap then bear in mind that you'll die before any of us do. Understand?” the general warned, pushing his blaster up beneath the man's jaw and he nodded rapidly.

General Kinnerman then shoved the man and he pressed his blaster into his spine as he began to lead the general and his men deeper into the facility. As part of its cover as a veterinary supply company the facility included several laboratories where tests could be carried out and medicines mixed. Some of these were occupied and the workers inside them hid as soon as they saw the armed intruders marching past the glass fronted work areas. The general ignored these workers, instead concentrating on the man who was leading them towards the vault where he knew the activator to be stored. On the other hand his men fired on them through the transparent walls that were totally inadequate to provide and protection from blaster fire at point blank range.

“It's just up-” General Kinnerman's prisoner began but as he stepped around a corner he was suddenly cut

down by a stream of blaster bolts that obviously came from something more than a pistol. "Repeating blaster." the general said as more blaster bolts started to punch holes in the wall behind him. One of his men produced a grenade and was about to pull out the pin when the general stopped him. "No, not here." he said, "We don't want to damage the vault entrance." "But we can't just go charging down there with that weapon in place sir." the soldier replied. "I know that." the general said, "But take a look at that." and he pointed to the wall right across the corridor from the passageway the blaster bolts were being fired down. Each impact of an energy blast on the wall was removing another chunk and the wall was looking increasingly pitted, "Take another man and get into the room on the other side. We'll make sure they keep on shooting." the general added. "Yes sir." the soldier responded and he waved at another man to follow him as he doubled back down the corridor and rushed into the glass fronted laboratory on the other side of the wall. From inside the lab the two soldiers could hear the sound of the repeating blaster continuing to fire along with the occasional lighter rifle and pistol shot used to provoke another burst of fire from the vault's defenders. As they waited both soldiers unfolded the stocks of their Blastech E-11 rifles for better aiming stability and then crouched down as the repeating blaster kept firing. All of a sudden several of the shots from the repeating blaster blew right through the wall and the two soldiers looked away as they were showered with fragments of the wall. Looking up they saw that there were now three fist sized holes in the wall that enabled them to see through to the corridor beyond it and both men leapt up and pushed the muzzles of their weapons into two of them. The holes were just big enough for the rifles to poke through and also permit them to use the optical sights mounted on top of the weapons. Through these sights the two soldiers saw a pair of security guards crouched behind a tripod mounted medium repeating blaster that they had set up in front of an innocuous looking door. Focused on the corner they knew General Kinnerman and his team to be hiding behind, the gunners failed to notice the muzzles of the two blaster rifles before the soldiers wielding them opened fire in unison and twin bursts of energy blasts shot down the corridor towards them. The repeating blaster was a powerful weapon when set up to cover such a narrow approach but it provided them with almost no cover and both gunners were struck repeatedly before they fell, one of them slumping forwards over the weapon and the other collapsing in a heap on the floor. General Kinnerman heard the sound of the bodies falling and smiled. Then as soon as his men inside the laboratory ceased fire he waved his men onwards. "Come on, the way is clear now." he told them before leading them around the corner. Unsurprisingly the door to the vault was locked when the general and his men reached it and despite it looking like any other ordinary door in the facility, General Kinnerman knew that it would in fact be an armoured blast door. "Get this open." he ordered and one of his men slung his rifle over his shoulder and took out an electronic lock pick. Connecting this to the control panel beside the door he began to work. Given the nature of the vault's contents the lock was one of the most advanced available. However, the lock pick was also a state of the art device and given that both were of Imperial manufacture the lock pick was able to access the lock easily and after just under a minute of trying the soldier smiled as the door slid open. General Kinnerman looked into the vault as its lights flickered into life and he smiled when he saw the shelves stacked with metal flasks, all of them marked with the words 'Activator, Binary, FEX-M-3' and then unique serial numbers beneath this. Unlike the primary compound that had been stored in large drums at General Kinnerman's facility, the flasks holding the activator were only a little larger than the bottles many soft drinks were sold in. "Everyone grab as many as you can." he ordered, "We need to get out of here before anyone comes to find out what all the shooting was about."

