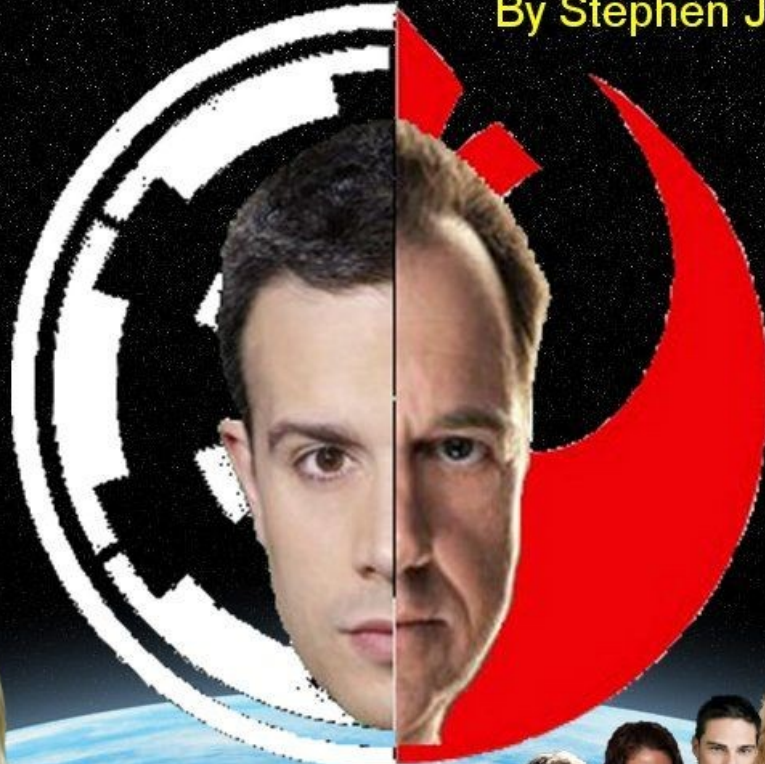


STAR WARS

1-03: Ship of Shadows

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...

SHIP OF SHADOWS

WHEN AN EXPERIMENTAL STAR DESTROYER BREAKS AWAY FROM THE CONSTRUCTION YARDS AND DISAPPEARS BEFORE IT CAN BE COMMISSIONED, BOTH THE EMPIRE AND THE REBELLION BECOME CAUGHT UP IN A RACE TO RECOVER IT. THE OCCUPANTS OF THE SILVER HAWK FIND THEMSELVES NOT ONLY BATTLING THE VESSEL'S SAVAGE OCCUPANTS BUT ALSO FACED WITH THE QUESTION OF JUST WHAT CAUSED THE SHIP TO VANISH IN THE FIRST PLACE...

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

"Are you actually going to drink that, or just stare at it all night?"

Tobis looked up from the glass he had been staring at and instead looked towards the pair standing over him. Both were human, Kara Bilstran and Tharun Verser, two of his fellow rebels that were permanently stationed aboard the light freighter for which he was engineer.

"So where's Jaysica gone?" Tharun asked as the big mercenary sat down beside him.

"Yes we all want to know how far you got tonight," Kara added as she too sat down so that Tobis was between the two rebels.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Tobis said.

"He's still in denial." Tharun said to Kara.

"Which means he's not got anywhere." Kara replied, then she looked at Tobis again, "So where is the klutz anyway?"

"Oh I don't know," Tobis said, "she said she was coming over here when we got our drinks at the bar, but then she never turned up. She must have met someone she'd rather be with."

"Unlucky lad," Tharun said, "in that case I suggest you drink up and get good and drunk." he took a deep gulp from his own drink.

"What are you doing?" someone suddenly yelled out elsewhere in the nightclub.

"Ah, I think I know where Jaysica's got to." Kara commented, and all three rebels looked towards the source of the shout, as did many other of the nightclubs patrons.

There, busy trying to wipe the remains of her drink off the woman she'd just spilt it over they saw the young woman they had been talking about. Somehow she'd been able to tip her drink down the front of another young woman in the group that she'd been talking to: and as well as staining her dress bright blue had also managed to get the tiny umbrella that had decorated the drink stuck down the front of the woman's dress.

"Just get lost," the woman yelled loudly, "no one's interested in you anyway!" and she shoved Jaysica. Before the woman could do anything more a man stood beside her grabbed hold of her and pulled her back. He said something to Jaysica that the other rebels couldn't hear from where they sat that caused her to turn and walk away from him. Moments later she found her way to the table where the rebels sat.

"You aren't going to believe what just happened to me." she said sitting down next to Tharun and managing to knock into him as he tried to drink also.

"You almost got your ass kicked for tipping your drink over some other idiot?" Tharun said and he gulped down what remained of his drink before Jaysica could make him spill that too.

"I didn't do anything on purpose," Jaysica protested, "anyway it's not like her and her friends would have come out of a fight better than us."

"What's with this 'us'?" Tharun said.

"Yeah," added Kara, "we would have been right here watching you get your ass kicked."

"I'd have helped." Tobis interrupted, and Jaysica laughed.

"Oh that's funny." she said, "The idea of you in a nightclub brawl," then while Tobis stared back into his drink she turned her attention to Kara and Tharun, "Why wouldn't you help me?" she asked, sounding hurt.

"Do the words 'low profile' mean anything to you?" Tharun asked her quietly, "It's what the major said we should keep, remember?"

"Yes," Kara interrupted, "it wouldn't do for us wanted fugitives to be attracting attention for the sake of a brawl."

"Where is Major Larcus anyway?" Jaysica asked, "I don't see him around."

"That's because he and Mace decided that it would be better to hold their top secret meeting somewhere less public than here," Kara said, "so our contact behind the bar took them out back."

"These images were recorded by the hive." the Alliance Intelligence officer said, referring to a surveillance post operated by a tribe of the insectoid verpine species. The images that appeared in the air in the centre of the room before Vorn Larcus and Mace Grayle were of a structure in space. Both men knew what the structure was, it was an Imperial shipyard, the massive framework of dry docks, hangars and berths open to space was used not only for housing and maintaining vessels belonging to the Imperial Navy's sector fleet, but also for manufacturing new ones.

"This is the vessel that interests us," the officer continued, and he changed the image to one of a large ship in the early stages of construction, still mainly a collection of supporting struts that would one day be used to support the superstructure and internal systems.

"A star destroyer?" Vorn said, "Imperial-class. The Empire already has over twenty five thousand of them. What's so interesting about this one?" and Mace nodded in agreement.

"These images are about six months old," the intelligence officer said, "while this one," and he changed to another image that showed the partially built star destroyer now with much of its hull plating installed, "is from two months ago."

"What are those spikes?" Mace asked before Vorn could. The image clearly showed that the hull of the star destroyer was dotted with spikes that stuck directly out.

"They are just the beginning," the officer said, and he changed to yet another image of the star destroyer. This new one showed the ship almost complete, and now the spikes each mounted complex antenna arrays at their tips, "and at this point we had no idea what they were for. But then the hive recorded this three days ago," and he switched from his latest still image to a video.

The film showed the star destroyer powering up, though it appeared to be doing so erratically. Lights flickered from view ports all over the ship, and the glow of the exhaust from its main drives at first varied in brightness before they came fully to life. The massive capital ship began to move, even before the various tethers and gangways to the surrounding framework of the construction dock had been disconnected. Under the strain of the star destroyer pulling at them, these links to the dockyard first stretched and bent, before they tore loose, just about visible from some were the shapes of construction workers as they were blown from pressurised corridors to their deaths in the vacuum of space.

Free of the space station, the star destroyer continued to move away from the planet below.

"Some sort of malfunction?" Vorn said.

"Just wait for the best bit," the intelligence officer said, smiling, and Vorn turned back to the video just in time to see the star destroyer vanish. It did not move out of the frame, and there was not the characteristic flash of a vessel entering hyperspace. Vorn and Mace both gasped.

"What was that?" Mace exclaimed.

"There was no malfunction in the recording," the intelligence officer explained, "the images were recorded as a continuous sequence, and the ship was far too close to the planet to make an entry into hyperspace, which leaves only one other option."

"A cloaking device," Vorn said.

"Yes, a cloaking device," the intelligence officer repeated, "one good enough to defeat every sensor that the hive has, and it appears that the Empire is rather keen to get it back," and he showed them another set of still images in rapid succession. In each image another docked starship was powering up or manoeuvring out of their docking berth.

"The hive monitored these ships making the jump to hyperspace," the intelligence officer explained, "they jumped individually instead of in formation, and all of them had different exit vectors."

"So they aren't moving to a staging area for an assault then," Vorn said, "they're spreading out for maximum coverage."

"That's correct, we've observed a few of them when they came out of hyperspace later on, and every one of them began using their active sensors to scan the space around them immediately. But even when they detected some of our ships they didn't attack them."

