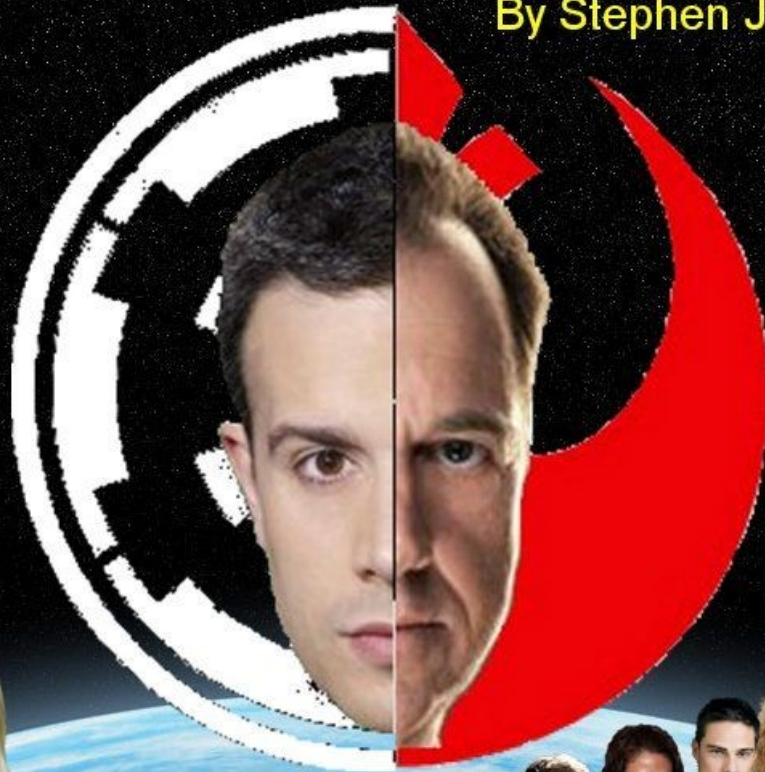


STAR WARS

8-05: The Droid We're Looking For

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...

THE DROID WE'RE LOOKING FOR

BEING PUSHED BACK ON MULTIPLE FRONTS, THE EMPIRE IS TAKING STOCK OF WHAT RESOURCES REMAIN TO IT. BUT THIS ALSO PRESENTS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR THE ALLIANCE TO GATHER INTELLIGENCE IF THE CREW OF THE *SILVER HAWK* CAN JUST INTERCEPT THE COURIER...

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

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1.

"Is this a joke?" Rodge Larrs asked when the instructions from Coruscant were delivered to him in person. As the most senior member of the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order in the sector he had unrivalled access to both military and civilian arms of government and as such the order he now held in his hands would fall to him.

"No Mister Larrs," his assistant replied, "the grand vizier wants every sector to conduct a full survey of their resources and send it back to Coruscant for analysis."

"Thank you, you are dismissed." Rodge said as he got to his feet, "If anyone calls I have gone to see Moff Horatian. Perhaps he can shed some more light on this."

Exiting his office, Rodge headed straight for the one occupied by Moff Gregor Horatian. Most visitors to the moff had to be cleared by his secretary but Rodge was one of the few who could rely on being admitted automatically and so he merely acknowledged the secretary with a nod as he walked past her. Walking up to the large doors to the moff's office the unit of armoured COMPForce assault troops standing guard snapped to attention. Until recently a pair of stormtroopers would have stood guard here but in the aftermath of an abortive coup by an Imperial inquisitor in which numerous military officers had proven to be unreliable security around the moff had not only been stepped up but transferred to COMPNOR, that organisation having been totally loyal to the moff and targeted for purging by the inquisitor.

"Ah Rodge do take a seat." Moff Horatian said as the doors to his office opened and Rodge entered, "What can I do for you?"

"It's about this order from Imperial Centre." Rodge replied and he placed the datapad he had been given on the moff's desk and slid it towards him.

"The resource audit? Yes, I thought that may cause some upset." Moff Horatian said.

"What is the point?" Rodge asked.

"The point is that the war is going badly for the Empire. Very badly in fact. That accursed rebellion have already taken several sectors and the situation on Coruscant itself is becoming less stable by the day. Grand Vizier Amedda wants to know what resources he still has available to him and where they are located."

"But to use droids-" Rodge began.

"I know. But those are the vizier's orders. He doesn't want any signals that the rebellion can intercept and decode. Every planet and vessel in the sector is to compile a full report of their situation and send it to us here. COMPNOR will then collate all of this information into a single report that can be sent to Coruscant. Even if the rebels are somehow able to discover what is going on the information can easily be destroyed at any point in the process simply by destroying the droids carrying it." the moff explained without letting Rodge finish.

"This could take weeks." Rodge said.

"I know it's a lot of work but those are our orders and the grand vizier expects them to be carried out. Feel free to requisition whatever resources you need to make this happen but make sure it's done right. According to Imperial Centre the Empire could stand or fall on the basis of this."

"Colonel Larcus!" Lieutenant Kara Larcus said when she saw her husband and commanding officer, Vorn, emerge from his cabin and she snapped to attention and saluted.

"You don't need to keep doing that Kara." he replied, returning the salute so that she would sit down again.

"Okay boss, but I just want to recognise your promotion properly even if the others don't." Kara said and she glanced at the two other rebels sat at the table in the lounge of the transport ship *Silver Hawk*.

"What? Oh, err." the man said as he looked at the woman beside him and holding his hand, "I, err, Jaysica and I didn't think that."

"It's not a problem Tobis." Vorn said.

"See Kara?" Jaysica added.

"See what?" a man's voice said as Mace Grayle, the owner of the *Silver Hawk* and his daughter Cass appeared from the cockpit.

"No-one's taking the boss's promotion seriously." Kara said as she sat down.

"Huh?" Mace responded.

"Forget it." Vorn said, "Frankly it feels odd to have Kara saluting me."

Before anyone else could say anything there was the sound of someone running up the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp and a tall man in combat fatigues came rushing into the lounge, gasping for breath.

"Tharun? What's wrong?" Cass asked as Tharun continued to try and catch his breath.

"If there's some kid down a well it's not our problem." Kara said.

"Lyssa." Tharun gasped and Vorn frowned at the mention his daughter, Tharun's wife.

"What about her?" he asked.
 "She's on her way. I ran to try and warn you all." Tharun said.
 "Warn us about what? She may be a bit picky but she's not that bad." Mace said.
 "I don't know. The boss's little princess-" Kara began.
 "I wish you wouldn't call her that Kara." Vorn interrupted
 "She's bee -, she's been-" Tharun began but before he could finish there was a woman's voice from outside the ship.
 "Hello? Daddy?" Lyssa called out.
 "Brace yourself. Hurricane Lyssa just started." Kara said before Lyssa appeared at the top of the ramp.
 "Holy kriff!" Mace exclaimed when he saw her and the Alliance fleet uniform she was wearing.
 "Why are you wearing that?" Jaysica asked.
 "I've been given a commission." Lyssa announced, "I'm a captain."
 "Gods no." Kara said, slumping forwards so her head struck the table.
 "Lyssa darling, what do you mean?" Vorn asked, "You're not even part of the Alliance military."
 "I am now daddy and it's all thanks to you and Tharun."
 "Gee, thanks you two." Kara said, looking up and then lowering her head again.
 "I don't understand." Vorn said.
 "The *Golden Empress*." Tharun said as he finally got his breath back.
 "The factory ship we captured?" Mace said.
 "That's right." Lyssa said, "The Alliance needed someone to command the ship and since it's going to be used to manufacture equipment they wanted someone who has experience with organising supply systems."
 "So if you're a fleet captain," Cass said, "how does that fit in with all of our ranks?"
 "It's equivalent to a lieutenant colonel." Vorn said and Lyssa smiled.
 "Isn't that wonderful daddy?" she said, "We're the same rank."
 "I've got a very bad feeling about this." Kara said, not bothering to lift her head.
 "Congratulations Lyssa." Vorn said, "I'm sure everyone's very happy for you."
 Kara then looked up and raised her hand.
 "Boss-" she began.
 "Everyone is very happy for you." Vorn said and he glared at Kara, "Now how about we meet later in the officer's bar and we'll celebrate."
 "Okay, I'll see you later daddy. I love you." Lyssa said and she turned around and exited the ship.
 "Right I need to be going as well." Vorn said, "Lieutenant Pay has asked to see me. I'm guessing that we're about to be given an assignment."
 "But doesn't that mean we might miss Lyssa's celebration?" Jaysica asked.

