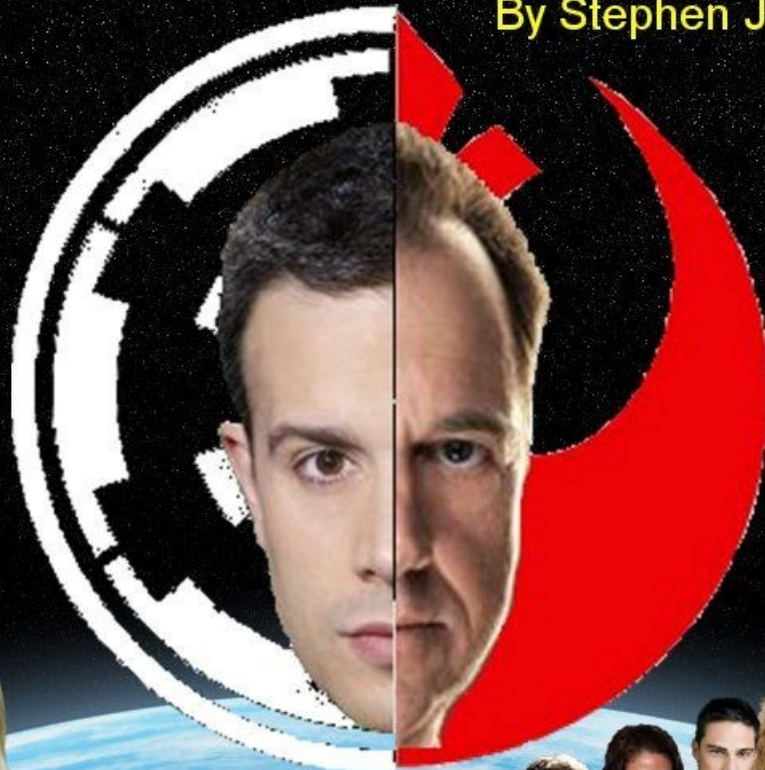


STAR WARS

8-04: The Industry of War

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 MAGE GRAYLE, CAPTAIN OF THE FREIGHTER THE *SILVER HAWK* TAKE THE FIGHT TO THE EMPIRE.

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

THE INDUSTRY OF WAR

THE LUCREHULK-CLASS *GOLDEN EMPRESS* IS A GREAT REFINERY IN SPACE. NORMALLY USED AS A BASE OF OPERATIONS FOR MINING WORK, IT COULD BE OF GREAT USE TO THE ALLIANCE. ASSUMING THAT THE CREW OF THE *SILVER HAWK* CAN TAKE THE SHIP INTACT THAT IS...

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

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1.

The door to the cargo hold opened to reveal stacks of crates that reached up to the ceiling.

"Do we really have to go through all of these?" Cass Grayle, the youngest of the three women in the group asked, pulling a face at the thought of having to check the contents of every container in the captured gladiator-class cruiser's hold and check it against the inventory taken from the ship's main computer.

"Those were our instructions Miss Cass." the golden coloured protocol droid following behind them answered.

"I don't think Cass expected anyone to actually answer that." the tallest of the three said, "Hey Jaysica, did your boyfriend stick Jeeves's head back on properly or do we need to start teaching him everything from scratch?"

"Oh shut up Kara." Jaysica replied, "Tobis knows what he's doing and he knows far more than you do."

"So what do we do?" Cass said as she looked around.

"Well on the one hand we could open every single crate in turn and count up what's inside." Kara said.

"Or?" Cass commented when Kara paused.

"Or we can just sit back and relax while Jeeves does it all." Kara told her, "Why else do you think I got the boss to lend him to us? He knows we're not going to be doing anything so all we need to do is lock the door just in case anyone decides to wander in. We'll go through the inventory of course, no sense in letting anything useful go to waste when we can grab it first."

"But isn't that stealing?" Cass pointed out.

"We stole this entire ship." Jaysica reminded her, "Well me and Tobis. Kara just complained about being tied up."

"I did not." Kara responded angrily, "Anyway, I'd have been able to do more if you and Tobis hadn't locked me in a closet full of spiders just so you could indulge in weird sadomasochistic acts."

"You did nothing but complain afterwards." Cass said, smiling, "Especially when Tharun was nearby."

"That's because you all left me tied up for three days and Tharun slapped my ass every time I was within reach." Kara said.

"It was your own fault. You bet that Tobis's plan wouldn't work but it did. We captured a cruiser for the Alliance."

"Can we just get on with this?" Kara said as she climbed up on top of one of the containers in the hold and produced a printed magazine from under her jacket, "I want to get some reading in."

"Sure." Jaysica said and she handed her datapad to Jeeves, "Here you go Jeeves. You can get the load lifters to help you."

"Of course Mistress Jaysica. But I really should point out that this task was assigned to-" the droid began.

"Just shut up and get to work Jeeves." Kara interrupted, "Or I'll knock your head off again."

"There is no need for threats Lieutenant Larcus. I was only trying to explain the situation as I saw it." Jeeves replied and then the droid activated the datapad and shuffled towards the nearest of the load lifter droids that were stood motionless in the hold, waiting to be given instructions.

While Kara and Jaysica relaxed near to the entrance, Cass decided that she was going to search through the inventory they had been given to see whether there was anything interesting in the hold and whenever she saw something promising in the inventory she searched for a container that bore the matching serial number so that she could investigate further. Each container was large enough for a person to walk into and Kara suddenly noticed that she had not come out of the latest one she had gone to investigate.

"Hey Cass, are you okay in there?" she called out as she jumped back down from the container she had been resting on top of and approached the open container to stand beside the bulky load lifter droid that had brought it down from a nearby stack for Cass.

"Fine." Cass responded from inside the container, "I'm just checking something."

"What have you found?" Jaysica asked as she abandoned the solo card game she had been playing and also approached the container, "Is it something good?"

"Maybe." Cass said, "Look." and she suddenly appeared from inside the container holding what looked at first sight like a bag made of shiny black polymer, "Remember these Kara?"

"Stang." Kara said, wincing as she saw another of the body restraints the crew of the cruiser had used to restrain her and Jaysica when they had been captured.

"What do you want that for?" Jaysica asked.

"I thought maybe you'd like to show me how you went about capturing this ship from the Empire." Cass said, "Come on, put these on and show me. I may need to know how to do it one day."

"Forget it laser brain." Kara replied and she walked away, returning to where she had been sat, picking up her magazine again and continuing to read.

"You'll show me won't you Jaysica?" Cass said, smiling as she held out the restraining garment.
"No I won't." Jaysica answered and then she went back to her card game.
Just as Jaysica sat down again Kara's comlink chirped and she took it from her belt.
"Hi." she said simply.
"Kara it's Vorn." a man's voice said and Kara smiled.
"Yeah boss, I know my husband's voice." she said, "What's up?"
"General Kain wants to see us." Vorn said, "Jaysica too. It sounds like we're getting an op."
"So soon? We only just got back from the last one." Kara said.
"Well you can tell the general yourself if you want though I wouldn't recommend it." Vorn said.
"Okay boss." Kara said, sighing, "The klutz and I will be right there." and at the mention of the nickname Kara used for her Jaysica looked up and scowled at her. Kara then shut off her comlink and returned it to her belt before getting to her feet and as she headed for the exit she beckoned for Jaysica to follow her, "Come on, you heard the boss. The general wants us."
"What about me?" Cass asked and Kara shrugged.
"Just stay here until we get back okay?" she said, "Oh and Jeeves?"
"Yes Lieutenant Larcus?" Jeeves responded, "Keep Cass out of trouble. Make sure she keeps her hands to herself okay?"
"Of course Lieutenant." Jeeves said before Kara and Jaysica left the hold and closed the door behind them. Cass looked at the restraint she held, smiled and looked towards Jeeves.
"Jeeves?" she said.
"Yes Miss Cass?"
"I have a job for you." Cass said, "Kara's orders."

