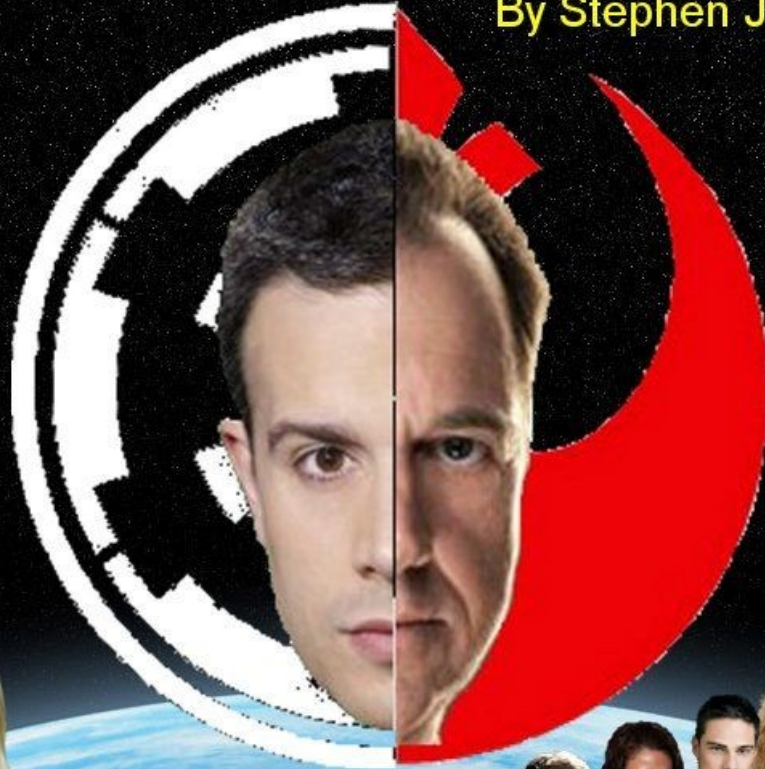


STAR WARS

9-12: It's a Trap

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...

IT'S A TRAP

EVEN AS THE ALLIANCE CONTINUES ITS ADVANCE TOWARDS ESTRAN, THE IMPERIAL FLEET IS STILL THE MOST POWERFUL FORCE IN THE SECTOR. SEEKING TO REMOVE THIS AS A THREAT IN ONE FELL SWOOP THE ALLIANCE GAMBLES BRINGING THE EMPIRE TO BATTLE...

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

General Syres Kain had gathered together several other high ranking rebels to discuss the state of the sector. The mon calamari Rear Admiral Aphanar commanded the Alliance fleet assets assigned to the sector while Colonel Max Collis commanded its special forces units, the mon calamari Colonel Shintal Sallir commanded the various covert rebel field teams operating in the sector and Colonel Harris Ergard had spent the last few years scouting the far reaches of the sector for suitable locations for the Alliance to use to establish bases. In addition to these military officers Shyla Nerin, the head of Alliance Support Services and the kaminoan Doctor Lona Na were also present to represent the non-combat arms of the Alliance to Restore the Republic, as was the intelligence officer Lieutenant Geran Pay.

The rebels stood around a holographic representation of the sector that highlighted systems in red if they were now under Alliance control or green if they were held by the Empire. The region of the sector known as the Spire Worlds, the barely charted column of stars that were located between two protruding arms of the nearby nebula had long been a hotbed of rebel and criminal activity. Navigation here was difficult and the Alliance had maintained its headquarters aboard an ancient space station in this part of the sector for this very reason. Below the Spire Worlds was the Shadow Region and now many systems here, on the far side of the sector from the capital world of Estran had thrown off Imperial control and declared for the Alliance. More significant though were the worlds in the central region of the sector known as The Heart that were now highlighted in red. So far there were only four of these, but each one represented a major resource to the Alliance. This just left the Trade Corridor where Estran and several other major worlds were located as well as the Mining Belt on the opposite side of this region where all of the systems remained highlighted in green. "Our new headquarters on Tarlen is ready." Shyla said and she pointed to one of the systems in The Heart, "The planetary shield is operational again and the population are reacting favourably to our presence." "Are there any signs that the Empire intends to move against us there?" Dr Na asked. "None." Geran replied, "It doesn't look like they have the slightest idea that we're relocating our headquarters."

"I concur with the lieutenant." Admiral Aphanar said, nodding her head, "We are still seeing the imperial fleet concentrating its efforts on locating our bases here in the Spire Worlds. Last week alone we intercepted and shot down more than fifty probe droids. Unfortunately that is forcing me to keep ships back that could otherwise be put to work expanding our area of control. We have the fleet strength to attack numerous Imperial bases in the Shadow Region and Heart."

"That's all very well admiral," General Kain said, "But the fact remains that the Imperial fleet still dominates the Trade Corridor and with that they control the primary commercial hyperspace routes through the sector." "Yes general." the mon calamari admiral agreed, "However, even with the destruction of the Pride of the Empire and recent defections from the Imperial Navy, the sector group is still too powerful for us to challenge directly. They still have more than twenty modern star destroyers available to them that are more than a match for our star cruisers and battleships."

"We have more than twice that many large warships." Doctor Na pointed out.

"Most that have just skeleton crews." Shyla pointed out, "Am I right admiral?"

"Plus most of them are twenty to thirty years out of date." Colonel Ergard added.

"Correct." Admiral Aphanar replied, "Most of the ships seized from the Kurrad Industries shipyard are being used as sources of spare parts for those we can operate at full capacity."

"The Empire has shown itself willing to deploy its larger warships in large numbers." Geran pointed out, "If we commit our forces to any major operation then the Empire will be able to respond with overwhelming force within two hours."

"So basically we can take out the odd isolated outpost or lighter warship line but we'll never be able to take a planet by force." Colonel Ergard said.

"Essentially, yes colonel." Admiral Aphanar responded.

"Limiting us to whatever covert operations my teams can manage on more heavily defended worlds." Colonel Sallir said.

"Well Alliance High Command isn't going to be sending us the reinforcement we need to be able to fight the Imperial sector group on an equal footing." General Kain said.

"Is this related to the rumours I'm hearing about a major deployment in the Outer Rim? Jakku or something?" Shyla asked.

"I can't say. All I know is that we have to fight the Empire with whatever resources we can obtain for ourselves." the general replied.

"I don't suppose that there are any more defections on the cards?" Colonel Collis said and Colonel Sallir shook his head.

"No, my teams have been working hard to undermine military discipline in the sector but they haven't come across any more Imperial crews that look ready to desert and join us." he said.

"Those star destroyers are the key." Colonel Ergard said, "Take them out and the Empire is left with nothing bigger than a heavy cruiser."

Geran smiled.

"You have an idea lieutenant?" General Kain said when he noticed this.

"Possibly." Geran answered, "I've already mentioned how the Empire is willing to deploy its major fleet assets if it thinks it has a worthwhile target. Fleet Admiral Vretan has led his forces more than once in response to a major threat. They did it to try and ambush our ships at the nebula and again when they destroyed the rakata's Star Forge. If we give them a tempting target then we ought to be able to lure their star destroyers out and ambush them."

"I thought that our ships could not match their star destroyers." Doctor Na pointed out.

"They can't." Admiral Aphanar said, "Even if we managed to defeat them, the losses we'd take would be staggering. Our cruisers can't repel that sort of firepower."

"But what if our cruisers weren't how we intended to attack them?" Geran said.