Lieutenant Geran Pay had been sent to the sector by Alliance Intelligence to track down an Imperial agent who had infiltrated the local rebel forces. Then when she had been identified and killed trying to escape he stayed on to serve as the local intelligence representative.

"Ah, lieutenant colonel come in." Geran said when he saw Vorn standing in the doorway of his office,
 "Congratulations on your promotion by the way."
 "Thank you lieutenant." Vorn replied, "It's handy not to have to salute my own daughter." and Geran frowned,
 "Never mind." Vorn said, "Now what can I do for intelligence?"
 "Ah, straight to the important stuff." Geran said, "This way if you would." and he beckoned Vorn to follow him to a large holographic display that showed numerous documents in a grid pattern and when he reached out and touched one of these it expanded to be the only one remaining, "This arrived from Alliance Intelligence late last night," Geran explained, "and I've been checking in with local cells to see if they've picked up anything similar. The Empire appears to be collecting data on all of its operations across the galaxy."
 "Someone's taking stock." Vorn said, "What assets they've got and how they're deployed."
 "My thought's exactly." Geran said in agreement and he smiled before he continued, "Anyway the information that's being collected isn't being transmitted to a central point. Instead the Empire's using droids to carry it, first to processing points on the planets where the data originates from and from there to Estran where we can only assume that it is being collated for despatch to Coruscant using another droid. I'm sure I don't need to tell you how valuable that data would be to our operations."
 "The strength and deployment of every military unit? Of course not." Vorn said.
 "Maybe much more than that." Geran said, "The reason we've been able to confirm this locally is because the survey extends outside of the military. Someone wants to know everything that is available to the Empire. That includes production and economic data as well as intelligence. If we can get hold of the droid being used to send the information to Coruscant then we'll know the names of every agent and informant in the sector as well as where to strike to take out the industrial support structure that supplies the Imperial forces here."
 "Let me guess, you want my team to capture that droid." Vorn said.

"I do." Geran answered.

"You realise that whatever droid the Empire puts all that information in is going to be heavily guarded don't you?"

"Of course it will. That's why we need to know about how it's being transported back to Coruscant. It'll be far more vulnerable once it leaves Estran and you may have the opportunity to intercept it en route."

"Intercepting a ship while in hyperspace?" Vorn commented, "That's not exactly easy."

"But it is possible, people have been doing it for as long as interstellar warfare has been around." Geran pointed out, "Even without artificial mass shadow projectors."

Vorn sighed.

"Okay then. Give me everything you have and I'll see what my people can come up with." he said, "But we may need to bring in some outside help with this."

"That's okay, this is a priority mission. Use whoever you like."

2.

"So what did intel have to say boss?" Kara asked when Vorn returned to the *Silver Hawk*. She was standing underneath the ship's hull with Jaysica and Tharun assisting Tobis with routine maintenance on its engines.

"We've got a mission." Vorn replied, "How long until the *Silver Hawk* is flyable again?"

"Oh, err, about two hours I think." Tobis replied.

"Assuming the klutz doesn't break the hyperdrive." Kara commented and Jaysica scowled at her.

"Good. I take it Mace is inside?" Vorn asked and Kara nodded.

"In the cockpit boss, monitoring what we're up to." she said.

"Thanks." Vorn said and he walked up the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp and headed for the cockpit.

"Maj- sorry, colonel." Mace said, looking up from the pilot's chair when he noticed Vorn enter the room.

"That's alright, I'm still getting used to it myself." Vorn replied as he sat down in the co-pilot's seat and handed the datapad Geran had given him to Mace, "I take it Lyssa's gone?"

"She wants to redecorate her quarters aboard the *Golden Empress* to make it more suitable for her, Tharun and Hallanah. Cass went with her."

"Voluntarily?" Vorn asked and Mace grinned.

"Yes, I think she wanted to get away from the sarcastic comments about getting herself tied up recently.

Eventually she'll learn that all she's doing is giving Kara and Tharun time to think up more. Now what have intelligence decided to throw our way this time? Is there a shipment of the late Emperor's under shorts that need stealing and sending up a flagpole?"

"No, I think Dayle and Inra got that one." Vorn commented and Mace's smile widened. Dayle Kord commanded a field team like Vorn's aboard the YT-2400 *Beauty Queen* that was owned by Inra Vayne. The hapan woman was notoriously snobbish and never passed up an opportunity to try and belittle the vessels that other field teams were assigned to, thus making her extremely unpopular with their crews.

"Oh you've got to be kidding me." Mace said suddenly as he read the mission summary he had just been presented with, "We've got to intercept an Imperial warship and force it to drop out of hyperspace?"

"And then we have to get aboard it and steal a droid before the crew can destroy it and the information it will be carrying." Vorn said.

"So do you have a plan for how to force this ship out of hyperspace and get aboard?" Mace asked.

"No. But I do have a plan for how to force it out of hyperspace and get off it. Do you remember the *Glory of Corellia*?"

"Of course I do. Our first mission together was to steal the thing and we only just managed it thanks to Jaysica triggering the hyperdrive incorrectly." Mace said, "Hang on, you're thinking that we could get aboard the ship carrying the droid before it leaves port and then sabotage it?"

"Correct. But for that to work we're going to have to identify the ship in question and also get aboard it to start off with." Vorn said.

"Well I doubt your old friend Fleet Admiral Vretan will be willing to identify it to us and hand us the access codes. So how do you intend to do that?" Mace said and then his eyes widened, "Oh no." he said, "I've got a bad feeling about-"

"Odras Balve." Vorn said and Mace groaned. Odras Balve was a crime lord on the sector's capital world of Estran that Mace had worked for as a smuggler for some time before joining the rebellion. Odras had also been the one who lent Mace the money for the *Silver Hawk* itself and thanks to the sky high interest charges and penalties that he applied Mace still owed him a great deal of money.

"You've got to be kidding me." Mace said.

"No. We know that he has a lot of Imperial personnel among his customers and we need access to them so we can get real time intelligence without having to wait for it to filter through gods know how many layers of local resistance cells and dead drops before reaching us here."

"I know. But that doesn't mean I have to like it." Mace said.

"Oh I realise that Mace. But frankly you're going to like what I have to say next even less. It's about Cass."

Odras Balve ran his criminal empire out of an office located behind a cantina in a starport district of Estran. He had most of the Imperial and local officials at the starport on his payroll and this meant that he often knew about what ships had just landed before anyone from them entered his establishment. Added to this Mace and the rebels aboard the *Silver Hawk* were well known to Odras's men so when they entered the cantina the large man behind the bar smiled.

"Captain Grayle." he said to Mace, "Mister Balve is expecting you." and he glanced at the door to Odras's office."

"What sort of mood is he in?" Mace asked.

"An impatient one. He wants his next payment."

"I'll bet he does." Mace said, "Can we go through?"

"Just knock first."

"Thanks." Mace said and he walked up to the office door and knocked on it.