2.

In addition to Vorn and Mace Grayle, the captain of the YT-1300 class freighter *Silver Hawk* that Vorn's team was assigned to as well as the ship's engineer Tobis, three of the Alliance's most senior officers were present in the briefing room when Kara and Jaysica entered. General Kain was a dark skinned human who hailed from Alderaan and had lost most of his family when the Empire destroyed the planet several years earlier. Meanwhile both Rear Admiral Aphanar and Colonel Sallir were members of the mon calamari species. The admiral commanded the Alliance's fleet assets in the sector and she had been a part of the attack force that took part in the Battle of Endor. On the other hand Colonel Sallir was a former academic who had been enslaved by the Empire until an Alliance team rescued him and now he served as the commanding officer of all of the field teams like that led by Vorn or the colonel himself.

"Reporting as ordered boss." Kara said as she walked up to Vorn and kissed him on the cheek before sliding her arm around him and adding, "So what's going on?"

"The general was just about to explain." Vorn replied.

"Actually I'll let Admiral Aphanar tell you." the general said and he stepped back so that Admiral Aphanar could stand right next to the holo projector they were all gathered around.

"In the wake of the Battle of Endor the scope of our operations has expanded rapidly." she began, "The Empire is not currently able to properly co-ordinate actions between different regions and we are doing our best to exploit this. The destruction of the star destroyer *Necromancy* was just one example of our new, more aggressive strategy. However, if we continue with this strategy we will soon face a massive shortfall in our resources. We have an ample supply of trained personnel for the time being at least and more volunteers are reaching out to us every day. But we need to procure a means of manufacturing equipment for them that doesn't not make us reliant on what we can steal from the Empire or what can be smuggled in from the Alliance itself. Neither of these methods is sufficiently reliable to guarantee us the supplies we need."

"I'm guessing that we're supposed to solve this problem?" Mace commented.

"In part, yes." the admiral replied and she looked at Vorn, "Major Larcus your team is to provide us with a new starfighter manufacturing facility."

"Ha! Good one." Kara exclaimed and then her eyes widened, "Oh wait, you're serious." she added.

"Indeed." Admiral Aphanar said and although Kara could not read mon calamari facial expressions very well she guessed that the admiral was not pleased by her outburst, "Perhaps Colonel Sallir can explain better than I can."

"Thank you admiral." Colonel Sallir said as he stepped forwards to take her place and he activated the projector. Instantly an image of a large circular starship appeared above the projector and the rebels looked up at it.

"Oh, err, that's a *lucrehulk-class* ship." Tobis commented.

"Indeed it is Sergeant Dorfus." the colonel said, "This is the industrial vessel *Golden Empress*. As the sergeant has pointed out it is based on the hull of a *lucrehulk-class* transport. First commissioned approximately one-hundred and eighty years ago, this particular example was converted by the Trade Federation to a battleship a decade prior to the outbreak of the Clone Wars. At the conclusion to that conflict it was seized by the Empire, disarmed and sold back into commercial service. It's new owners refitted it once again to function as a base ship for their mining operations in the Shadow Worlds. It serves as a base station for a small fleet of prospecting craft and carries all the equipment necessary to mine and refine all manner of minerals and also features its own manufacturing facility that can use those refined materials to produce spare parts for the prospecting ship."

"You're thinking that that ship could be used to make parts for our ships instead?" Mace asked.

"More than that Captain Grayle." Colonel Sallir replied, "Our intelligence suggests that the machinery aboard this vessel is quite capable of taking base materials and carrying out all of the work required to produce complete vessels."

"I'm guessing you're not talking about freighters and shuttles here." Vorn said.

"No major, we are not. We believe that the *Golden Empress's* equipment is capable of producing a full squadron of starfighters every sixty days."

"X-wings, Y-wings, A-wings, B-wings. Whatever we want." General Kain added, "With that one ship we can build enough starfighters to fully equip our fleet as well as a reserve force that can be used to support our ground forces."

"Hijacking one of the prospecting ships seems like the best way to get aboard." Vorn said.

"We'd need to disable it without causing significant damage." Mace pointed out.

"Ooh, we could use an ion cannon." Jaysica suggested, smiling.

"Oh, err, Jaysica the *Silver Hawk* doesn't have an ion cannon." Tobis pointed out.

"Are there any other ships available that we could make use of that do?" Vorn asked, looking at Colonel Sallir.

"We currently have several Y-wing fighters that have not been assigned to any of our fleet squadrons." Rear Admiral Aphanar said, "I could place one of them at your disposal."

"A two seat version I take it?" Vorn said.

"Correct." Admiral Aphanar answered, "I understand that your team can provide an astromech droid of your own?"

"Oh, err, yes. Harvey." Tobis said, giving the name of his R5 unit.

"I guess I'll be flying that fighter." Kara added.

"I'm not so sure about that." Vorn replied and Kara frowned, pulling away from him.

"Why not boss?" she asked.

"We need to be able to disable that prospecting ship and then secure it before it can alert the mother ship."

Vorn told her, "That means we need to get someone aboard who can temporarily disable its communications and seize the ship before they can send a distress signal."

"So we send a boarding party from the *Silver Hawk*." Kara replied.

"Two ships makes us twice as likely to be spotted." Mace pointed out, "We need two people who with Harvey's help can operate a starfighter and have the technical skill to deactivate the communications and override the security systems on the prospecting vessel before boarding it and dealing with the crew."

"Oh no." Kara said, "I've got a bad feeling about this." and then she winced as Vorn and Mace both looked in the direction of Tobis and Jaysica.

"Oh, err." Tobis said as he looked back at them both, "I, err, I've never flown a Y-wing."

"No, but you've flown the *Silver Hawk*." Mace reminded him, "Take it from me, a starfighter isn't much different as long as you're not trying to dogfight in it."

"Which leaves the klutz there manning the turret." Kara said, "Need I remind anyone what happened the last time she was trusted to do anything with an ion cannon?"

"You ended up tied up in rubber for three days and spanked continuously?" Mace responded and all of the other team members smirked as Kara scowled. Then she elbowed Vorn in his ribs.

"Obviously we need to make certain that Jaysica is properly instructed on how to operate the ion cannon." he said.

"But how are just the two of us supposed to take an entire ship?" Jaysica said.

"Ah so you admit that without me you couldn't have captured that cruiser." Kara said.

"Err, actually I think it ought to, err, to be fairly easy." Tobis said and Jaysica smiled, provoking a sigh from Kara.

"Explain your plan sergeant." General Kain said.

"Well, err, ah, we'll have to conceal ourselves in the system where the, err, the lucrehulk is operating. We run silent until, err, until one of the prospecting ships comes within range and then we, err, then we use the ion cannon to disable it just long enough for us to get to it. I, err, I can disconnect the transmission antenna and then providing that Jaysica can, err, can get a hatch open we can, err get aboard. Ah, err, the, err crew should only be about half a dozen." then he smiled nervously.

"Sounds like you could use my decksweeper." Mace said, referring to the blaster weapon he owned that was specifically designed for use in boarding actions. Though it emitted a non-lethal energy pulse the weapon was designed to take out closely packed groups rather than individuals.

"Avoiding lethal force sounds good to me." Vorn added, "These individuals may be operating to support the Empire but they're still non-combatants."

"Okay, so I'm guessing that as soon as the prospecting ship is secure Tobis can fix the antenna and call in the rest of us. Then we'll use the prospecting ship to get inside the lucrehulk."