Between them, General Kinnerman and his men were able to carry all of the flasks of the activating agent to their speeders and the loaded them into the storage compartments at the rear. Just as they were finishing there was the wailing of a siren and looking towards the gate they saw a pair of police speeders rushing towards them. These ground to a sudden halt and a pair of police officers got out of each, all armed with blaster pistols only.

"This is the police. Drop your weapons and get down on the ground." one of the officers ordered, using his vehicle's communication system to amplify his voice. However, rather than obey the command General Kinnerman chose to issue one of his own instead.

"Deal with them." he said simply and as the general got back into his speeder his men all turned towards the police officers and opened fire with their rifles on automatic.

"I'm picking up replusorlift signatures ahead." Mace said as he flew the U-wing over the Allastran wilderness. "No," Geran responded from beside him, shaking his head at the same time, "those are Alliance troop carriers. Our lines are moving faster than we'd projected."

"The benefits of a population that's easily bribed I suppose." Mace commented, remembering his days as a smuggler and how easy it was to bypass customs checks when moving cargoes to or from the notoriously corrupt world. Then he sighed and added, "That means we've discounted every hospital between the armoury and our lines then. If we've not done a flyover then there are Alliance troops standing guard."

"I know and all of them are still reporting in." Geran replied.

"What's going on?" Vorn asked from the transport compartment below the two officers in the raised cockpit.

"We've hit a dead end colonel." Mace answered.

"Captain Grayle's right." Geran agreed, "The Alliance has every potential storage facility locked down. The soldiers that stole that gas haven't been to any of them and there's no signs of any transports on the roads capable of moving it."

"Sounds like they've gone to ground colonel." Tharun commented and Vorn nodded in agreement.

"What about places where they could leave their transports behind?" he asked.

"That could be just about anywhere." Geran said, "We've got minimal assets in this area right now so they could just park them up under cover, turn off their engines and we'd never spot them from the air."

It was then that Geran was interrupted by his portable computer chirping.

"What's wrong?" Vorn said.

"Nothing I hope." Geran responded as he picked up the computer from beside his seat and opened it up, "I just set it to alert me whenever there are any reports of fighting, I don't want to miss out on any vital information just because I'm down here instead of up on the Wave Rider with General Kain and Admiral Aphanar." then he frowned, "Now that's interesting." he said.

"What is?" Mace asked.

"A police report." Geran said.

"You and I obviously have different definitions of interesting." Kara commented from below.

"Police received a call about an armed raid on a veterinary supply company. They sent two units to investigate ahead of a full tactical team and before they were all killed one of them managed to report being engaged by beings armed with military specification blasters." Geran said.

"Do you think it was the soldiers that took the gas?" Jaysica asked, looking around at the other rebels.

"I doubt it little lady." Tharun commented, "I'm sure that everyone who wants black market bantha tranquillisers uses that sort of firepower to get their fix."

"It sounds a bit over the top to me." Jaysica said, not getting the joke and Kara groaned.

"Of course it is you nerf herder!" she exclaimed, "Tharun was joking."

"How far away is this place?" Vorn asked and Geran smiled.

"Just forty kilometres." he replied.

"Give Mace the co-ordinates. We're going to check it out." Vorn ordered.

5.

Tharun pulled the U-wing's side hatch open while the craft was still descending and through it the rebels saw several police vehicles and officers looking back up at them. Vorn was the first to leap out of the U-wing the moment that it touched down, with Tharun following him. Wearing a blast helmet and armoured vest as well as carrying a heavy blaster rifle, Tharun appeared far more imposing than Vorn and the police officers focused their attention more on him.

"Who's in charge here?" Vorn called out over the sound of the U-wing's engines.

"There's a captain on his way but until then I am." a police officer with sergeant's markings on his uniform replied, "Who are you?"

"Lieutenant Colonel Vorn Larcus of the Alliance to Restore the Republic. What can you tell me about what happened here?"