The door immediately slid upwards to reveal Odras sat behind his desk while his wookiee bodyguard stood just within the room.

"Ah Mace, do come in and bring your friends with you." Odras said in a friendly manner and the rebels filed into the office, "Do you have something for me?" he added.

"Here you go Balve." Mace replied and he tossed a bundle of banknotes onto the desk behind which the crime lord sat.

"Ah cash." Odras said, "I'll count it later. Of course my other offer to clear your debt still stands Mace." and he glanced in turn at Kara, Jaysica and Cass.

"Oh yeah? Well kriff you Balve." Mace hissed.

"Try not to annoy him too much." Vorn said softly.

"Yes do try not to make me so angry that I refuse to hear out what Major Larcus has to ask of me." Odras said.

"It's Lieutenant Colonel Larcus actually." Vorn said.

"Really? You got promoted? Congratulations. Here, let's have a toast. I have a bottle of the good stuff in my desk for occasions such as this." Odras said and he stood up, opened a drawer in his desk and took out a bottle of Corellian whisky and two glasses. He then poured two drinks and handed one to Vorn while he took the other for himself, "To your continued success lieutenant colonel." he said and then he and Vorn both downed their drinks in one.

"Thank you." Vorn said, "Now perhaps I can explain the proposal I have for you."

"Oh do go ahead. I always enjoy hearing about these crackpot plans for galactic revolution, they're just so entertaining. When this civil war ends I think I'll write a book that has them all in." Odras said as he sat back down again.

"I take it that you still provide services to Imperial officers?" Vorn asked, "The navy in particular."

"Of course I do. They have money to spend and little else to spend it on while trapped aboard a star cruiser so I make sure they have plenty to spend it on when they get into port."

"We need you to arrange some sabacc games." Vorn said, "Get as many Imperial officers to attend as you can."

"I can do that." Odras said, "But what will you be doing then?"

"That's our business." Jaysica said and Vorn winced.

"Actually it's my business." Odras replied, "If anything's going to happen to these men then I need to make sure that it can't be linked back to me."

"We aren't interested in the officers themselves." Vorn said, "We're just hoping that they bring along datapads with them."

"Ah." Odras said and he looked at Cass, "I believe that the little waitress used to specialise in taking datapads from unsuspecting Imperial personnel."

"Then I cloned their drives and put them back." Cass said.

"So you're after information from the Imperial navy." Odras said, "I can understand that. But what I'm not seeing yet is what's in it for me?"

"Oh now can't you do anything just because we've asked politely?" Vorn said and he slipped a credit stick from his pocket and slid it across the desk towards Odras. He then picked it up and inserted it into his computer terminal and both Vorn and Mace noticed his jaw start to drop before he recovered his composure.

"Never let it be said that Odras Balve turned down a polite request from his good friend Lieutenant Colonel Vorn Larcus the Third." Odras said, "Will you be needing anything else to go with this? Your politeness will buy a lot of goodwill."

"Actually there is something else we need." Vorn said, "Something I'm sure you'll have no objection to providing." and he looked over his shoulder at Kara, Jaysica and Cass.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Jaysica said, staring at the waitress uniform that had been laid out for her.

"Oh come on!" Kara exclaimed from beside the mirror she was checking the fit of her own uniform in, "I've seen you wear polymer catsuits so tight they look like Tobis just got a marker pen and coloured you in from the neck down. Surely you're not bothered by a short dress."

"I wouldn't call this a dress." Jaysica said as she began to undress, "More a shirt that I should be wearing with a skirt or trousers."

"They are a bit short Kara." Cass commented as she tugged at her uniform, trying to get it to cover more of her legs than it did, "If I bend over or crouch down then everyone's going to be able to see right up this."

"That's the idea." Kara said, "These officers will be playing cards and the drink will be flowing freely thanks to the open bar the Alliance's credits are paying for. Then Jaysica and I will make sure that they are suitably

distracted while you swipe their datapads and get them to Tobis to copy before you return them.”

“What if any of these officers get a little free with their hands?” Jaysica asked.

“Could they?” Cass added nervously and Kara smiled.

“Oh that’s even better.” she said, “According to the boss Mace and Tharun are going to be ready with a few of Balve’s thugs. If any of the nerf herders here tonight cause us any trouble then they’ll drag them out the back and give them a genuine beating. They’ll also have anything of value taken from them before they’re sent on their way. They won’t dare report what happened to them because they’d be admitting to taking part in an illegal sabacc game so having their datapads stolen won’t be reported either. They won’t even know why they were taken.”

Just then there was a knock on the door of the bedroom the three women were in and Jaysica quickly grabbed hold of a bed sheet to hide behind.

“Who’s there?” Kara called out, knowing that Odras would probably enjoy barging in on them while they were changing but not putting it past him to knock just to make his entry appear innocent.

“Lieutenant Larcus, it’s Jeeves.” a formal voice responded and Kara walked over to the door and opened it to allow Vorn’s golden coloured protocol droid to enter.

“Kara don’t open the door.” Jaysica protested.

“Stang, it’s just Jeeves. Relax.” Kara said.

“Yes, but someone else could have been with him.” Jaysica pointed out.

“Oh like who?” The only guy in our unit who isn’t already married is Tobis and he sees you wearing even less than you are now on a regular basis.” Kara replied. Then she looked at the droid, “So what do you want Jeeves?”

“Lieutenant Colonel Larcus sent me to make sure that you were ready.” Jeeves responded, “The first of the Imperial officers has already arrived.”

“Well the klutz isn’t finished yet but Cass and I are. So I guess we better go and start getting those guys good and drunk.” Kara said before she glanced at Jaysica and added, “You can join us later. But don’t take too long about it.”

3.

There was not just one but eight sabacc tables set up in the illegal casino Odras and his men had prepared for this occasion. Each table was operated by a dealer drawn from among Odras's organisation who had been selected for their ability stack decks of cards and manipulate the shifter field that would alter their values once dealt. Normally their aim was to cause players to lose as much as possible without the game appearing obviously rigged. However, on this occasion their function was to draw out the game and prevent players from being eliminated before Cass was able to acquire their datapad and return it unnoticed.

There was a bar set up in the centre of the large room and again this was operated by some of Odras's people. Out of all of the beings running the games, the bar staff had the most mundane task, without any hidden purpose. They would simply prepare the drinks ordered by the players for Kara, Jaysica and Cass to deliver to them without their needing to leave the games. The price of the drinks had been kept deliberately low to encourage the players to consume more. This was a suggestion from Odras, who had used the ploy on numerous occasions on the grounds that intoxicated gamblers tended to lose a lot more.

The overwhelming majority of the players were male and as was to be expected of the Imperial military all were human. The invitations to take part in the game had been issued at various other establishments run by Odras Balve and the players had been picked out by the uniforms they wore, meaning that all of them were still in uniform and a small number were even armed. Initially there was nothing for Kara and Cass to do other than wait by the bar while the players consumed the drinks they had purchased upon entering and before taking their seats and so when Jaysica came hurrying into the casino the other two women were still standing at the bar.

"What did I miss?" Jaysica asked.

"Nothing yet." Kara replied, "No-one's asked for-"

"Waitress!" a voice suddenly called out from one of the tables and Kara saw a man in the uniform of an army captain raise his hand to attract the rebels' attention.

"You wait here." Kara said as Cass stepped forward with a datapad in her hands and Kara took the datapad from her, "Let me and Jaysica check them out up close first. We'll let you know who looks like they've got a datapad worth lifting."

"Okay." Cass replied as Kara headed towards the captain to take his order.

After this first request the number of summons increased as more of the players finished their drinks and wanted refills. Where possible Kara and Jaysica would approach tables first and try to determine which of the players at each one was carrying a datapad or any other data storage device that Cass might be able to discretely take from them.