"Interesting. What are you considering lieutenant?" General Kain asked.

"Boarding actions?" Colonel Collis commented, "I've got enough men to perhaps take one star destroyer by force if it came down to it but I doubt there'd be much left of it at the end and getting aboard isn't going to be easy."

"Actually I was thinking of luring them into a minefield of sorts." Geran said, "We use the hulls of those ships we don't have the personnel to crew and turn them into flying bombs. Droids can be programmed to fly them on collision courses with the Imperial ships."

"Droids are inefficient combat pilots lieutenant." Admiral Aphanar said, "I doubt that we would destroy all of the Imperial ships. They are bound to fire on our ships and they will undoubtedly destroy a large number of them. They may also opt to jump into hyperspace as soon as they see that our ships are on collision courses with their own."

"Yes I appreciate that admiral. We'll need to hold the star destroyers here and that means risking our interdictors." Geran replied, referring to the small number of Alliance ships that were equipped with gravity well projectors that prevented hyperspace travel in the vicinity around them.

"Okay, so we lure the Empire into sending out its star destroyers and hold them in place to hit them with targeted suicide runs." General Kain said, "But that still leaves the question of what we tempt them with and how we feed them the information without it looking fake."

"What we tempt the Empire with is easy." Geran said, "We tempt it with this station. We're abandoning it anyway and if we can get their ships in close enough then overloading the main reactor ought to produce a nice big bang."

"If the Empire found this place they would attempt to board it." Colonel Ergard commented.

"Yes, they'd be after us." Shyla added, nodding in agreement.

"But how do we get the Empire here?" Admiral Aphanar asked.

"For that I'll need Colonel Sallir's help I think." Geran said and he looked at the leader of the rebel field units.

"What do you need from them?" the colonel responded.

"Admiral Aphanar has already told us about how many probe droids her ships are shooting down colonel, I'd like your people to capture one. Then we'll reprogram it to look like it spotted one of our warships and followed it back here. We'll make sure it goes back to Estran with plenty of data about this station and the numerous warships apparently protecting it."

"Very good." General Kain said, "Very well, if there are no objections then I'll approve this plan. Bring me a more detailed outline tomorrow and start selecting a team."

Mace Grayle, owner of the YT-1300 class freighter *Silver Hawk* smiled as he listened to the sound being made by his ship's repulsorlift engines.

"Listen to that." he said to his teenage daughter Cass as she sat in the seat beside him, "Perfect." then the engines suddenly spluttered and Mace frowned.

"Maybe they still need a little work dad." Cass said.

"They told me they fixed it. I trusted them to fix it." Mace said as he got up and stormed out of the cockpit, "Tobis!" he called out, "Tobis where are you?"

"Oh, err, I'm right here captain." Tobis Dorfus, the *Silver Hawk's* engineer responded as he emerged from one of the cabins, still fastening his overalls. Behind him Jaysica Horbid, the security and demolition expert of the rebel field team assigned to the *Silver Hawk* peered over his shoulder.

"Tobis you and Jaysica were supposed to have fixed that final repulsorlift coil." Mace said.

"Ah, err. Well-" Tobis began before Jaysica interrupted.

"I accidentally spilled coolant all over us both." she said, "So we had to come and change. But don't worry, we'll have it done by midday. Just like we promised."

"Midday was an hour ago." Mace said, "Now stop screwing around and fix it."

"An interesting choice of words there Mace." a female voice said and Mace turned to see a dark haired woman standing at the top of the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp.

"Jenessa." he said, recognising the university professor turned rebel field team leader Jenessa Drame, "What are you doing here?"

"Colonel Sallir ordered me here for a joint briefing with you and Vorn. Thracken should be along soon as well. So where's Vorn?" she replied.

"The colonel's not here. Nobody said anything to us about a briefing. Are you sure about it?" Mace said.

"Of course I am." Jenessa said, "Why wouldn't I be?"

"So it's my fault." another familiar voice said as Geran walked up the access ramp behind Jenessa, "This briefing was called at short notice. I have it on good authority that Lieutenant Colonel Larcus is on his way."

"Well in the mean time we may as well make ourselves comfortable." Mace said, "Help yourselves to refreshments." and he pointed to the *Silver Hawk's* small kitchen facility before looking at Tobis and Jaysica again, "Not you two. I want that engine fixed."

"Hello? Is anyone there?" a voice called out from outside the ship and Jenessa looked back over her shoulder.

"In here Thracken." she responded and a white haired man came up the ramp.

"Ah, yes. Hello." he said when he saw the other rebels present, "Is this the meeting? I was told there was a meeting here."

"There will be just as soon as Colonel Larcus gets here." Geran said.

"Grab a drink and a seat while we wait." Mace added and Thracken smiled before darting towards the kitchen and starting to rummage through the available provisions.

Vorn arrived a few minutes later, running up the access ramp and into the *Silver Hawk's* lounge where he found the other four Alliance officers waiting for him.

"Sorry I took so long." he said, "There's something wrong with the turbolifts and with the move to Tarlen maintenance isn't bothering to fix anything that's not an emergency."

"That's okay colonel, maintenance is going to be busy for the next week or so." Geran replied.

"Okay Geran, so how about you start telling us what all of this is about?" Mace said as Vorn poured himself a mug of caf and joined the other officers at the table.

"Of course." Geran said and he opened up the portable computer that he had brought with him before looking around the room, "Is that astromech of your engineer's here? We could do with its holo projector."

"Harvey." Mace called out, "Get in here." and there was an abrupt whistling as a red and white R5 unit rolled into the lounge from the workshop.

"Ah Harvey, I have need of your holo projector." Geran said and the droid rolled towards him so that he could plug his computer into its cylindrical body. As soon as this was done the droid used its built in holo projector to create a three dimensional map of the sector that immediately zoomed in on the Spire Worlds.

"A local job?" Jenessa commented and Geran smiled.

"This time, yes." he said, "The Empire is still patrolling the region and launching dozens of probe droids every week to try and locate us. Our plan is to give them what they want."

"I'm guessing that we won't actually be luring them here though." Mace said.

"Actually yes we will, though it won't be until after we've gone." Geran replied.

"So you're using the station as bait?" Vorn said and Geran nodded.

"Bait means a trap." Thracken added, "What are we trapping?"

"Right again." Geran said, "Despite our recent successes in the sector, the Empire still out guns us here and we need to do something about their fleet. Our intention is to bring the sector group's major combat vessels here where we can ambush them. Your two teams will be responsible for this part of the plan."

"With a freighter and a scout ship?" Jenessa commented, "How are we supposed to achieve that?"

"With one of these." Geran said and he adjusted the projected hologram to show an Imperial probe droid, "You need to locate and capture one of the probe droids the Empire is using." he explained, "After that you reprogram it and turn it loose. When it gets back to the Empire it will show them our current headquarters and a large number of capital ships. That should be enough to provoke a major response. If our projections are correct then we could cripple or destroy all of the Empire's star destroyers in the sector."

"Now I see why you picked our teams." Mace said, "Tobis is the best engineer in field operations and as a slicer Emissi from Jenessa's team is second only to you."

"Will you be joining us as well lieutenant?" Vorn asked.

"Not this time, no. My skills are needed here to prepare for the final stage of the plan." Geran replied, "That's why I opted for Captain Drame's team to join yours. Plus of course Captain Grammel here has spent decades searching through the Spire Worlds. He should have no trouble finding a probe droid."