"How big is the lucrehulk's crew?" Kara asked.

"About five or six hundred according to our best guess." Colonel Sallir replied, "Plus a battle droid security force of about a hundred. B-ones."

"Battle droids?" Vorn said and he looked at Tobis, "You captured a heavy cruiser by reprogramming mouse droids, do you think you could reprogram a company of battle droids?"

"Oh, err, I suppose so." Tobis answered.

"Then that's our plan." Vorn said, "Once aboard the lucrehulk we'll use their own security force to round up the crew."

"Very good major." General Kain said, "We will await confirmation that you have taken the ship. May the Force be with you. Dismissed."

As the members of Vorn's unit left the briefing chamber Mace looked at Kara.

"Where's Cass by the way?" he asked, "She wasn't on the *Silver Hawk* with Tharun when I got back."

"She's still searching the hold of that cruiser we captured." Jaysica replied before Kara could answer, "We were going through its inventory."

"The boss only said for me and the klutz to be on this meeting. Don't worry though, she's with Jeeves." Kara

added and Mace nodded.

"Okay then does she have her comlink?" he said.

"She ought to." Kara replied and Mace took his comlink from his pocket and activated it.

"Cass are you there?" he transmitted.

"Oh Captain Grayle sir," Jeeves's voice responded in a signal that was disrupted by static thanks to the considerable distance between the briefing chamber and where the gladiator-class cruiser was docked to the station, "It is so good to hear your voice again. I do hope that your honeymoon was uplifting."

"Nice choice of words there." Kara muttered.

"Thanks Jeeves. Now is Cass there?" Mace asked.

"Of course sir. She has not left the hold since Lieutenant Larcus and Mistress Horbid departed."

"Then can I speak to her?"

"That may prove difficult sir. She is tied up right now and unable to-."

"Okay it doesn't matter." Mace said, "We're off on an op but that cargo still needs its inventory checked so she can keep on with that. I'll see her as soon as we get back."

"Captain Grayle I think you misunderstand-" Jeeves began but Mace was already returning his comlink to his pocket and ignored him, "Okay, let's go get Jaysica some shooting lessons shall we?"

Captain Jarad Tarl and Kara glared at one another across the hangar where not only the *Silver Hawk* but also numerous other small vessels were docked, including several two seat Y-wing starfighters. Jarad had once been Kara's squadron commander before he turned her down for a promotion in favour of an officer willing to bribe him and Kara struck him in anger, resulting in her losing her original commission as well as being forced out of the Alliance starfighter corps.

"Just keep your attention focused on that screen there." he told Jaysica as he stood behind the turret of the Y-wing fighter she and Tobis were both sat in as Tobis's R5 droid was being loaded into the astromech socket behind it.

"Yes I see." Jaysica replied and she tried out turning the turret from side to side, watching the effect it had on the targeting display, "And these buttons fire the cannons right?" and she flicked the covers up off the two red buttons on the top of the control column.

"Whoa! Be careful there." Jarad exclaimed, "Remember these are live guns."

"Hey captain!" Kara shouted out when she heard this, "You realise that anything she does wrong from now on is your fault?" and Jarad just scowled briefly before looking back at Jaysica.

"I think you're sorted." he told her, "Just remember that hitting the engines will cause a flame out but the damage is unlikely to spread far because of all of the shielding in an ion drive."

"Don't use the ion cannon on the ion drive. Right." Jaysica said, nodding.

"Sounds like you've done your job there captain." Mace said as he approached the fighter carrying not only his bulky deck sweeper but also Jaysica's blaster carbine.

"Captain Grayle." Jarad said in greeting.

"Captain Tarl." Mace replied and then he passed the two weapons up to Jarad who in turn handed them to Tobis to stow inside the Y-wing's cockpit.

"Oh wait, pass me my carbine." Jaysica said, reaching forwards and Tobis handed her the weapon. However, as she accepted it from him she grabbed hold of it by its sling and dragged it over the back of seat between them. As soon as the carbine cleared the seat it therefore swung down where it struck one of the still uncovered trigger buttons for the starfighter's ion cannons.

Jarad flinched and overbalanced as the cannons fired and twin pulses of disruptive energy shot across the hangar where they struck a labour droid that was carrying a pallet of spare parts. Its electronics overloaded, the droid staggered for several metres before it finally collapsed and the spare parts it carried rolled across the hangar and forced rebel ground crew to scatter.

"What the hell are you playing at?" Jarad yelled as he got back to his feet and around the hangar numerous rebel personnel .

"Just what you taught her to do." Kara called out in response and Jarad glared at her again as she grinned at him.

"Tobis are you ready?" Mace asked.

"Oh, err, yes captain." Tobis answered.

"Good. Then I suggest you leave before there are any more accidents." Mace said, "We'll join you later."

3.

The Y-wing carrying Tobis and Jaysica dropped out of hyperspace close to a frozen world on the outer edge of an uninhabited system in the Shadow Worlds region of the sector and from the astromech socket behind the cockpit Harvey whistled.

"Oh, err, Harvey indicates that he had detected several vessels in a debris field near here." Tobis said.

"Did they see us come out of hyperspace?" Jaysica asked.

"I, err, I don't think so. They probably aren't equipped to detect ships leaving or entering hyperspace." Tobis answered before Harvey whistled again.

"What did he say?" Jaysica said, lacking a screen that translated the sounds made by the little droid.

"Ah, that there's another prospecting ship orbiting the planet ahead of us." Tobis told her, "I-I'm changing course and going silent."

Tobis used a low power push from the Y-wing's engines to turn the fighter towards the lone prospecting vessel and to propel it in that direction. Even using only this amount of power left the starfighter still moving at a considerable rate and it closed rapidly on the unsuspecting prospecting ship. Without active sensors it was impossible to see exactly what the ship was doing but as the Y-wing came closer Tobis saw that it was accompanied by several probe droids that were surveying a tiny moon orbiting the much larger planet.

"They, err, they should be in range now." he said and Jaysica took hold of the ion cannon controls.

"Shall I shoot them now?" she said.

"No. Err, wait until we're closer. We don't want them to recover before we can get aboard." Tobis told her,

"But, ah, I'll arm the weapons just in case."

Considered a light bomber, the Y-wing was well armed for its size and in addition to the turret mounted ion cannons also had a pair of laser cannons in its nose and two proton torpedo launchers fed from four round magazines. For this mission the torpedo magazines were empty but the Y-wing was still more than a match for the unarmed prospecting vessel. The only concern that Tobis had was that in addition to the battle droid security force aboard the Lucrehulk-class mother ship there could also be some droid starfighters that the Alliance had been unaware of when they briefed the team on their mission. If there were and these were launched against the Y-wing then the only action open to Tobis would be to withdraw. He was not a combat pilot and in any case he and Jaysica would most likely be badly outnumbered.

Another soft whistle from Harvey told Tobis that the prospecting ship would likely be able to detect the Y-wing even while it was running silent soon.

"Fire." Tobis said.

Behind him Jaysica had been keeping the ion cannon turret trained on the prospecting vessel and as soon as Tobis gave the order she pressed her thumbs down on the trigger buttons to discharge them, intentionally this time. There was a flash of bright white light as the ion cannons fired and the twin energy pulses struck the prospecting vessel amidships and the impacts produced arcs of lightning that danced across its hull. At the same moment that the ion cannons hit their target Tobis brought the Y-wing up to full power and accelerated towards the stricken ship.

"Err, get ready." he said to Jaysica, "We'll have to go EVA to do this." then he slowed the starfighter again and turned it to match the way that the prospecting ship was turning.

Unlike many Alliance pilots who wore helmets with only a partial faceplate, both Tobis and Jaysica wore full vacuum suits, though they had so far kept these open and Tobis now lowered his faceplate and engaged the suit's life support system.