"Table four, naval ensign." Kara said after her third return to the bar, "He's ordered a beer."

"Got him." Cass replied and when the drinks for the table were placed on the bar she picked them up instead of Kara and carried them towards the table, taking care to position herself beside the ensign where she could see his datapad, "Okay I've got your drinks here." she said, smiling at the various officers, "So who has what?"

"Blue wine." a woman in an ISB uniform answered first.

"Lum." an army colonel added.

"Beer." the naval ensign that had been marked out as Cass's target then said and one by one Cass handed out the drinks, finishing with the ensign. As she set his drink down she crouched, pressed her body against his so that he would hopefully not notice what she was doing and lowered her hand under the table to gently slide the datapad from his pocket before tucking it into a hidden pocket in her own outfit.

"So how much are you little girl?" the army colonel suddenly said from behind Cass and he reached out his hand to push his hand up the back of her dress and squeeze.

Upon seeing this from across the room where he and Tharun waited along with a group of Odras's thugs, Mace tensed up.

"Easy captain." Tharun said softly.

"That's my daughter." Mace responded.

"And I've seen her take care of herself." Tharun pointed out.

"Fine." Mace muttered as he watched Cass bat away the colonel's hand.

"More than a colonel earns." she told him before she departed from the table.

Cass then walked right past the bar and headed for an unmarked door. Passing through this she found herself in a room filled with security monitors that gave the occupants a perfect view of every player's hand and communication equipment that allowed messages to be sent to the dealers. This was being operated under the watchful eye of Odras himself while Vorn and Tobis sat to one side with a portable computer.

"You handled yourself well out there young lady." Odras said, "I've seen a lot of girls scream and slap a guy

for that. Bad for business to hit the customers.”

“Even if they're perverted nerf herders?” Cass asked as she handed the datapad to Tobis so that he could download its contents into the computer.

“Oh especially if they're perverted nerf herders.” Odras replied, “More than ninety percent of my business relies on selling services to perverted nerf herders in fact. Why in the past Mace and Tobis here have-”

“I don't think that there's any need to be discussing that subject.” Vorn interrupted as Tobis winced when his name was mentioned and Odras smiled.

“As you wish.” he said. Then he looked at Cass again, “You know I could find work for someone with your skills, looks and temperament.” he told her.

“No thanks.” Cass replied.

“Err, I'm done here.” Tobis said suddenly and he handed the datapad back to Cass.

“Thanks.” she replied as she took the device from him and she looked at Vorn, “So now what?” she asked.

“Now you put that one back and bring us as many more as you can while Tobis decodes them.” he told her.

Back in the casino room Kara and Jaysica were continuing to serve drinks and by now they had built up a good picture of which of the players were potential targets for Cass's pick pocketing skills.

“Your friends made this list.” one of the bar staff told Cass when returned to the bar and he handed her a list of players who were known to have datapads on them.

“Over here girl.” a familiar voice called out and Cass saw the army colonel waving towards her.

“He's been knocking the drinks back.” the bar man said, “He ordered a full bottle when he arrived and it's already empty.”

“At least it'll give me a chance to return this datapad.” Cass replied, sighing and she headed back for the table, “So what can I get you?” she asked, bending over so that she was able to slide the datapad back into its owner's pocket.

“Another of these my beauty.” the colonel said as once again he reached out and started to slide his hand up her leg, “Or make it two and we can share them.”

“Just one it is then.” Cass said and the colonel snarled at her before suddenly getting to his feet and grabbing hold of her by the arm.

“You little bantha cow!” he hissed, “You'll soon learn to appreciate me before I ugly you up good.”

Then he felt someone tap on his shoulder and he turned around to see Mace glaring straight at him, “And who the kriff are you supposed to be?” he asked.

“I am her father.” Mace replied calmly and then in rapid succession he head butted the colonel in the face and brought his knee up between the man's legs.

Groaning as he collapsed, the colonel was caught by Tharun and one of Odras's men and along with another of the hired thugs the rebels dragged the groaning colonel out of the casino into another back room where they dumped him unceremoniously on the floor. Mace crouched beside the man and quickly removed the rank cylinders from his tunic as well as feeling in his pockets for his wallet and anything else worth taking. This happened to include a compact model of datapad and Mace smiled when he saw this.

“This should come in useful.” he said. Then he looked at one of Odras's men, “Hold out his right hand.” he said and the thug nodded before he held out the colonel's right arm across the floor, “That's the hand you put on my daughter.” Mace said to the colonel and before the Imperial officer could respond he stamped the heel of his foot down on the man's hand hard enough that there was a 'crunch' of breaking bone. Then Mace turned to the two thugs again, “Make sure he understands the error of his ways.” he said.

“Don't worry.” one replied, “He won't be groping any more women for a while.” and as the two rebels left the room there were the sounds of fists and feet striking the colonel.

“You think I over reacted?” Mace asked, glancing at Mace.

“Frankly captain if I saw someone trying that with Lyssa or Hallanah then I'd be inclined to use a vibroblade to express my displeasure on suitable parts of their anatomy.” Tharun responded before they returned to the casino and Mace headed straight for the bar where Cass was picking up another tray of drinks.

“Are you okay?” he asked her.

“Oh dad, it's not like it's the first time some guy has put his hand there.” she said and Mace frowned.

“It's not?” he asked.

“No and if you remember one of those times was you when I got into bed between you and mom before we stole those TIE fighters.” Cass said.

“Just get back to work.” Mace said, “I'm going to try and forget this conversation ever happened.”

“Table one.” Kara said as she then appeared, “Four drinks and at least two of them have datapads.”

“Thanks.” Cass said, “But why is Jaysica there?”

“Someone else must have ordered something.” Tharun suggested as he watched Jaysica start talking to the players at the table, setting down her empty tray. Then all of a sudden Jaysica reached down to lean on the table but instead pressed down on the tray where it overhang the edge and it promptly flipped over, causing her to fall forwards across the table and in turn cause it to tip over and spill cards and chips to spill across the

floor. In addition many of the drinks on the table spilled over their owners while others just spilled onto the floor, all of which prompted a round of applause from players at other tables.

"The klutz strikes again." Kara said, shaking her head.

"We better go help." Tharun commented and he, Mace and Cass all hurried to help. On the other hand Kara noticed a naval officer at another table raise his hand to attract her attention and she smiled as she went to see what he wanted.

The chaos at the upturned table turned out to be a blessing in disguise as while Tharun and her father were helping Jaysica back to her feet and promising the players that their drinks would be replaced for free Cass was able to get close enough to the two players noted as having datapads and take the devices from both of them.

"I better just help Jaysica get cleaned up." Cass commented.

"It was an accident." Jaysica added.

"Yeah, I'm sure it was." Cass replied before she led Jaysica to the door that led to the surveillance room.

As soon as the door opened Tobis took Jaysica by the hand.

"Are – are you okay?" he asked.

"I'm fine." she replied, "But that table-

"That was some fancy work there." Odras said.

"What?" Jaysica asked.

"All the players were so fixated on you floundering around that they never noticed your talented little friend here relieving them of their datapads." Odras said. Then he looked at Vorn, "You know I'm starting to think that your female companions could be even more profitable than I had anticipated, are you sure about them not being available to me?"

"Quite sure." Vorn replied, "My people are valuable to me as well." then he glanced at Jaysica who was now wiping herself down with a towel while Tobis copied the datapads that Cass had just handed to him and sighed before adding, "All of them."

A total of nine datapads were temporarily removed from the Imperial officers playing sabacc and returned without them noticing. This did not include the datapad and other items taken from the Imperial colonel who had been beaten after assaulting Cass. That officer had literally been thrown out onto the street after Odras's thugs were done with him and he had been gone by the time that the sabacc games had come to a close and the Imperial officers, several of them somewhat the worse for drink as well as having lost a lot of credits headed back to their bases. Meanwhile the rebels gathered around Tobis to see what he had been able to come up with.