"Yes, yes of course." Thracken said excitedly, "I know it all like the back of my hand." and he held up his hand with his fingers spread out from each other.

"That's your palm." Mace said and Thracken quickly turned his hand around so that the back of it was

exposed to the other rebels.

“What sort of time scale are we looking at here?” Vorn asked, looking at Geran.

“We can't move to the final stage of the plan until we've completed the evacuation of the station but that shouldn't take much more than a couple of weeks. After that though we need to move as quickly as possible, before the Empire realises that we've moved our headquarters to Tarlen.”

2.

Three starships dropped out of hyperspace in an uninhabited system in the Spire Worlds. The first was the *Silver Hawk* while just behind it followed the Ghtroc Industries 720 series freighter that Jenessa's team operated from. The third and final ship to arrive from hyperspace was a starfighter rather than a freighter, a two seat Y-wing. This was piloted by Kara Larcus, Vorn's young wife who prior to becoming his team's medic had spent some time as a fighter pilot. Now her piloting skills were going to be put to good use. In the back seat of the Y-wing Mace sat ready to operate a turreted ion cannon. This weapon was the reason why the fighter had been assigned to the mission, its ability to disrupt electronics was expected to be invaluable when dealing with a probe droid. The Y-wing's crew was rounded out with Harvey, the R5 astromech droid sitting in the socket behind the cockpit to provide jump co-ordinates when the fighter had to travel through hyperspace.

"Okay boss we're here. So now what?" Kara signalled from the Y-wing.

"Now it's up to Thracken." Vorn responded from the *Silver Hawk*. With Mace acting as gunner in the Y-wing it had been left up to Cass to fly his ship while Vorn acted as navigator, "He's travelled around these systems more than any of us. He knows where the Empire tends to search."

"Okay," Jenessa added from the cockpit of her own transport and she looked at Thracken, "where do you suggest we start?"

"Start? Yes start. But it's all different." Thracken replied, "My old ship was smaller, much smaller. Now everything else doesn't seem so big."

"I'll leave you to it." Jenessa said, "Just let Colonel Larcus and his people know where we need to fly. I'm going to go and see how preparations for handling the droid are going." and she got up from her seat and left the cockpit.

In the lounge area immediately behind the cockpit Jenessa found the other two members of her team. The slicer Emissi Caysa was sat reading from a datapad while her slicing droid watched from close by.

Meanwhile the final member of the team, a young woman called Kay Laren was stood in the centre of the room blindfolded and holding a length of plastic pipe about a metre long as if it was a sword while watched by the holographic image of a male human.

"Good." the hologram said while he judged Kay's posture, "Now strike." and Kay lunged forwards, thrusting the pipe towards Jenessa.

"Whoa! Watch what you're doing with that thing." Jenessa exclaimed and Kay stopped before striking her commanding officer and lifted her blindfold. Then she looked back towards the hologram.

"Criston, why didn't you tell me she was there?" she asked.

"You should have been able to sense her presence in the Force." the hologram replied.

"It's all a waste of time anyway." Emissi commented without looking up from her datapad, "It's not like you're ever going to find a real lightsaber anyway."

"I don't need to." Kay said, "Criston says his memory banks have all the information needed to teach me to make one."

"Just make sure you know what you're doing before you use it inside." Jenessa told Kay.

"So I take it that crazy grandpa man is hunting for the droid then." Emissi then said, looking up from her datapad and towards Jenessa.

"Thracken is co-ordinating the search pattern." Jenessa said.

"Co-ordinating. Right." Emissi said and she looked back at her datapad.

"Just tell me that you're ready to handle a probe droid when we catch one." Jenessa said and Emissi looked at her droid.

"Well Sneaky? Are we ready?" she said and the droid chirped.

"There you go captain. If we happen to stumble across a droid while grandpa reminisces about every lump of rock he's ever seen then we've got the specs committed to memory."

"You'll have Tobis to help you as well." Jenessa reminded her.

"As long as he leaves that girlfriend of his behind. I don't fancy the idea of her accidentally reactivating a probe droid in the hold." Emissi said and Jenessa sighed before returning to the cockpit.

"I've got a bad feeling about this colonel." Cass said as she flew the *Silver Hawk* towards an asteroid field that Thracken had highlighted as somewhere he had spent a lot of time surveying and somewhere from where he had observed numerous probe droids exiting hyperspace.

"You're a good pilot Cass." Vorn replied, "Besides this asteroid field isn't supposed to be particularly dense. I'm sure you'll do just fine."

"It's not my flying I'm worried about." Cass said, "It's Thracken. Does he seem like he's a few co-ordinates

short of a hyperspace jump?"

"Thracken can be a bit eccentric." Vorn admitted, "But he's spent decades out here alone and he probably knows more about the Spire Worlds than anyone else alive." then he looked towards the rear of the cockpit where his golden coloured protocol droid sat plugged into the *Silver Hawk's* communication system, "Picked anything up yet Jeeves?" he asked.

"Regrettably no Lieutenant Colonel Larcus sir." the droid answered, "I am detecting no transmissions of any kind."

"Asteroids dead ahead." Cass announced and Vorn looked forwards through the cockpit canopy. Initially he saw nothing but points of light against the blackness of space but then he saw one of those points moving in relation to the others, indicating that it was relatively close to the *Silver Hawk* whereas the stars he could see were many light years distant. Looking down at the sensor display he saw that this moving point of light was an asteroid about six kilometres across and that there were many more smaller examples of the lumps of rock drifting close by it, these being too small to see with the naked eye.

"That looks like it'll do." he said, "Are you ready?"

Cass nodded.

"It's not like I can't break off and try again is it?" she said and Vorn smiled, thinking about how landing on an asteroid was not something most pilots would ever attempt and that there would be no do-over if Cass crashed the *Silver Hawk* into it.

"Just take your time over this." he told her.

Flying the *Silver Hawk* towards the largest asteroid in the cluster Cass slowed the freighter down as it got closer and when the enormous lump of rock was practically all that could be seen through the canopy she brought the ship to a complete stop. From inside the cockpit the asteroid appeared to be spinning and so Cass fired the *Silver Hawk's* manoeuvring thrusters to put an equal spin on the ship before edging even closer. Then she turned the ship so that the asteroid was beneath it and, lowering the landing gear she set the freighter down on the asteroid's surface.

It was only then that Vorn realised that he had been holding his breath and he exhaled.

"Very good." he said, "A very smooth landing indeed. Now shut down everything we don't need and let's wait and see what happens. I'm going to let the others know where we're up to."

Vorn found the other three rebels aboard the *Silver Hawk*, Tobis, Jaysica and the former mercenary Tharun Verser in the lounge. All three were sat at the table wearing the safety harnesses built into the seats.

"We're there." he told them.

"We've landed?" Tharun said, frowning, "I never felt anything."

"No, Cass set us down perfectly." Vorn replied.

"So when she has to set us down on a spinning lump of rock in space she does it perfectly. How come we get bounced all around when she has to land us on something solid and stable?" Jaysica said, releasing her harness.

"I guess the two lots of bouncing around just cancel one another out little lady." Tharun replied.

"Well we're going dark." Vorn said, "We'll use passive sensors to watch for anything exiting hyperspace and Jeeves is monitoring for Imperial transmissions. If we do find anything then we'll call in Kara and Mace to deal with it."

"So what do we do until then?" Jaysica asked.

"We wait I suppose." Tharun said before Vorn could answer.