"Let me guess," Vorn said to the agent, "you want us to try and find that thing."

Mace snorted.

"Yes," he said, "because a single freighter is going to do much better than a couple of warship squadrons."

Mild sarcasm tinged his voice.

"Oh there's no need to search for the ship," the agent answered, "we've already found her."

Vorn and Mace looked at one another.

"How?" Mace asked.

"By chance actually. One of our frigates was being re-supplied when the star destroyer jumped out of hyperspace. The bulk transport jumped to hyperspace immediately, while the frigate stayed around just long enough to cover it. During that time the star destroyer did nothing at all, no active scans, no manoeuvres, and it didn't fire on our ship," then the agent brought up another image, "and our frigate took this picture."

The ship shown was undoubtedly the same vessel as Mace and Vorn had seen forcing its way out of the construction dock in the earlier video, its hull bristling with the characteristic antenna arrays.

"We want you to investigate this ship," the agent said, "get as much information as you can about it. Any questions?"

"Yes," Mace said, "Are you insane? That's a star destroyer, a *star destroyer*. Its sixteen hundred metres long, packs enough firepower to ruin the day of most inhabited planets and carries over forty thousand crew and soldiers. There are six of us in a ship with one laser cannon."

"Oh we just want you to observe the ship," the officer said, "take active scans if possible, but there's no need for you to get close to it."

"Good," said Mace dryly, "Because I'd hate to think of the odds of surviving an attack on an Imperial star destroyer."

2.

The space outside the cockpit's view port appeared empty when Mace brought the *Silver Hawk* out of hyperspace. They were between star systems here, with no planets or other large bodies. Beside him Tobis sat in the co-pilot's seat, studying the readings from the ship's sensors. For now they were just using passive systems, hoping that they could locate the star destroyer without it seeing them first.

"I've found something," Tobis said, "large object emitting thermal energy dead ahead."

"So its not a comet or other lump of debris then?" Vorn asked from a seat behind them.

"Not at this distance," Mace said, glancing at the sensors himself, "they wouldn't give off this amount of heat, I think this what we're looking for."

"Alert Kara," Vorn said.

"Kara, are you ready?" Mace spoke into the ship's internal communication system, "we'll be coming up on the target shortly. If they launch fighters at us I want you to keep them off our back."

"All ready," Kara replied from the gunnery station where she controlled the ship's only weapon, a dorsally mounted laser cannon.

"Right," Mace said turning to Vorn, "how should we do this then?"

"Get in behind the ship," Vorn suggested, "at least that way we'll be out of the firing arcs of their turrets. Then just drift in closer while we watch her."

"Okay, let's do this," Mace said, and then he added, "Tobis, let me know if they start scanning us."

Tobis just nodded.

Carefully, Mace steered the *Silver Hawk* towards the star destroyer, using the minimum amount of power he could to try and keep their presence hidden from the Imperial ship. He was all too aware that a single blast from it could shatter his own ship. The immense size of the star destroyer meant that the rebels had seen it while it was still a considerable distance from them and the occupants of the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit waited with baited breath as their ship drew closer to the unmoving warship waiting for it to react to their presence. When the star destroyer was close enough for him to be able to identify key features such as the docking bay and control tower, Mace cautiously swung his ship around to get into a position to its rear, where none of its guns would be able to target him. It would still be able to launch fighters of course, but hopefully Kara would be able to hold them off long enough for him to make the jump to hyperspace.

"She looks dead in space," Vorn said when he got a good look at the star destroyer, "Tobis, what do your sensors say?"

"The energy output of that ship is abnormally low." Tobis replied, "I think that the basic environmental systems are operating because she's radiating heat from all decks, but beyond that I don't think that she's operational."

"I want to try something," Vorn said, and he activated the *Silver Hawk's* communications array, "Attention star destroyer ahead of me, can you read me?" he said, and he waited for a reply that never came. A grin spread across Vorn's face.

"What?" Mace said, "I don't like that look on your face."

"Maybe she's abandoned." Vorn said, "Maybe the crew abandoned her before she broke loose of the construction yard."

"So what?" Mace asked.

"So do you know how to fly a star destroyer?" Vorn asked in return.

"Oh," Tobis interrupted, "a star destroyer requires a crew of thousands even just keep its basic systems running properly."

"For the sake of capturing a ship this big," Vorn replied grinning, "I'm sure that the Alliance would lend us a crew for a while."

"So you two know what to do then?" Vorn asked as Mace and Kara completed checking the seals on their vacuum suits.

"Sure boss," Kara replied, "we go outside and take a walk across the hull of the ship until we find a way inside without getting noticed by anyone who may still be on board."

"While the rest of you stay here nice and warm and actively scan that thing," Mace added.

"Right," Vorn said, "now let's get to it."

Mace and Kara put on their helmets and stepped into the airlock. After the door was shut behind them there was the hiss of air being pumped out and they felt their suits inflate slightly as the pressure outside them dropped to nothing. Then the airlock ramp lowered. Outside the hull of the star destroyer filled the gap between the ramp and the *Silver Hawk's* hull.

"Here goes." Mace said, and he ran down the ramp before leaping off the end towards the nearby hull of the star destroyer. He reached out his arms and grabbed hold of a length of pipe running across the star destroyer's hull when he landed. A moment later Kara landed beside him.

"I hate doing that," she said as she stood up on the hull.

"Me too," Mace agreed, "give me a starship any day." and he too stood up, "Now let's go find a way in."

The enormous mass of the star destroyer provided just enough of a gravitational pull to allow Kara and mace to walk across the hull without drifting of into space, but they did so very carefully, choosing a path with as many surface features as possible so that they would have something to hang onto as well.

Their leap had landed them on the top of the control tower and they headed forward, rounding the corner of the tower and then walking down its front face.

"This looks so weird." Kara said, looking at the star destroyer's main hull. Because of the angle she was looking at it from it appeared to go upwards for hundreds of metres.

"I try not to think about it," Mace replied, "Here's the bridge now."

Immediately ahead of the pair there was a windowed protrusion in the hull, and they approached it carefully. Inside the room was in darkness.

"Bodies," Kara said when she looked in through the armoured glass.

"I see them," Mace said, "doesn't look like a full bridge crew though."

Inside the bridge, just visible in the gloom, several bodies lay on the deck. That they did not float around demonstrating that the ship's artificial gravity systems were functional at least here.

"*Silver Hawk* come in," Mace said into his suit's comlink.

"Go ahead." Vorn's voice came back.

"We're looking into the bridge now, its in darkness and there are bodies inside," Mace told him.

There was a pause.

"Can you get inside?" Vorn asked.

"Not from here," Mace told him, "but there's and airlock nearby, we can use that and then make our way to the bridge from inside."

"Copy that, go ahead. We'll take the ship around to the docking bay and see if we can land there."

"Understood." Mace said and he broke the link before instead communicating with Kara, "Let's head back to that airlock we passed."

"Good idea," Kara replied, "I'm freezing out here."

The exterior door of the airlock was only a few metres away, two decks above the bridge that Mace and Kara desired to gain access to. As expected there was a control panel located beside the door, but instead of being illuminated the buttons on it were dark.

"There's no power to the door." Kara said.

"Then I'll have to do this the hard way then." Mace replied, and he bent down next to a covered panel beside the door controls. Though the panel was closed, there was no lock, and the cover was labelled 'EMERGENCY USE ONLY.' Mace opened up the panel to reveal a lever beneath it and a dial labelled 'OPEN' and 'CLOSE' next to it. Steadying himself on the hull with one hand, he turned the dial so that it was in the 'open' position and grabbed the lever with the other hand and pulled it. Nothing happened when he pulled it, but Mace had not expected it to. Instead he returned the lever to its original position and then pulled it again, then he repeated this once more.

The door suddenly raised up slightly, and there was a blast of escaping air from the gap beneath it. Mace continued to crank the lever back and forth, and the door rose slowly.

"I think that's enough," Kara said when the gap under the door looked to be big enough for her to get through. She crouched down by the gap and tried to crawl through.

"A couple of more times." she said, when her suit proved to be slightly too big.

"Perhaps if you did it, you're ass would be thin enough to fit," Mace said sarcastically as he worked the lever again, but Kara ignored his teasing and instead just crawled into the airlock and then Mace followed her.

Inside the airlock, the two rebels held up their glow rods and looked around. There was what felt like standard gravity here, and they could stand and walk easily.

"Here," Kara said, and she pointed at a panel identical to the one that Mace had opened to access the manual door release. Mace opened up the hatch and turned the dial to 'close' before he began to move the lever up and down, causing the partially open exterior door to slowly drop shut once more. As he did this, Kara located the manual control for the interior door. When the door was fully shut, Mace turned the dial to a position between the 'open' and 'closed' labels, releasing the control to the interior door.