"I, err, I've found references in all of the datapads to the survey." Tobis explained.

"Any indication of how the results are being sent to Coruscant?" Vorn asked.

"Ah, err, all of them mention the droids being used to report to the capital." Tobis answered.

"So it's not just the trip to Coruscant where the data's being carried by a droid." Mace commented.

"It makes sense." Vorn added, "A droid to droid transfer would be quicker than having to manually move the data from a mem-stick or computer to one. The whole thing would be automated."

"Doesn't give us any clue about where or when the final droid will be on its way to Coruscant though." Kara pointed out.

"Oh, err, I – I think there may be another way." Tobis said.

"What's that lad?" Tharun said.

"Well, err, that colonel who ah, err-" and he looked at Cass.

"Yes, we all know what he did." Mace said, "Just move on."

"Well, err, the colonel has been given orders to travel to Coruscant with his men." Tobis said.

"You mean that they're escorting the droid?" Cass asked with a smile.

"The ship, err, the ship carrying them isn't a normal troop transport." Tobis said, "It – it's a, err, strike cruiser."

"Interesting." Vorn said, "Powerful enough to hold off a lot of ships but not as obvious as a star destroyer."

"Expendable too." Mace said, "If the Empire doesn't send it back to the sector then all they've lost is one medium cruiser rather than a major ship of the line."

"So how do we get aboard boss?" Kara asked.

"Oh I think that the good colonel will be able to help us out with that." Mace said and he held up the code cylinders he had taken from the colonel, "Though we'll have to move quickly."

4.

The speeder pulled up close to the Imperial air base and Mace got out in full view of the guards, dressed in the uniform of an Imperial colonel and with the stolen code cylinders sticking out of his pockets.

"Head for the rendezvous point." Mace said to Tharun as he picked a small holdall up from the back seat of the speeder, "Tell the others I'll meet you all there as soon as I can."

"Will do captain." Tharun replied and as Mace walked away the former mercenary drove off.

Mace calmly approached the main gate to the base but rather than heading for the manned checkpoint he made his way to the smaller automated entrance close by. Here he inserted one of the stolen code cylinders into a reader port and waited for the computer it was connected to to confirm that he was authorised for access to the base. If the colonel had already reported his code cylinders as being stolen then the system would refuse him access and base security would be alerted. However, Mace was certain that he had two things working in his favour here. Firstly he doubted that the colonel would have returned directly to wherever he was based, instead seeking out medical attention for his injuries at a civilian facility where he could make up any story he wanted without risking being found out for taking part in an illegal sabacc game and secondly even if the colonel's code cylinders had been cancelled already Mace was confident that he could outrun the guards at the nearby manned checkpoint given the head start he would have from here.

A high pitched bleeping sound indicated that the code cylinder had been accepted and Mace removed it from the socket before dashing through the gate. Once within the base perimeter Mace headed towards the landing pads where the tails and folded wings of several lambda-class shuttles were visible from some distance away and he walked up the access ramp of one that had lights on inside.

"Hey!" he called out, "Is anyone here?"

"In here." a voice responded from the cockpit and when Mace entered it he found two Imperial pilots there running through the preflight checklist, "What can we do for you colonel?" the pilot asked when he saw Mace.

"I was hoping for a lift. Where are you headed?"

"The outpost over at Martal Point." the pilot told him and Mace smiled.

"That's what I thought." he said, "That's where I need to get to."

"Got business there colonel? Why not just make a formal requisition for transport?" the co-pilot asked and Mace smiled again.

"Because the business I have there has red hair and an ass that's as sculpted as the armour on a stormtrooper." he replied, "How exactly do I describe that on a requisition form?"

"Ah, a code sixty nine. Top priority and top secret." the pilot said as he and the co-pilot smiled at one another,

"Sure, buckle up back there and I'll make this the second best ride you'll get tonight."

"Thanks." Mace said before retreating into the rear compartment and taking a seat.

Soon after this there was a hissing sound as the access ramp was raised and sealed prior to take off and Mace heard the flight crew communicating with the control tower, asking for permission to take off and then Mace heard the shuttle's repulsorlifts power up and felt the craft rise into the air. Having chosen a seat close to the cockpit door Mace was able to see out of the forward canopy and so he knew when the shuttle was clear of the base they had just departed and it was then that he undid his safety harness and opened the holdall he had brought aboard with him. Inside was his DL-44 heavy blaster pistol and Mace stood up as he removed the weapon and released the safety. Then he headed back to the cockpit.

"You need stay in your seat colonel." the pilot said before he noticed the fact that there was a blaster pistol pointing at him, "Holy kriff!" he exclaimed and then before he could take any action to stop Mace, the rebel shot him with the blaster set to stun. Startled, the co-pilot could do nothing more than look on dumbfounded and Mace promptly shot him as well. The co-pilot slumped forwards across the flight control instead of falling sideways like the pilot had done and the shuttle suddenly lurched as he landed on them. Mace quickly dragged the co-pilot from his seat and took his place, placing his blaster on top of the console as he took hold of the flight controls to steady the shuttle. Then he checked its exact position and steered off.

"Look! Dad's here." Cass called out when the shuttle descended out of the sky and its wings folded up alongside its tail. The rebels were all dressed in Imperial uniforms. Vorn, Kara and Cass wore officer's uniforms with the rank of major, lieutenant and midshipman respectively while Jaysica, Tharun and Tobis wore those of enlisted personnel. Tharun and Tobis were both army sergeants while Jaysica was an administrative clerk. Behind them stood Odras and several of his men, here to remove the speeders that they had used to reach the rendezvous point in the remote countryside. Then when the shuttle touched down Mace came walking down the ramp, the rank badge on his uniform now swapped to major to match Vorn's.

"Come on." he called out, "I reckon we've got about three hours before anyone notices this thing is missing."

"What about the crew?" Vorn asked as the rebels boarded the shuttle and Mace looked at Odras who was

stood nearby.

"Hey Balve, can you-" he began.

"Sure." Odras replied without giving Mace chance to finish his sentence, "We'll keep them on ice for a day and turn them loose where they can't do any harm."

"That should be good enough." Vorn said and then he disappeared into the shuttle.

After unloading the two incapacitated Imperial pilots Odras and his men backed up and watched as the lambda-class ship rose into the air and its wings unfolded, after which it accelerated rapidly into the air and vanished into the clouds.

"Think they'll be back?" one of Odras's men asked him.

"They better be." he replied, "Mace still owes me a lot of money."

The orbiting Imperial Navy headquarters was a massive space station tethered to the surface of Estran by an orbital elevator. The space stations berths could handle any size of starship in the known galaxy while its dry dock hangars could contain almost any ship up to three kilometres in length. There were also numerous smaller hangars intended for shuttles and fighters scattered all around the station and Mace chose one of these that was in close proximity to the only strike-class medium cruisers that he could see.

"Shuttle *Veridium* your arrival is not scheduled." the voice of a flight controller said when the shuttle was picked up on the station's short range detection systems, "State your purpose for approach."

"This is shuttle *Veridium* to flight control," Mace responded, "we are en route to Martal Point and request permission for an unscheduled docking."

"Negative shuttle *Veridium*. This is restricted space. Divert or state your reason for your approach. Failure will result in your destruction."

"Flight control we, err, have a code sixty-nine fault." Mace said and beside Vorn smiled while Cass frowned.

"What's a code sixty-nine fault?" she asked but Vorn suddenly developed a keen interest in the console in front of him.

"Confirmed shuttle *Veridium*. I'll let you through but keep this quiet okay?" the flight controller replied and Mace smiled as he continued to fly towards the hangar.