"Hang on." Jaysica said before she too closed her faceplate and Tobis heard it click into place. Without bothering to de-pressurise the Y-wing's cockpit Tobis opened the cockpit to space and there was a rush of air as it escaped. The two rebels then grabbed hold of their equipment, released their safety harnesses and pushed themselves off into space towards the still floundering prospecting ship. Their vacuum suits were equipped with magnetic boots and as soon as they landed on the hull of the prospecting ship they latched onto it.

"This way." Tobis said, waving at Jaysica to follow him as he carefully made his way across the hull towards the ship's communication antenna. When he reached it Tobis took a powered screwdriver from the toolkit strapped to his leg and used it to open the maintenance panel at the base of the antenna. With this open disabling the antenna was simply a matter of unplugging the primary cable.

"Is that it?" Jaysica asked.

"Err, yes." Tobis replied, "Now you need to open a hatch for us."

"Okay, I think I spotted one when we were floating over here." Jaysica replied and she turned around and hurried across the hull as fast as her magnetic boots would allow. Reaching an airlock, Jaysica was easily able to override the outdated lock and there was a blast of air as the hatch open, indicating that the inner door was

open.

"Quickly." Tobis said and he entered the airlock and then helped Jaysica through the hatchway as well. Then he slammed his hand down on the controls to the air lock and the outer door slid shut, cutting off the rush of air. The two rebels then unslung their weapons and started to advance deeper into the ship.

"Wait. Something's wrong with my suit." Jaysica said.

"Err, have you turned off your magnetic boots?" Tobis asked and Jaysica sighed as she made the adjustment and then they continued on their way.

Rounding a corner they found themselves confronted by two crewmen in vacuum suits of their own who were responding to the sudden loss in pressure. Seeing the two rebels the startled crewmen ground to a halt. Before either of them could call out a warning Tobis brought up his weapon and fired. Using Mace's decksweeper made this process far faster than it would have been with a more conventional and even though the muzzle of the weapon was not pointing directly at them the energy pulse expanded to fill the entire corridor and enveloped the two crewmen, rendering them both unconscious.

"Come on." Tobis said as he jumped over the two incapacitated crewmen, the bridge is this way.

The prospecting ship's bridge was a scene of chaos. The flight crew of four had regained enough control of their vessel to stop it spinning out of control but they were still unable to raise their mother ship. Lacking a hyperdrive, the journey all the way back to its location deeper in the system would take several hours, during which time they would be vulnerable to further attack by the unidentified starfighter they could see on the sensors shadowing their every move.

"Can anyone tell me what the kriff is going on?" the captain demanded, "Where are Jayle and Corson?"

"They were heading to check out that pressure leak but now they aren't responding." one of the other crew replied.

"Lock down the ship." the captain ordered, "We've been boarded."

"What then?" another crewman asked, "We'll be trapped in here still."

"Then we break out the weapons." the captain replied.

Tobis and Jaysica encountered no further members of the prospecting ship's crew as they made their way to the bridge. But when they arrived there they found their way blocked by a heavy blast door preventing access to the bridge.

"Jaysica, can - can you open this?" Tobis asked and Jaysica walked up to the control panel beside the door.

"It's encrypted." she said, "Looks like they aren't entirely without security after all. This may take a few minutes." and then she got to work, removing the control panel from the wall and attempting to trick the electronics behind it into letting them into the bridge.

Unfortunately one effect of this was that the door motors would sometimes begin to operate before releasing and this produced an unmissable thumping sound on both sides of the blast door.

"They're coming in." one of the flight crew exclaimed inside the cockpit, "That door's not going to hold until the refinery notices we're not reporting in."

"That's what these are for you nerf herder." the captain replied as he crouched down behind a console and aimed a battered looking blaster pistol towards the door.

"I think I've got it." Jaysica said to Tobis, "Yes, that's it!" and all of a sudden the blast door slid upwards to reveal the bridge on the other side. But before Tobis could unleash another blast from the deck sweeper there was a sudden volley of blaster fire that came from inside the bridge and Tobis dived out of the way, knocking Jaysica to the floor as well.

"They're shooting at us!" Jaysica squealed, "They're not supposed to be shooting at us."

"They, err, they must have had a supply of weapons aboard." Tobis said and he crawled across the floor to sit just beside the now open doorway. Then he held the muzzle of the decksweeper around the door frame and fired without looking.

The angle of the shot prevented the energy pulse from covering the entire bridge and another volley of blaster fire came back through the doorway as the remaining crew tried to drive the rebels off.

"Tobis what are we going to do?" Jaysica asked, "There are too many of them."

"Actually I, err, I think that there are only two left now." Tobis replied, "Unless there are more without blasters. But I - I can't get a clear shot from out here."

"But if we try going through that door they'll kill us." Jaysica said.

"I know." Tobis said as he tried to figure out a way of getting into a better firing position without exposing himself to hostile fire. Then he smiled, "I - I've got an idea." he said, "Can you trigger the bridge fire suppression system?"

"Tobis you're a genius." Jaysica exclaimed as she got to her feet and started to remove more wall panels, hunting for the control mechanism to the bridge's fire suppression system. Meanwhile Tobis moved away from the doorway and braced himself, aiming the decksweeper towards the opening, "Ready?" Jaysica asked when she found the correct control line and Tobis nodded. Jaysica then shorted two wires together

and all of a sudden a klaxon sounded and there was the sound of gas being released under high pressure. This prompted cries of alarm from the flight crew who had not already been incapacitated. The carbon dioxide gas used in the fire suppression system was bitterly cold and although not instantly toxic it displaced oxygen which was why it was so useful for extinguishing fires. The only way for the crew to escape the gas was to evacuate the bridge and both men came charging out through the doorway at once, firing their blasters randomly to try and clear the way. But Tobis had expected this and positioned himself where he was able to fire at them almost as soon as they appeared and the expanding energy blast enveloped the pair of them, bringing them crashing down to the floor in an instant.

Then the only sound was that of the fire suppression system in the bridge continuing to pump gas into it that was now starting to spill out into the corridor outside and Tobis looked at Jaysica.

"Err, I think you can shut that off now." he said, "Then, ah, we'll secure the crew and I'll fix the antenna."

4.

"There's our signal." Vorn said as he sat in the co-pilot's seat of the *Silver Hawk* beside Mace. At that moment the *Silver Hawk* was waiting in interstellar space, far beyond the range of the Lucrehulk's sensors while its occupants waited for word from Tobis and Jaysica.

"Jump co-ordinates look to be on the outskirts of the system." Mace said, "I'll program them into the nav computer and we ought to be there in about ten minutes."

"Good. I'll go and let the others know." Vorn replied as he got out of the chair before leaving the cockpit.

In the *Silver Hawk's* lounge area he found the other two members of his team, Kara and a large man in military style clothing. Both of them were sat at the table checking an array of blasters that covered the entire surface.

"What's up boss?" Kara asked, "Has Jaysica managed to make a mess of things already? Did she destroy the prospecting ship."

"No she didn't." Vorn replied.

"The Lucrehulk we're after?" Kara said and Vorn glared at her, "Boss, did the klutz destroy the entire star system? I've always known she'd do something like that one day."

"You can't destroy a star system." Tharun commented, "It'd take a thousand ships with more firepower than"

"Jaysica hasn't destroyed anything." Vorn interrupted.

"Tell that to Tharun's foot." Kara said. Jaysica had recently dropped an air cylinder on Tharun's foot and broken it and although it was well on the way to being healed he was still keeping off it as much as he could.

