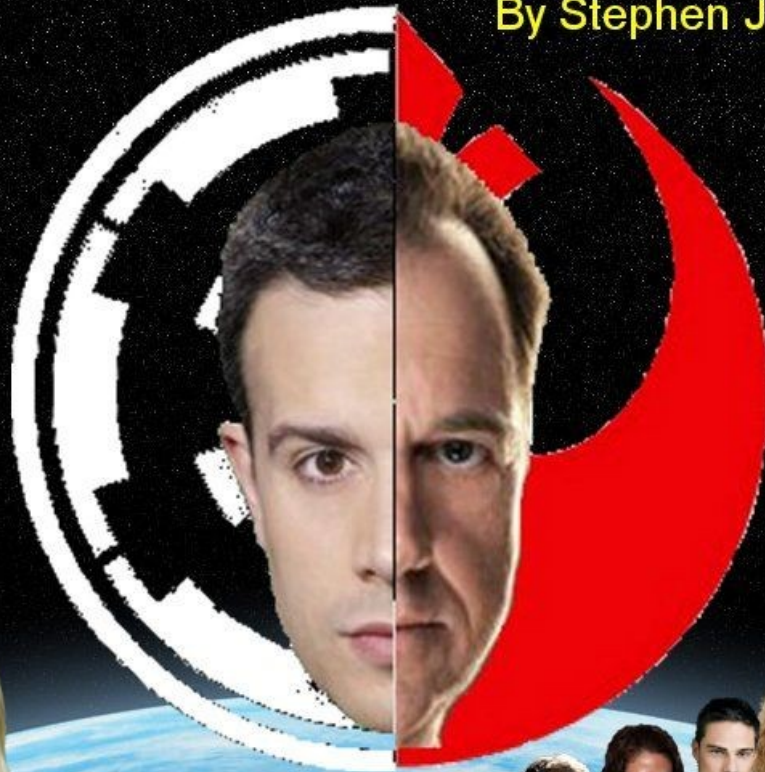


STAR WARS

9-03: Breaking the Hammer

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...

BREAKING THE HAMMER

AS THE EMPIRE CONTINUES ITS COLLAPSE SOME REGIONAL GOVERNORS TURN TO EXTREME MEASURES TO PREVENT SECESSION AND ORDER ENTIRE WORLDS BOMBED FROM SPACE. SEEKING TO PREVENT THIS HAPPENING LOCALLY, THE ALLIANCE SENDS VORN LARCUS AND HIS TEAM TO REMOVE THE THREAT OF ADMIRAL LYDIA TRELL'S VICTORY-CLASS STAR DESTROYERS...

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

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1.

The victory-class of star destroyer had been in service since before the Clone Wars with the navies of many wealthier Republic worlds and when Emperor Palpatine's New Order replaced the Republic it took direct control of most of these warships. Technically obsolete even at the end of the Clone Wars, the victory-class had continued to see major front line use while more modern ships such as the venator-class came and went. This owed much to their powerful missile armament, something lacking in the Imperial-class ships that formed the backbone of the Imperial Navy and they were frequently deployed to carry out long range bombardments of planetary and orbital targets.

There were more than a dozen victory-class star destroyers in the heavy squadron that dropped out of hyperspace close to the world that had just recently fallen to the advancing forces of the Alliance to Restore the Republic. The retreating Imperial forces who had once dominated this world had been able to sabotage the planetary defences on their way off planet and now the only things protecting this world were the half dozen corvettes that the Alliance had been able to spare from the heavy fighting that continued elsewhere in the sector. These small ships were no match for the star destroyers but the larger warships ignored the Alliance ships entirely, leaving them to be engaged by their own corvette escorts while the star destroyers focused their attention on the planet itself.

Launched in volleys of ten missiles each, the victory-class vessels fired their main armament, each volley rising up out of the dorsal missile tubes before angling themselves forwards and accelerating towards their assigned targets. Most of these were what remained of surface military installations, ensuring that the Alliance would get no use from any of them, while others targeted centres of industry and government. To sow further panic among the population a small number of the missiles were also directed at major population centres, punishing the inhabitants for daring to rise up against the Empire.

The missile barrage lasted little more than ten minutes but during this time the planet's infrastructure was reduced to ruins. Even targets over the horizon were struck by missiles guided by information relayed from the fire control TIE fighters launched by the star destroyers and these tiny craft also fed back live images of the extent of the damage inflicted.

Satisfied that the damage done to the planet would turn it from an asset to the Alliance into a drain on their resources as they were forced to divert troops and supplies to keep the population alive the admiral in command of the squadron ordered the ships to return to hyperspace. Their withdrawal covered by the corvette escorts, the star destroyers turned away from the planet while their fighters rushed back into their hangars. Then in rapid succession each of the star destroyers and their corvette escorts vanished in a flash of light as they jumped into hyperspace, leaving behind them a ruined planet and a terrified population.

"End playback." General Syres Kain, the commander of Alliance forces in the sector said and the hologram that the gathered rebels had been watching vanished into thin air before the dark skinned man addressed his audience directly, "What you have just witnessed has happened in nine sectors that we know of already. We liberate a planet and the Empire retaliates almost immediately with a saturation bombardment that does not discriminate between military and civilian targets. Unlike a base delta-zero operation there are plenty of survivors left behind because the Empire knows that we won't abandon them, thus forcing us to divert resources that could otherwise be used to press the war against them." then he looked around to where a small cluster of fleet officers stood behind him, "Admiral Aphanar." he said.

"Thank you general." the mon calamari rear admiral said as she stepped forwards and he stepped back to give her the floor. Then using a handheld remote control she activated the holo projector again, this time showing an image of a squadron of victory-class star destroyers as well as a large image of a woman in an Imperial admiral's uniform, "As I am sure you are all aware, Admiral Lydia Trell commands one of the Imperial Navy's heavy squadrons in this sector and the only to be made up of victory-class star destroyers. So far we have not liberated any of the worlds in the sector under Imperial control so they have had no need to take any action similar to that which you have just seen. However, it is inevitable that we will start to free worlds from Imperial control and then the Empire may strike back. Therefore, it is imperative that we remove the threat of Admiral Trell's squadron before this happens."

Sat towards the back of the briefing room the former mercenary Tharun Verser leant sideways towards the commanding officer of his field team, Lieutenant Colonel Vorn Larcus III.

"I've got a bad feeling about this colonel." he whispered.

"Why?" the young woman sat on the opposite side of Tharun holding hands with the man in overalls beside her asked. This was Jaysica Horbid, the team's demolition and security expert while the man she held hands with was Tobis Dorfus, engineer aboard the *Silver Hawk*, the ship that the team was assigned to, "Taking out star destroyers is the fleet's job isn't it?"

"A direct assault is out of the question." Admiral Aphanar said as if in answer to Jaysica's question, "Even with the increase in our fleet resources thanks to the ships we acquired from the Kurrad Industries shipyard-" "That we stole, right boss?" Kara Larcus, the tall woman who was already leaning up against Vorn said with a smile. Kara was not only the team's medic but was also Vorn's wife despite the more than thirty-year age gap.

"- we could not overwhelm and destroy the entire squadron before it was able to send for help." Admiral Aphanar continued, "This would then risk dragging our fleet into a battle of attrition that we are unlikely to win."

"Here it comes." Vorn muttered and he glanced past his wife to Mace Grayle, the owner and captain of the *Silver Hawk* who sat at the end of their row with his adopted teenage daughter Cass.

"We know that Admiral Trell's squadron is currently patrolling the Shadow Region," the admiral continued and she adjusted the holo projector to show a star chart that illustrated the region of space in the sector that was located beneath the Spire Worlds, so-called because they formed a column between two arms of the nearby nebula, where the Alliance had its headquarters, "Their task appears to be to deny us the use of any system in the region that could be used as a forward staging area to attack any of the inhabited planets there. Our intention is to deploy small strike teams throughout the region to locate this squadron and then sabotage it. The key aim will be to disable hyperdrives, weapons and communication systems to leave the squadron isolated and vulnerable to attack. Only then will our forces attack."

"Great." Kara said, "So all we need to do is sneak aboard multiple star destroyers filled with thousands of Imperial crewmen and somehow render them ineffective."