"Get ready with your blaster," he said to Kara when he turned the interior door's dial to 'open', "we can't be sure that there's no-one on the other side of this," and then he began to open the door.

Tobis kept the speed of the *Silver Hawk* low as he piloted it around the star destroyer.

"It looks like the bay shield is up." Vorn said, staring out of the cockpit at the massive warship above them.

Tobis glanced at the sensors.

"Yes, but its just the low power shield to keep the air in," he told Vorn, "we can just fly right through it." and he carefully brought he ship up through the shield into the star destroyer's massive hangar bay. The bay, like the rest of the ship, was in darkness and it was only when the running lights of the *Silver Hawk* were shone inside it that the rebels got a look at what was inside.

"There aren't any TIE fighters," Vorn said surprised when he saw the racks that would have normally held the ship's fighter wing were empty.

"And no shuttles either." Tobis said when he saw the hangars to the side of the docking bay, "It looks like we have our pick of parking spots."

"Which ever one is closest to the traffic control booth," Vorn said, "we need Harvey to access the ship's computer."

Tobis set the *Silver Hawk* down in one of the empty hangar bays as close to the control booth as he could get and shut down the engines.

"We're there." he said.

3.

The first to emerge when the entry ramp was lowered was Tharun; the mercenary wore his armour and held his rifle at the ready just in case any threat lurked in the darkness. He turned around slowly, letting his rifle follow the light cast from his glow rod.

"It's clear," he called back up the ramp, and his fellow rebels followed him from the ship.

"Right then," Vorn said, "we're splitting up. Tobis and I will head to the control booth with Harvey and try and find out what's going on here, I want the pair of you," and he pointed to Tharun and Jaysica, "to search the bay. Even if we can't claim the entire ship, then we can at least take everything that isn't welded down."

"Excuse me major Larcus," a shrill voice came from back up the ramp, and a golden coloured humanoid droid appeared, "but what am I to do?"

"Stay and guard the ship Jeeves," Vorn said to his protocol droid, "shut the door and don't open it for anyone but us."

"Certainly sir," Jeeves answered, and he retreated back into the ship.

Lacking legs R5-HV, or 'Harvey' as he was known to the crew of the *Silver Hawk*, could not climb the ladders that were the most direct route to the walkway on which the hangar bay's control booth was located, so instead Vorn and Torbis had to circle around the hangar bay to where a ramp lead up to the walkway. Like the bay itself, the control booth was in darkness, none of the control consoles had power either.

"There's a computer port over here," Vorn said, when the light cast from Tobis's glowrod reflected off a socket beneath one of the consoles, "get Harvey to work."

Harvey rolled towards the socket and extended his interface plug that he inserted into the socket. As he did this, Tobis produced his hand held datapad and a cable that he used to connect the compact computer to Harvey. The small droid chirped as it attempted to access the star destroyer's computer network, and as it did so a text translation into basic of its communication appeared on the datapad's screen.

"That can't be right," Tobis said, "check it again Harvey."

"What did he say?" Vorn asked.

"He said that it's impossible to access the computer network because the ship's computer core has not been initialised."

"What? Has it been damaged? Is that why the ship's dead in space?"

"No sir, he means that the computer core has never even had its operating system installed on it, let alone the programs that allow the ship's systems to be operated."

"So how come there's heat, air and gravity?" Vorn asked.

"Those system's aren't controlled by the computer core," Tobis explained, "In case of a ship wide computer failure they are each controlled by numerous smaller systems that are run by dedicated micro controllers. These are monitored and calibrated by the droids that are normally a part of the ship's standard equipment."

"What about the lights?"

Tobis held up his glowrod and shone it around the room.

"Actually," he said when he saw what he was looking for, and he walked towards the control booth's doorway and pressed a button on the wall. Immediately the lights inside the control booth came on, "There are local overrides for those everywhere," he added and he turned off his glowrod, "Most internal doors should work perfectly as well, their motors tap directly into the same power grid as the lights. Only airlocks, security and blast doors rely on the computer network, so we'll have to either avoid them or try and force them open."

Meanwhile Jaysica and Tharun were making their way out of the hangar bay and into the cluster of storage areas adjoining it. Ahead of them went Jaysica's compact boxlike mouse droid, MSE-6-PNI or 'Penny' as Jaysica liked to call it.

"Penny, don't get too far ahead," she called out after the droid, and the droid halted.

"I say we start here," Tharun said, shining his glowrod towards the nearest storage room door.

"Why that one?" Jaysica asked.

"Because the door's already open," Tharun replied.

"In here it is then," Jaysica said, and she stepped through the door. She then cried out as she tripped over something just beyond the doorway in the darkness.

"Are you alright?" Tharun said, approaching Jaysica.

"I think so," Jaysica replied, "there's something on the floor here." She reached out and picked up her glowrod from where it had fallen and then angled it so that it cast light on the object that had tripped her. Jaysica gasped and scabbled backwards across the floor as the corpse was illuminated.

"Its alright," Tharun said as he crouched down by the body, "he can't hurt you."

"Never mind him," Jaysica said, "its whatever did that to him that I'm more worried about."

Tharun held his glowrod closer to the dead man at his feet. The man was lying in a pool of what looked like his own blood, most of which appeared to have come from a large wound on his neck. He wore an Imperial Naval officer's uniform, and his rank badge identified him as a lieutenant. The uniform was badly ripped, especially on its arms where more wounds were revealed.

"These are defensive wounds," Tharun said, "and some of them look like teeth marks."

"What from an animal?" Jaysica asked.

"No," Tharun answered, "they look human."

"What happened here?" Kara said as she and Mace held up their glowrods, illuminating the bridge. There were at least a dozen corpses here, some in Imperial Navy uniforms, others in the overalls worn by workers at the construction yard that the star destroyer had forced its way out of. There was blood everywhere.

"Some of them were shot," Mace said, looking at the body of a worker who had the unmistakable burns inflicted by a blaster hit at point blank range on his chest, "and some look to have been torn apart," and he turned instead to a body in a Navy uniform.

Kara looked at the wounds on the bodies for herself.

"Mace," she said slowly, "look at the workers, and then look at the navy guys."

"What about them?" Mace asked looking at the bodies all around him. Then he added "Oh."

"Oh indeed," Kara replied.

"Err guys," Kara's voice came over the comlink, "has anyone else found any bodies?"

"Copy that," Tharun answered, "Jaysica stumbled on one. Literally. It looked like someone had taken a bite out of him, well more than one bite actually."

"Was he in a Navy uniform by any chance?" Kara asked.

"Of course he was," Tharun replied, "this a star destroyer, who did you expect to find here?"

"Well we've just found a whole load of workers from the construction yard on the bridge, they've been shot."

"So what?"

"So there's also a bunch of navy guys who look like something tried to have them for lunch. I think it was the workers."

"Tharun look out!" Jaysica yelled suddenly, and Tharun dropped his comlink and glowrod as the construction worker leapt onto him.

The man snarled at Tharun as the mercenary tried to throw him off, but the best he could do was to clamp his hand around the man's neck and keep him from sinking his teeth into Tharun's face. This close, even in the darkness, Tharun could see that the whites of the man's eyes were streaked with red. But more worrying was the obvious blood around the man's mouth.

"Help me!" Tharun shouted to Jaysica who was stood watching in shock.

Fumbling in her pocket, Jaysica pulled out her blaster, it was a compact hold out weapon designed for concealment instead of stopping power, and she took aim at the man attacking Tharun. Afraid that she would hit her fellow rebel, Jaysica moved her aim away from the man's head and chest towards the base of his spine and squeezed the trigger. There was a flash as the blaster discharged, and a bright red bolt struck the man exactly where Jaysica had aimed. Any normal opponent would scream in agony from an injury such as that, but instead the man just collapsed without crying out as his spine was severed and continued to try to claw and bite at Tharun, still snarling. The man's collapse allowed Tharun to roll his attacker off him and scabble away. The man began to drag himself across the deck towards Tharun using his arms while his legs trailed uselessly behind him until a second blaster bolt hit him in the head and he stopped moving.

"Thanks," Tharun said to Jaysica as he got back to his feet, "Now where's my comlink gone?"

"What's happening?" Vorn said into his comlink. He had heard the exchange between Kara and Tharun that was interrupted following Jaysica's shout.

"I don't know boss," Kara answered, "one moment they're there and the next they were cut off."

"You and Mace stay put," Vorn ordered Kara, "I'll take Tobis and look for Tharun and Jaysica, They were searching near here, then we'll head up the bridge and join you."

"So we have to stay here in the dark with all these dead people," Kara said, "Thanks."

Vorn looked around to see how close Tobis was stood, and then he whispered into the comlink, "If it bothers you that much you could always try looking for a light switch," and he broke the link.

"The boss says he's coming up here," Kara said to Mace.