"Tobis and Jaysica have secured the prospecting ship," Vorn said just moments before the *Silver Hawk* shuddered as it entered hyperspace, "and we ought to be there in about ten minutes." then he looked down at the weapons laid out on the table, "Expecting trouble?" he asked.

"We are about to try and steal a three thousand metre long starship major." Tharun pointed out, "I doubt that the crew will just hand it over and I really want this mission to succeed."

"Looking to impress Lyssa?" Kara asked and Tharun nodded.

"She works in supply and a factory ship will make her job a lot easier. That leaves more time us to be together." he said.

"Well I have three things to say about that." Vorn said, "Firstly this mission isn't about you and my daughter having more time to undertake activities I'm probably best not enquiring too deeply about and secondly there is no try, only do or do not."

"That makes no sense major." Tharun said.

"Yeah boss, how can you do something without trying to start with?" Kara added.

"It's a Jedi saying." Vorn told them.

"Yeah, and look what happened to them." Kara replied, "Perhaps if they'd concentrated less on saying stupid stuff and more on doing smart stuff we wouldn't be in this situation to begin with."

"Never mind." Vorn said, "The main point is that our plan is to use the droid security force to take the ship."

"And everything always goes to plan right boss? Especially when the klutz is around." Kara said and Vorn sighed.

"Just make sure all these are functional by the time we arrive. Which should be in about five minutes."

When the *Silver Hawk* came out of hyperspace the prospecting ship was located nearby, with the Y-wing fighter now squeezed inside the hangar meant for the dozens of probe droids that were still busily surveying the tiny moon nearby. Mace flew the *Silver Hawk* beneath the prospecting ship so that he could dock the transport's top hatch to a collar on the underside of the other vessel's hull.

Crossing over to the prospecting ship, the rebels aboard the *Silver Hawk* were met by Jaysica who smiled at them.

"See?" she said, "We did it."

"We never doubted you would." Vorn replied.

"I did." Kara muttered.

"What can you tell us about the Lucrehulk?" Vorn asked, ignoring Kara's barbed comment.

"Oh Tobis is handling that. He and Harvey have been monitoring their communications. Come on, I'll show you." Jaysica said before leading them to the bridge where Tobis had plugged Harvey into one of the control stations.

"Nice ship you've got here lad." Tharun commented.

"What? Oh, err, thanks." Tobis replied.

"Jaysica says you've been monitoring communications from the Lucrehulk." Mace said.

"Oh yes." Tobis answered, "Well, err, Harvey has been. We, err, we have listened into the signals between

the lucrehulk and the other prospecting ships.”

“Have they noticed that something's happened to this one yet?” Vorn asked.

“No. Err, I don't think so anyway. But there, err, there is a specific format to the transmissions sent by the prospecting ship when they return to the lucrehulk.”

“Can you duplicate them properly?” Mace said and Tobis nodded.

“I think so.” he said, “Though, err, we may want to fake a problem with our communications to hide the fact that we aren't the real crew.”

“Okay, so we've got a way of getting aboard the lucrehulk.” Vorn said, “Now can we just head straight to it or do we need to wait for a shift to be over?”

“Oh, err, there doesn't appear to be any set shift pattern.” Tobis said, “We can head for the mother ship any time we want.”

“And how long will it take to get there?” Kara asked.

“Err, about four hours.” Tobis answered.

“Then we'd better get a move on.” Vorn said, “Now what about the crew?”

“They're locked in their quarters.” Jaysica told him, “Don't worry though, we emptied all of the drawers and closets to make sure that there was nothing they could use to escape.”

“Good, because the last thing we need is the alarm being raised now.” Tharun said. Then he looked at Vorn and added, “Though it might be an idea if Tobis welded the doors to their quarters shut major.” and Vorn nodded.

“Yes I agree. Once we're under way you and he can see to that. For now though we need to get this ship moving. Mace, you'll have to release the *Silver Hawk*.”

“Perhaps we should have brought Cass after all.” Mace replied, “She could have taken the ship back to headquarters for us instead of us having to loop back round and pick it up while Harvey takes the Y-wing back to headquarters.”

“Oh she was having a great time looking through the hold when we left her.” Jaysica said, “Why spoil her fun?”

The lucrehulk-class refinery and factory ship *Golden Empress* was located in open space far away from any of the planets in the system. The ship's position had been determined by the need for all of the smaller prospecting ships to reach it with the minimum expenditure of fuel while being limited to travelling at sublight speeds only. The ship was one of the droid control vessels originally used to direct the Trade Federation's droid armies in the years leading up to the Clone Wars and it still bore the large antenna arrays for communicating with millions of droids at once.

As soon as the prospecting ship being flown by the rebels came into sight of the *Golden Empress*'s short range sensors the lucrehulk-class ship made contact.

“Scout seven transmit your status.” a voice said calmly and Mace looked at Tobis.

“Now we get to find out if that procedure you overheard is as good as you say it is.” he said.

“Best keep our distance just in case we need to make a run for it.” Vorn commented, “But don't look like you're keeping your distance.”

Meanwhile Tobis activated the ship's transmitter.

“Err, this is scout seven reporting an emergency level four.” he said.

“Repeat scout seven. Emergency level four.” the voice repeated.

“What's a level four emergency?” Tharun asked Jaysica quietly.

“A reactor leak.” Jaysica replied, “Tobis found that in a service manual in the main computer.”

“I like it.” Mace said, “They won't want to come near a ship with a reactor leak.”

“Just as long as they let us dock with it.” Kara commented.

“Scout seven you are cleared for emergency docking in hangar one four port side.” the flight controller said.

“Err, confirmed. Port one four. Ah, scout seven out.” Tobis said before he shut off the ship's communications,

“I, err, I told you it would work.” he said.

Mace piloted the prospecting ship into the vast hangar within the port side arm of the lucrehulk's circular structure. Smaller than the standard lucrehulk hold because of the amount of space that had to be given up for the mineral refining and manufacturing machinery that had been installed but it was still large enough to admit a ship as large as a Corellian corvette. The hangar was lined with smaller individual hangars and cargo holds, each of which bore a number on the bulkhead above it and Mace flew the prospecting ship into the one marked '14'.

Inside this isolated hangar there was the equipment needed to conduct repairs on a small starship and as soon as the prospecting ship entered a heavy blast door slid down behind it to isolate it from the rest of the hangar.

“Looks like they expect the crews to fix their own ships.” Vorn noted.

“Makes sense.” Mace replied, “No-one knows a ship like the people who fly them.”

“It also give us a bit of privacy.” Vorn said. Then he looked at Tobis, “I take it you have a way for us to get out

of here though.”

“Oh, err, well I thought that we could make use of the ventilation system.” Tobis said, “The ship must have one, right?”

“How original.” Kara commented.

“Everyone grab your gear.” Vorn said, “We’ve got a droid control centre to find.”

Exiting the prospecting ship the rebels began to search the hangar for any access points to the ventilation system. When they located the three vents present in the hangar the rebels found that all of them were at a high level, too far up the walls for any of the rebels to climb up to them unaided.

“Anyone got a ladder?” Tharun asked as he looked up at one of the ventilation grills and the rebels looked around for something they could use to climb the walls.

“Looks like we’ll have to do without.” Vorn said when their search came up empty.

“How?” Kara asked, “It’s not like we’re Jedi who can just leap up there.”

“What, have none of you ever been to a circus?” Vorn asked, smiling.

“Oh I’ve got a bad feeling about this.” Mace said.

“Got any better ideas?” Vorn asked in response.

“Unfortunately not.” Mace replied.

“In that case you and Tharun join me by the wall. Tobis and Kara will be next and Jaysica will-” Vorn began.

“Whoa!” Kara exclaimed, “Boss are you seriously suggesting that we form a human pyramid?”