Tharun smiled and looked at the chronometer on his wrist.

"Then it must be centaxday." he said.

"I hate centaxday." Kara replied.

"Everybody hates centaxday." Vorn said, "But we still have a job to do."

When the YT-1300 class freighter *Silver Hawk* dropped out of hyperspace most of its occupants were gathered in the lounge area while Mace had been flying the ship alone.

"We'll we've arrived at our designated co-ordinates." Mace announced as he entered the lounge from the cockpit and he went to make himself a drink, "Harvey will let us know if those star destroyers turn up."

Harvey was one of the team's droids, an R5 astromech droid possessing a bad-tempered personality that belonged to Tobis and generally helped him maintain the ship.

"Err, has anyone considered what we do if they do turn up here?" Tobis asked, "I mean, err, how do we sabotage a dozen star destroyers?"

"You're the technical expert Tobis." Kara pointed out, "I thought you'd already have a plan."

"Oh, err." Tobis replied.

"I'm sure Tobis will think of something." Jaysica replied.

"No need." Tharun said as he cleaned parts of his rifle that were laid out on the floor, "I've already got a plan."

"Really?" Cass said, frowning, "I'm sorry but you don't normally come up with the plans."

"No you just shoot things." Kara added.

"Well as it happens this time I have a plan that I know will work." Tharun said.

"Go on." Mace replied, "I'm dying to hear this."

"It's easy really." Tharun began, "We strip Tobis down to his skivvies and stuff Kara and Jaysica into straitjackets. That worked last time." and he smiled. The incident he was referring to had occurred when Kara, Tobis and Jaysica had been captured and held prisoner aboard an Imperial cruiser. Despite being bound the three of them had still been able to not only escape confinement but also capture the ship they were being held on. However, being reminded of the circumstances surrounding this did not go down well with any of them.

"Find another plan." Kara said, glaring at Tharun.

"Didn't you say you'd like to try that out Cass?" Mace asked, "Remember when you were going through-"

"Dad no." Cass interrupted, "I'm not getting stuck like that again."

"We can call in other teams if the star destroyers do appear here." Vorn said, "Alternatively we may get called upon to support one of the other teams." and Mace winced.

"As long as it's not the *Beauty Queen*." he said, referring to the ship owned by Captain Inra Vayne. The hapan woman was known for bragging about the supposed superiority of her modern YT-2400 over the mainly older vessels operated by the other rebel field teams and she and Mace held one another with deep contempt.

"Commander Kord's team is involved in this mission." Vorn said, "Everyone is."

"Even Colonel Collis is out here with a platoon of SpecForce spacetroopers." Tharun added, "I spoke with some of them before we left."

"Boss, we are going to need a plan of some sort." Kara said.

"Yes, I know." Vorn replied, "But I think that the best idea is to see how Admiral Trell's force acts if it arrives."

I'm hoping that she'll divide her squadron and we'll be able to target her ships individually."

"And what if they stay together?" Cass asked.

"Then we'll have our work cut out for us kid." Tharun replied.

Admiral Trell stood on the bridge of her flagship as it and the other vessels of her squadron dropped out of hyperspace.

"Comscan, squadron status." she said while still looking out of the viewports at the front of the bridge.

"All ships reporting in. No damage and no enemy contacts." the star destroyer's comscan operator reported.

"Just as expected." Admiral Trell said, "Send to squadron, standard dispersal. I want this system swept in two days."

"Yes admiral, sending now."

2.

"The fleet's breaking up." Vorn said as he and Mace watched from the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk*. The freighter was operating on minimum power and searching the system with only passive sensors to avoid detection.

"Looks like a three way split." Mace added in agreement, "The corvettes are staying with one of the bombardment lines while the other two split off to cover more space."

"It also make it difficult for us to call for back up. Even sending a narrow beam transmission they're likely to pinpoint our position almost instantly."

"So we're on our own then." Mace commented, "Maybe we could tack their exit vector and alert the Alliance to where they go from here."

"The problem is that we don't now how much longer their patrol is due to last. Their next stop could be back at Estran or some other fleet base." Vorn said, "But look at this line here. This could work for us." and he pointed to where the sensors showed a group of four victory-class star destroyers heading almost directly towards the gas giant where the *Silver Hawk* concealed itself among the planet's rings.

"If they stay on that heading they should pass within a quarter of a million kilometres of us." Mace commented.

"Exactly." Vorn said, "Now there's a lot of debris around here, we've got the rings and more than fifty small moons. What if one of those happened to crash into a star destroyer?"

"It probably wouldn't destroy it but it could inflict some damage." Mace said, "Are you thinking of using the *Silver Hawk* to accelerate something? But how would you stop them from just blasting the object to pieces?"

"I'd be counting on them doing just that." Vorn replied, "Like you said, we'd probably damage a ship but not destroy it outright. Even if the Force was with us and the target ship suffered critical damage that would only be one out of twelve. We need to disable all of the bombardment lines long enough for our fleet to be able to arrive."

"So hurling a lump of ice or rock at them would just be a distraction then?" Mace asked and Vorn nodded.

"It's just to get their attention really. I want them to chase us." he said.

"Thinking of leading them into a trap?"

"Of sorts." Vorn said, "But it involves a degree of risk."

"Doesn't everything we do? Tell me your plan."

"Okay, so first we get those star destroyers chasing after us. They might launch fighters but our shields should protect us from their weapons long enough for at least one of the star destroyers to get close enough to get a lock onto us with a tractor beam, at which point we'll power down and act like we're surrendering."

Vorn explained.

"Ah, so we get them to invite us aboard their ship." Mace said, smiling.

"Exactly. But I want you and Kara ready in the air lock to jump across to the star destroyer's hull before we're dragged into the hangar. Then find the nearest air lock and break in. You'll probably need to take Harvey with you for that."

"Okay, so while your wife and I take a stroll outside what will the rest of you be doing?" Mace asked.

"Tharun, Jaysica and Tobis will all need to conceal themselves in the ship. I'm sure Tobis can rig up some sort of shielded container that will fool a basic search. They'll stay hidden until they can slip out of the ship and stow away on a shuttle bound for another vessel."

"What if there isn't one?" Mace asked.

"I'm guessing there will be. In fact I'm hoping that it'll be heading right for Admiral Trell's flagship." Vorn replied with a smile.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this, but why would you think that? And how come you haven't told me what you and Cass will be doing?"

"We'll be aboard that shuttle as well." Vorn said, "As prisoners." and Mace glared at him, "Now hear me out before you get angry about using your daughter as bait." Vorn added, "The Empire knows about the pair of us and we're least useful for sabotaging a star destroyer, so we'll be the ones they find aboard the ship when they board it. I'll identify myself and demand proper treatment in accordance with the Republic's rules governing prisoners of war. Cass can fly the *Silver Hawk* and I need a pilot."

"The Empire ignores those colonel. You know that." Mace pointed out.

"Of course they do. The main point is that they'll know who I am and I'm hoping that Admiral Trell will want me aboard her flagship. That's why a shuttle will be sent. I doubt that the line captain will want to divert a star destroyer just for us. That puts you and Kara with Harvey on one star destroyer in one line and the others on Admiral Trell's flagship with Penny and Jeeves." Vorn said. Penny and Jeeves were the team's other two droids. Penny was a stolen Imperial mouse droid that belonged to Jaysica while Jeeves was Vorn's own

protocol droid and neither type would look out of place on a star destroyer. This was especially true for Penny, the tiny wheeled mouse droids were ubiquitous in Imperial service and most personnel ignored their presence completely.

"Harvey in one team and Tobis, Jaysica and Penny in the other." Mace commented, "That sounds to me like you intend for us to implant some sort of malware in the star destroyers to shut them down."

"That's exactly what I have in mind." Vorn replied, "I'm hoping that Tobis can come up with something that will spread between the different ships of each line."

Ah, so that's why you want us on different lines. But why not have me and Kara hide aboard our ship as well rather than use an EVA?"

"I don't want to use the same method of infiltration for both groups. If either gets caught then the other won't be compromised by their method of infiltration. So what do you think?"