"Well I don't mind admitting that I'll feel safer when there are more of us up here," he replied as he shined his glowrod over some of the bodies.

"And he's bringing Tharun and Jaysica too," Kara added.

"Jaysica? Okay now I don't feel quite so safe," Mace said, and both he and Kara grinned.

"He also suggested we look for a light switch," Kara said, and she began to shine her glowrod over the walls of the bridge, "A-ha," she added when she located a control panel beside the entrance. She went to the panel and began to press the buttons on it, as she did so the bridge lighting activated.

"Oh crap." Kara said when the bridge was fully illuminated.

"What?" said Mace, staring at her, "That's much better."

"Not the lights," Kara replied and she pointed past him.

"Oh crap." Mace said as well when he turned and saw some of the supposedly dead construction workers getting to their feet.

"Hey guys, how are you? Mace said to the men staggering towards him, but none of them replied. All of the men looked at the pair of rebels with vacant looks on their faces, and blood was clearly visible around their mouths and on their hands, though unlike the workers who had not got to their feet these men showed no signs of having been shot. Kara and Mace both drew their blasters.

"You know, I'd take it as a personal favour if you lot would just stop right there," Mace said, but the men kept coming towards him, "Oh well," he said, "boring conversation anyway," and he shot the man nearest to him in the chest.

The man fell to the deck without a sound and for a brief moment his comrades stopped and looked down at the dead body before they looked back towards Mace. The lead man then let out a ghostly wail and broke into a run, his arms stretched out in front of him. Mace aimed his blaster and fired again, the powerful weapon dropping this man also. But the man was close enough to Mace that when he fell his momentum carried him far enough forwards for his body to crash into Mace and knock him from the upper deck of the bridge into one of the pits where most of the flight systems were controlled from.

"Mace!" Kara cried out, and she fired her blaster towards the remaining workers who were heading for where Mace had fallen.

Her fire struck most of the shambling men, but one of them reached the edge of the pit and toppled over the edge, disappearing from view. As she ran towards the pit herself, Kara heard snarls from within it, followed by a scream of pain. Looking over the edge into the pit Kara saw Mace wrestling with the worker who had fallen in after him. Mace's blaster had fallen out of his reach, and he was tried to drive the man off with his bare hands. Mace had blocked an attempt by the man to bite him by putting his forearm between them, but instead the man had just bitten down on his arm. Fortunately, the vacuum suit that Mace still wore was designed to be resistant to rips and tears and so the man was unable to bite through it. He was however, keeping a grip on Mace's arm with his teeth.

"Mace, catch!" Kara yelled, and she tossed her own blaster down into the pit beside him. Mace reached out for the weapon as the man began to claw unsuccessfully at his vacuum suit before placing the muzzle under his chin and pulling the trigger.

"Are you okay?" Kara shouted down as Mace pushing the dead worker from on top of him.

"I'm fine," he replied, "Thankfully this guy couldn't bite through my suit so I don't need your services right now," and then he held Kara's blaster up for her.

"Thanks." she said, taking her gun from him.

"Look at their eyes," Mace said; indicating the body of the man who had attacked him, "They're bright red." Kara knelt down by another for a closer look.

"Haemorrhaging of the blood vessels in the eyeballs," she said, "it can happen spontaneously to an individual, but when it's happening to a group then it suggests something else is going on."

4.

Tobis lead the way out of the hangar control booth, glow rod in one hand and blaster in the other. He and Vorn were half way towards the ramp when Tobis stopped suddenly.

"I've got a bad feeling about this," he said, staring into the dimness of the hangar bay.

"What is it?" Vorn asked, looking down from the walkway also.

Below, just visible in the light provided by the glow of the shield holding the atmosphere in the hangar numerous shapes could be made out making their way slowly towards the walkway.

Humanoid shapes.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this," Vorn said.

Vorn reached to his belt where there was a roughly triangular black plastic container. Kneeling down, he opened the container at its base and tipped the contents onto the walkway.

"Try and raise Tharun and Jaysica while I assemble this," Vorn said to Tobis, "tell them we need back up."

Tobis holstered his blaster and pulled out his comlink while Vorn set to work. The lightweight blaster rifle was not meant for combat, it was intended for small game hunting by people waiting for rescue, but it had a longer range than his compact pistol and a much higher ammunition capacity.

"I can't raise either of them," Tobis said.

"Never mind," Vorn said, "whoever's down there is at the ramp now."

Tobis looked down again and saw that Vorn was right; the shambling group had reached the ramp that was their only way down unless they were going to abandon Harvey and were now making their way up towards the rebels.

"Your blaster man, draw your blaster," Vorn snapped as he raised his survival rifle.

"Should we be shooting at them like this?" Tobis asked as he swapped his comlink for his blaster once more.

"They're uniformed Imperial workers on a naval vessel," Vorn said to him, "under our rules of engagement they're a legitimate target." and he fired.

"Was that a gunshot?" Jaysica said as Tharun reached under a container for his comlink.

"Sounded like it," he replied.

"That's not good is it?"

"Rarely," and having retrieved his comlink he stood up again, "I think we should get back to the hangar," he said, "It sounded like the shots came from there."

"Okay," Jaysica said nervously, "wait, where's Penny?"

"Jaysica we have to go," Tharun said, "Tobis and Vorn could be in trouble."

"You go ahead," said Jaysica, "I have to find Penny first."

"Fine, but don't stay too long," Tharun said before he sprinted back towards the hangar.

Jaysica had modified her droid with an internal comlink, and rather than shout out loud for it to return to her she searched through her backpack for her own comlink and switched it on.

"Penny come back to the storage room," she said into the comlink, and in response there was a short series of electronic whistles and chirps. Jaysica stood at the doorway, looking in both directions, but Penny did not appear.

"Penny signal me if you can't get back to me," Jaysica said into her comlink, and there was another burst of electronic communication in return, "Call out," Jaysica said, "I'm coming for you," and this time the electronic sounds came from down the corridor, "I'm coming," Jaysica said into her comlink before putting it in her pocket and sprinting down the corridor towards her droid.

"Get back," Vorn said as the workers got closer. The blaster fire from him and Tobis had reduced the numbers of the approaching group, but they had climbed the ramp and were now moving along the walkway itself.

"What?" Tobis said.

"Get back," Vorn said again, "we'll fall back to the booth and try and hold them off there."

Tobis understood, and he turned and ran back towards the control booth they had not long since left with Harvey right behind him.

Vorn's survival rifle had a limited rate of fire, and did not make for a very good weapon for laying down covering fire, but it was the best that he had, and so Vorn kept firing as he too retreated. One of his shots struck a worker in his leg, and the man toppled over the walkway railing and plummeted to the deck below. Though he must have been alive at least until he hit the deck, the man did not cry out at all.

"Can we lock this door?" Vorn asked Tobis when he entered the control booth.

"I don't know," Tobis replied, "that sort of function is controlled by the main computer."

"Then can you override it locally?"

"I'll try," Tobis said and he hit the button to drop the control booth door shut.

"Don't try," Vorn snapped, "either do it or don't!"

"Wait!" Tobis said suddenly, "The motor." and he began to remove a panel by the base of the door using a pocket multitool.

"What about the motor?" Vorn asked.

"I can just do this," Tobis said as he pulled the panel from the wall. Behind it Vorn saw the motor that raised and lowered the door that was the only way in or out of the control booth. Tobis folded the screwdriver tip back into the tool and instead used the pliers to snip through a wire that ran to the motor.

"There," he said, standing up, "now the signal to open and close the door can't reach the motor," and at that moment there was the sound of someone right outside the door slamming their fist against its control panel.

"Excellent work," Vorn said, "now they can't get in."

"Yes," Tobis replied, "but we can't get out either." and the two men stood in silence as the control booth was filled with the sound of fists pounding on the door.

"Penny?" Jaysica called out, and she followed the answering chirps through an open doorway into another storage room, where she found her droid lying on its side, its wheels spinning around uselessly.

"Let me help you." Jaysica said, and she knelt down, tucked her blaster in her belt and righted her droid,

"How did you get like that?" she said to the droid, even though she knew she would not get an answer that she could understand. Then she noticed something strange about the light in the storage room, it did not all appear to be coming from her glowrod.

Jaysica looked around and she caught sight of an open panel near to the ceiling at the far end of the room from the doorway, a faint glow emanating from the hole.

"Wait right here Penny," Jaysica said to her droid, and she headed for the source of the light.

Jaysica was not very tall, not much over one and a half metres and easily the shortest member of her team, and the hole exposed by the open panel was far too high up the wall for her to reach. Instead she dragged a cargo container under the hole and stood up on it. The added height of the container allowed her to see into the hole, and beyond it she saw a conduit that in which were numerous pipes and cable clusters. She also saw that one of the pipes appeared to be made of a glowing crystal.