"Okay it looks like we're through the defences." Vorn said, "I'll go let the others know." and he got up and exited the cockpit.

In the rear compartment the rest of the rebel team was seated in their uniforms. Kara, Tharun and Tobis all carried military issue blaster pistols and so they wore these weapons openly on their waists while the teams other weaponry remained concealed either beneath uniforms in the case of the hold out blasters Vorn and Jaysica carried or in holdalls in the case of the bulkier carbines and rifles the team had at their disposal.

"Are we there yet boss?" Kara asked when Vorn appeared in the doorway leading to the cockpit.

"Yes." he said, nodding as he replied, "Mace has been able to talk us past the flight controllers so we'll be docking shortly. But we need to be discrete when we disembark. Then we'll locate a computer terminal and Tobis can patch in and locate the cruiser we're looking for." then he looked at Jaysica, "Jaysica are you and Penny ready?" he asked.

"Yes colonel." she replied and she looked down at the wheeled boxlike mouse droid by her feet, "She'll make sure the way is clear for us."

All of a sudden the pitch of the shuttle's engines changed and there was the sound of the wings folding up as the *Veridium* neared the hangar Mace had selected.

"This is your captain speaking," Mace's voice announced over the intercom, "we have just arrived at fleet headquarters. The no smoking sign has been turned off and you may now move around the cabin."

"Looks like we're set to go then." Vorn added, "Just remember not to do anything that would attract attention to us."

"He means you." Kara said, leaning over towards Jaysica and speaking in a hushed voice that was still loud enough for everyone to hear.

The sound of the engines cut out entirely as the shuttle touched down and moments later both Mace and Cass appeared from the cockpit.

"Okay we've landed." Mace said, "There are work crews in the hangar so we should go one at a time though. I reckon that the energiser array straight ahead of us ought to provide a decent hiding place while we figure out where to go after that."

"Okay we'll do that." Vorn replied, "Jaysica, I want Penny to go first then Tobis can follow with Kara and Tharun going after him. Jaysica and Cass will be next and then Mace and I will bring up the rear."

When the access ramp lowered Penny sped down it and the tiny droid paused as soon as it was on the deck of the hangar itself. As was to be expected in a facility where droids were so prevalent they were often regarded as just being a normal part of the background none of the ground crews working on any of the other vessels present gave any indication of having noticed Penny and the droid chirped before rolling across the deck towards a large energiser array.

Within the droid was a compact camera capable of making two and three dimensional recordings and as

Penny sped towards the energiser the rebels watched the feed from this camera on a datapad back inside the shuttle.

"Security doesn't look too bad." Tharun commented.

"No need for us to take any risks though." Vorn replied. Then when he saw that Penny had reached the energiser he looked up at Tobis, "Okay Tobis, you're next." he said and Tobis just nodded.

Starting with Tobis the rebels made their way one at a time towards the energiser where they could stand out of sight and assess their situation.

"Okay we'll stick together from here on." Vorn said, "Jaysica send Penny out to find a terminal and we'll follow her."

"Yes colonel." Jaysica replied, smiling.

"Major." Vorn replied, "Use the rank on my badge just in case anyone overhears."

"Yes major." Jaysica said. Then she looked down at her droid, "Okay Penny, we need a computer port we can use." she said and the droid let out another chirp before rolling away again.

Penny headed out of the hangar and into a corridor that was filled with naval personnel moving back and forth but just as within the hangar none of them paid any more attention to the mouse droid than was necessary to avoid treading on it. As Penny headed down the corridor the droid paused at each intersection and circled slowly, looking out for a computer port located away from the steady flow of people that would prevent the rebels from using it without being seen. As soon as such a terminal came into view Penny dashed towards it and chirped as the footage was sent back to the rebels in the hangar using the comlink built into the droid's body along with the camera.

"She's found a terminal." Jaysica said when she saw the footage on the datapad she held.

"That route looks pretty simple." Tharun commented.

"Tell Penny to stay put." Vorn said, "We'll be with her shortly."

The rebels then left the hangar as a group, calmly walking down the corridor in the same direction Penny had taken until they reached the junction where they had to turn off to reach the computer port and they heard Penny chirping at them. Hurrying down the side passage they were soon standing in front of the terminal and as Tobis plugged his datapad into it the other rebels formed a barrier to prevent his actions from being observed.

"So what is he looking for exactly?" Cass asked.

"Err, the ship that the colonel is due to be on is called, err, is called the *Dark Storm*." Tobis replied, "I just need to find which berth its in."

"And quickly if you could." Vorn commented, "The longer we're here the more likely someone is to start asking what we're doing."

"Can't we just tell them it's a code sixty-nine emergency again?" Cass suggested and Mace winced as both Kara and Tharun averted their gaze to hide their expressions, "What? What's wrong? Cass asked.

"That won't work." Vorn said.

"Why not?" Cass replied.

"Ask your mother." Mace said, "I'm sure that she can explain it better than I can."

"Oh, err, I've got it." Tobis said and he quickly disconnected his datapad from the computer port, "The Dark Storm is, err, is in berth one-one-three-eight and is scheduled to depart for Coruscant in, err, just under an hour."

"Where are we?" Jaysica asked.

"Level nine." Vorn replied.

"So the berth is two levels up." Mace said, "Come on, we better get a move on."

5.

At four hundred and fifty metres long, the *Dark Storm* was anchored to the fleet headquarters at more than a dozen different points. About half of these were docking ports intended for the transfer of personnel but each of them was guarded by stormtroopers from the ship's marine complement or ordinary fleet troopers and any of these would be able to spot someone trying to get aboard without the proper authorisation. There were also several utility tethers that supplied air, power and fuel to the cruiser without it needing to rely on its own stored reserves while docked. Unfortunately these would not allow for living beings to enter the ship without cutting through the heavily armoured hull. This left just the cargo loading docks where spare parts and provisions were being transferred from the station to the cruiser. This loading was almost fully automated and several dozen bulky binary load lifters were at work transferring cargo containers under the close supervision of a handful of administrative droids and a pair of living crewmen from the cruiser.

"Over there." Vorn said and he pointed to a cargo container in a cluster that had yet to be loaded aboard the cruiser, "That one will be just perfect."

"Ho do you know?" Cass asked.

"Oh, err, it's refrigerated." Tobis told her.

"The benefit of growing up aboard a freighter huh lad?" Tharun commented.

"It's air sealed and filled with organic foodstuffs." Vorn explained, "Which means that the droids' scanners won't be able to pick us up providing that we can get inside without attracting attention."

"We'll need firefighting gear boss." Kara point out.

"What for?" Cass said.

"Like the boss said, it's air sealed. The seven of us could end up running out of oxygen pretty fast in there." Kara said.

"I think I saw a damage control station back there." Jaysica said and she pointed back the way they had come.

"Take Tharun and collect all the oxygen masks you can." Vorn told her, "Mace and Tobis will get us into that container while I distract the overseers."

The rebels then split up again. Tharun and Jaysica headed back to collect oxygen masks for the team while Mace and Tobis circled around the various cargo containers to reach the refrigerated one without being seen by either the droids or organic crewmen. Meanwhile Vorn left Kara and Cass behind and walked right up to the two navy personnel overseeing the loading process.

"Crewmen!" he called out, "Why is this loading behind schedule?"

"I'm sorry major I didn't realise it was." one of the crewmen replied.

"Maybe not by the navy's standards," Vorn said, "but this ship is carrying army personnel as well and the colonel will be most displeased if our supplies are not loaded according to his schedule."

"Yes major." the crewman said, snapping to attention, "I'll re-task the droids to load the army cargo first." and he began to adjust the droids' instructions on his datapad.