"I'm thinking that I can't really complain about you using Cass in your plan since I'm the one that brought her aboard this ship over your objections in the first place. Other than that I can't think of anything better. Though I'm not sure how the others will see it."

"Admiral, all lines are reporting that they are in position to commence search procedures." one of the bridge officers called out as Admiral Trell returned to the bridge of her flagship after a break. The main drawback of victory-class star destroyers lay in their sublight engines and the mark variants that made up the bulk of Admiral Trell's squadron could not even outrun many civilian craft. However, for the task of searching a star system devoid of intelligent life this was not something she considered a problem.

"Very good." she said, "I want regular updates from all ships. Run their readings against our records of this system and check for any variation, no matter how small. If the rebellion has been here gathering resources then they may have left some signs."

The *Silver Hawk* had been landed on a piece of rock that orbited near to one of the gas giant's moons. By clamping the ship to the object it would be able to form the projectile that would be accelerated towards a star destroyer using the ship's ion drive.

When Vorn entered the *Silver Hawk's* cargo hold he found the rebels due to infiltrate the star destroyers gathered and preparing themselves for the parts they each had to play in their upcoming operation. Tharun and Jaysica had already changed into Imperial uniforms so that they could blend in with the crew of the star destroyer and both Mace and Kara were packing uniforms of their own into bags that could be attached to the vacuum suits they had already donned. Tobis on the other hand had yet to change out of his overalls, though this was to prevent his stolen uniform becoming covered in any of the spray paint that Vorn had smelt before even setting foot inside the cargo hold. This was being used to cover the golden body of Jeeves, his protocol droid, with a dull grey paint that was more in keeping with Imperial colour schemes.

"I hope the smell of that isn't going to make you all high before this mission starts." he said.

"Don't worry boss." Kara responded, "I've already given everyone the talk about not inhaling solvents."

"Colonel Larcus sir," Jeeves said, "is this really necessary?" and before Vorn could reply the R5 astromech droid standing next to Tobis let out a series of whistles, "I take your point Harvey." Jeeves said before looking at Tobis, "Please do continue Sergeant Dorfus."

"What did he say?" Jaysica asked.

"Harvey merely pointed out that a grey colouring made it less likely that the crew of the star destroyer we end up on will realise that I am not supposed to be aboard their vessel and have me broken up and my parts melted down for their scrap value."

"Well I hope Tobis has that paint job done quickly because the Empire is on it's way here right now." Vorn said, "Cass and I will begin to accelerate the rock towards their ship in about five minutes so you've probably got about ten until we get caught."

Without waiting for a response Vorn then exited the hold and returned to the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit where Cass sat in the pilot's seat monitoring the progress of the Imperial navy vessels approaching their location.

"It's just as you thought colonel." she said, "They've spread into a line abreast formation and are each focusing their sensor in a single arc for maximum coverage."

"That's been standard procedure since I was in the Navy during the Clone Wars." Vorn said as he sat down beside her, "Now are you sure you know what to do when we get boarded? You aren't to offer any resistance."

"Yeah, I know. Resistance is futile and all that. I have been arrested before. Your son and-" Cass began.

"Alright Cass. But just remember that the military aren't the same fanatics as many in the ISB are. As long as you don't give them any trouble there's a reasonable chance they won't just shoot you on the spot. Now are we ready to start?"

"Engines are on minimal power but we can build up to full in under thirty seconds." Cass replied and Vorn nodded.

"Then let's get this started." he said.

Having already searched several star systems, all of which turned out to be empty, the crew of the victory-class star destroyer *Infernal Heart* were now able to repeat their tasks without any instruction from their superiors and each crewman on the bridge got on with his task while the ships commanding officer, Line Captain Hayal Antos, looked out of the viewports.

"Captain," his first officer called out from one of the crew pits, "we may have something here."

"Seriously?" Captain Antos replied in surprise and he turned away from the viewports to look down at his first officer and the crewmen below him.

"Yes captain, there's what looks like a rogue asteroid on a collision course with us." the first officer said and Captain Antos frowned.

"So what? Space is littered with worthless lumps of rock Commander Sands." he said.

"But captain, this asteroid is speeding up." the commander replied and Captain Antos' eyes widened.

"Sound action stations. Bring the line to full battle readiness. Gunnery, I want a firing solution on that rock and someone get our shields up!"

"Admiral, Line Captain Antos just brought his line to action stations." the comscan operator aboard Admiral Trell's flagship reported.

"Has he located a rebel squadron?" Admiral Trell asked.

"Uncertain admiral. The *Inferno's Heart* reports that it is under attack but no assailant has been identified yet."

"Not identified? If Antos doesn't know what sort of ship is firing at him then how does he even know he's under attack?"

"It appears that an asteroid is being propelled towards his ships." the comscan operator answered, "He is ordering his ships to engage."

"Their shields are going up." Cass said.

"That's it." Vorn said, "Separate us from the asteroid and I'll get our own shields up. You need to fly us directly away from the asteroid so that we stay in its shadow."

"But don't we want the Empire to see us?" Cass asked.

"Trust me young lady, they'll see us." Vorn said.

3.

A bright flash of green marked the turbolaser blast that pulverised the hundred metre wide asteroid with just a single shot. For a brief moment the entire asteroid glowed brightly before it fractured. Most of its mass was reduced to mere subatomic particles by the intense energy but there were a few fragments that shot off in all directions.

"Target destroyed captain." Commander Sands announced before he saw the strong thermal flare of the *Silver Hawk's* ion drives on the star destroyer's sensor readouts, "Captain!" he exclaimed, "We have the ship that was attempting to hit us with the asteroid. It looks like a YT-thirteen hundred."

"A freighter?" Captain Antos responded, "A freighter dares attack us?"

"Yes captain. It's accelerating away. We can keep up but we won't be able to overtake it if they keep going."

"Launch fighters. We'll see how these criminals find trying to outrun them."

"Yes captain." Commander Sands responded and he activated the intercom in front of him, "Hangar, this is the bridge. Fighter squadrons aurek and besh, scramble, scramble, scramble."

"Here they come." Vorn said when he saw multiple smaller sensor contacts emerge from the lead star destroyer in the line now pursuing them. From the number it was easy to see that the star destroyer's commanding officer had ordered both his squadrons after the *Silver Hawk* and the two dozen fighters were already starting to close the gap between the warships and the freighter.

"What do I do?" Cass asked.

"Keep going straight ahead." Vorn told her, "Then when they get within firing range take evasive action. Our shields should hold but changing from a straight line course will allow those star destroyers to catch up with us."

"Okay." Cass said, nodding and she continued to fly a straight and level course away from the Imperial heavy attack line.

Less than a minute later the first flash of laser fire from the lead TIE fighter struck the *Silver Hawk's* shields and Cass flinched. Then she pulled back on the flight controls sharply and the nose of the freighter rose rapidly.

The highly manoeuvrable TIE fighters has no difficulty in turning to follow the *Silver Hawk* and as more of the fighters came within range they too opened fire. A standard YT-1300 lacked defensive shields and had Mace not spent a great deal of money installing a highly illegal military specification shield generator the ship's hull would have failed after just a few hits. However, the strength of the installed shields was such that the occupants of the *Silver Hawk* felt nothing more than a shudder as each shot hit the ship.

Mace, Kara and Harvey were in the *Silver Hawk's* airlock when one volley struck the ship and it rocked violently. This caused Mace to fall forwards into Kara, pushing her up against the ladders that led up to the *Silver Hawk's* upper hatch.

"Whoa there captain!" she exclaimed, "Remember we're both married to other people. I don't know about Malia but the boss is a jealous man."

"I'll bear it mind." Mace replied, frowning as stepped back and picked up his helmet. He checked this for damage after having been dropped on the floor and then put it on his head, sealing around his neck. Kara did the same while Mace sealed the inner hatch and at a nod from her he began the process of decompressing the compartment. For the time being however, neither he nor Kara made any move towards the top hatch.

Meanwhile in the cockpit Vorn monitored the position of the four victory-class star destroyers chasing after them while Cass concentrated on flying the ship. Just as Vorn had hoped the requirement to take evasive action against the TIE fighters surrounding the *Silver Hawk* was allowing the obsolete capital ships to close the distance between them. So far none of the star destroyers had made any attempt to directly engage the *Silver Hawk* with either turbolasers or missiles and Vorn hoped that this would continue to be the case. Just a single hit from either weapon would punch through the freighter's shields and most likely destroy it entirely.