"What is that?" Jaysica said to herself as she switched off her glowrod and put it in her backpack. She then reached into the conduit and pulled herself up into it.

The walls inside the tunnel were flat metal and difficult to get a proper grip on, and Jaysica had to push her feet against the wall of the storage room in order to lift herself higher up. She had just got her body inside the conduit as far as her waist when she felt something tug and she realised that her belt was caught on something at the opening.

Jaysica wriggled, trying to shake herself loose of whatever she was caught on, kicking out with her legs as she did so. Suddenly she heard the sound of the container she had stood on falling away from the hole, and she slid backwards slightly, stopping only when her trapped belt caught her.

"No, no, no!" Jaysica exclaimed as she realised her position. She was trapped in the conduit, with her legs hanging out in the storage room. Her first thought was to summon help with her comlink, but her arms were reaching out in front of her, and the conduit was too narrow for her to reach down to the pocket where she had put it.

"Penny," she said softly, "go and get help."

Tharun came to a sudden halt when he got back to the hangar. Above him he could see light spilling from the control booth where Vorn and Tobis had been heading when he last saw them, and because the hangar was in darkness Tharun could make out the shapes of two people he took to be his fellow rebels still inside the booth. Outside the booth, barely visible in the shadows, was a crowd of humanoid figures trying to get in.

Tharun activated his comlink.

"Major Larcus can you read me?" he said.

"Yes, I read you," Vorn's voice came back, "Tobis and I are trapped in the flight control booth."

"Yes, I can see you from here. It looks like you've got company. Bad company."

"We have, can you do anything about them?"

"I think so, be there shortly," and Tharun broke the link. He returned his comlink to his webbing and shut down his glowrod so as to avoid attracting attention. Then he unfolded the stock of his blaster rifle, brought it to his shoulder and sprinted towards the walkway ramp.

Normally the hangar bay of a star destroyer was a hive of activity, with technical crew performing any one of hundreds of checks on the smaller craft typically docked here. But right now the bay was almost empty, the *Silver Hawk* being the only ship docked here, and the noise of Tharun's footsteps rang out across the empty space.

Reaching the ramp, Tharun continued to run and the echoing of his footsteps became even louder on the hollow structure. There were bodies here, all in the uniforms of dockyard workers and bearing injuries from blaster bolts. Presumably inflicted by Tobis or Vorn, Tharun thought to himself. Doing his best to step around the bodies, Tharun nevertheless caught his foot on something and fell, barely managing to keep hold of his rifle. He looked down at his foot to see what it was caught on, and there he saw a hand clasped firmly around his ankle.

"Oh not good." he said to himself and he followed along the arm to where a worker he had thought dead was staring at him. The worker stared back and let out a groan.

Acting swiftly, Tharun used his other foot to deliver a well-aimed kick to the worker's face. There was a 'crack' as the man's jaw was knocked loose, but still he kept a hold on Tharun and began to pull himself towards the mercenary.

"Not again." Tharun said, remembering the worker in the storage room and he swung his rifle around, placed its muzzle between the worker's eyes and fired. Then kicking himself free of the headless corpse, Tharun got back to his feet.

Ahead of him, Tharun saw that a number of the workers who had been hammering on the control booth door were now moving slowly and uncertainly in his direction instead. Tharun aimed his rifle and fired a short burst towards this group. The cluster of blaster bolts struck several of the staggering figures in their torsos and they fell onto the plating of the walkway, one then tumbling over the edge. But to Tharun's horror not one of them stopped moving. Ordinary men would at least have been immobilised by such hits, unable to do anything but scream with pain. But these men were eerily silent, and were now pulling themselves along the walkway with their hands. Then Tharun remembered how the workers he had fought in the storage room and just now on the ramp had been stopped, and he adjusted his aim for head height.

His next burst put down a trio of workers, their brains roasted by the high energy blaster bolts, and when these men fell they did not get back up again.

"That's more like it." Tharun said to himself, and he fired another burst, and another.

Suddenly the large group of workers around the control booth all ceased their efforts to break in and turned towards Tharun instead. Tharun checked the power readout on his rifle, it read just under three quarters full, but at the rate he was firing he doubted that he would be able to stop them all before they reached him. So instead he slung his rifle, turned around and ran for it.

At the bottom of the ramp he headed for the *Silver Hawk* and as he ran he fumbled for his comlink again.

"Jeeves can you hear me?" he signalled.

"Yes master Verser, I'm here," the protocol droid replied.

"Good, open the door, I'm heading back and I'm in a hurry."

"Oh master Verser, what's happening?"

"Open the door Jeeves."

"Everyone seems to be reporting very strange things master Verser."

"I know, just open the door Jeeves."

"But how are we to save them master Larcus?"

"Jeeves, just open the damn door!"

"What? Oh yes, the door."

The boarding ramp of the *Silver Hawk* lowered just as Tharun reached the ship, and he jumped up onto it before it was fully opened.

"Close it!" he shouted as he rolled clear inside.

"Of course sir." Jeeves replied, and before the end of the ramp had even hit the deck beneath the ship, it began to lift back up again.

Lying on the floor of the *Silver Hawk*, Tharun lifted his comlink again.

"Major," he said, "rescue didn't go quite to plan sir, but I got them away from the door for you."

Inside the *Silver Hawk*, Tharun could now hear the sound of the workers hammering on the hull outside,

"Now if you wouldn't mind returning the favour." Tharun said into his comlink.

"This doesn't look good." said Vorn, looking out into the hangar. The landing lights of the *Silver Hawk* clearly illuminated the hoard of uniformed workers now standing beneath the ship as though they were waiting for Tharun to come out.

"Actually, I think I have an idea about how to get rid of them." Tobis said.

"Really, how?" Vorn asked.

"We turn off the shield."

"The shield?"

"Yes, the shield holding all of the air inside the hangar. Then when the bay decompresses..."

"Then they all get blown out into space as well." Vorn interrupted, pointing towards the workers.

"Yes, that's right."

"But what about the rest of the ship?" Vorn asked, "We don't know where Jaysica is."

"So long as she's not in the hangar she'll be fine," Tobis said, "As soon as the pressure drops local systems will isolate the area and shut the doors even without the computer. Then when we turn the shield back on we can open the doors again."

"Good idea." Vorn said, and he activated his comlink, "Tharun can you hear me?"

"Loud and clear boss, I'm in the cockpit now. Do you have a plan yet? Because all these guys hanging around outside are really giving me the creeps."

"Well they won't be there much longer." Vorn told him, "Tobis is about to take of them for us. Just hang on."

The light from the shield suddenly disappeared, and the control booth window rattled under the sudden change of pressure as the air in the hangar was evacuated into space. Sat in the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk*, Tharun was surprised to see the horde of construction workers who had him trapped suddenly dragged towards the end of the hangar and fly off into space. For a moment he heard a klaxon from outside the ship, but as the last of the atmosphere was lost into space the vacuum silenced it.

On the other hand, the klaxon continued to sound in the control booth.

"Can you get that to stop?" Vorn shouted over the noise.

"One moment." Tobis said, and he reactivated the hangar shield. Almost immediately the klaxon ceased and the bay was once again illuminated dimly by the shield emitter, "there you are," Tobis said, "just give the life support system a minute to properly pressurise the hangar, and then we can get out of here."

"I'd prefer it if we could get rid of them all." said Mace.

"I don't think that any more of them are getting back up Mace," Kara replied, "I've checked them all out and they're definitely dead." but Mace just grunted as he looked over the controls of the star destroyer.

"This is odd." he said.

"What's odd?"

"The helm controls are sealed, look."

Kara looked at the helm control station for the massive starship. Sure enough the control levers were fixed in place by bright red strips of plastic.

"So whoever flew this ship out here didn't do it from here," Kara said, "where else could you fly this ship from?"

5.

"So we're definitely alone now?" Tharun asked when he came down the *Silver Hawk's* ramp.

"Definitely," Tobis answered, "Everyone in the hangar area that wasn't in a sealed section was either blown into space or suffocated by the vacuum."

"Good," Tharun said, "then I suppose we should go find Jaysica."

Vorn already had his comlink in his hand.

"Jaysica where are you?" he said, but there was no reply, "Jaysica respond."

"Major Larcus..." Jeeves called out.

"Not now Jeeves. Jaysica where are you?"

"She couldn't have been here in the hangar could she?" Tharun said, "She was going to follow me here after she found Penny."

"Major Larcus..."

"No," Tobis said, "we'd have seen her from the control booth if she'd come back."

"Major Larcus..."

"What is it Jeeves?" said Vorn in a frustrated tone of voice.

"Its just that Penny has been signalling the ship for several minutes now, apparently mistress Horbid has become trapped."