While the *Silver Hawk* had been heading for the asteroid field, Thracken had been flying his ship towards the rings system that surrounded the system's primary planet, a barren and storm racked world that was barely habitable. The rings were made up largely of lumps of ice no more than two metres across, with only a handful exceeding that size. This made entering the rings relatively safe since collisions with the vast majority of the pieces of ice would inflict nothing more than cosmetic damage to a ship. Sheltering inside the ring of debris Thracken also powered down most of the freighter's systems, using passive sensors only to monitor the system while Emissi tasked Sneaky with monitoring communication channels.

On the other hand Kara kept the Y-wing in open space so that the fighter had a direct line of sight to both of the other two rebel starships, though she too powered down most of the Y-wing's systems to make it appear as if it was just another piece of debris drifting in space.

"Kara, how do you stand this?" Mace said from the back seat of the fighter.

"Stand what?" Kara responded as she began to unwrap a ration bar.

"Sitting still for hours on end." Mace said, shifting in his seat, "At least in the *Silver Hawk* I can get up to use the refresher rather than needing some plastic bag hooked up to my-"

"Trying to eat here." Kara interrupted, holding up the ration bar and then lowering it to take a bite. She quickly chewed and swallowed what she had bitten before continuing with, "You just get used to it." then she smiled and added, "We're wearing vacc suits though. You could always try stepping outside."

"I think not." Mace said. Then he looked down at the console in front of him, focusing on the small display

that was linked to the Y-wing's astromech socket, "So Harvey, picked anything up yet?" he asked and the droid responded with an abrupt burst of noise.

"What did he say?" Kara said rather than look at her own console.

"He said that he'd have told us if he had." Mace replied, "Also that he hopes that this assignment doesn't last too long because he likes being able to move around when he wants to as well."

3.

It was still Cass's turn to keep an eye on the *Silver Hawk's* sensors and she was sat in the cockpit with a mug of caf when a shadow moved past the canopy that prompted her to turn around suddenly.

"Jeeves, did you see that?" she asked.

"I am afraid not Miss Cass. I am currently focused on monitoring communication channels. What is wrong?"

"I think there's something out there." Cass said and then she looked towards the open doorway leading out of the cockpit, "Hey!" she shouted, "Come see this."

Tharun was the first into the cockpit, arriving just seconds later.

"What's wrong kid?" he said.

"There's something outside the ship." she told him just as the other rebels aboard arrived.

"What's going on?" Vorn said.

"Cass thinks we've got company." Tharun replied.

"A probe droid?" Jaysica said.

"Oh that is not likely Miss Horbid." Jeeves replied, "Neither our sensors nor my monitoring of communication channels has picked up anything in the system other than ourselves and the other two Alliance ships assigned to this mission."

"There!" Cass exclaimed, pointing out onto the surface of the asteroid where a creature could be seen crawling across it. The dim light made it difficult to make out precise details but it was obvious that the creature possessed bat-like wings and a long thin tail.

"Err, ah, mynock." Tobis said.

"Oh kriff." Tharun said, frowning at the mention of the energy eating parasites, "What are they doing here?"

"This asteroid probably absorbs enough solar energy to make it worth their while nesting here. Plus there are the metals themselves." Vorn said.

"I've never seen a mynock before." Cass commented.

"There's not much see kid. They're a nuisance." Tharun replied and he looked at Vorn, "So colonel, shall we suit up and go outside and take a look?"

"We better had." Vorn said, "We may have escaped notice by being largely powered down but eventually those pests will notice us."

"Should I warn dad and the others?" Cass suggested but Vorn shook his head.

"No, don't break communication silence." he said, "Besides, I expect Thracken knew all about the mynock but just forgot to tell us about them. We'll use Mace's deksweeper to clear any we find on the hull. A stun pulse should dislodge them without risking any damage to the *Silver Hawk* itself."

"I'll go get it." Tharun said before there was a bleeping from the control console.

"Tobis what's happening?" Jaysica exclaimed, grabbing the engineer by his arm, "Are those things out there attacking us?"

"Oh, err, no." Tobis said as he sat down beside Cass, "That, err, that's a sensor alert. Something just dropped out of hyperspace."

"Whatever it was, it was small." Cass said, "We just picked up a minor burst of cronau radiation."

"An Imperial probe droid." Vorn said, "That will be its hyperspace pod. Time to signal Kara."

"But what about the mynock?" Jaysica asked.

"We'll deal with them later. For now all that matters is that probe droid." Vorn answered.

"Kara? Dad? Can you hear me?" Cass asked and in the cockpit of the Y-wing Mace sat up with a start.

"Cass, yes I can hear you." he responded.

"Dad we've just picked up a probe droid's hyperspace pod arriving in the system. It's located about a quarter of a million kilometres further out from the system's star than us."

"I've got it." Kara said, "Harvey we need a micro jump to those co-ordinates."

Harvey had been pre-programmed with the data necessary for making short hyperspace jumps to the locations of both rebel freighters and it required only a slight adjustment to one set of numbers to move the exit point further from the system's star. While the little droid worked to make this adjustment Kara acted to bring the rest of the Y-wing's systems on line, in particular its weapons and when Harvey signalled that the jump co-ordinates were ready she already had the Y-wing ready to jump.

"Hold on." she said, "Here we go." and then she activated the hyperdrive.

Travelling from one part of the system to another required only a few moments in hyperspace and the two rebels in the cockpit barely had chance to register that their fighter had entered the alternate dimension before the same stars they had been looking at just before reappeared. The trip was so short that not even the pattern of the stars changed.

What did change though was that the Y-wing's active sensors were now registering two metallic objects several thousand kilometres away from their new position. One of these appeared to be adrift while the second, smaller object was registering as powered as it moved towards the massive frozen world on the outer edge of the system.

"Okay it looks like we've got a probe droid and a hyperspace pod." Kara said, "I'm setting a course for the droid now. Are you ready to engage?"

"Ion cannons primed and ready to fire." Mace replied as he took hold of the controls for the turret and released the trigger safety locks.

"Then here we go. Accelerating to attack speed." Kara said.

An old yet dependable design, Y-wings were far from being the fastest starfighters in the Alliance fleet but they could still outrun an Imperial probe droid in open space and the fighter rapidly began to close on the droid's position. The probe droid itself soon detected the Y-wing from the strong energy emissions relating to running an ion drive at full power. In accordance with its programming the droid first attempted to identify the oncoming vessel but as soon as it successfully labelled the starfighter as a type that was often used by the Rebel Alliance its defensive programming kicked in. This was a risky point in the plan to capture the droid. Imperial probe droids included self destruct mechanisms that were intended to prevent them from falling into the hands of rebels or anyone else who may try to steal one and sometimes these would trigger as soon as the droid realised that it had been detected.

However, this droid was programmed to try and evade capture before resorting to the drastic solution of self destruction and it immediately turned away from the rebel fighter and began to fly in a zigzag pattern in the opposite direction.

"Come on." Kara said, "Shoot it."

"I'm trying to get a fix on it." Mace replied as he moved the Y-wings turret back and forth in an attempt to keep up with the movement of the probe droid.

"Well have you noticed that it's heading for the asteroid field Thracken had the boss hide in with the Silver Hawk?" Kara asked.

"I know. I see it."

"Well then, how about you shoot that damned thing before it gets among the rocks and crashes into one of them, if you finally do manage to disable it?"

"Hey, you chose to be the pilot. Let me be the gunner." Mace said and Kara sighed.