"Armed robbery. Looks like the perpetrators had weapons from one of the old defence force stockpiles." the police sergeant told him.

"Defence force weapons?" Vorn commented, remembering how many of those weapons had ended up in Alliance hands before the Empire could secure them.

"Well where else would they have got military issue blaster rifles?" the sergeant said.

"The Imperial military perhaps?" Tharun commented.

"What was taken?" Vorn asked and the police sergeant shrugged.

"We don't know." he answered, "By the time we got here everyone was dead, including four of our own. But without access to the computer network we don't know what was supposed to be in the vault."

"Vault?" Vorn commented.

"Yeah, there's some sort of disguised vault in there that the security staff looked really keen to protect." the sergeant said, pointing towards the entrance to the building.

"Show me." Vorn said.

"No way. I don't care who you are. This is a crime scene and-" the sergeant began but Vorn simply turned and started to walk towards the entrance with the other rebels following him, "Hey! Come back here!" the police sergeant shouted out and one of the other officers stepped in front of Vorn as if to block his path but then stepped back out of the way when Tharun and Mace both raised their weapons in a threatening manner. Realising that he could not stop the rebels from entering the building, the police sergeant ran in after them and caught up with Vorn, "I can at least try and make sure you don't destroy physical evidence." he said, "Come on, I'll show you the way."

"Thank you sergeant." Vorn responded.

The police sergeant then led the rebels through the corridors to the now empty vault and Vorn came to a halt as soon as he saw it.

"Does it not appear strange that the security staff here had access to a repeating blaster?" he asked when he saw the tripod mounted weapon set up in the corridor outside the vault.

"Or that whoever broke in didn't take it?" Mace added, "That thing's worth thousands on the black market."

"The Alliance could also make good use of it." Geran added and Vorn nodded.

"We'll take it with us." he said.

"No way mister lieutenant colonel whatever your name is." the police sergeant said, "That's evidence in a criminal investigation."

"Sergeant what happened inside this building was no ordinary crime. A war crime perhaps if any of these people were non-combatants but nevertheless investigating it is out of your department's jurisdiction." Geran said.

"What do you mean?" the sergeant replied.

"What he means sergeant is that this was no ordinary break in and no ordinary veterinary supply company." Vorn said, "We suspect that these men lying dead at our feet were Imperial troops assigned to guard that vault and that what was taken was the activating chemical to a stockpile of lethal nerve gas. Enough to kill millions."

The police sergeant's jaw dropped when he heard this. Even the shock of finding officers he had served alongside for years murdered seemed to pale when compared to the potential deaths of millions and all of a sudden he felt out of his depth.

"You said you don't have access to the computer system." Vorn said and he looked at Geran, "Perhaps my associate here would have better luck. Could you show us to the main computer room?"

"Of course. Come this way." the police sergeant replied.

When General Kinnerman's vehicles returned to the freight terminal the soldiers he had left behind to guard

the skiffs immediately gathered around the landspeeders.

"Did you find it sir?" one asked as the general got out of his speeder and he smiled.

"We found it." he said and the gathered troops smiled as well, "Now what about a ship?"

"We think we've identified a perfect one sir. A bulk grain carrier out of Tarlen. It's been sat in a docking bay since that planet revolted. It's tanks will easily hold the gas.

"Excellent. In that case have the activation agent unloaded. As soon as we've secured the ship I want half the gas primed for use and loaded into its tanks."

"Just half sir?" one of the soldiers asked.

"Yes, we'll keep the rest in storage for now. Half is enough to kill a sizeable number of the treasonous population of Allastra's capital and still leave enough left over for us to deal with Tarlen the same way. But Moff Horatian and General Dern are too soft. They should have authorised us to use that gas the moment Allastra rose up. I doubt that they'll welcome us with open arms on Estran even after we've shown the other planets in the sector what happens when they defy Imperial rule. That means we'll have to disappear and that will take money. The remaining half of the gas will get us that money, it's worth a fortune on the black market."