"Hello, is someone there?" Jaysica called out when she thought she heard someone moving about in the storage room behind her. There was no answer, but she was certain that she could hear someone talking quietly, "Come on who is it?" she called out, and then she added an "Ow!" as someone slapped her.

"Just us," Tharun said, "Jeeves told us you were too wide for the hole you crawled into."

"Shut up!" Jaysica shouted back at him, "I'm not fat."

"Tharun's just kidding," Vorn said, "now just relax and we'll have you out of there in a moment."

The three men stood back and looked at the conduit into which Jaysica had crawled and that now had her legs sticking out of it.

"So how do we get her out?" Tharun said."

"I'm thinking the two of us grab a leg each and pull," Vorn said, "Tobis can catch her when she falls."

"Falls?" Jaysica said, "I don't want to fall. Wait, what are you doing?"

Tharun and Vorn each grabbed hold of one of Jaysica's legs and tugged on them.

"Ow!" she cried out again, "That hurts. I think my belt's snagged on something. Think of something else."

"Here," Tobis said, and he dragged a container under the entrance to the conduit where Jaysica's dangled and climbed up onto it, "now I can reach you," and he pulled out his multitool. He immediately saw that Jaysica's belt had become caught on a metal rod that protruded from the top of conduit. Tobis reached out with the multitool's pliers, grabbed the tip of the rod and bent it sideways, away from Jaysica.

"Whoa!" Jaysica cried out as she slid free of the conduit and dropped back into the storage room, then Tharun and Vorn called out in surprise as she landed on top of them.

"Thank you," Jaysica said, hugging Tharun, "but please don't tell Kara what happened, she won't let me forget it."

"Fine," Tharun said, "but you may want to stand up."

"Why?" Jaysica asked.

"Because I don't think the major can breathe properly while you're sat on his head."

"This doesn't look good does it?" Kara said to Mace as the pair stood looking out of the bridge windows.

"Well that depends on your definition of the word 'good'," Mace replied, "which in this case I think means anything but what we're seeing here."

"Perhaps we should try and raise the major," Kara suggested, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

Mace activated his comlink.

"Major, are you there?" he said.

"Yes, I'm here," Vorn replied, sounding out of breath, "What is it?"

"There's something weird going on," Vorn said, "with the stars."

"The stars?" Vorn asked.

"Yes, the stars outside the ship," Mace answered.

"What about them?"

"They're gone."

Vorn looked at the other rebels around him who had been listening to his conversation with Mace. They all looked as puzzled as he was.

"What do you mean gone? Have we jumped to hyperspace?"

"Hyperspace doesn't look like this," Mace replied, "there is literally nothing outside, its just blackness."

"We'd have felt a jump to hyperspace anyway," Tobis said, "even on a ship this big," then something occurred to him, "The cloaking device." he said, a smile spreading across his face.

"What about the cloaking device?" Tharun asked him.

"Well cloaking theory goes that it works both ways," Tobis explained, "so when you activate one not only does it make you invisible, but it makes you blind as well. The light from the stars can't get to us if the cloaking device has been activated."

"Oh this is bad." Jaysica said.

"No actually," Tobis said, "it means that we don't need to worry about the Empire turning up, because they could fly right past us and still not detect the ship, and since we're already aboard we can still try and seize control of the vessel."

Vorn raised his comlink, which had been active while Tobis had been speaking.

"Did you two catch that?" Vorn asked.

"We got it major," Mace replied, "but there's something else, all of the control panels here are dead, and the helm still has construction seals on it. We didn't activate the cloak, so who did?"

"Could it be a computer malfunction?" Kara interrupted, her voice being picked up by Mace's comlink.

"No," Vorn answered, "Harvey told Tobis that the main computer has never been activated, however the ship is being controlled, its not with the computer."

"Crap," Kara answered, "even a shuttle can't fly without a computer."

"Not without a *computer*, no," Tobis said, "but whatever is being used to control this ship, it's not the ships own computer network."

"So what do we look for?" Tharun asked, "And where do we start? This ship's sixteen hundred metres long after all."

"The main computer," Tobis said, as the other rebels around him all looked to him.

"But I thought you said that the main computer wasn't working," said Vorn, "So why should we go there?"

"Because that's the best place to plug in a substitute," Tobis answered, "you'd have access to all of the data feeds in one place. Without that you'd be running cables all over the place."

"Mace, Kara, we're heading for the main computer core," Vorn said into his comlink, "meet us there."

"Okay boss," Mace replied, "but I have one question."

"What?"

"Where is the main computer core exactly?"

Vorn looked at Tobis.

"I don't know," the engineer said, shrugging, "this is my first time on a star destroyer."

"Why of course I know major Larcus," Jeeves said when his master contacted him. The droid had been left on the *Silver Hawk* again, and was relieved to hear Vorn was safe and sound and had not been ripped apart by mindless construction workers, "I have been programmed with the general specifications of over forty five classes of Imperial starship, including Imperial star..."

"Never mind the lecture Jeeves," Vorn interrupted, "I just need to know exactly where the main computer core is located."

"An exact location is hard to provide sir," Jeeves told him, "though all Imperial class star destroyers are built to the same general specifications as each other, the precise layouts can vary depending on..."

"Then just give me an approximate location Jeeves."

"Well that would be at the base of the control tower sir, the optimum location in relation to the bridge and engineering sections, also allowing for..."

Vorn cut the link to the *Silver Hawk* and instead signalled Kara and Mace on the star destroyer's bridge.

"The main computer's at the base of the control tower," he said to Mace when the smuggler answered his call, "so you're probably closer than us. We'll join you there as fast as we can."

"Very good boss," Mace replied, "We'll see you there."

"Oh and Mace," Vorn added before the smuggler could cut the link, "watch out for any more of the construction crew. The ones that Tobis flushed into space may not have been the last," and then he cut the link.

"Right then," Vorn said to the rebels with him, "you know roughly where we're heading, so let's move out. Tharun, you're on point."

"Thanks boss," Tharun replied, remembering his close encounter with the worker in the other storage room.

Normally to get from the bridge of a star destroyer to the base of the control tower all one had to do was step into a turbolift and it would descend to the desired level. But without the main computer to operate them, they were not functional. Not that that made much difference to Kara and Mace, even if whatever technology was being used to control the star destroyer in place of its computer had allowed the use of the turbolifts they would not have trusted it. Instead they had gone back to the shaft they used to travel from the deck where they had entered the ship to this one and used the ladder there to descend deeper into the ship.

"So how far down do we go?" Kara said to Mace as they continued their climb downwards, and Mace stopped to think.

Unfortunately, the signs and other markings that would indicated deck numbers and section functions were among the last things to be added to a starship when it was built, and the star destroyer was devoid of these conveniences.

"Well I'd say about twenty decks," he said after a few moments thought, "and I think we've done about half that."

"Feels like more," Kara responded as she continued on her way down ahead of Mace, "Perhaps we should stop here and have a look around."

"Can't hurt," Mace agreed.

Kara stepped off the ladder when she reached the next deck and walked into the unlit corridor. Then, while Mace left the ladder behind her, she shone her glowrod in either direction.

"Hello?" a voice suddenly cried out from the darkness, "Is someone there?"

Mace and Kara froze. The voice was not one belonging to another member of their group, and the Alliance had stated that the other rebel ships to encounter the star destroyer had not approached it closely. Which meant that the voice had to belong to someone that worked for the Empire. Kara extinguished her glowrod and both she and mace drew their blasters.

"Hello?" the voice called out again, "I saw your light, please answer me."

Mace decided to gamble, and he turned his own glowrod on and shone it down the corridor in the direction of the mysterious voice.

"Come out where we can see you," he called out, "and keep your hands where I can see them."

There was the sound of footsteps, and a moment later a man in an Imperial Navy uniform stepped into the beam of light projected by the glowrod.

"Identify yourself," Mace shouted.

"Lieutenant Oryle," the officer called back, "unit one-one-three-eight."

Mace and Kara looked at one another.

"What's going on here lieutenant?" Kara shouted.

"I, I don't know." Oryle answered, "The construction workers went mad and killed my entire unit. I tried to get to the bridge to warn the captain, but the lights went out and I heard screams everywhere so I just hid."

"You go take a look at him," Mace said softly to Kara, "I'll let Vorn know."

"Oh great," Kara replied, "I get to go investigate the stranger."

"If you didn't want to be a medic you shouldn't have gotten yourself court martialled," Mace replied. Kara just frowned at him and turned her glow rod back on and headed towards lieutenant Oryle.

"Major Larcus come in please." Mace said into his comlink, keeping his voice formal.

"I'm here," Vorn answered after a moment, "why so formal suddenly?"

"Err, we've encountered a survivor sir, a naval lieutenant."

"Oh, I see. Well get a full report and then bring me up to speed. Larcus out."

While Mace was contacting Vorn, Kara inspected Oryle.