"I knew we'd have been better off with a longprobe." Kara muttered, referring to the single seat version of the Y-wing fighter that was used for reconnaissance missions. Possessing only a single seat, the pilot operated all of the fighter's weapons in that version, "Hell even a B-wing would have been better."

Harvey then let out a sudden burst of chirps as well.

"What did he say?" Mace asked, keeping his focus on the ion cannons' targeting system rather than the translation screen.

"He thinks you're taking too long as well." Kara told him.

"Everyone's an expert all of a sudden." Mace said right before he fired the ion cannon and a bright pulse of energy shot towards the probe droid, missing it only narrowly before impacting harmlessly on the surface of one of the smaller asteroids in the field ahead. The effect of the highly charged particles passing so close to the droid was still enough to disrupt its systems slightly and rather than zigzagging it began to spin.

"Quick! Hit it again before it flips the suicide switch." Kara exclaimed and Mace fired again, this time firing several rapid shots rather than just one. One after another these slammed into the already out of control probe droid and it was consumed in lightning as the highly charged blasts overloaded its systems, shutting them down in an instant. This left the droid without power and tumbling through space, its multiple limbs waving at random as it spun.

"Got it!" Mace said excitedly.

"Okay, droid is disabled." Kara said, "It looks intact as well. I better let the boss know that we've got a present for him."

4.

Exiting the Y-wing in their vacuum suits, Kara and Mace used rocket packs to move across the space between the starfighter and the disabled probe droid before using their rocket packs again to stop its spin.

"Okay now we wait for the colonel to get here." Mace said and Kara nodded.

"Keep hold of this thing." she said, "I'm going back for Harvey." and she let go of the probe droid before using her rocket pack to fly back to the Y-wing fighter where Tobis' astromech droid was in the process of releasing itself from the socket built into the fighter's fuselage.

It was not the *Silver Hawk* that arrived first though, instead Jenessa's Ghtroc 720 that dropped out of hyperspace following a micro jump and flew towards the probe droid. Thracken manoeuvred the Ghtroc freighter carefully towards the probe droid, positioning the ship so that the droid was directly below one of its cargo doors and matching its rate of drift.

"We're in position." he said over the intercom and in the cargo hold Jenessa reached for the controls to the cargo door.

"Acknowledged. Opening up." she responded before she pressed her hand down on the hatch controls.

A force field activated to cover the hatchway before the doors started to slide open, preventing the air inside the cargo hold from being blown out into space and taking her along with it. Jenessa peered out through the hatch, standing as far back from it as she could just in case the ship suddenly lurched so that she would not fall out into space. Below the ship she saw Mace looking back up at her and gripping the probe droid tightly he fired his rocket pack to propel both him and it up through the force field into the hold before one last burst from the rocket pack moved them both sideways away from the hatch and Mace let the probe droid fall to the deck.

"Careful!" Jenessa exclaimed, flinching as the probe droid came crashing to the deck, "What if it reactivates in here?"

"Then it'll probably kill us both." Mace replied as he removed the helmet from his vacuum suit.

It was then that Kara came through the force field as well, dragging Harvey along with her and like Mace she fired one last burst from her rocket pack to get clear of the hatch before the freighter's internal gravity field pulled her and Harvey back down to the deck and Harvey let out an abrupt burst of sound when Kara let go of the droid and dropped it the last few centimetres.

"Okay so how about we get this thing reprogrammed?" she said, lifting the faceplate of her helmet.

Jenessa closed the large cargo hatch in the floor before she opened the door that led to the freighter's lounge to reveal Emissi and Kay waiting outside with Sneaky.

"Time to get to work." she said as the two young women entered the hold and approached the probe droid.

"This thing isn't going to wake up is it?" Kay asked, moving towards the droid only slowly and staring at the blaster mounted on its body and Kara snorted.

"After being hit with an ion cannon? No chance." she said, "It'll take hours for its circuits to dissipate the charge enough for the reset to work."

"And since I'll be disconnecting its power pack it won't even be able to reset when the charge does go."

Emissi added, "Now come over here and give me a hand. I need those spare memory packs. You too Sneaky, we need to make sure that this blends in perfectly."

As Emissi and Kay set to work on opening up the probe droid to access its internal systems Jenessa approached Mace and Kara instead.

"It seems that the *Silver Hawk's* having some mynock problems at the moment." she told them, "Colonel Larcus told me that they'd head straight for the hyperspace pod as soon as they finished making sure the ship was clear of the things."

"Perhaps we ought to head back and give them a hand." Kara suggested and Mace nodded in agreement.

"Assuming you've got everything in hand here." he said.

"Sure." Emissi responded, reaching inside the probe droid's casing to connect her datapad to its central processor, "With the fake memory Tobis and I whipped up before leaving headquarters all I need to do is upload it into the droid and we're all set."

"Yeah, come on captain." Kara said, "Let's back to the *Silver Hawk* before the klutz tries clearing mynocks with Tharun's rifle." and Mace frowned.

"She better not." he said, "I've only just got that ship back together. I'm not having her tear it apart again."

The *Silver Hawk* was close enough that Mace and Kara could reach it in the Y-wing without having to make another hyperspace jump to avoid spending hours travelling there. By the time they reached the freighter Vorn and Tharun had already confirmed it was clear of mynocks and it had taken up a position close to the probe droid's hyperspace pod.

Stowing their helmets in the storage racks of the *Silver Hawk's* air lock, Mace and Kara exited it to find Tobis and Jaysica getting into vacuum suits of their own as they prepared for an EVA to the nearby hyperspace pod.

"Ah," Vorn said when he saw them, "You're back. How are things going with Jenessa's team?"

"That slicer of hers is hard at work boss." Kara replied.

"She didn't seem to think that uploading the data into the probe droid would present much trouble." Mace added.

"Oh, err, I think she was downplaying that." Tobis commented, "A probe droid's memory system is very complex."

"What about the hyperdrive pod?" Cass asked from the entrance to the short corridor that led to the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit.

"I'm sure Tobis knows what he's doing." Jaysica replied as she struggled with connecting an air hose to her suit.

"Something you don't with that." Kara said as she walked over to Jaysica and pulled the hose from her hand,

"You were trying to plug this into your waste collection system." she said, smiling, "Talking poodoo is one thing. Trying to breathe it is another." and then she connected the hose to the correct socket, "Okay you're set. Just do up the main suit and put your helmet on."

Exiting the *Silver Hawk* through the same upper hatch Mace and Kara had used to get aboard, Tobis took Jaysica's hand and reached for the controls to his rocket pack.

"I can do this myself Tobis." she said.

"Oh, err, I just thought we'd save fuel this way." Tobis replied nervously. The statement was a lie. He knew that Jaysica's ability to operate a rocket pack was extremely limited and he did not want to see her flying off out of control.

Inside the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit the other members of the team were watching and listening in on the comlink signals between Tobis and Jaysica and Kara smiled when she heard this.

"Yeah," she said, "this way he doesn't have to go rushing off to save her and burn up all his fuel doing it."

This provoked a smile from Tharun while Vorn and Mace just exchanged glances while pretending not to have heard her.

Outside the ship, Jaysica took hold of Tobis and he used his rocket pack to propel the pair of them across to the hyperspace pod where they secured themselves to it. Having already deployed its probe droid, the hyperspace pod was open at the front and completely inactive. This allowed Tobis to climb inside while Jaysica waited outside the pod with his bulky tool kit.