"Range to target?" Line Captain Antos asked.

"Approximately one hundred and seventy thousand kilometres captain." Commander Sands replied, "We have a firing solution."

"I'm not wasting ammunition on the likes of them." Captain Antos said, "Besides, we're just as likely to hit our own fighters. Keep a lock on them and order our fighters to disperse when we reach one hundred and twenty thousand kilometres."

"You intend to use a tractor beam?" Commander Sands asked and Captain Antos nodded.

"I want to know exactly who they are commander. These renegades obviously have access to restricted

technology which marks them out as potential rebels in my book. I want to interrogate them and maybe their ship will lead us to their base." he said.

"Yes captain." Commander Sands replied.

One moment there were twenty four TIE fighters swarming around the *Silver Hawk* and then all of a sudden both squadrons broke off, splitting apart and putting as much distance between themselves and the light freighter as they could.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Cass said as she watched the fighters disperse.

"Stand by." Vorn said into the intercom, "The enemy has cleared a line of fire between us and the star destroyers."

Moments later the *Silver Hawk* lurched strongly as it came to an abrupt halt and the ship's engines strained as they attempted to break free of the grip of the tractor beam that had just locked onto the *Silver Hawk*.

"They've got us." Vorn called out over the intercom and in the air lock Mace checked the tethers connecting him to both Kara and Harvey before he climbed the ladder towards the top hatch and halted just inside it.

Meanwhile in the ship's hold Tharun, Tobis and Jaysica climbed into a large crate that Tobis had rigged up to be resistant to basic scans.

"What do I do now?" Cass asked, "Dad never taught me anything about flying while we're caught in a tractor beam."

"Cut all power to the engines and shields." Vorn told her, "You'll just overheat the system if you don't. It'll cut out before it explodes but we need to make sure the ship is still flyable and I doubt Tobis would appreciate having to repair the damage."

"Okay. Shutting down." Cass replied and she shut off the *Silver Hawk's* engines and the ship began to move solely pulled towards the star destroyer by its tractor beam.

Vorn and Cass waited patiently as the *Silver Hawk* continued to be dragged through space. Through the transparisteel cockpit canopy they occasionally saw TIE fighters fly past as they continued to monitor the freighter, however none of them came too close for fear of getting caught up in the tractor beam themselves and potentially enable the rebel ship to break free and escape. When Vorn saw the prow of the star destroyer appear outside the ship he activated the intercom again.

"Mace now." he said and in the airlock Mace opened the *Silver Hawk's* top hatch. At the same time Kara shut off the gravity in the compartment so that she and Harvey floated free as Mace climbed out onto the freighter's upper hull. While Mace clung onto the hull Kara pushed off a wall towards the open top hatch and followed Mace out through it. Then she gripped the hull with one hand while pulling Harvey through the hatch with the other.

"Stang that things big." she said as the two rebels and the astromech droid stood together and looked up at the victory-class star destroyer that was now less than a hundred metres away from them.

"Harder for us to miss." Mace said, "Ready?"

"Ready." Kara replied, "But one of these days we need to get some rocket packs and magnetic boots."

Taking one another's hands, Mace and Kara then jumped up off the *Silver Hawk's* hull into space, pushing themselves towards the hull of the star destroyer. Thanks to the proximity of the nine hundred metre long warship, their leap was hidden from the TIE fighters that continued to patrol further away from the warship. Striking the hull of the star destroyer at a relatively low speed, both Mace and Kara were able to grab hold of it and avoid bouncing back off into space while Harvey clamped onto a flat section of the hull using electromagnets built into the droid's feet. Looking back towards the *Silver Hawk*, Mace was just in time to see his ship being pulled into the star destroyer's hangar and disappear from view.

"Something wrong Mace?" Kara asked.

"I don't know. I've just got this bad feeling. Like I'm not going to see her again." Mace replied.

"Jaysica's aboard." Kara said, "The klutz may well trash your ship before the Empire gets the chance to."

Mace looked at her and frowned.

"Come on." he said, "I spotted an air lock this way."

4.

As the *Silver Hawk* was pulled into the hangar of the *Inferno's Heart*, Cass extended the freighter's landing gear so that the hull would not be damaged when the tractor beam was released and as the ship was being manoeuvred into position by the hangar crew a squad of stormtroopers and several fleet troopers led by an unarmoured officer in a black uniform ran towards it and formed a line. The soldiers positioned themselves close enough to the *Silver Hawk* that its single dorsal mounted laser cannon could not be depressed enough to fire on them and pointed their weapons towards it. The officer then waved a pair of technicians closer and they rushed towards the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp. Here they were about to override the locking mechanism when all of a sudden there was a 'hiss' and the ramp began to lower.

"Get back!" the officer called out as he drew his sidearm in anticipation of a force of armed rebels coming rushing out of the ship. However, what he instead saw was Vorn and Cass calmly walking down the ramp with their hands raised above their heads, "That's far enough you rebel scum!" the officer called out, "Get down on your knees."

Vorn nodded at Cass and the pair of them knelt down on the hangar deck at the base of the ramp.

"We are surrendering without resistance." he announced, "My name is Lord Vorn Larcus the Third and I claim our rights under the Republic's convention on the treatment of prisoners of war."

The officer snarled when he heard this.

"You are members of the rebel alliance and traitors." he said, "That makes you common criminals, not soldiers and you will be treated as such." then he looked at the fleet troopers and waved them forwards, "Secure them." he said and as they ran towards the rebels the officer turned to the stormtroopers' squad leader, "Search the ship." he ordered and the stormtroopers move forwards as well.

The fleet troopers took hold of both Vorn and Cass by their arms began to go through their pockets as well as patting them down to make sure that they were not concealing any weapons under their clothes.

Cass felt the trooper searching her sudden squeezing her flesh and he leant close enough to be able to whisper into her ear.

"Like that little girl?" he said and Cass lunged forwards to try and bite his face, "Little bitch!" the trooper snapped and he slapped her with the back of his hand.

"My companion is entitled to be searched by female personnel." Vorn said but the officer snorted.

"You can both count yourselves lucky I'm not ordering a strip search here in the hangar." he said before the trooper searching through Vorn's pockets found his deliberately placed identity card. This was a copy of the security pass he had been issued while serving in the Estranian Parliament and it bore his real name.

"Sir." the trooper called out.

"What is it corporal?"

"I think you should see this." the corporal replied and he tossed the identity card to the officer who looked at it and frowned. Then he took out his comlink and activated it.

"Captain Antos," he said into the device, "we have something here that may interest you."

"What is it lieutenant?" the ship's captain responded.

"Sir, two prisoners have surrendered to us. One is a girl and the other an older man who I have identified as Vorn Larcus." the officer told him.

"Vorn Larcus? Are you certain?" Captain Antos asked.

"Yes sir. The prisoner has confirmed his own identity and has an ID to back up his claim."

"And there are just the two prisoners?"

"Yes captain. Though I have my men searching their vessel now just in case there are more of them hiding aboard it."

"Call for a scanning crew to be sure. But secure the two prisoners you have and bring them both to the bridge. Admiral Trell will want to hear about this."

"Yes captain, I'm bringing them up to you now." the lieutenant said and he shut off the comlink.

The fleet troopers then bound Vorn and Cass's wrists and lifted the two rebels back to their feet before dragging them towards the nearest turbolift. This took them and the lieutenant directly to the star destroyer's bridge where they were brought before Captain Antos as he stood at the rear of the bridge in front of a hologram of Admiral Trell herself.

"Ah, here they are admiral." Captain Antos said, "I don't know who this juvenile is, probably just some street urchin tricked into betraying the Empire, but this is-"

"Vorn Larcus. Yes, I recognise his face." Admiral Trell interrupted, "Were these two the only ones aboard his ship?"

"Our marines have found no-one else yet but I've ordered a scanning crew to run a full sweep." Captain Antos answered.

"Very well. But I want those two sent to my flagship as soon as possible." Admiral Trell ordered and then her hologram vanished.