"See to it that you do." Vorn said, ensuring that in order to maintain his disguise of an Imperial officer he did not show any appreciation for the favour that the crewmen were granting him. Then he simply turned around and strode away, heading towards the exit from the cargo hold rather than where Kara and Cass were still hidden and in the corridor he met up with Tharun and Jaysica, now both carrying several sets of breathing apparatus each.

"We've got the masks." Tharun said as he handed one to Vorn. The mask consisted of a full face mask and smoke hood combined with an oxygen cylinder that was worn on the back, intended to provide the wearer with protection from smoke and flames for around an hour.

"Okay, I've got the loading crew focusing on the army supplies." Vorn replied as he took one of the masks and strapped the cylinder onto his back, "That ought to give us enough time to get inside the refrigerated container unnoticed."

The trio then returned to the cargo hold, first giving Kara and Cass breathing apparatus and then waiting for Mace to signal them.

"Container's open." he transmitted using his comlink, "But Tobis says we need to be inside quickly before the temperature sensors get triggered and the container is flagged as having been opened."

"Okay we're on our way." Vorn replied and the rebels with him darted from container to container until they reached the open container.

"We should leave Penny out here." Mace said, "She can let us know when all the containers are loaded and the coast is clear."

"Do it." Vorn said, looking at Jaysica.

"Penny you heard them." she said to her droid and Penny let out another chirp before rolling in the direction

of the cruiser's cargo loading hatch, ignored by the loading droids and naval crewmen. Meanwhile the rebels crept into the refrigerated container and closed the door behind them. Though there was still breathable air available they still put on their masks straight away to preserve it and avoid doing anything that could be detected by the sensors used to ensure that the large slabs of meat hanging from the top of the container were not spoiled.

"I think I'm going to be sick." Cass commented as she tried to avoid touching any of the meat.

"Piece of advice kid," Tharun said, "don't puke in your mask."

"Thanks, I got that." Cass replied, "So what do we do now?"

"We wait." Kara said, "The navy will load this crate aboard their ship and then when there's no-one around Penny will let us know and we'll sneak out of this thing. Hopefully before we get frostbite."

The rebels waited quietly inside the container, not speaking even when they felt it shake as a loading droid picked it up and transferred it to the cruiser. Then Jaysica took out the datapad that was receiving Penny's camera feed and watched it, waiting for all of the activity outside the container to end.

"That's it." she said when Penny filmed the two crewmen placing the loading droids into storage and exiting the hold.

"Tobis open the door." Vorn said and Tobis hurried the container's door and released the lock.

Exiting the container the rebels once again found themselves in a large compartment filled with cargo containers.

"Should we go through these to see what we can find?" Jaysica asked, "There might be something useful in them."

"Or could we not?" Cass responded.

"We don't have time." Vorn said as he looked at the chronometer on his wrist, "The ship will be leaving at any moment and we need to locate the droid as well as getting to the engines and communications. Mace, I want you to take Jaysica and Cass to locate the droid. Tharun and Tobis are to get to the hyperdrive and be ready to disable it and I'll take Kara to find the subspace communications. Once the droid is secured we'll bring the ship out of hyperspace and alert the Alliance to where we are. Now does anyone have any questions?" and he looked around his team, none of whom spoke, "Good. Then let's go and may the Force be with us."

Tharun and Tobis had the easiest task in locating the cruiser's hyperdrive. This was located in the main engineering section and the two rebels found it easy to blend in among the large number of engineers on duty as the cruiser left the headquarters station.

"So what do we need to do to bring this ship out of hyperspace lad?" Tharun asked quietly as he watched a pair of fleet troopers positioned just inside the entrance to the engineering section for any signs that they were about to take action against the rebels.

"Oh, err, well disconnecting the hyperdrive motivator would do the trick." Tobis answered.

"Great, so where's that?" Tharun said.

"Err, right there." Tobis said and he pointed towards the centre of the compartment they were in at a column surrounded by engineers.

"Stang." Tharun muttered, "Then I guess that means we won't be disconnecting that without being noticed. So what else can we do?"

"Well, err, all we need to do is cut the power to the drive. But, err, ah, I don't see how we can do that without being seen."

"How about you just show me where the power goes in lad?"

"Err, sure. This way I think."

"You think?"

"Well, ah, this is my first time aboard a strike cruiser." Tobis admitted.

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Tharun responded as Tobis then led him down a flight of steps to where the cylindrical hyperdrive itself ran along the centre of a lower deck.

"This, err, this is it." Tobis said, "The power goes in over there." and he pointed to where a cluster of thick cables connected with the hyperdrive.

Tharun looked around to double check that they were alone on this lower deck before he reached into the holdall he had over his shoulder and pulled out his heavy blaster rifle.

"Think this'll cut the power?" he asked with a grin and Tobis smiled back at him.

Meanwhile Vorn and Kara headed upwards to the strike cruiser's control tower, the nerve centre of all of the ship's operations. Subspace communications were normally handled from the main bridge but the rebels knew that on a vessel of this size there would also be a dedicated communications suite where the state of the ship's communication hardware would be monitored from and that as part of the function of this suite it would be possible to send messages from here.

When they located the communications suite Vorn adopted the stern demeanour of a typical Imperial officer

again.

"Are communications functional?" he said without addressing the question to any of the technicians or the lieutenant in charge of them in particular.

"The system is working perfectly major." the lieutenant replied, "However, we just entered hyperspace and I don't know if you were aware or not but that means we can't send or receive any signals right now."

"The colonel wants to be kept aware of the ship's communication status." Vorn said, "Any attempt to interfere with communications may indicate an attempt by the rebels to launch an attack."

"I thought the rebellion wasn't supposed to know about this mission." the lieutenant said.

"Maybe in the navy you accept what you're told blindly but in the army we try to plan for the unexpected." Kara said and the lieutenant frowned, annoyed at being called out in front of his men.

"My men are ready for anything." he said.

"I doubt that lieutenant." Vorn said, "I doubt that very much." and then he turned around and strode out of the room, followed by Kara. Once they were back out in the corridor and the door slid shut behind them he took out his comlink, "We've located the communications suite." he broadcast, "How's everybody else doing?"

"Tobis and I are ready to bring the ship out of hyperspace any time you want." Tharun replied.

"This is Mace, we're still searching for the droid. No luck so far though."

"Hurry." Vorn told him, "We're getting further from Admiral Aphanar's ships all the time." and then he turned off his comlink.

"What does he expect us to do?" Cass asked as Mace put his comlink away.

"He expects us to do our job." Mace replied, "We need to find that droid."

"But we don't even know what sort of droid we're looking for." Jaysica pointed out.

"No, but we know that it's being guarded by army personnel." Mace replied, "So we just need to find them. We'll try the mess hall, maybe we can catch some of them off guard and follow them to wherever they've stashed the droid." and then he led the two young women up to a nearby turbolift and pressed the summon button.

When the door slid open the rebels stepped inside and Mace was about to select the deck he knew that the main enlisted men's mess hall was located on when he heard a familiar voice call out.

"Hold that turbolift!" and Mace folded his arms to cover his rank badge before the colonel he had beaten behind Odras's illegal casino could see it and realise that he was not a genuine army officer.

Moments later the colonel appeared, limping as he hurried into the turbolift. The colonel clearly bore the signs of having been beaten. His arm and hand that Mace had stamped on was encased in a cast while both his eyes were blackened and a plastic brace was taped over his nose. The turbolift door slid shut just after he entered and he reached to the control panel. But before he could press any of the buttons he paused and looked at Mace.

"Do I know you?" he said and Mace smiled. Then all of a sudden he punched the colonel in the nose as hard as he could, breaking his nose again and propelling the man back against the inside of the turbolift door.