"Err, hand me the hydrospanner." he said and Jaysica passed him the tool.

With this Tobis was able to open up the covering plate of the pod's hyperdrive. This was intended for just a single jump, deploying the probe droid from a base or starship to any system within range, but as long as there was fuel remaining the pod could be pressed into service again and make further jumps. The only real limitation came in calculating the co-ordinates needed for this. The onboard navigation computer held only the co-ordinates for a single jump and so the probe droid itself would need to calculate any further jumps itself. This was not an issue for Tobis however, everything to do with the droid itself was down to Emissi and Sneaky. His responsibility was to give the hyperdrive the appearance of having been used repeatedly to lend credence to the false memories of having uncovered the Alliance headquarters. The effect of making the hyperdrive appear to have failed from overuse was an easy one to create and as soon as Tobis was able to see the mechanism he drew the blaster pistol from his belt and pressed the muzzle up against the hyperdrive motivator.

"Err, here goes." he said, averting his gaze before pulling the trigger.

There was a bright flash of red as the weapon discharged directly into the hyperdrive, blasting a hole through the motivator itself and raising the temperature of several nearby parts of the hyperdrive that they either melted or the individual components on their circuit boards came loose as the solder holding them in place softened. The end result of this was a hyperdrive that was utterly useless, its key components all destroyed.

"Okay, err, that's it." Tobis said as he holstered his pistol and then began to replace the cover plate.

"*Silver Hawk*," Jaysica transmitted while Tobis finished his work, "Tobis has disabled the hyperdrive. We'll be ready for Captain Drame to drop the droid off soon."

In the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit Vorn smiled and activated the main communication system.

"Jenessa," he signalled, "Tobis is done and we're all set at our end. How are you doing?"

"Emissi's just finishing up on the droid." Jenessa replied, "When that thing reboots it'll remember engaging Kara's Y-wing but think that the fighter withdrew and that it as able to follow her through hyperspace to our headquarters. Then it'll have taken some good clear pictures of our ships there and returned here before it could be shot down."

"Okay tell her well done from me." Vorn said, "Then get the droid back here and drop it off."

"We're on our way." Jenessa said and then the channel went dead.

It took several minutes for the Ghtroc to arrive at the hyperspace pod and when it did Jenessa opened the cargo hatch again so that the droid inside the hold could be pushed back into space. Then it was simply a matter of returning the droid to its hyperspace pod and reconnecting its power supply. The charge induced in the droid's circuits had dissipated completely by this point and under normal circumstances it would have restarted immediately. However, Emissi had taken this into account and introduced a delay into the droid's start up routine that would give the rebels an hour to get clear. With the probe droid returned to its hyperspace pod it was left adrift in space once more and the three rebel ships rapidly flew away, abandoning it and jumping to hyperspace before the hour's delay expired and it could reactivate and detect them. As soon as the droid returned to life its tampered with memory told it that it had just exited hyperspace, having followed the rebel Y-wing fighter back to its headquarters by making multiple jumps along the fighter's exit vector until it detected the emissions from the headquarters itself. The repeated use of the pod's hyperdrive to reach the rebel base and then escape had burned out the device and another jump to take the data collected back to Estran would not be possible. Instead the droid aligned its subspace transmitter to the sector's capital and began to send the information back wirelessly, giving the Empire the precise location of the base and the details of the rebel starships protecting it.

"Enter." General Kain said and the door to the quarters he had been assigned aboard Admiral Aphanar's flagship, the *Wave Rider*, opened to reveal Geran standing in the corridor outside.

"I just thought I'd come and tell you myself general," he said, "Lieutenant Colonel Larcus has just checked in. They successfully intercepted a probe droid and reprogrammed it. The Empire should be receiving its transmission at any time now."

5.

The headquarters of the Imperial Navy's sector group was a massive complex of dry docks and hangars combined with the most advanced detection and communication handling equipment available that orbited Estran, tethered to the surface via a turbolift shaft almost thirty-six thousand kilometres in length to match the distance required for a geostationary orbit around the planet. The heart of this station was the command and control centre that was designed to be capable of co-ordinating the actions of more than two thousand starships and more than twenty times that number of star fighters all around the sector. Here dozens of specialist technicians and officers monitored communications from every ship in the sector group.

"Admiral I think you should see this." one such technician called out and Fleet Admiral Vretan, the sector's highest ranking naval officer, walked across the command centre to his duty station.

"What is it specialist?" he asked.

"A transmission from one of our probe droids in the Spire Worlds sir. The droid's hyperspace pod has been disabled and it is unable to return to us but it has sent us the footage of what its found out there." the technician told him and at the same time he brought up the recorded footage he had been looking at on one of the large wall mounted monitors. Located centrally in the video feed was the ancient navigation beacon that the Alliance was known to have been using as its headquarters in the sector. Once before it had been located but by the time a force could be mobilised the rebels had been able to rig it with an improvised hyperdrive and move it elsewhere in deep space. Now however, Admiral Vretan had another chance to destroy the Alliance's command and control in the sector, potentially dealing them a crippling blow.

The ancient space station was not the only thing in the image though. Gathered close by it were more than a dozen warships, all of Clone Wars vintage but still among the most powerful available to the Alliance fleet.

Destroying these would also go a long way to weakening the Alliance forces in the sector. Sadly the footage did not feature the two mon calamari built MC-80 star cruisers that the Alliance was known to be operating in the sector but even destroying just the ships known to be present would be a major achievement. With their command and control destroyed and their fleet severely weakened the remaining rebels would be far easier to deal with. Ordinarily Admiral Vretan would have wanted to order another probe droid or a scout ship be sent to these co-ordinates to confirm what he was looking at but any delay now could mean some or all of the Alliance capital ships leaving and if a second scout was detected then the rebels would flee en masse.

"Alert all commands." Admiral Vretan announced, "I want every star destroyer unit in the fleet to rendezvous one parsec core-ward of the Bytan system as soon as possible. Now someone get me a priority channel to Moff Horatian."

All around the fleet admiral technicians and officers worked frantically to distribute his orders to the sector group while one of them established a link to the capital building on the surface of Estran below the orbiting fleet headquarters.

"I have the moff for you now admiral." the technician announced and at the same time a holographic image of the moff materialised close to where Fleet Admiral Vretan was standing.

"Admiral, what's happening?" the moff asked, "I just got told you're putting the entire fleet on a mobilisation footing."

"I'm sorry for the lack of notice sir but the situation is one of the utmost urgency. We've just received a transmission from one of our probe droids in the Spire Worlds. It has located not only a large part of the fleet stolen from the Kurrad Industries shipyards several months ago but also the space station that the rebellion is using as its headquarters. Their mon calamari vessels are not among the ships there but there are still many others and this is too good an opportunity to miss." Admiral Vretan explained.

"That's excellent news admiral. You intend to attack them?"

"I do moff, I'm calling in every star destroyer in the sector as well as several interdicator cruisers to prevent the rebels from just fleeing with their ships when we arrive."

"You'll be leaving our worlds thinly defended admiral." Moff Horatian pointed out, "I know we've done this sort of thing before but the rebellion wasn't quite so bold then as they are now they control actual worlds in the sector."

"Yes moff, but this operation shouldn't take much more than a day at most. Even if the rebels are planning to launch a major offensive then we'll be back before they can penetrate any of our planetary shields."

"Very well admiral, you may continue."