"What if it ends up being used against the Empire?" another soldier asked but General Kinnerman just snorted.

"The Alliance is soft as well. Nerve gas isn't their style. Besides, stormtroopers are invulnerable to chemical attack. No, I'm thinking of selling it to corporate mercenaries we can depend on to use it wisely against alien populations. Now get moving. Our attack on the storage facility won't have gone unnoticed and we need to be away from here before the rebels realise what's going on."

"This place was Imperial military alright." Geran said as Vorn and Mace approached him in the computer room. He and Tobis had spent almost an hour reviewing the facility's computer files while the other rebels searched the rest of the facility for any other material that could be of use to the Alliance, "According to their records all of the staff were drawn from the army, either infantry or medical corps."

"Just the sort of people you'd want to look after the components of chemical weapons." Mace commented.

"Yes." Vorn added, nodding, "But since they were all obviously killed trying to prevent the activator being taken we can assume that they weren't in on the theft."

"Kind of points towards it being a rogue operation boss." Kara said.

"But we still don't know where they took the gas." Cass pointed out.

"Oh, err, I think I found something that will help with that." Tobis said, smiling nervously and Jaysica grinned at him.

"I knew you would." she said and Kara winced.

"What's the matter mom? Doesn't young love bring a warm feeling to your heart?" Tharun whispered, knowing how much being reminded that despite being more than a decade younger than the former mercenary she was still his mother-in-law thanks to her being married to Vorn and Tharun being married to Vorn's daughter Lyssa and she snarled at him.

"So help me-" she began before Vorn interrupted.

"Perhaps you could show us Tobis." he said and Tobis nodded.

"I, err, I was able to access the security recordings." he said, "The people who took the activator, they, err, they didn't even try and hide their faces." and then he activated a holographic display and called up the footage that showed General Kinnerman and his troops arriving by landspeeder and being met by Major Sovan before shooting her dead.

"Can you run that through facial recognition and identify who that man is?" Vorn asked, pointing to the image of General Kinnerman and then looking at Geran.

"I don't need to." the intelligence officer replied, "I know exactly who that is."

"Then do enlighten us." Mace said.

"That is General Baran Kinnerman, commanding officer of the facility where the main component of the FEX-M-three gas was stored." Geran said.

"Does he have any other connections to Allastra?" Kara asked, "Family?"

"Oh no." Geran replied, shaking his head, "The general hails from Estran and has no family connections here at all."

"So no-one he could go to for shelter but no-one that he'd be worried about poisoning." Tharun pointed out and Vorn nodded.

"At least we can issue a description of our target now." he said.

"Err, ah, we also have the licences of their speeders." Tobis said and he adjusted the image being projected to an earlier recording taken at a different angle where the three speeders were driving through the gate and their registration plates were all clearly shown.

"Geran, Tobis, can you two patch into the traffic monitoring system and see if these speeders have been seen anywhere else?" Vorn asked and the two men exchanged glances.

"I suppose we know the rough direction they will have come from." Geran said.

"And, err, we know what time they were here." Tobis added.

"Plus they probably wouldn't want to draw any unnecessary attention to themselves by breaking any traffic laws that would get them automatically flagged. So from that we can get a maximum travel speed and a basis for plotting how far away they'd be at any particular time." Geran replied.

"So that's a 'yes' then is it?" Vorn asked.

"Yes." Geran answered.

"Good. Then get on with it." Vorn told him.

The three man crew of the grain transport had been waiting inside their ship since the news of Tarlen's revolt had broken and when the Allastrans also rose up against the Empire they hoped that they would soon be able to return home. However, three unarmed spacers were no match for the squad of Imperial soldiers that overrode their vessel's security locks before storming aboard with blasters and the ship was quickly seized. As General Kinnerman walked up the access ramp of the transport his men were dragging the three corpses back down before they were unceremoniously dumped on the ground at the base of the ramp.

"How long until we can launch?" General Kinnerman asked one of his men who was sat in the cockpit studying the control console.