“More of a trapezoid really.” Vorn said, “Jaysica will be climbing off the top into the vent. The she’ll drop a line down to-”

“Please don’t use the word ‘drop’ when you’re talking about her boss.” Kara interrupted as she shuddered.

“Let’s just get on with this shall we?” Tharun said and he slung his blaster rifle over his shoulder as he walked over to the wall and stood directly beneath the vent. Vorn and Mace then took up positions either side of him and they wrapped their arms around one another’s shoulders to form a solid line. Tobis and Kara then climbed up onto their shoulders, maintaining their balance by leaning against the wall while standing on the three rebels beneath them.

“Okay little lady, you’re up.” Tharun said, “Make it quick would you? My mother in law is putting on weight.”

Kara scowled and glared down at him.

“I swear I’d kick you in the head if it wouldn’t mean me falling and braking my neck.” she hissed.

“Okay here goes.” Jaysica said and then she began to climb up the other rebels, each of them wincing as she pushed against them and tugged at them when she needed a hand or foothold.

Standing on top of Kara and Tobis, the vent was at head height to Jaysica and she grabbed hold of it with one hand while she fumbled for a tool to remove the vent with the other. As she removed each of the fasteners Jaysica just dropped them and Kara frowned as they bounced off her head one at a time. Then the vent suddenly came free and Jaysica only stopped herself from falling back away from the wall by dropping the tool right on top of Kara’s head and using her now free hand to grab hold of the edge of the now open vent. In turn this caused Kara to flinch, pulling her arm away from Tobis and she slipped from Vorn and Tharun’s shoulders and fell, starting a chain reaction of rebels collapsing into a heap on the floor beneath the vent. Only Jaysica did not fall, but she was only able to maintain her grip on the vent by releasing the grill itself and grabbing hold of the edge with both hands, squealing as she did so. Meanwhile the vent grill bounced off Tharun’s blast helmet.

“It’s alright.” she said without looking down, “I’m okay.”

“You’re okay?” Tharun responded, removing his helmet and rubbing his head.

“Oh, err, can you climb into the vent?” Tobis asked as he crawled away from the other rebels and got back to his feet.

“I think so.” Jaysica replied, “Will you catch me if I fall?”

“No.” Kara and Tharun responded simultaneously and Vorn frowned.

Above them Jaysica scabbled upwards and dragged herself into the vent. Once inside she unravelled a length of syntherope from a dispenser on her belt and fed it out of the vent, bracing herself inside by wedging her legs either side of the vent.

“Kara, you first.” Vorn said when the line reached the rebels below.

Kara took hold of the line and used it to brace herself as she pressed her feet against the wall.

“Boss, I swear that if she drops me-” she began.

“Just go Kara.” Vorn said and Kara started to climb the wall. Upon reaching the vent she started to climb inside and found herself looking right between Jaysica’s legs.

“Save it for Tobis.” she said, frowning before climbing past Jaysica into the vent. Then she looked back out and called out to the rebels below, “Next.”

5.

Once all of the rebels were squeezed into the vent they followed after Tobis as he crawled towards the droid control centre, guided by a schematic based on the Alliance's own *Lucrehulk*-class battleship in the sector, the *Trading Dream*. At each access point the rebels peered out carefully to make sure that their passing would not be noticed. However, on the vast majority of occasions on which they did this they saw either empty corridors and compartments or alternatively just some of the thousands of droids that made up the bulk of the crew. Only occasionally did they see a living crew member despite the number of organic beings aboard being significantly higher than normal even for the operational warship versions of the same ship type.

"Where are the rest of the crew?" Jaysica said softly, "I thought that there were supposed to be hundreds aboard. We could have just walked to where we want to be. It would have been far more comfortable."

"Oh, err, they'll be centred mainly on the refinery." Tobis said.

"And don't forget that some of them will be aboard the prospecting ships." Mace added.

"We couldn't have risked walking anyway." Vorn said, "It would only take one droid to spot us and realise that we don't belong here to raise the alarm."

"Well how much further do we have to go? It's so cramped in here my knees are hurting from all this crawling around." Jaysica said and from the back of the group Tharun frowned.

"Oh you think it's cramped do you little lady?" he responded. Standing about thirty centimetres taller than Jaysica and wearing an armoured vest and helmet that made him even bulkier, he was finding crawling through the vents to be tougher than the rest of the rebels.

"Oh, err, about two hundred metres I think." Tobis replied as he studied the schematic on his datapad.

"You think?" Mace commented, "Can you be more precise?"

"Err, not really. I – I don't think that the *Trading Dream* is laid out quite the same. It's a lot newer than this ship. But, err, well, if the droid control centre is in the same place then it's about three hundred metres dead ahead and four levels down."

"Tobis you just said that it was only two hundred metres ahead, now it's four and we need to move down through the ship. So which is it?" Vorn asked.

"Err, it is four hundred metres but only two hundred going flat like this. Then there's a slope that ought to lead right down to the droid control centre."

"You mean we're just going to slide all the way down?" Kara asked and Tobis nodded.

"Err, yes." he said.

"Alright then. This could be fun." Kara said and Vorn frowned.

"Kara you are not to cry 'weeee' all the way down." he said and she frowned, "I'm warning you Kara," he went on, "try it and when we get back I may just decide to review a recent command decision I made about letting you off the hook for a certain wager you made with Tobis and Jaysica. How many days did you have left?"

"Twenty-seven." Jaysica answered cheerfully and then she added, "I dare you to do it Kara."

"Do it." Tharun then whispered just loudly enough for everyone to hear, "You know you want to."

"Well Kara?" Vorn asked.

"Spoilsport." she replied.

"Tobis just carry on." Vorn said and the rebels began to crawl forwards again.

Tobis's prediction turned out to be quite accurate and a short time later the rebels found themselves at a junction where the vent split off to both the left and the right as well as sloping down directly ahead of them.

"Err, this is it." Tobis said and he moved aside so that the rebels behind him could see past to the slope in front of them.

"Right then Tharun you go first." Vorn said, "You're best equipped for a direct assault. Mace you follow."

"Okay major." Tharun replied and he began to try squeezing past the other rebels.

"Stang Tharun," Kara hissed as she had to press herself against the side of the vent for him to get past, "be careful. I don't want you to get wedged with my face stuck between your legs. It was bad enough when Jaysica was spreading herself wide open when she thought Tobis was going to be first into the vent."

"I did not think Tobis was going to be first." Jaysica protested.

"Is there any chance we can do this without you lot sounding like irate kowikian monkey lizards?" Mace asked, "Look, we can just crawl down these side passages while we sort ourselves out."

When the rebels had sorted themselves into a more logical order Tharun unslung his rifle, taking care not to let the weapon bang against the side of the vent and give them away to anyone who may be close by. Then he sat at the top of the slope and looked back over his shoulder.

"Here goes." he said and he pushed himself off, sliding feet first down the slope towards the vent grill at the bottom. The grill was only held on by four lightweight fasteners and was not designed to withstand the impact

of an adult man wearing body armour and carrying a heavy rifle and so when Tharun struck it the grill flew right off and across the room outside the vent with Tharun following. Dropping out of the vent, Tharun rolled as he landed and made sure to clear the way for Mace to follow him. Coming to a halt behind a control console he leapt up and quickly surveyed the room. There were two living crew members present and also several droids and it was the latter that Tharun targeted with his rifle, taking rapidly aimed shots at each one using his powerful rifle that blew the machines apart when they hit. Instantly the organic crew members cowered, convinced that he would move on to them next and too scared to try and raise the alarm. But Tharun had no interest in the living crew members, instead when Mace appeared out of the vent he levelled his deck sweeper towards them both and fired. Energy pulse caught both men in its path and they collapsed on the spot just as Tharun dealt with the last of the droids.