"Thank you moff." Admiral Vretan said, nodding as the holographic image of Moff Horatian faded. Then he turned to a nearby technician and added, "Alert my star destroyer to prepare for my arrival."

The core of the Imperial fleet that assembled in the Shadow Region was made up of star destroyers, eighteen of the ubiquitous Imperial-class and three of the similar but hangar-less tector-class all drawn from

the battle squadrons of the sector group. Until recently the Imperial Navy had even more of the massive vessels, including an even larger allegiance-class battlecruiser but these had fallen victim to rebel attacks. Now though Fleet Admiral Vretan hoped to deliver a killing blow to the rebellion that would prevent any further such losses. In addition to the star destroyers Fleet Admiral Vretan had included a force of a dozen interdicator cruisers. Their crews were under orders to activate the gravity well projectors their cruisers were equipped with as soon as they dropped out of hyperspace. These would prevent any ships in the vicinity from forming stable hyperspace windows or maintaining current travel through hyperspace and ensure that the rebels would be forced to stand and fight.

Fleet Admiral Vretan smiled as he looked out of the viewports along the front of the bridge of his own Imperial-class star destroyer, the *Iron Warrior* and saw the massed fleet of warships.

"All ships reporting ready admiral." one of his officers said as he walked up to the admiral and stood at attention.

"Very good commander. Tell them to execute the planned hyperspace jump. All ships should come to battle stations as soon as we exit hyperspace and attack, there's no need for them to wait for orders from me."

"Yes admiral." the officer said and he turned and strode towards one of the nearby crew pits to begin relay Fleet Admiral Vretan's orders to the crewmen sat in them.

Less than a minute later there were flashes of light outside the viewports as the Imperial fleet began to jump to hyperspace before the stars themselves blurred as the *Iron Warrior* itself made the jump. The trip through hyperspace lasted just a few minutes, the rendezvous point having been chosen to permit the most rapid final jump possible and when the star destroyers returned to realspace Admiral Vretan saw the shape of ancient navigation beacon in the distance.

"I have you now." he said to himself.

"The Imperial fleet has arrived general." Geran said as he and a group of the Alliance's senior command staff in the sector stood aboard the *Wave Rider* and watched the feed from the now abandoned space station.

"They have brought their own interdictors." Admiral Aphanar said when she saw the smaller heavy cruisers appear in the hologram.

"That's useful." General Kain said, nodding, "Rear admiral, do you think that the Imperial interdictors will provide sufficient disruption to hyperspace travel that we'll be able to avoid having to send in our own?"

"Undoubtedly general." the mon calamari admiral answered, "They have deployed their ships to block all exit routes and behind their own heavy units."

"In that case have our interdictors remain on standby and send the order to begin the attack to our ships." General Kain said.

Aboard a massive Lucrehulk-class battleship that had been designated the flag ship for this operation a T-series super tactical droid sat silently in the commander's position while all around it B-1 battle droids tasked as a command crew waited for orders.

"Sir!" one of the battle droids exclaimed, "Enemy vessels have exited hyperspace and we have been ordered to engage them."

"Acknowledged." the super tactical droid responded, "Raise shields and power weapons. Scramble all vulture droids. What is the state of our jamming?"

At first there was no response to this but then one of battle droids turned to the droid beside it.

"He's talking to you." it said.

"How was I supposed to know? I'm programmed for destruction not electronics." the other said before it turned its head towards the super tactical droid, "Jamming is on line sir." it said, "The enemy's life form detectors won't be able to get any readings from our ships."

The first flashes of turbolaser fire came from the space station that had served for many years as the rebel headquarters. Crewed by droids that had been rapidly reprogrammed for a starship gunnery role the accuracy of the turbolaser fire left a great deal to be desired but having only just left hyperspace the Imperial fleet was still double checking the relative positions of their own ships before making any sudden manoeuvres that could send them crashing into one another and against such easy targets even the crudely programmed battle droids were able to find their marks.

Aboard the tector-class star destroyer *Horrific* Admiral Hall staggered as his ship was the first to be hit and then he looked angrily at his crew.

"Well what are you waiting for?" he yelled, "Return fire!"

The *Horrific's* own turbolasers suddenly came to life as it fired on the space station, the Imperial gun crews targeting the source of the fire that had just impacted on the star destroyer's shields. Though the space station was also shielded, these shields dated back to the time of its construction more than four thousand years earlier and the star destroyer's powerful turbolasers were easily able to penetrate them, demolishing a battery of the station's weapons with the first salvo.

In space around the station the numerous Alliance ships were all turning to face the Imperial task force and volleys of fire were already passing between the two forces. At the same time the hangars of the two fleets of warships opened to disgorge swarms of starfighters, various models of TIE fighter in the Empire's case and vulture droid fighters from the Alliance vessels. The opposing fighter squadrons raced towards one another and opened fire as soon as they were within range. Just as with the capital ships, the Imperial TIE fighters with their organic pilots outclassed the droid brains of their opponents and their starfighters were far more modern than the vulture droids that were almost half a century old in design terms. The result of this was that the Imperial fighters smashed through the rebel line and a wave of TIE bombers was soon racing towards the rebel capital ships.

"Sir we have bombers on approach. What do we do now?" a battle droid called out from one of the comscan consoles on the flagship's bridge.

"Full power to ion drives." the super tactical droid announced, "All ships are to lay on collision courses for Imperial vessels and accelerate. Stand by on hyperdrive. Prepare to jump to hyperspace."

6.

"Admiral." the bridge commander said as Fleet Admiral Vretan watched the battle unfold through the *Iron Warrior's* bridge viewports.

"Yes commander?" he asked.

"Admiral we're having trouble maintaining communication with the fleet. The rebels appear to have put extensive jamming equipment in place." the commander told him.

"That's be expected. They would want to cover the escape of their evacuation transports."

"But admiral we haven't detected any attempts to evacuate their headquarters." the commander said and Admiral Vretan frowned.

"That's not like them." he said, "They should be making some attempt to run our blockade by now."

"Admiral I have enemy ships in sector forty-seven coming straight at us. They are powering their hyperdrive." a technician called out from a crew pit.

"Ridiculous." the commander exclaimed, "Even these rebel scum must realise that they'll just be dragged straight back out of hyperspace by our interditors."

"Admiral it looks like the rebels are heading for more of our ships." the comscan technician added.

"How many more?" Admiral Vretan asked and the technician checked his display before looking up at him.

"All of them." he said.

Admiral Vretan turned suddenly to look out of the forward viewports again and now he could just about make out the three kilometre wide broken ring shape of the *Lucrehulk-class* battleship lumbering towards the *Iron Warrior*. The out of date converted freighter could not match the sublight speed of an Imperial-class star destroyer but a jump into hyperspace, no matter how brief before being dragged back out again was something different entirely.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." the admiral said, "The rebel fighters, what types are they?"

"Vultures droids admiral." the comscan technician told him.

"Nothing else? No manned types at all?" Admiral Vretan asked.

"No sir. Just vulture droids."

"What about the capital ships. How many crew are we picking up on them?" the admiral asked next.

"We don't have any readings sir." the comscan technician replied.

"It's the jamming admiral." the commander added, "We don't have life form readings on any of the rebel ships or their space station."

"It's a trap!" Admiral Vretan exclaimed, "We need to retreat before those rebel cruisers can engage their hyperdrives."

"But admiral-" the commander began.

"They don't want to escape." Admiral Vretan interrupted, "They'll jump to hyperspace just long enough to reach us before being dragged back to realspace and ramming us. These are suicide runs, that's why their ships are crewed entirely by droids. They knew we were coming."