"There's no lockout on the controls general, so it's just a matter of loading the gas aboard and then we can go." the other soldier replied.

"Good." the general said and he looked up at the sky, "Before this day is out we'll teach the rebellion what it means to invade an Imperial world."

6.

"I, err, I think I've found them." Tobis said from the U-wing's cockpit where he and Geran were making use of the ship's computers to access Allastra's traffic monitoring camera system. Unlike the sector capital of Estran, where almost every metre of public highway in the cities was covered by a surveillance camera, the system on Allastra was patchy owing to poor maintenance. However, the government department responsible for operating them had at least had the good sense to focus their efforts on key areas of interest and this included starports.

"Let me see." Geran said and he leant across to look at the display in front of Tobis. There he saw a still image of several repulsorlift vehicles entering a freight yard. Small brightly coloured rectangles around the registration plates of the landspeeders moving ahead of the cargo skiffs indicated the matches found by the pattern matching software and Geran slapped Tobis on the shoulder, "Yes, that's them." he said, grinning. Then he pulled out his comlink and activated it, "Colonel, Tobis has found them." he said into the device.

"Excellent. Where?" Vorn replied.

"At a starport freight handling terminal about a sixty kilometres from here." Geran answered, "We've got the three landspeeders used in the raid here and several skiffs."

"Just like the missing vehicles from the munitions store you mean?" Vorn asked.

"That's right colonel and all of the skiffs have whatever's on their decks covered."

"That's it. The gas is there." Vorn said, "Tell Tobis to prep the ship for launch. We're on our way now."

As soon as the other rebels arrived Geran vacated the pilot's seat so that Mace could take his place.

"What's our situation?" Mace asked as he sat down and donned a communication headset.

"Oh, err, the engines are on line." Tobis replied, "So, err, we can take off whenever you want. The weapons still need charging though."

"Go." Vorn ordered from the transport compartment below, "We'll charge the guns on the way. But I want Kara up there with Mace. She can operate the forwards cannons. Tharun, if we need it you can take the door gun."

"Right boss." Kara replied and as soon as Tobis had vacated the cockpit Kara climbed up to take his place.

"Yes colonel." Tharun added and he immediately walked over to where the door mounted repeating blaster had been stowed for flight and began to make it was ready for use.

Mace powered up the U-wing's repulsorlifts and the gunship rose up into the air."

"So where are we heading?" he asked.

"Head north-east." Geran told him, "You should be able to pick up a beacon."

"Okay I've got it." Mace said, "Here goes." the U-wing's engines roared as Mace put as much power into them as he safely could. By air travelling sixty kilometres took just a few minutes and the starport control tower stood out against the horizon as the U-wing approached it.

"Colonel I've got a bad feeling about this. We haven't been challenged by traffic control." Mace said.

"Everything's probably grounded because of the fighting." Vorn replied.

"So how come I've got a target boss?" Kara asked, "Looks like a freighter with a Tarlen transponder."

"Tarlen?" Jaysica said when she heard the name of the homeworld she and Kara shared, "Why is a ship from Tarlen here?"

"It looks like a grain carrier." Kara said.

"A grain carrier?" Vorn commented, "Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure boss. I grew up seeing these things, it's got the tanks down both sides and everything."

"Tanks that could be filled with poison gas." Vorn said, "Where's that ship heading?"

"Uh-oh." Kara said.

"Now I've got a very bad feeling about this." Cass commented.

"Boss, that ship's heading for the capital. At current speed they'll get there in under an hour." Kara said and Vorn frowned.

"If they've activated the gas then they could use the grain carrier's tanks as a delivery system." Vorn said to Geran and the intelligence officer nodded.

"Dispersed from the air, the casualties would be horrific." he replied.

"Mace, order that ship to land." Vorn said sternly, "Kara, be ready to engage it if it refuses."

"Got it boss." Kara replied while Mace checked the transponder details for the ship's name.

"Grain hauler *Tosker's Luck* this is Alliance U-wing trill herf xesh one-one-three-eight. Respond." Mace transmitted but the freighter gave no indication of following his instruction.