"Commander Sands." Captain Antos called out.

"Yes sir?" the commander responded.

"Have a shuttle prepared to carry the prisoners to the admiral's flagship and let me know what the scanning crew find."

In the *Silver Hawk's* hold a large crate opened with a hiss and the trio of rebels hiding inside climbed out.

"At last." Jaysica said as she straightened her Imperial uniform, "I thought I was going to suffocate in there."

"Hey I already apologised for that." Tharun commented, "It was that spicy ration pack."

"Err, perhaps we should let the droids out." Tobis said and he walked over to another crate that he then opened to allow Jeeves and Penny to exit.

"Oh thank you Sergeant Dorfus sir." Jeeves said, "It is such a relief to be out of that awful container."

"Well we need to be out of this ship as well." Tharun said and Jaysica started to head for the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp, "Hey! Where are you going little lady?"

"To the ramp." Jaysica replied, pointing.

"Oh, err, I think that is likely to be guarded." Tobis commented.

"Right lad." Tharun added, "Penny can sneak down there but the rest of us need to sneak down through the cargo hatch." and he pointed to the centre of the hold where there was a hatch set into the floor, surrounded by four columns. This was all part of the cargo loading elevator system but it was also possible to open the hatches to the outside and use it as a lower hatch.

"I'm almost afraid to ask," Jeeves said, "but does that include me as well? I'm not much good at jumping. It was never considered an important feature when I was programmed."

"Well unless you can teleport yourself out of here then yes, it does include you." Tharun said while Tobis opened the floor mounted cargo loading hatch.

Tharun was the first to lower himself down through the hatch, lowering a holdall containing equipment and spare uniforms down ahead of him and then as he crouched beneath the light freighter he waved at the other rebels to follow him.

"Err, perhaps you ought to go first. I'll help you down." Tobis told Jaysica.

"That's okay Tobis. I can manage." Jaysica replied and before Tobis could stop her she began to climb down through the hatch. Not paying attention to what she was resting her feet on and rather than using a duct that was properly fixed in place she inadvertently stood on a flexible cable that promptly slid out of the way and sent her falling to the deck below. Tharun was right beneath Jaysica and he looked up just before she landed right on top of him and the pair of them sprawled across the deck. Jaysica let out a high pitched squeal as she landed and Tharun knew that the stormtroopers standing guard by the bottom of the access ramp would hear. Quickly he rolled over so that Jaysica was now beneath him and he began to kiss her. Jaysica's eyes widened and she tried to push Tharun away before a voice called out.

"Hey!" it said, "What's going on?"

Tharun lifted his face away from Jaysica's and both rebels looked around to see the two stormtroopers who had been guarding the access ramp peering under the *Silver Hawk* at them.

"Sorry about that." Tharun said as he got up and Jaysica pushed herself away from him across the deck,

"Being around all these ships gets my friend here excited. Really excited if you know what I mean."

"Come out from under there." a stormtrooper ordered, "This ship is off limits."

"That's why we didn't go inside." Tharun replied and he helped the frowning Jaysica to her feet and led her out from under the *Silver Hawk*, past the two stormtroopers. As they walked out from under the freighter the two rebels noticed Penny suddenly come zooming down the access ramp while the stormtroopers remained distracted.

"Now get out of the hangar and I won't report you." the stormtrooper said sternly.

"Thanks." Tharun replied and he pulled Jaysica by the hand towards the nearest exit from the hangar bay, the same doorway that Penny was also speeding towards and the two rebels and Jaysica's tiny droid all came to a halt just outside.

"What were you doing?" Jaysica hissed.

"Making it look to those stormtroopers that we weren't rebels sneaking out of our ship little lady." Tharun answered.

"But Tobis was right above us. What will he think?"

"That he was right when he offered to help you probably." Tharun muttered, "Now pipe down because your boyfriend and Jeeves are sneaking down out of the ship now and that protocol droid is making a better job of it than you did."

"That was an accident." Jaysica said.

Harvey was easily able to override the seals on an airlock and provide Mace and Kara access to the interior

of the star destroyer. The pair changed out of their vacc suits and into their own Imperial uniforms, both of them impersonating officers, while inside the airlock. Kara wore her military issue blaster pistol on her hip while Mace kept his heavier DL-44 in a small equipment case that he slung over one shoulder. Then they stuffed the vacc suits into the same bag that Mace had carried their uniforms over from the *Silver Hawk* in before they exited the air lock and concealed the bag in the storeroom outside it.

"So which way to the main computer core?" Kara asked as Mace shut the bag into a locker.

"I don't know." Mace replied, "I've never been on a victory-class ship before. If the layout is anything like the *Night Wraith* then it should be that way." and he pointed in the direction he would go to find the computer core on a larger Imperial-class star destroyer. However, at the same moment he did this Harvey let out an abrupt and crude sounding noise before rolling off in the opposite direction.

"I think we should follow him." Kara said as the droid rolled away, "I bet Tobis uploaded a floor plan into his memory or something."

Vorn and Cass were taken from the bridge to the star destroyer's detention section while a shuttle was being prepared to carry them across to Admiral Trell's flagship. Left in their binders, the two rebels were placed in the same cell and when the door was locked behind them Vorn sat down on the raised ledge meant to be a bed.

"I'm sorry about trying to bite that guy. I know you told me not to-" Cass began.

"Cass that's all right." Vorn interrupted, "Your reaction was perfectly understandable. Now take a seat, if the hangar ground crews are as efficient as most Imperial personnel are then we could be here quite a while. Let's face it, if they were up to the same standards as Alliance ground crews we'd already be strapped in and flying away from here." Cass walked over to the bed and sat down beside Vorn before trying to adjust her posture to make herself more comfortable while her hands were bound behind her back.

"Why couldn't they have taken these off while we're in a cell?" she said.

"Possibly because they know we're being moved soon or maybe because they trying to be cruel." Vorn replied, "Hopefully we'll get better treatment from the admiral. I'm counting on her being more rational."

"Why?" Cass asked.

"Admiral Trell was in the Republic Navy during the Clone Wars at the same time as I was. I never met her but I heard enough about her to know that she's not a monster like some high ranking Imperial officers are. Before the war she was in the Republic's deep space exploration service and was transferred to the newly formed navy at the outbreak of hostilities. I'm hoping that she remembers what the Republic stood for and can be made to see sense."

"You're trying to get her to defect?" Cass exclaimed.

"It would save the Alliance the trouble of having to destroy this squadron if we could get her to turn her ships over to them. Scuttle them even, though a dozen victory-class star destroyers and a similar number of corvettes would be a massive boost for our fleet." Vorn said, "Of course if she can't be persuaded to join us then our fleet will destroy her squadron. In either case I expect her to treat us with respect though. You won't need to worry about the wandering hands of her crew."

"I suppose that's something at least." Cass said.

"Sergeant Verser sir, it's so good to see that you managed to escape those stormtroopers." Jeeves said as he shuffled out of the hangar.

"Yeah, great. Now where's Tobis?" Tharun asked, wondering why the *Silver Hawk's* engineer had not arrived with the droid. Tharun had not bothered to keep watching after he had seen Tobis emerge from the freighter and had assumed that he would make his way directly to where the other rebels waited for him.

"Oh Sergeant Dorfus told me that he was going to take a look around the hangar. If a shuttle is being prepared to carry Lieutenant Colonel Larcus and young Miss Grayle to Admiral Trell's flagship then he says that he ought to be able to identify it right now."

"He does have a point I suppose." Tharun said.

"Of course he does. Tobis is very intelligent." Jaysica added, "But what do we do while we're waiting here?" "Hope it's not those two stormtroopers from the bottom of the ramp that catch us making out." Tharun said and Jaysica scowled at him.

Back in the hangar Tobis avoided making eye contact with any of the maintenance teams servicing the craft stored there. Now that the fighter squadrons scrambled to intercept the *Silver Hawk* had been recovered by their mother ship the ground crews were hurrying to get the fighters back into a state of readiness for further operations. The strain this caused on their manpower meant that there were not enough personnel to go around and the shuttle that was to carry Vorn and Cass to Admiral Trell's flagship had only a skeleton team working on it. Thankfully it also made the ship as easy for Tobis to identify as he had thought. The vessel in question was a standard Imperial lambda-class shuttle that had been moved out of the row of such craft while a trio of technicians and a single droid carried out the necessary checks on its systems before take off.