"But admiral, our interditors are blocking our retreat and we can't contact them to get them to shut off their gravity well projectors." the commander said.

"Too late!" the comscan technician shouted as the *Iron Warrior's* sensors picked up a massive power surge in the *Lucrehulk's* hyperdrive.

"So we're about to ram into that star destroyer, right?" a battle droid commented.

"That's the plan." the one beside it replied.

"So how exactly are we supposed to get off this ship first?" the first asked right as the *Lucrehulk's* hyperdrive was engaged. However, instead of the white lights of hyperspace, the bridge was suddenly filled with light of many different colours and alarms sounded all around the room as the powerful gravity well projectors of the Imperial interdicator-class cruisers disrupted the battleship's transit into hyperspace. Almost instantly the battleship was dragged back into realspace but now it was right in front of the *Iron Warrior* and it ploughed into the Imperial-class star destroyer at a significant fraction of the speed of light.

The *Lucrehulk-class* battleship broke up on impact with the star destroyer's particle shields but the individual pieces of debris, now molten from the force of the impact, continued on their previous path. Viewed from the bridge this had the appearance of a wall of flames engulfing the *Iron Warrior* from its prow and moving back towards the command tower and Admiral Vretan closed his eyes just as the viewports exploded inwards and the bridge was consumed in flames.

"What the heel was that?" Admiral Hall exclaimed when he saw the *Iron Warrior* destroyed in a massive explosion.

"Admiral the *Iron Warrior* was just rammed by a rebel ship. We've got rebels closing on our position as well." the *Horrific's* comscan officer announced right before there was another massive explosion as a second star destroyer was rammed before it could do anything to prevent it.

"Take evasive action!" Admiral Hall ordered, "Turn us aside."

The bridge crew felt the *Horrific* tilt as its helmsman turned the ship sharply to starboard. Technically this presented a much bigger target area to the oncoming rebel vessel, a munificent-class star frigate, but it also meant that the droid crew had to try and account for the lateral movement that varied as the helmsman continued to make random course adjustments in their jump calculations. This proved to be more than they were capable of. With so little time in which to make the calculations, the vessel was dragged back out of hyperspace by the gravity wells that littered the area it ended up just above the triangular hull of the star destroyer. The star frigate's large ventral fin assembly still tore into the *Horrific*, but losing a large portion of the prow was not enough to inflict crippling damage on the tector-class vessel. Furthermore the droid crew were unable to make any further attempts at ramming as the *Horrific's* gun crews opened fire on the rebel vessel from point blank range. Its shields down from entering hyperspace, the star frigate was torn apart by the barrage of powerful energy blasts that ripped straight through it.

Two more star destroyers attempted to turn away from the rebel vessels closing on their positions but the heavy jamming signals prevented them from communicating with one another and the two vessels collided with one another, shearing the command tower off one while the other suffered massive damage to its hangar. The level of destruction now being inflicted on the star destroyers was obvious to the fighter squadron leaders and being much closer to one another than the capital ships were, they were just about able to cut through the jamming.

"Break off from the station." the most senior fighter squadron leader told his pilots, "We need to intercept those rebel cruisers. Target their engines." However, as the TIE fighters were looping around the space station and strafing any targets of opportunity such as weapon batteries or shield emitters an alarm sounded as the fighter leader's sensors picked up a sudden spike in power output from the space station and a fraction of a second later the station's reactor overloaded and exploded, tearing apart the entire space station and sending pieces of debris that varied in size from microscopic up to some the size of a light cruiser flying out in all directions. Caught so close to the space station when it exploded, the lightweight and unshielded TIE fighters and bombers were torn apart and pieces of them became part of the expanding cloud of debris.

Admiral Hall flinched at the flare of light from the exploding space station and seconds later he heard the sound of impacts on the *Horrific* as the debris could expand enough to reach the star destroyer.

"Comscan, what's the state of the fleet?" he demanded.

"Eight ships destroyed admiral, no wait, nine ships destroyed. Five more critically damaged. I'm picking up escape pod launches from two of them."

"Fourteen. Fourteen star destroyers gone." Admiral Hall muttered.

"Admiral I have another rebel ship closing." the comscan officer called out.

"Concentrate all fire on that vessel. Target its engines, do whatever you have to do to keep it away from us. Helm find us a way out of here. This battle is lost, we need to pull back while we still can."

"Admiral, what about the other surviving ships?" one of the bridge officers asked.

"Have we found a way through the rebel jamming yet?" Admiral Hall responded.

"No admiral but-" the officer said.

"Then they're on their own. Get us out of here." the admiral interrupted.

The *Horrific* continued to turn, its helmsman making sure that the ship did not remain travelling in a straight line for more than a few seconds at a time. Given that none of the tector-class star destroyer's turbolasers covered its rear arc the helmsman could not just turn away from the battle without exposing the ship's vulnerable aft so instead he flew in a path that took the ship around the fighting and kept one of its flanks facing towards it until there was a break in the fighting and he could at last bring the star destroyer's ion drives to full power and race straight ahead.

This took the *Horrific* between the interdicator cruisers that still surrounded the area and beyond the reach of the gravity well projectors that were all focused forwards.

"Admiral we are clear to jump." the ship's navigator announced, "What is our destination?"

"Estran." Admiral Hall replied, "The moff needs to know what happened here."

"Yes admiral. Entering co-ordinates into navigation computer now. Ready to jump in five seconds."

"Enemy vessel closing from the stern." the comscan operator announced suddenly and Admiral Hall pictured his vessel being struck just as it was about escape the slaughter into hyperspace. However, now that it was beyond the gravity well projectors as well the rebel ship had to rely purely on its ion drive to reach the *Horrific* and it was too slow to manage this, being several hundred kilometres short when there was a massive flash of light that heralded the *Horrific's* departure.

"One just got away." Colonel Ergard commented as the *Horrific* jumped to hyperspace and disappeared from

the tactical display aboard the *Wave Rider*.

"And another." Colonel Sallir added when a second star destroyer followed the example of the *Horrific* and fled into hyperspace. By this point the crews of the interdicator cruisers had realised that they had lost and were beginning to shut down their gravity projectors so that they too could retreat but the surviving rebel ships were starting to turn their attention on them. Unlike the heavily armed and armoured star destroyers that were more than a match in one on one combat for any of the rebel vessels, the interdicator cruisers carried a meagre conventional armament that was intended mainly to be used to keep starfighters away. All of the vulture droids had been destroyed by now, the last of them consumed in the same explosion that claimed all of the Imperial TIE fighters and now the only rebel ships advancing towards the interdicator cruisers were better armed and protected than they were. One by one the icons on the holographic display that represented the interdicator cruisers began to vanish as they were destroyed by the remaining droid controlled rebel vessels until only three of them were left. These had shut down their gravity well projectors by now and before the rebel ships could finish them off all three jumped into hyperspace in rapid succession and vanished.

"It's over general." Admiral Aphanar said.

"Two star destroyers got away." Colonel Collis pointed out.

"Perhaps, but they were both badly damaged." Admiral Aphanar replied, "I would not regard either to be a major threat until they can be repaired. Something that is likely to take the Empire a significant amount of time."

"Then we need to move ahead quickly." General Kain said and he reached out to adjust the holographic display, changing it to show an image of a planet that all of the gathered rebels recognised, "Our next step is the invasion of Estran itself."