"General, we've got company." the soldier piloting the freighter announced, "It's a rebel ship and they're ordering us to communicate."

"Ignore them." General Kinnerman ordered, "They won't fire on an unarmed freighter until they've exhausted every other option first."

"*Tosker's Luck*, you are ordered to land and prepare for inspection." Mace transmitted as it became apparent that the freighter was not going to reply but the response from the freighter was still to continue on its course towards the capital.

"Kara fire a warning shot." Vorn said and Kara smiled as she took hold of the controls in front of her.

"Sure boss." she replied and then she fired a rapid burst of energy blasts from the U-wing's forward facing laser cannons. These shot past the grain carrier, just far enough away that they would be obviously identifiable as deliberately aimed off. However, even this demonstration of force had no effect and the freighter stuck to its course, "Boss, they're ignoring me. Want me to fire for effect?" Kara added.

"What about the gas?" Cass asked, "If we shoot the transport down won't it all leak out?"

"Oh, err, maybe." Tobis replied, "But, err, the gas will break down if, err, if it's exposed to high temperatures."

"So shooting it should destroy it." Jaysica said.

"A blaster shot will destroy the gas it comes into contact with little lady. But if we don't get the whole tankful in one go then the rest could still leak out through the hole we put in it." Tharun said.

"Boss we need to come up with something quickly." Kara said,

"Mace where are we?" Vorn asked, "Are there any people below us?"

"Some." Mace told him, "There are small settlements dotted all over."

"That's only going to get worse as we get closer to the capital." Geran pointed out and Vorn nodded.

"Kara, can you target the freighter's engines?" he said.

"I think so boss. It's not like they're flying a starfighter." Kara replied.

"Give them another warning shot." Vorn said, "Mace, tell them that if they don't land then we'll shoot them down."

Mace just nodded and as soon as Kara had fired another rapid burst of energy blasts past the freighter he activated the communication system again.

"*Tosker's Luck* that was your final warning. You will not be allowed to reach the capital. Land or be shot down." he transmitted. This time however, there was a reply from the freighter.

"Rebel craft," General Kinnerman spoke, "Back off or I'll poison everyone for ten kilometres." and then from beneath the storage tanks mounted on either side of the freighter rigid tubes began to extend.

"Boss something's happening!" Kara exclaimed when she saw this, "They're getting ready to dump their tanks."

"Mace how close can you get us to that ship?" Vorn asked, "Can you get us within twenty metres?"

"Twenty metres? Are you insane?" Geran exclaimed, "One slip and we'll collide."

"Which will probably produce a massive fireball that will incinerate the gas. Am I right Tobis?" Vorn said and he looked at the engineer.

"Oh, err, probably. Yes." Tobis responded, looking back and forth between Vorn and Geran.

"Mace do it." Vorn said, "Get us right underneath them and stand by to power up the ion drive."

"The ion drive? This gets even worse." Geran said.

"Moving in." Mace said from the cockpit.

"You can't use the ion drive in the atmosphere." Geran said, "It'll create a-

"It'll create a massive blast of heat that will burn off any gas they try to release from their tanks." Vorn interrupted, "Plus at that distance the shock wave we'll trigger could well knock that freighter out of the sky."

Geran stared at him dumbfounded, then he sighed.

"How the hell do you make the stupidest plans sound so rational?" he said.

"Practice." Vorn replied.

"We're right under them colonel." Mace called out from the cockpit as the sound of proximity alerts filled the inside of the gunship.

"Yeah, we can see their output valves clearly from here boss." Kara added as she looked up at the tubes that now protruded from the storage tanks.

"General they're right below us." the freighter's pilot said, "I mean right beneath us. I've got proximity alarms all over."

"They just don't get the message do they?" General Kinnerman asked rhetorically, "They can't stop us releasing the gas just by taking up a position beneath us."

"Your orders general?" the pilot asked and the general considered his options.