"You've got some scratches here," she said, seeing several marks on his face.

"Yes, the workers, they just used their bare hands, and, and their teeth. It was horrible."

"Yes, we've encountered some of them on the bridge," Kara said.

"The bridge? Is the captain still alive?" Oryle asked, but before Kara could answer he noticed her vacuum suit, "You're not one of us are you?" he asked.

"No lieutenant," Mace said, approaching from out of the darkness, "We were sent here to investigate the loss of this ship. My superior wants a full report from you and stand to attention man, I outrank you."

"Yes sir!" Oryle said, and he snapped to attention, "My unit was assigned to test that the biological control was correctly interfaced with the energy channelling network. We received word from the medical interface unit that the control was operating and that they were about to induce it to cloak the ship. It was then that the ship's engines activated and we began to move out of dock. Immediately after that the workers turned on us."

"All of them?" Kara asked.

"Yes." Oryle replied, then he changed his mind, "No, wait there were two I saw that didn't."

"Why?" Kara then asked.

"I don't know, I don't even know what their names were. They were new arrivals."

Mace caught on to the point about the new workers not being part of the mutiny.

"How long had you been here lieutenant?" he asked.

"Two weeks," he answered, "like all the other naval personnel. Except for the medical interface unit of course, they came here with the control about three months ago."

Mace beckoned to Kara to follow him and he led her away from Oryle.

"So what do you think?" he asked her in a whisper.

"What, about how it looks like everyone who had only just got here was fine, while those here longer suddenly went mad?"

"Exactly."

"I think that this 'biological control' has got something to do with it."

"I agree, we better find out more about it."

Kara and Mace returned to where Oryle stood, and he went to attention once more.

"Stand easy," Mace said, "now, what do you know about the biological control?"

6.

"A biological control?" Vorn said when Mace reported to him with his comlink, "Is that what's running the ship?"

"The lieutenant doesn't know sir," Mace replied, "he says that as far as he knows it is only supposed to control the ship's cloaking device and sensors while the ship is cloaked."

"Sensors while the ship is cloaked? How is that possible?" Vorn asked, looking at Tobis while he did so.

"The lieutenant doesn't know that either sir, only that the same method used for cloaking the ship also allows for it to be able to scan outside the volume of the cloak."

"Where is it?" Vorn asked.

"Oh you're going to love this," Mace replied, "the lieutenant says that it's hooked up right next to the main computer core."

"How soon can you get there?"

"Well now that we have the lieutenant's datapad which includes a full deck plan of this ship, not that long from now."

"A deck plan? Can you send that to my datapad too?" Tobis interrupted on hearing this and he plugged his comlink into his datapad, "I'm ready for transmission now," and in a few moments the file containing the layout of the star destroyer was copied to it, "Got it thanks," he said, disconnecting his comlink.

"So what does the map suggest then?" Vorn asked Tobis.

"Well there are several emergency ladders between here and the computer core that would get us to the correct deck," Tobis said, scrolled over the map, "but they're no good. Jaysica could carry Penny up a ladder I'm sure, but we need Harvey with us too and he's far too big."

"So what do we do without turbolifts?" Tharun asked.

"Easy," Tobis answered, "there are ramp ways also. A ship like this would normally contain hundreds of droids including astromech units and mouse droids and they clearly didn't want them clogging up the turbolifts, so they fitted ramps for them instead."

"Excellent," Vorn said, "Where are they?"

"There's one back the way we came, beyond the hangar," Tobis began, searching the map once more, "but our best bet looks like one of two that are located beneath the main control tower. There's one either side of the computer core."

"Fine, that's where we'll head for then," Vorn said, "Tharun, you're on point again, Tobis direct him."

"So what's this biological control then?" Kara whispered to Mace, careful to keep her voice low enough that Oryle would not hear what she was saying. The last thing they needed now was for him to realise that they were not part of an Imperial rescue team. It was only good fortune that one vacuum suit looked pretty much the same as another.

"I've no idea," Mace replied, also keeping his voice low, "I'm guessing it must be some sort of genetically engineered material that functions like a computer, though how that works, I don't know."

"This is the deck," Oryle said suddenly, and he stepped from the ladder to the deck beside it. Then he froze.

"What's the matter?" Kara asked, and she shone her glowrod over the deck and then added "Oh."

More bodies lined the corridor that ran past the shaft, mostly they were construction workers with blaster wounds, but there were also a few naval personnel present.

"Be careful," Mace said, "They might not be totally inactive."

"I think this man was assigned to the bridge," Oryle said, pointing to a naval officer whose face was illuminated by the light of Kara's glowrod, "why would he be here?"

"Perhaps the same reason we are, heading for the computer core to try and find out what's happening here," Mace suggested, "now let's keep moving, this map suggests that the computer core is just around the corner yes?"

"Yes, that's right," Oryle replied, and Mace took the lead. But when he reached the corner it was his turn to come to a sudden halt. When Oryle and Kara caught up with him they too stopped in their tracks. Ahead of them was a pile of bodies.

Unlike the corridor nearer to the shaft, where most of the corpses belonged to workers, here they were mainly naval personnel, and among them was one wearing the rank insignia of the ship's captain.

"It looks like they were trying to get in there," Kara said, pointing towards a closed blast door beyond the bodies. Beside it were the remains of a naval rating equipped with a cutting torch who had been attempting to cut through the heavily armoured door.

There was the sound of footfalls from behind them, and Kara and Mace both raised their blasters.

"Don't shoot, it's only us." Tharun called out as he led the remaining rebels around the corner.

"Wait a minute," Oryle said, looking at the clothing worn by the newly arrived group, "You're not from the Imperial Navy, who are you? You're rebels aren't you?" and he backed away from them.

"Of course we're rebels," Vorn said, "But we're your only hope of getting off this ship alive, so I'd co-operate if I were you." then he turned to Tharun, "Keep an eye on him," he ordered, and the mercenary trained his weapon on Oryle.

"So what's going on here then?" Vorn said to Mace and Kara.

"We've not been here that long boss," Kara replied, "But it looks like the navy guys were trying to cut their way through the blast door when the workers got to them."

"That kind of confirms that whatever is responsible for what happened here is behind that door then," Vorn said, "So what exactly is this biological control lieutenant?" he then asked Oryle.

"I don't now," Oryle answered, and Tharun pressed the muzzle of his blaster rifle against him, "I don't know, I swear it!" he then yelled out, "I'm just a technician, I monitor power flows."

"Hey guys, look at these," Jaysica suddenly interrupted, and she pointed at an open panel in the wall, behind which were several glowing crystal pipes running to the room beyond the blast door, "Those look just like the one I saw in the conduit."

"What are they?" Tharun asked Oryle.

"They're just energy transfer guides," he answered.

"They look like crystal," Vorn said, "I've heard of people using crystals to channel and focus energy before, but not for almost twenty years now."

"Who was it?" Kara asked.

"The jedi," Vorn replied, "they used crystals in their lightsabers to channel the force through. That's what this biological control unit isn't it lieutenant? And that's how your cloaking device works, you've got a force user wired into your ship haven't you?"

"A force user?" Mace commented, "Like that Skywalker boy that blew up the death star?"

"That's right Mace," Vorn answered him, "I met a few jedi when I was much younger. Some of them could absorb and dissipate energy, including blaster bolts, so one powerful enough should be able to block the emissions from a starship and prevent active scans from returning to their source. At the same time they should be able to detect things outside the ship through the force itself."

"But how does that explain what happened to the crew?" Jaysica asked.

"The jedi can make you do things you wouldn't normally do," Tharun said in response to Jaysica's question, "typically they just make it so you don't notice what's right in front of you, but given a little longer to work on you they can turn you into a puppet."

"That could explain the burst blood vessels in the eyes," Kara said, "If someone's been messing with these men's brains then it could have affected them."

"It also explains why the workers were the only ones affected," Mace added, "They were here with the force user for much longer. The navy guys only came here recently, so he probably didn't have enough time to take them over."

"That's awful," said Jaysica, "These people really used to protect the Republic?"

"Not the ones who took over people's minds," Vorn said, "The jedi were relentless in tracking down anyone with their abilities who acted like that, right up to the end of their order."

"So its not a jedi behind that door then?" Mace said.

"I doubt it," Vorn answered, "this would probably be easier if it was. But we won't really know for sure until Tobis gets that blast door open."

Tobis nodded and began to study the wall around the heavy door. He located a metal panel beside it, which he then removed.

"These should be the control circuits for the door," he said when a mechanism behind the panel was revealed, and he then ripped several wires free, "I just need to find the right ones then I can use my datapad to tell the door motor to open it up," he said.

Vorn was about to ask Tobis how long he estimated that it would take when instead a moaning sound came from in the darkness further down the corridor.

"I don't like the sound of that," Kara said.

"Neither do I," Vorn replied, "Tharun, light it up."