"What are you looking at?" one of the technicians called out when he saw Tobis staring at the shuttle.

"Oh, err, I was just wondering whether this is the shuttle that will be carrying the prisoners to the admiral's flagship." Tobis said, gambling that such a decision had been taken.

"Yeah, this is the one but there's a red light in the system and we can't figure out where." another technician added.

"So, err, why not just pull out another shuttle?" Tobis asked and he looked at the three other lambda-class shuttles lined up close by.

"You're new here aren't you?" the lead technician said and for a moment Tobis was concerned that he had inadvertently given himself away, "The last thing we're going to do is tell Captain Antos that we can't figure out what's wrong with this."

Tobis relaxed and then a thought occurred to him.

"Err, maybe I can help." he suggested, "If, err, you can make it worth my while."

The technicians looked at one another.

"What are you after?" one of them asked.

"Oh, err, I just need a ride. Me and two others. Plus a couple of droids." Tobis said.

"Is that it?" the lead technician responded as the technicians all smiled.

"Yeah," another added, "I thought you were going to ask for cash."

"Take a look." the lead technician said, "Find what's wrong with this in ten minutes or less and I'll see to it that the pilot takes you wherever you want to go."

Tobis smiled and stepped forwards to be handed a datapad by the lead technician and he started to study it. With few resources available to them, Alliance ground crews sometimes had to resort to cutting corners to get ships functioning and this taught them where obscure problems could creep into a system. Many of these had to do with the sensors that monitored vital components rather than the components themselves and when Tobis saw that the reported fault was an overheating power regulation component in the shuttle's ion drive he knew exactly where to look. Walking up to the shuttle he reached into the open access point and felt for the thermal sensor. This could be easily detached from its socket and Tobis removed it. Just as he had expected this was clogged with dust that the ground crews had failed to clean out of the engine compartment regularly and he blew on it hard. This produced a cloud of dust as the particles that had built up within the sensor assembly scattered into the air and Tobis calmly returned the sensor to its mounting.

"Err, try it now." he said and the Imperial technicians stared at him. Then the lead technician nodded to one of his men and he walked up the ramp into the shuttle. Making his way to the cockpit he sat down and began the preflight sequence, powering up the shuttle's ion drive.

"No alarm." he said, "It's passed."

"Stang." the lead technician hissed, "How did you know to look for that?"

"Oh, err." Tobis began, uncomfortable with having to come up with excuses on the spot, "I, err, I was stationed on a planet with a lot of dust. It, err, well, it was always getting into the engines and clogging the thermistors so that they overheated."

The lead technician then strode up to Tobis and slapped him on his shoulder as he took back the datapad.

"Well you've earned your lift specialist." he said, "Go get your friends and have them here by the time the shuttle launches."

5.

The cell door slid open and a squad of stormtroopers marched in.

"On your feet rebels." one of them ordered and Vorn and Cass got to their feet as the armoured marines surrounded them. Then the stormtroopers shoved them towards the door and marched them out of the cell.

"What's happening?" Cass asked, "Where are you taking us?"

"Either our ride is ready or the admiral has changed her mind and this is our firing squad." Vorn replied.

"But you said she'd treat us well." Cass reminded him.

"Silence rebels." the leader of the stormtroopers said as they continued to march towards the star destroyer's hangar.

The two rebels were escorted to a launch pad where a lambda-class shuttle waited with its engines already running.

"Prisoner transfer from cell one-one-three-eight." the stormtrooper squad leader said to the crewman standing at the bottom of the access ramp.

"Get them aboard." the crewman replied, "I want this trip over with as soon as possible. We've got three other passengers hitching a lift and one of them has already accidentally destroyed an entire row of seat covers." Vorn smiled slightly when he heard this, guessing that the responsible party was Jaysica and when he and Cass were led up the ramp they saw their three fellow rebels already sat waiting for them.

"Sit down here." a stormtrooper ordered and Vorn and Cass were pushed down into a pair of seats where they were strapped in. Unable to reach the fastenings of their safety harnesses while wearing binders, this effectively tied the two prisoners to their seats for the duration of the flight. The stormtroopers then sat down around Vorn and Cass while the crewman headed for the cockpit.

"Taking off now." the pilot announced over the intercom and the shuttle's access ramp lifted shut before the ship rose up off the hangar deck.

As soon as the shuttle left the star destroyer's hangar its wings lowered into flight position and the pilot steered the ship towards Admiral Trell's line of star destroyers. These ships were much closer to the system's star than the *Inferno's Heart* and travelling there at sublight speeds would involve a journey of several hours. Rather than spend all this time travelling between the two star destroyers, the shuttle's flight crew plotted a short 'micro-jump' through hyperspace that cut the journey time from several hours to just under a minute. The shuttle shuddered slightly twice in rapid succession, once as it entered hyperspace and then seconds later as it returned to realspace close to the position of Admiral Trell's flagship. Cleared for immediate access to the hangar, the pilot flew his shuttle inside and landed on a pad where a squad of the flagship's stormtrooper marine compliment waited with an officer who sneered as Vorn and Cass were led down the access ramp.

"You will come with me." he told them, "The admiral wants to see you."

"Yes, we know the drill." Vorn replied as the other rebels calmly disembarked from the shuttle and headed away.

A single guard at a security station looked up as Mace and Kara entered the compartment where the *Inferno's Heart's* main computer core was located. The guard was alone in the compartment, there only to monitor who entered and left. There was no need for any other permanent crew presence other than a handful of droids that made their way from one part of the core to another to make sure that each part continued to function as intended.

"Can I help you sir?" the guard asked as Mace and Kara approached his station. Meanwhile Harvey rolled past towards the core itself.

"Have any of the core's main memory modules been replaced since you came on shift?" Mace asked.

"No sir. The droids haven't reported any errors at all." the guard replied and Mace nodded.

"Go and have a quick check." he said to Kara and she walked off after Harvey while Mace continued to keep the guard occupied.

"Is there a problem sir?" the guard asked.

"I'd say so." Mace replied, "Stores is coming up short of memory modules. All the computer records say we have one quantity but a visual inspection says we've got fewer. The only clue we have is a droid's visual recording from the start of the shift that shows us some of the missing modules on the shelf then."

While Mace was talking to the guard, Kara followed Harvey as the little droid sought out a suitable computer access port and rolled up to it before extending a probe that fit into it.

"Hurry up." Kara whispered as she stood beside Harvey and looked around. From this location she could see one of the genuine service droids and while for now it seemed to be ignoring them Kara did not want to take the risk of it suddenly deciding to investigate what Harvey was doing. In response Harvey merely let out a

rapid series of bleeps and whistles that were completely unintelligible to Kara without some means of translation.

All of a sudden Harvey disengaged from the computer port and whistled while rolling back from it.

"Is that it?" Kara asked, "Are you all done?" and Harvey whistled again before turning around and rolling back towards where Mace was still talking with the guard.

Kara followed the droid again and smiled at Mace.

"No signs of them here." she said and Mace shrugged.

"Oh well, I suppose we'd better try somewhere else." he said.

"Maybe main engineering has them." the guard suggested and Mace nodded.

"Thanks. We'll try there." Mace replied before he and Kara left the main computer compartment with Harvey.

In the corridor outside Mace looked at Kara as soon as the door slid shut behind them, "Well?" he asked.

"Well what?" Kara responded.

"Well was the program uploaded?" Mace asked and now Kara shrugged.

"I guess so." she answered, "But who knows with Harvey? For all I know he just rigged all the refreshers to backfire." and behind the two rebels Harvey let out a brief and rude noise, "See? So where to now captain?"

"Back to the airlock to pick up our gear and then the *Silver Hawk*." Mace replied, "I'll be a lot happier when I'm in my own ship. Now we just need to wait and see how Tobis gets on uploading his program into Admiral Trell's flagship."

"Jaysica's with him." Kara commented, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"Hello Lydia." Vorn said as stormtroopers forced him and Cass to their knees on the star destroyer's bridge in front of Admiral Trell.