"I am a man of my word." he replied, "I said that if they didn't back off then I would release the gas. So release the gas. Slowly mind you. Once they see we're serious they'll back off and we'll still have plenty left to use on our primary targets."

The gas emerged from the output pipes as a fine mist that would have been easy miss had it not sprayed

across the cockpit canopy of the U-wing directly beneath it.

"Boss!" Kara snapped, "They've done it! They're releasing the gas."

"Mace, go." Vorn said and with a flick of his finger Mace switched from the U-wing's repulsorlifts to its ion drive and the vessel shot forwards like a missile, producing a massive sonic boom as it broke the sound barrier almost immediately. Behind it the U-wing left a trail of fire from its engine exhaust that heated the air to hundreds of degrees, immediately burning off the gas being released as well as melting the release pipes shut as the flames pushed inside them. But more significant than the heat was the shock wave of displaced air and the sudden energy flare at the moment that the U-wing's ion drive was activated. This was strong enough to knock the grain transport off its course and the energy flare disrupted the repulsorlift field keeping it airborne.

"We're going down!" the Imperial pilot exclaimed as the freighter spun out of control

"Do an emergency restart." General Kinnerman ordered but it was already too late and the freighter ploughed into the ground just seconds later. The hull of the freighter buckled and then gave way as the freighter skidded along the ground, throwing up a massive cloud of dirt as it travelled before it finally came to a halt resting on its side.

General Kinnerman was pushed forwards by the force of the impact, only the safety harness he had had the forethought to fasten preventing him from being thrown from his seat.

"We need to get out of here." he said to the pilot but the man did not reply and it took the general a few seconds to realise that this was because he was dead, a section of the cockpit canopy had broken off during the crash landing and embedded itself in the pilot's chest. The nose of the freighter had buried itself in the ground on impact and so despite the canopy having been destroyed it was not possible to escape from the freighter that way.

Releasing his harness, General Kinnerman dropped onto a wall that was now horizontal and he climbed out of the cockpit into the corridor that led to the access ramp. As he made his way along the corridor, climbing over obstacles that under normal circumstances would have been mounted on vertical surfaces as well as clambering over debris that had been broken loose by the crash General Kinnerman came to the conclusion that he was the only person to have survived the crash. He heard no cries for help from anywhere in the ship and the few of his soldiers that he saw were obviously dead.

When the access ramp came into view General Kinnerman smiled, believing that escape was imminent.

However, it was then that he noticed a cloud of vapour seeping through cracks in a bulkhead that separated the freighter's internal hold from its external storage tanks.

"No!" General Kinnerman exclaimed as he began to cough and he tasted blood in his mouth, "No, not me. Not like this." and then he dropped to his knees and coughed again, this time bringing up a larger amount of blood as the leaking gas ate away at his internal organs. Then as more blood began to drip from every orifice on his body he collapsed and began to convulse violently.

"They're down." Mace said when the U-wing's sensors confirmed that there were no other craft in the sky.

"Take us back around." Vorn ordered, "We need to make sure that the gas doesn't escape."

"Yes colonel, switching back to repulsorlifts and bringing us about."

"Ready on cannons boss." Kara added.

Mace turned the U-wing back towards the crashed freighter and approached it at a low angle. It was apparent that the freighter was completely wrecked but there were no indications of fire.

"The tanks are ruptured," Mace said.

"Then you know what to do." Vorn replied and Mace nodded.

"Taking us in." he said.

The U-wing descended directly towards the wreck of the freighter and Kara fired its cannons, keeping her finger down on the cannon trigger to fire a sustained burst of laser blasts. The wrecked freighter was an easy target and as Mace pulled the nose of the U-wing up again the volley of laser fire impacted along the full length of its hull. Each high energy blast was enough to burn away more of the escaping gas but it was not until the ship's fuel cells were breached that the entire freighter exploded and a massive ball of flame was sent skywards.

"Target destroyed boss." Kara said as she ceased fire and released her grip on the controls, "Now what?"

"Set a course back to the munitions warehouse." Vorn said, "I expect Colonel Collis will be waiting for us."