"Remember me now?" Mace said then he pulled his pistol from his holdall and pressed it to the colonel's temple, "Now where's the droid?" he demanded.

"You rebel scum. I'll never help you." the colonel hissed.

"In that case I don't suppose we need to keep you alive." Mace said, "If you're not helping us then you're a threat to our mission." and he pressed the muzzle of his blaster harder into the colonel's flesh.

"No wait!" the colonel exclaimed, "Level ten, mid section guest quarters. It's an astromech, an R-three unit."

"Thanks." Mace said as he flicked the selector on his weapon to its 'stun' setting and pulled the trigger. Then he stood up again and looked at Jaysica and Cass, "Okay now we know where we need to go." he said and he pressed the button to take the turbolift to level ten.

Exiting the turbolift the rebels headed for the mid section of the ship where the cabins reserved for visiting VIPs were located. This area was guarded by a squad of Imperial army troops lined up along either side of the corridor and Mace knew that taking them all out one by one would not be possible before one of them was able to raise the alarm. However, Mace had with him a weapon perfectly suited to the task of incapacitating them all at once.

Reaching into his holdall as he stepped around the corner Mace pulled out a bulky carbine with a flared barrel and before any of the guards could react he pulled the trigger. The decksweeper was designed to release a large energy blast that expanded as it left the muzzle and it spread out to rapidly fill the entire width of the corridor. Though it was designed only to stun targets caught within its area of effect it was still powerful enough to incapacitate the entire security squad.

"Quickly." he said as he slung the decksweeper over his shoulder, "Let's find which room the droid is in."

Moving along the corridor the rebels tried each cabin in turn until Cass reached one that was locked and she called out.

"Over here." she said, "This one is locked."

"Let me see." Jaysica replied and she hurried over. Removing the lock panel from beside the door she

touched wires together until the door slid open to reveal a cabin empty apart from an astromech droid with a transparent domed head.

“An R-three.” Mace said, “I think we've found the droid we want. Jaysica, get a restraining bolt on it.” and as Jaysica approached the droid Mace took out his comlink, “We've got the droid. Proceed to the next stage.”

6.

In the engineering section Tharun smiled.

“Stand back lad.” he said as he brought his rifle up to his shoulder, “Let me show you my own style of hyperdrive mechanics.” and then he pulled the trigger of his weapon, firing a sustained burst of blaster bolts into the cables that took power to the hyperdrive.

The effect of this was dramatic as the cruiser suddenly found itself without power to its hyperdrive and it was filled with bright coloured lights as it pitched and lurched as the energy field keeping it in the alternative dimension of hyperspace broke down in an uncontrolled fashion.

“We're back in realspace!” the cruiser's helmsman called out when stars reappeared through the viewport at the front of the bridge.

“I can see that mister. But where are we?” the captain replied.

“About sixty parsecs from Estran.” the navigator replied.

“Can we get back into hyperspace?”

“Captain! Engineering reports they are under attack from rebel infiltrators.” another bridge officer shouted before anyone could answer the captain's question.

“Security alert!” the captain shouted, “All troopers to respond. Protect that droid and get me control of this ship back.”

The door to the communications suite slid open to reveal Vorn and Kara both aiming weapons into the room. Vorn held a rifle while Kara had her pistol in her hand and both of them opened fire without warning.

Concerned about damaging any of the equipment they needed, both rebels had their weapons set to stun and there were flashes of blue as they kept firing until all of the surprised crewmen inside the room were incapacitated, at which point Vorn hurried to a nearby console and inserted a mem-stick into a port.

“That's it.” he said to Kara, “The Alliance knows we're here. We need to get off this ship.”

In engineering Tharun and Tobis burst out of the lower deck firing their weapons. Tobis now wielded a carbine and both rebels used their weapons on fully automatic, firing bursts intended to encourage the engineering staff to stay away from them while Tharun placed two rapid bursts into the guards by the door before they could even draw their weapons.

“Where to now lad?” he asked as they ran from the engineering section.

“That way.” Tobis exclaimed and he pointed in the direction indicated by a sign that read 'ESCAPE PODS'.

The Imperial navy considered it good politics to ensure that if anything went wrong aboard one of their vessels any VIPs aboard would be able to escape so there were more escape pods located very close to the cabin where the R3 unit had been kept. Getting there however, was not as straight forward as it might have been. Troops from the cruiser's own contingent were closing in on the section and the rebels had to fight their way to the escape pods. Mace's decksweeper was not designed to be used in sustained firefights and both its low rate of fire and ammunition capacity made it no use to them. Fortunately however, the rebels were able to simply pick up the rifles that the droid's security detail had been armed with.

Mace led the way, firing his rifle when ever he caught a glimpse of movement from ahead while Jaysica brought up the rear, watching for any signs of pursuit while Cass guided the droid using the caller device for the retraining bolt now fitted to its body.

“How far do we have to go?” Cass asked.

“The escape pods are just ahead through those doors.” Mace replied before a blaster shot flew over his head.

“Behind us!” Jaysica cried out and she returned fire.

“Cass go.” Mace said, “Take Penny and the R3 with you. We'll follow.”

“But dad-”

“Just go.” Mace repeated as he and Jaysica continued to fire at the stormtroopers now advancing towards them.

Accompanied by the two droids, Cass made her way to the nearby escape pods and climbed into one. Though she had never operated an escape pod before the controls were designed to be operated by anyone and all she had to do was pull on a large red lever. This immediately sealed the hatch she had just come through and then fired the main thruster to propel the pod clear of the cruiser.

“Captain three vessels just dropped out of hyperspace.” the cruiser's comscan operator called out, “They're

closing on our position.”

“Raise shields. All crew to battle stations. Prepare for-”

“Captain they're ours. I'm reading an Imperial-class ship and two gladiator-class cruisers.” the comscan operator said and the captain smiled.

“They must have detected our exit from hyperspace.” he said, “Good, once the droid is secure we can transfer it to one of them and they can get it to Coruscant while we make repairs here.”

“Captain we have escape pods launching.” another of the bridge crew said, “Four of them. Captain, it's the rebels.”

“Ridiculous.” the captain said, “We're light years away from the nearest planetary system. Where could they hope to get to? Unless-”

“Captain I'm picking up a launch from the star destroyer. I don't understand it. It's a Corellian corvette.” the comscan officer interrupted.

“Quick,” the captain replied, “can you identify that star destroyer?”

“Yes sir, the transponder reads *Night Wraith*.”

“*Night Wraith*? Those aren't our ships lieutenant, they're rebels! Destroy those escape pods.”

“Captain, enemy cruiser is powering weapons.” the comscan operator aboard the *Night Wraith* told the captain of the rebel vessel.

“Signal our cruisers,” he replied, “fire at will. Protect those escape pods.”

Cass squealed as laser blasts suddenly erupted all around the escape pod she was riding in. Outside the massive capital ships were now firing at one another while the four tiny and fragile escape pods flew away from the strike cruiser. Meanwhile the Corellian corvette launched from inside the *Night Wraith*'s hangar swooped down over the four pods and scooped them all up into its hold. As soon as the hold's external doors were sealed again rebels came rushing in to make sure that the escape pods' occupants were who they were supposed to be and Mace smiled as he climbed out of his and was met his wife Malia, the captain of the ship that had just rescued them.

“Are you a sight for sore eyes.” he said as they embraced.

“Mom! Dad!” Cass called out as she was helped out of her escape pod by a pair of Malia's crewmen.

“Cass are you okay?” Malia asked.

“I'm fine, I've got the R-three.”

“That's the droid we were sent for.” Mace told his wife.

“Well done.” Malia said, “Ready to go home?”

“Yes.” Cass replied, “But there is just one thing I need to know.” and Mace winced, guessing what was coming, “Can you tell me what a code sixty-nine emergency is mom?”