"Clear." Tharun called out while Mace darted to the door and sealed it to prevent anyone from just walking in and disturbing them before they had taken control of the droid security force.

"Tobis was the next out of the vent and he immediately made his way to the nearest control console and started to study it as he attempted to figure out the best way of bringing the ship's battle droids under the control of the rebels while the rest of the team followed him out of the vent.

"What can you tell us Tobis?" Mace asked as he and Vorn stood beside the engineer.

"Oh, err, we can gain control of the droids using this equipment." he said.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Kara said, "I sense a 'but' coming and I'm not referring to having the klutz sit on my head."

"Oh, err, but—" Tobis began.

"Told you." Kara interrupted.

"But, err, there's an override." Tobis finished.

"So we take control and the crew can just turn them back to their own side?" Vorn asked but Tobis shook his head.

"No, err, no sir. They can't change the droids' behaviour but they can just send a shut down command to them all." Tobis explained.

"I'm guessing that this override isn't in here anywhere." Vorn said.

"Here it comes, I've got a very bad feeling about this." Kara added.

"Err, no. It's on the bridge." Tobis said, "If we, err, if we try and alter the battle droids' command system then they'll be warned about it and be able to shut them all down."

"Leaving us facing a few hundred angry crewmen." Tharun said.

"Who even if they don't have weapons of their own will be able to take the carbines from the inactive battle droids." Vorn said.

"So we've got to get someone to the bridge." Mace said.

"It'll be guarded." Tharun pointed out, "I should go."

"No." Vorn replied, "If our presence here is detected before we can seize control of the battle droids then there are going to be about a hundred or so of them beating down that door to get in here and you're the one most able to keep them back. Mace and I will use the uniforms of those two guys over there and head for the bridge. Now what do we have to do to disable this override?"

"Blast the kriffing thing." Kara suggested.

"Err, actually yes, that would do." Tobis said, "As soon as the override control is destroyed I can issue a new set of commands to the battle droids from here."

"Giving us an army." Mace said, smiling, "Okay Tobis, what does this override look like?"

"I – I'm not sure." Tobis replied and Kara groaned.

"Oh great." she said, "Did I mention that I've got a bad feeling about this?"

"Twice." Vorn said, "Okay Tobis, if this override will warn the command crew that something's up with the droids can you make that work to our advantage? Get the right console to produce a specific output that we'll recognise?"

"Oh. Ah." Tobis said, frowning as he considered this for a moment, "Err no, not without knowing exactly how it works. All I know is that it exists."

"What about just taking over the droids and letting us stop them from using the override?" Mace suggested, "If they trigger it can it be reversed?"

"Err, maybe. I don't know." Tobis answered.

"That still sounds like our only chance right now." Vorn said, "We'll signal you when we get to the bridge and you can send the command to the droids to follow our orders. Then we'll make sure that the crew don't get to trigger the override."

"How?" Jaysica said and Mace held up his deck sweeper.

"I'll ask nicely." he said.

6.

The uniforms taken from the two crewmen in the droid control centre provided no way of carrying more than the most compact blasters without it becoming obvious and so while Vorn was able to tuck his hold out blaster into a pocket, Mace's heavy blaster pistol as well as Vorn's rifle and the decksweeper were all far too bulky for this and so they had to be carried inside a holdall that the two rebels hoped would not arouse suspicion.

As it happened none of the labour droids that they encountered on their way to the bridge seemed to care about the two rebels at all and did not notice that they both had the identity cards pinned to their uniforms turned around so that the images on them were not visible. But as they approached the turbolift that they intended to use to take them to the level on which the bridge was located they found a group of four battle droids standing outside it. Nervously, Vorn slid his hand into his pocket and took hold of his blaster. But before the droids could say anything to them the turbolift doors slid open to reveal an empty turbolift car and the droids marched inside.

"Hold that turbolift!" Vorn called out, not wanting it to appear to the droids as if he and Mace were deliberately loitering to avoid them and then he and Mace rushed inside before the door slid shut again, "Bridge section." Vorn said, looking at the droid standing right beside the control panel and half expecting it to point its carbine at him at any moment.

"Roger roger." the droid responded and it pressed not only the button for the droids' own destination but also for the bridge and both Vorn and Mace breathed sighs of relief.

The central core of the *lucrehulk*-class vessel was significantly busier than the outer ring and the two rebels did their best to avoid making eye contact with any of the other crew members they happened to encounter in the corridors as they made their way towards the bridge. The crew of the vessel was large enough that it was unlikely anyone would be able to recognise every other member of the crew by sight alone but they were taking no chances on discovery at this late stage of the mission. To avoid looking suspicious Vorn and Mace acted as if they were conducting a casual conversation, discussing supposed encounters with women during shore leave between voyages. This ruse lasted long enough to get them to the large doorway that led to the bridge. This was closed and as Tharun had pointed out was guarded by a pair of B-1 battle droids positioned either side of the door. These remained motionless as the rebels walked up to the door and till did not react when Vorn reached out to open it. There was a loud 'hiss' as the door slid open and the rebels got their first look at the bridge on the other side.

As was common with *lucrehulk*-class ships the majority of bridge positions were manned by organic crew members rather than droids and this meant that the two rebels did not appear especially out of place as they entered. Located roughly in the centre of the bridge were the three flight crew themselves and in front of each of them was a console that had obviously been added when the ship's new owners had taken charge of it. Under Trade Federation control the command crews of *lucrehulk*-class ships had been almost exclusively neimoidian and their pilots would often have their eyes surgically replaced with implanted goggles that fed information on the ship's status directly into their brains. On the other hand the new human crew needed a more conventional means of maintaining control over their ship and so the extra consoles had been added. Just in front of the flight crew stood a pair of officers who were obviously the ship's captain and his first officer and at the moment that the two rebels entered both of these officers were studying a holographic projection of the star system that floated in the air beside them.

"So what do you think major?" Mace whispered, "Where's that emergency droid override?"

"Hard to tell." Vorn replied as he looked around at the various consoles, "The flight consoles are the only obvious modification I can see that's been made. But who knows what changes have been made to the functionality of any of the consoles?"

"I suppose we're just going to have to go off people's reactions then." Mace said and he and Vorn made their way to a quiet spot at the edge of the bridge where no-one appeared to be looking.

"Tobis," Vorn said softly into his comlink, "we're in position. You can activate your program any time you want."

"Oh, err, right away major. Give me thirty seconds." Tobis responded and Vorn smiled at Mace as he shut off the comlink and put it away.

"We're set." he said.

"You there!" a voice called out and the two rebels looked around to see the *lucrehulk*'s captain and first officer staring directly at them, "What are you doing back there? Who are you?"

Vorn and Mace glanced at one another.

"I've got this." Vorn said and he straightened himself up and looked directly back at the ship's captain, "My name is Major Vorn Larcus the third of the Alliance to Restore the Republic and I declare this ship to be a

prize of war. Order your crew to surrender captain and you have my word that they'll be well treated."

"Is this some sort of joke?" the captain exclaimed.

"I don't know. Is it?" Vorn replied and he pulled his blaster rifle from the holdall.

"Security! Get in here!" the captain yelled as crewmen ducked for cover all across the bridge.

In reaction to the captain's command the two battle droids stationed in the corridor outside the bridge came hurrying into through the doorway and Vorn swung his rifle around to aim at them.

"Drop the weapon rebel scum!" one of the droids commanded as both machines aimed their carbines back at him.

"Roger roger." the second added.

Meanwhile behind Vorn, Mace pulled his decksweeper from the holdall with one hand while he took out his comlink with the other.

"Tobis any time now would be good." he transmitted.

"Oh, err, I'm working on it but, ah, there's a, um firewall to stop slicing." Tobis replied.