Tharun pulled a flare from his webbing, banged the end of it on a bulkhead to ignite it and then hurled the burning stick into the darkness. There, revealed by the flickering light of the flare, a horde of construction workers filled the entire corridor.

"Tobis, hurry up." Vorn said, then he looked at Oryle, "You too navy boy," he ordered, "that door will open more quickly if you help Tobis with it."

"What makes you think I'm helping you?" Oryle replied, and Vorn pointed towards the horde of workers.

"Them." he said.

Oryle got down on his knees beside Tobis and began to help look for the wires that carried the command signals to the blast door's motor.

"Aim high everyone," Tharun said as he levelled his blaster rifle at the approaching horde, "blowing their legs off only slows them down," and then he fired a burst down the corridor.

Aside from Tobis, the remaining rebels joined Tharun in shooting at the workers who were getting steadily closer to them, but no matter how many of them fell, there were more behind them.

"How many are there?" Jaysica asked as she paused to insert a new power cell into her blaster.

"Could be thousands," Vorn said, then he looked briefly towards Tobis and Oryle, "Work faster you two, we need to get through that door."

"One moment," Oryle replied, "I've got them." and he passed a pair of wires to Tobis who connected them to his datapad.

A moment later there was a hiss as the blast door's seals released and then it began to open slowly.

"We've done it," Oryle said, dashing to the centre of the door where its different segments were moving apart to create a steadily growing opening.

"Wait, be careful," Tobis tried to warn Oryle, but he was too late to prevent the lieutenant from being grabbed by an arm that reached out from the other side of the door.

Oryle screamed and tried to back away, but more arms reached out for him and there was a chorus of snarling from whatever had hold of him. Tobis grabbed hold of Oryle also and pulled him away from the gap, as he did so he also dragged one of the people who had reached out through the opening door as well.

Unlike the horde approaching them in the corridor these men wore the uniforms of the Imperial Navy, though the white of the medic branch instead of the green of the general services, but like them their eyes were red with blood.

"Help me!" Oryle screamed as the former medical officer hissed at him and tried to take a bite out of his neck.

Mace broke off from shooting down the corridor and instead put a pair of blaster bolts into the medic, who promptly collapsed between the door segments as they separated. There were more men in medical uniforms beyond the door, and they advanced towards the rebels. Mace fired again, followed shortly after by Tobis when the engineer managed to get his own blaster free. Fortunately there were only a handful of them, and between Mace and Tobis they were easily despatched.

"Way's clear." Mace called out when the last one fell.

"Move!" Vorn shouted, and the rebels, along with Oryle made a run for the doorway.

"Close it up!" Vorn shouted.

Tobis still held his datapad in one hand and the wires leading to the blast door control mechanism were still connected. He jabbed at the datapad before ripping the wires out and throwing them back through the door as it began to slide shut once more.

"That should hold them," Vorn said when the door was fully closed, "Now let's take a look around."

The room in which they now stood was, unlike the rest of the ship, already illuminated. The light cast from the many crystal pipes set into the wall gave everything a bluish tinge, but at least they allowed everyone to see.

"I thought the navy personnel hadn't been here long enough for their minds to be taken over," Jaysica said.

"They were here before the rest of us," Oryle answered, "they came aboard with the control."

"You mean the force user," Mace said.

"I don't know anything about it," Oryle said, "How can you be so sure it's a person?"

"That's easy," Tharun said, "I've found him."

The rebels and Oryle all turned towards Tharun, the mercenary then pointed them towards an alcove. Within the alcove was a chair in which a man sat with his head lowered. Even from across the room it was easy to see the restraints at his wrists and ankles that held him in the chair and the assortment of tubes that ran into his body to carry nutrients and remove waste. With his head bowed something else was obvious too, fixed to the back of his shaven head was a cyborg construct that was hard wired into the star destroyer's main computer behind him.

"Kara, check him out," Vorn said.

"Why me boss?" Kara replied.

"Because you're our medic and I outrank you."

"Alright then," she replied before adding, "I've got a really bad feeling about this though."

Kara crept towards the man in the chair and reached out to him. She placed her hand on his head and lifted it up.

"Hello," the man said suddenly, and Kara jumped backwards in surprise, "its so nice to have guests."

Kara moved further away from the man in the chair, keeping her blaster trained on him.

"I suppose you've come to disconnect me," the man said as the rebels stared at him, "but I can't allow that to happen. The captain tried to do the same when he realised that the cyborg device the Empire so courteously provided me with allowed me to control everything that the main computer would normally do. So I had my children dispose of him and his tiny band of soldiers, though I see I missed one of them." and he looked directly at Oryle who stepped further back nervously, "Now I suppose that I will have to deal with you myself."

The man in the chair opened the palms of his hands and bright blue lightning lashed out from the tips of his fingers at Oryle, who fell screaming to the floor.

"Open fire!" Vorn shouted and all of the rebels trained their blasters on the man and fired. One after another the bolts flew at the man only to be diverted towards the palms of his hands where they apparently did nothing. The man just laughed out loud.

"I can take the energy of a reactor that is the equivalent of a small sun and make it no more noticeable than a single snowflake in a blizzard," he said, "how do you suppose that you can harm me with these toys?"

"Try this then." Tharun shouted, and he pulled his knife from its scabbard and hurled it at the man. The man just looked at the knife as it flew towards him, and it suddenly reversed its path. Tharun cried out in pain as the knife plunged into his thigh, and he dropped his blaster rifle and fell, clutching at his leg.

"Kara see to him!" Vorn shouted and he charged towards the man in the chair, intended to attack him up close.

Again, lightning shot from the man's fingers, and Vorn was forced to dive for cover before the bolts could strike him. Meanwhile then man in the chair just cackled.

Tobis, who had already taken cover looked around for some way of attacking the man. So far every weapon they had tried using had been useless, the man's ability manipulate the force shielded him from every avenue of attack. Then Tobis remembered something he had once heard about controlling the force, that it required concentration.

"Harvey," he whispered to his astromech droid that was right behind him, "I need some cover from those lightning bolts, enough to get to that wall over there." and he pointed to the wall into which the alcove was located.

Harvey just chirped before rolling beside Tobis, then a small hatch opened up in the front of the droid and there was sudden whooshing sound as it activated its built in fire extinguisher, the gas creating a dense cloud between Tobis and the man in the chair.

"I can still sense you boy," the man called out when Tobis jumped up and ran for the wall, but when he unleashed another blast of lightning the cloud deflected it away. Tobis skidded to a halt by the wall.

"What are you doing?" Vorn yelled to Tobis.

"Just be ready!" Tobis shouted back, and he activated his datapad.

Right beside Tobis was an access port to the main computer core and he connected his datapad to this. Though the computer core was inert, Tobis's datapad was still able to list all of the independent hardware devices that were connected to it. Devices such as the cyborg construct implanted into the man in the chair. Tobis called up a list of the files available on his datapad and then nominated the cyborg construct as their destination and then he hit 'Send'.

The man suddenly screamed, his head jerked back in pain and he convulsed

"Now!" Tobis shouted, and Jaysica, mace and Vorn all took aim and fired as rapidly as they could.

This time, instead of the energy bolts being deflected and absorbed, they slammed into the man's body, and there was the smell of burning flesh as they roasted him. The man gave out one last scream of agony before he slumped forwards once more, smoke rising from his corpse. Then the light from the crystal pipes began to fade.

"What did you do?" Vorn said as he got up from behind the machinery he had sought cover behind.

"I just overrode the communication port settings on his cyborg construct," Tobis explained while he and the others activated their glowrods, "then I transmitted data at an incompatible power level. It wouldn't have taken long for his data port to burn out, but it kept him distracted for a while."

"Good thinking," Vorn said, "now if you can just get that blast door open again we can get out of here."

"What about the workers outside?" Jaysica asked nervously.

"He subverted the minds entirely," Vorn replied, indicating the dead man in the chair, "after all this time under his control they won't even be able to breathe without him directing them to. I'm afraid they're all dead."

"That's horrible," Jaysica replied.

"What about the ship?" Kara asked, "Do we just leave it here?"

"For now yes," Vorn said, "there isn't anything else we can do after all. If the fleet can get here in time to bring her on line then the Alliance may still be able to salvage her, if not then I doubt that the Empire will be able to get her out of here before we can bring in enough ships to destroy her. She's an easy target in her current state."

"What about me?" Oryle said.

"Oh there's a nice little camp on an Alliance safe world waiting for you," Mace said, "So get moving, I want to get back to my own ship."

"Great idea," Kara said, "I want to get Tharun to a proper medical facility as fast as possible."

"I'd like that," said Tharun as Jaysica and Kara helped him up, "and while we're on our way there I'll tell you where we found Jaysica."

"You promised!" Jaysica protested and she punched Tharun's arm.