"Do we know one another?" she asked.

"No, we've never met. Though I know of you by reputation." Vorn said and Admiral Trell smiled.

"You have a reputation as well." she said and then she suddenly added, "My lord."

"All of it highly deserved I'm sure." Vorn said, "Now how about you let me and my young companion here go and we can discuss your surrender in a civilised manner?"

"My surrender?" the admiral exclaimed, "You may not have been keeping up with current events but you are both prisoners on a star destroyer carrying thousands of Imperial troops. Neither of you is going anywhere I don't want you to."

"So why bring us here?" Cass asked.

"Because I don't think that you're alone," Admiral Trell told her, "and I want you to tell me where your rebel friends are."

"We came here alone." Vorn said, "Cass is my pilot."

"Oh really? And what brings the pair of you here?" Admiral Trell said.

"You do Lydia." Vorn responded with a smile, "In fact I have been keeping up with current events and the Alliance knows that squadrons such as yours are being used to bombard civilian targets in revenge for joining us."

"I've had no such orders." Admiral Trell said.

"Not yet no, but it's only a matter of time before you do. We came to offer you an alternative option." Vorn said.

"Another option? What would that be?"

"Defect. Bring your ships to the Alliance and become part of our fleet." Vorn said and he immediately noticed crew members around the bridge look towards them when he brought up the subject of defecting to the Alliance.

"I'll never join you. I swore an oath."

"You swore an oath to the Republic just as I did." Vorn said before Admiral Trell could continue, "The only difference is that I eventually realised that the Empire that Palpatine created out of its ashes isn't worthy of your loyalty as well."

"Spare me your political posturing Lord Larcus. My superiors aren't about to order me to slaughter civilians and I'm not about to commit treason on your say so alone." Admiral Trell said, her voice raised, "Now tell me where to find your friends. The location of your headquarters ought to be good for a start."

"I don't think so." Vorn said.

Admiral Trell then looked towards one of her bridge officers.

"Where's that little rodent from the ISB?" she asked.

"I think he's in his office." the officer responded.

"Then get him up here." Admiral Trell told him, "Tell him I've actually got something for him to do."

The single guard inside the main computer section of the flagship looked up as Tharun walked in, followed by Tobis and Jaysica.

"What do you want?" he asked and Tharun grinned at him.

"Some one reported an accident in here." the former mercenary responded and the guard frowned.

"I'm the only one here. I'm not injured."

"What about that?" Tharun said and he pointed at the guard's face.

"What about what?"

"What about that?" Tharun said and he suddenly punched the guard in the face hard enough that he fell backwards from his duty station and lay sprawled out across the floor with blood pouring from his broken nose, "Okay lad, " he added, looking around at Tobis, "let's find somewhere to hide that before finding somewhere for you to upload your little program shall we?" and the engineer nodded.

"Sergeant Verser sir," Jeeves said as the protocol droid also walked into the room while Penny zoomed towards Jaysica, "was that really necessary?"

"Sure it was." Tharun replied as he and Tobis picked up the guard, "I've not punched anyone in ages and it was either him or you."

"Well really." Jeeves commented, "There was no call for that."

With the unconscious guard concealed and leaving Jeeves at the security station to warn them if anyone else came in, the rebels made their way through the compartment until Tobis found a suitable terminal for him to access.

"Err, this ought to do." Tobis said when he found a terminal with a fold out keyboard that he pulled towards himself. Then he took a mem-stick from his pocket and inserted it into a port located beside the keyboard.

"So how long will this take Tobis?" Jaysica asked.

"Ah. Err. I don't know exactly." Tobis replied.

"Probably less time if you let the lad work." Tharun suggested.

Tobis worked rapidly, copying the contents of the mem-stick directly into the main computer of the star destroyer before he pulled it from the port and then folded the keyboard away again.

"Is that it?" Tharun asked and Tobis smiled.

"Err. Yes. Why? What, err, what did you expect?" he responded.

"Well I thought you'd be slicing through security programs and such." Tharun said.

"Oh. Ah. I didn't need to. You see we're already within all of the computer security in here." Tobis replied, "Plus, err, plus the operating system is about, err, thirty years out of date. I, err, that is the Alliance knows all of the security flaws. Now if it was an, err, an Imperial-class ship then-"

"Never mind that lad. What will it do?" Tharun interrupted.

"Well, err, it waits until either a remote command is given or a key system is engaged. Then, err, then it causes the main reactor to spike." Tobis explained.

"But won't there be safety systems that will stop that from causing any damage Tobis?" Jaysica asked.

"Oh yes. But that's part of the reason why it works." Tobis replied, smiling, "You see it, err, it forces the main reactor to just shut down and then, ah, then all of the high energy applications on the ship are disabled. We'll still have, err, air and gravity. But, err, the ship won't be able to move or fight."

"Nice work lad." Tharun said, smiling at Tobis, "So we don't need to worry about being caught aboard when it's triggered, right?" and Tobis nodded.

"I, err, I also included functions to make it spread between all of the ships in the line and this one will alert the Alliance." he said.

"You couldn't spread it to that last line of star destroyer then?" Tharun asked.

"No. Err, each line has it's own security ID codes. If I tried to make it spread from one line to another then the firewalls would block it and the crew would know something was wrong. But, err, the transmission to the Alliance should let them know which ships are affected."

"Very good." Tharun said, "Now let's go find Cass and the Colonel. I want off this bucket before the Alliance blows it to pieces."

"Admiral I have a transmission coming in from Lieutenant Colonel Larcus's unit." one of Admiral Aphanar's command crew announced.

"Put him through commander." the admiral replied.

"It's not a voice message, it's data." the other mon calamari officer said before looking up from his console and adding, "Admiral, it contains the location of Admiral Trell's heavy squadron. The colonel's team have been able to slice into its computers and plant a virus that will disable eight of the star destroyers."

"That only leaves four." Admiral Aphanar said, "Show me the message and then inform our captains that I have orders for them."

6.

There were two chairs in the compartment that Vorn and Cass were shown to, both of them fitted with restraints that were used to hold them securely at their wrists, ankles and necks before they were left alone. "I thought the admiral was supposed to treat us well." Cass said as she tugged at her wrist restraints. "I know, I'm sorry. I thought that I might be able to get through to her but it seems that she sees the Empire as legitimate." Vorn replied before the door slid open and a man in the pale tunic of an agent of the Imperial Security Bureau entered.

"Vorn Larcus and Cass Jungen." he announced, using Cass's name from before Mace adopted her, "I will be conducting your interrogation." and then he set a case down on a table beside Cass's chair.

"She doesn't know anything." Vorn said, "Torturing her is a waste of time."

"Oh but it isn't." the agent said, "You see it is my experience that a person being interrogated directly will eventually say anything to make their pain stop, often giving false information. A droid can generally tell when someone is lying but for a person such as myself the distinction is harder to make. Fortunately I have found a much more reliable method." and he removed a gag from the case that he quickly pushed into Cass's mouth and fastened in place, "You see I know that you will be far more likely to give me information to protect this young lady than to protect yourself. Now the admiral may not allow me to carry out any acts that are intended to cause permanent injury to your companion but I can still inflict a lot of pain on her while you watch." and then he took a wand shaped device from his case that produced an arc of electricity when he pushed a button on the side. Then the agent stood behind Cass and smiled at her, "This will hurt a lot." he told her, "But it'll stop when he tells me where your headquarters is." and then he triggered the device.

Before the ISB torturer could press the electrical prod against Cass though, the door to the cell slid open and a guard fell through it with a smoking hole in his chest.

"Drop it!" Tharun shouted at the startled agent, pointing his heavy blaster rifle at him. However, the agent did nothing and Tharun fired his rifle. At such close range the energy blast blew right through the agent and his corpse fell backwards.

"Quickly! Get Cass untied." Vorn said as Tobis and Jaysica followed Tharun into the room.

"Oh Colonel Larcus sir, I am so relieved to see that you are still functional." Jeeves said as Tobis and Jaysica set Cass free before moving onto him.

"Thanks Jeeves." Vorn said, "Tobis is the virus uploaded?"