"Oh now he tells us." Mace said to Vorn, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Time for plan 'B'. 'B' for blast." Vorn said and he promptly shot one of the battle droids. The powerful energy bolt struck the machine in the centre of its lightly protected chest and it simply exploded, sending its arms and head flying across the bridge while its legs took a handful of staggering steps before collapsing.

In response the second battle droid guard returned fire with its carbine set to automatic and both Vorn and Mace dived for cover as the blaster bolts flew over their heads and struck the wall behind them.

In the droid command centre Tobis struggled to find a way around the software defences preventing him from uploading the modified program.

"What does that mean?" Jaysica asked, pointing to a flashing light on a nearby console and Tobis glance at it quickly.

"Oh, err, it means that the ship has been placed on security alert." he said, "Someone on the bridge has just activated the entire security force."

"What's taking you so long lad?" Tharun asked from beside the door, "They're bound to figure out we're down here sooner or later and when they do we'll be up to our necks in those clankers."

"And the boss is going to be dead much sooner than that if you can't bring those droids under our control."

Kara added as she unslung her own carbine and hurried over to join Tharun by the door to help him see off any droid patrols that appeared.

"Oh, err, hang on a minute." Tobis replied.

"The boss may not have a minute." Kara said.

"Got it!" Tobis snapped and he jabbed his finger at the console he was sat at to execute his modified commands.

"Now we see if it works." Tharun commented to Kara.

There was the sound of metal feet marching from outside the bridge as the squad of battle droids Vorn and Mace had encountered in the turbolift arrived to reinforce the bridge. However, just as the squad appeared the lone battle droid that had been keeping the two rebels pinned down with bursts from its carbine suddenly ceased fire and the squad of reinforcements came to an abrupt halt as well.

"What are you doing?" the Lucrehulk's captain called out, pointing towards the rebels, "Shoot them."

The droid that was marked as the leader of the newly arrived squad turned its head towards the captain and then towards Vorn and Mace.

"What are your orders Major Larcus sir?" it said and the ship's captain gasped as Vorn emerged from his hiding place and smiled.

"Take the command staff into custody corporal." he said, "Then inform all the other droid units to secure the rest of the vessel. This ship belongs to the rebellion now."

"No! I won't let you!" the captain exclaimed as he realised that his droid security force had just turned against him and he spun around towards a control station near the front of the bridge, "Deactivate all the droids." he called out and the crewman at the station he was looking at reached for his console.

At that moment Mace emerged from hiding as well. Having watched how the captain turned he had been able to determine exactly which control station was fitted with the droid override switch and he already had his decksweeper pointing towards it. Pulling the trigger he unleashed the expanding stun pulse. This spread out as it crossed the bridge until it was so wide that it struck not only the crewman about to trigger the override but also the crewmen at nearby stations as well, effectively guaranteeing that no-one else would be able to reach the override without being fired on by the rebels or their new droid allies.

"You're under arrest captain." the droid corporal announced, advancing towards the ship's startled commander.

"I suggest you do as the droid says captain." Vorn said, "Those droids can be very efficient if used correctly."

"You won't get away with this. This is my ship, these are my droids." the captain protested as he and the rest

of his command staff were being led away by the droids.

"And the Alliance thanks you for your kind donation captain." Vorn replied, "Rest assured we'll put your ship and its droids to good use."

When the *Golden Empress* dropped out of hyperspace close to the sector's Alliance headquarters the rebels aboard waited for a relief crew to come aboard to secure it before using the *Silver Hawk* to ferry themselves back over to the ancient jump beacon and when they came walking down the access ramp into the hangar they found themselves surrounded by members of other rebel field teams while waiting right at the bottom of the ramp were General Kain, Rear Admiral Aphanar and Colonel Sallir as well as Vorn's daughter Lyssa who smiled wildly at him as well as Tharun.

"Major Vorn Larcus," the general said loudly, "the Alliance thanks you for securing yet another starship for our cause."

"You're welcome general." Vorn replied.

"By my reckoning the *Golden Empress* is the fifth capital ship you and your team have brought us and we feel it's about time we recognise this achievement." General Kain went on and Kara smiled.

"I've got a good feeling about this boss." she whispered into Vorn's ear.

"Vorn Larcus," Colonel Sallir said, stepping closer to Vorn, "your services as a major in the armed forces of the Alliance to Restore the Republic are no longer needed. Therefore, you are hereby promoted to the rank of lieutenant colonel." and the mon calamari held out a small package wrapped in cloth. Taking this, Vorn unwrapped it to reveal a lieutenant colonel's rank badge inside.

"Let me boss." Kara said, taking the badge and fixing it to his jacket before planting a kiss on his cheek, "And we'll have a special celebration tonight." she whispered into his ear.

"Thank you colonel." Vorn said, saluting Colonel Sallir. Then when the colonel returned his salute he looked at General Kain and added, "Thank you general." and he saluted again.

"Carry on colonel." General Kain replied as he returned Vorn's salute as well and a cheer went up from the crowd.

"Well done daddy." Lyssa said as she approached him, pushing her way in between him and Kara, "You really deserve this."

"Where's Cass?" Mace said to the rest of the team as other team leaders closed in to congratulate Vorn on his promotion, "I'd have thought she'd have been here for this."

"They must have forgotten to tell her." Kara replied, "She must still be in the cruiser's hold."

"Perhaps we should go and get her." Tharun suggested, "I'm sure she'll be excited to see this."

Lyssa joined the rebel team as they boarded the gladiator-class cruiser and headed for the cargo hold to find Cass. But what they found in there when the door opened was not what they expected.

"Aren't these Cass's clothes?" Jaysica said when they saw a neat pile of clothing on the floor near the door.

"They are." Kara replied, "What's going on here?"

"Cass!" Mace called out.

"Jeeves!" Vorn added and from behind one of the cargo containers the gold coloured protocol droid appeared.

"Oh Major Larcus sir, I am so glad you have returned." the droid said.

"It's lieutenant colonel now Jeeves." Lyssa pointed out.

"Oh I do apologise Colonel Larcus sir. I was not previously informed." Jeeves replied.

"That's quite alright Jeeves." Vorn said, "Now where's Cass?"

"Oh my sir, there's been quite a mishap I'm afraid."

"Jeeves, where is my daughter?" Mace asked.

"And why are her clothes over here?" Kara added, holding up Cass's jacket.

"Oh Lieutenant Larcus, I was only following your instructions you understand." Jeeves said and Kara frowned.

"My instructions?" she said.

"Why yes, Miss Cass explained what you meant by keeping her hands to herself and although I did not understand the reasoning behind them I could not refuse a direct order so I-

"Jeeves where is Cass?" Mace demanded.

"Why right here, behind this container." Jeeves answered and the droid pointed to a nearby cargo container,

"Miss Cass, perhaps you should come out now."

"I can't. Not like this." Cass's voice responded from behind the container.

"Out of the way." Mace said and he pushed past Jeeves to look behind the container. What he saw there caused him to gasp in surprise and the other rebels dashed to see what was wrong.

"What the kriff?" Kara exclaimed when she saw Cass sat on the hold floor, now wearing one of the body restraints she had found in the container earlier on.

"Cass what happened?" Mace asked.

"I thought it would be interesting to see if I could do any of the things Kara and Jaysica managed." Cass replied.

"And could you?" Tharun asked.

"No I couldn't," Cass said glumly, "and then I found out that there was no key for the lock in the container with them and now I'm stuck. Can someone let me out please?"

Mace sighed and turned to Jeeves.

"Jeeves, when my daughter is done messing about make sure she gets back to the *Silver Hawk* safely, okay?" he said, "We'll be waiting there for you."