"Yes. Err, no problems." Tobis responded, "I, err, I can trigger it by remote or wait for-

"Trigger it now." Vorn said, "We can't put our faith in Admiral Trell keeping her ships here for much longer."

Tobis nodded and while Jaysica continued to release Vorn from his bonds Tobis took out his comlink and used it to send the remote trigger command.

"Okay this system is clear." Admiral Trell announced to her bridge crew, "Signal the squadron to jump to the next one and-" but before she could finish the lights began to flicker and all of a sudden a klaxon sounded, "What's going on?" she demanded.

"There seems to be a problem with the main reactor." a crewman replied, "It just spiked and the safeties cut in. We've lost power to all key systems. Engines. Weapons. Shields. Communications."

"Admiral look!" an officer called out and he pointed through the viewports at the front of the bridge to where another victory-class star destroyer was moving past them, the lights from inside it flickering randomly.

"Comscan, tell me how many of our ships have been affected." Admiral Trell asked.

"It's hard to tell admiral." the comscan operator replied, "But I think the effect has spread to our entire line. Captain Antos' as well."

"Larcus." Admiral Trell hissed, "He did something to our ships. Tell that ISB agent what's going on and tell him to find out what Larcus did and how to undo it."

Just then there was a flash from outside the ship as a single vessel exited hyperspace.

"It's a star destroyer." the officer close to the viewports exclaimed, "One of ours."

For a moment Admiral Trell considered the possibility that one of the ships in her squadron that had not been disabled had requested reinforcements, but then she realised that even with the most optimistic travel times from the other systems where major Imperial forces were present there was no way that an Imperial-class star destroyer could have reached them in time.

"It's a trap!" she snapped right before there were flashes of green light as the newly arrived star destroyer revealed itself as an Alliance vessel and opened fire on the corvettes accompanying Admiral Trell's star destroyers.

"Ignore the star destroyers for now and concentrate on those corvettes." Captain Lee Kase, commanding

officer of the Imperial-class star destroyer *Night Wraith* ordered, "We can't let any of them escape." The *Night Wraith* had emerged from hyperspace already in firing range of the corvettes and the Imperial vessels had not immediately recognised the ship as hostile. This hesitation doomed the smaller vessels as the star destroyer that was more than ten times their length unleashed the full fury of its turbolasers from point-blank range. With their shields down and unable to evade the attack the repeated volleys from the *Night Wraith* tore them apart.

A few second later there were more flashes of light as a full battlegroup of Alliance warships led by a pair of mon calamari MC-80 star cruisers and escorted by dozens of starfighters emerged from hyperspace close to the only line of victory-class star destroyers to have escaped being affected by the virus planted by Tobis. With overwhelming numbers as well as the element of surprise on their side this battlegroup inflicted massive damage on the star destroyers in the first few seconds of the engagement, leaving all four burning as the Alliance ships turned round for a second pass.

"Target the missile launchers on their dorsal hulls." Admiral Aphanar ordered, "If they get a firing solution on our ships then they can still inflict massive damage on us."

"Okay this is our chance." Mace said into the intercom from the pilot's seat of the *Silver Hawk*. Outside in the hangar there was general panic as crewmen rushed to try and bring key systems back on line. This meant that no-one was bothered about the captured freighter now and Mace powered up its engines before lifting off the pad and flying out of the hangar into space. From this location Mace could see the four nearby star destroyers drifting helplessly. Given the massive distances between the different lines of ships there were no flashes of turbolaser fire visible as the rebel warships struck at the Imperial vessels unaffected by their sabotage.

"So where's the boss?" Kara asked as she entered the cockpit and sat down beside Mace.

"Admiral Trell's flagship is here." Mace replied, pointing to the sensor display, "We'll need to be careful though. Her ships are being escorted by those corvettes and they won't have been infected with the virus."

"Are you thinking about jumping in some way off?" Kara asked and Mace nodded.

"About a light second." he said, "Then if it looks safe enough we'll head in the rest of the way."

From inside the cockpit of his X-wing fighter Alliance Captain Jarad Tarl smiled when he heard the admiral's orders.

"You heard her." he signalled to his squadron, "Arm torpedoes and follow me in."

The twelve starfighters raced around the control tower of the star destroyer in their path and lined themselves up on the missile doors that stretched out in front of them. The doors began to open and the moment that Jarad saw this he released a pair of proton torpedoes. The rest of his squadron copied him and two dozen torpedoes slammed into the upper hull of the star destroyer, the combined hitting power blasting through its shields and striking the missiles in their tubes. The secondary detonations of these being struck spread fire throughout the star destroyer and as Jarad's squadron looped around in case a second run was required they saw that the star destroyer was now a burning wreck.

"They're gone admiral, all of them." the comscan operator reported as the last of the corvettes was destroyed. With her line's escorts taken out and the only functional line of star destroyers now fighting for its survival Admiral Trell knew that her flagship was wide open to attack.

"Can we send a distress signal?" she asked, "Maybe someone is close enough to help."

"I'm sorry admiral, but even if our subspace communications were operating I'm picking up jamming from those rebel ships." the comscan operator responded, confirming to Admiral Trell that they were on their own.

"Then tell our engineers to get our reactor back on line." she said, "If we can't fire back then we're all dead."

"Too late." her first officer called out just as the *Night Wraith* opened fire again. However, with no corvettes left to target Captain Kase ordered his ship's turbolasers turned on the star destroyers instead. The bridge of Admiral Trell's flagship shook violently as the first volley struck the command tower and the admiral herself was thrown against a bulkhead at which point everything went black.

"Looks like the fleet is attacking now." Tharun said when the rebels felt the star destroyer shake. Vorn and Cass now also wore stolen Imperial uniforms and they were making their way towards the hangar with the intention of stealing a shuttle with which to make their escape. However, before they could continue any further Tobis' comlink activated.

"Tobis can you hear me?" Mace asked.

"Oh, err, yes captain." Tobis responded, "We, err, we have uploaded the virus and released the colonel and Cass."

"Good. It looks like the bridge of your ship has been hit and we're seeing escape pods jettisoning all over the place. We're on approach to the landing bay. Can you meet us there?" Mace asked.

"That's, err, that's where we're heading now." Tobis said but Vorn put his hand out for the comlink and Tobis

gave the device to him.

"Mace it's Vorn. We're going to be a bit late. I want to check out the bridge first. There should be something there that could prove useful to us." Vorn said before returning the comlink to Tobis, "Okay everyone," he told the rebels, "the bridge is this way." and as he walked away he waved for them to follow him.

"But shouldn't we get off this ship before it explodes?" Jaysica called out after him.

"I'm sure the colonel knows what he's doing little lady." Tharun commented as he started to follow Vorn. Then he paused and added, "Well, fifty-fifty."

When they reached the bridge the rebels found a scene of devastation. Most of the consoles were smashed or burning and bodies were scattered everywhere.

"Over here." Vorn said to the other rebels as he rushed over to one of the bodies and knelt down beside it, "She's still alive. We need to get her to the *Silver Hawk*."

"Who is it?" Jaysica asked, "A rebel spy?"

"No." Cass responded, "That's Admiral Trell."

Admiral Trell groaned as she started to open her eyes and immediately found that she could barely move her arms. Opening her eyes fully she found that she was no longer aboard her flagship and her uniform was gone. In its place she was wearing a bright orange jumpsuit that lacked any sleeves or arm holes, thus trapping her arms inside and rendering them useless. She was sat in a chair and a safety belt had been fastened around her waist that prevented her from getting up.

Looking around she saw that she was in the lounge area of a small starship and sat close by was a woman in the uniform of an Imperial lieutenant who was smiling at her.

"Boss!" Kara yelled, "The bitch is awake." then she looked at Admiral Trell and added, "In case your wondering the boss had me and Jaysica strip you and no-one messed with you while you were out cold."

"Ah Lydia, you're awake." Vorn said as he entered the *Silver Hawk's* lounge as well.

"What's going on?" Admiral Trell asked.

"What's going on is even after you handed Cass and myself over to that torturer I still came back to save your life. After all you are a flag officer in the Imperial Navy with all sorts of useful information. Now had you accepted my initial offer then things would be rather different right now. You'd still be on your way to be debriefed by Alliance intelligence but you'd be a whole lot more comfortable."