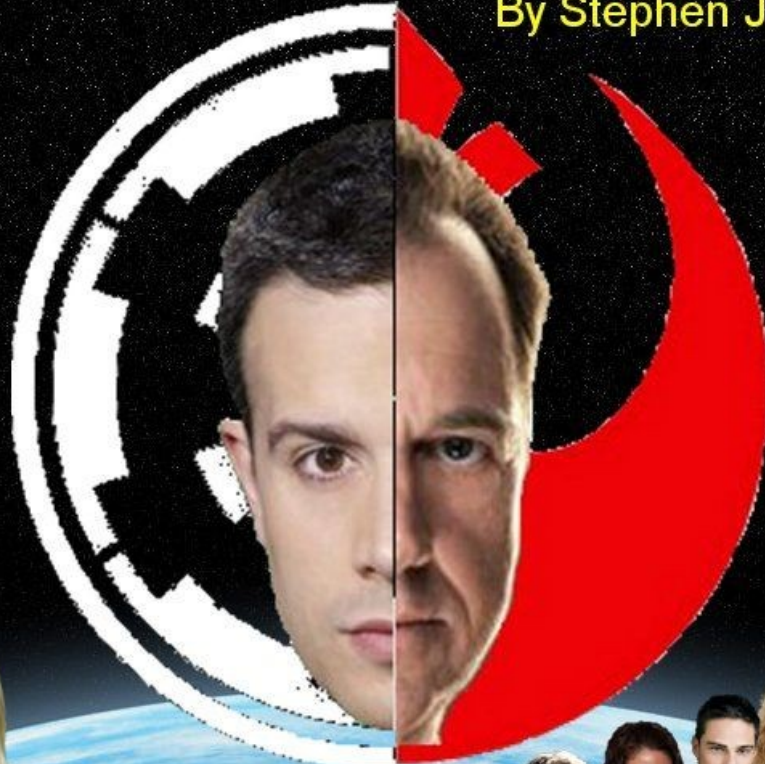


STAR WARS

7-03: Stowaways

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 GUERRILLA 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...

TITLE

HAVING ESCAPED FROM IMPERIAL NAVAL HEADQUARTERS THE REBELS NOW FIND THEMSELVES HAVING TO DEAL WITH NAVY PERSONNEL WHO WERE STILL ABOARD THE STAR DESTROYER THEY STOLE. NOT ONLY THAT BUT THE EMPIRE IS HOT ON THEIR HEELS, ANXIOUS TO RECOVER THE STOLEN STAR DESTROYER AND RECAPTURE THEM...

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

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1.

“Attention all Imperial personnel aboard. My name is Vorn Larcus the Third and this vessel is now under the control of forces loyal to the Alliance To Restore The Republic. You have two choices open to you, you can either surrender to the superior Alliance forces aboard and become prisoners of war or make your way to an escape pod and evacuate before we enter hyperspace. In the name of the Alliance To Restore The Republic, may the Force be with you.”

Years earlier the venator-class star destroyer *Justice* had been part of the Republic Navy, fighting in the Clone Wars that led to the transformation of that society into the Galactic Empire. With newer and more powerful vessels becoming widely available to the new reorganised Imperial Navy, the Empire had had little use for the older venator-class ships and the *Justice*, like so many of its sister ships had been condemned to be scuttled by being piloted into a star. But the individual trusted to program the autopilots had instead deliberately sent several dozen ships into deep space where he could later travel to them and steal parts that he could sell for himself. Rediscovered by the Empire, the *Justice* and several other venator-class ships were taken back to the navy's sector group headquarters to be taken apart and used as a source of parts for those few venators still in Imperial service. But before this could be accomplished a small force of rebel agents had boarded the *Justice* and stolen it from right under the noses of the Imperial Navy.

Vorn's announcement from one of the star destroyer's twin bridges spread panic among the technical crews surveying the ship. They had known that something was amiss the moment the ship first fired its ion drives to break free of the dry dock at the sector group's headquarters but only now did they realise their situation. All of them knew that the navy would make some attempt to intercept the *Justice* before it could escape into hyperspace, regardless of whether or not they were aboard. Therefore, the reaction of the overwhelming majority of these personnel was to flee. Rushing to escape pods as quickly as they could the technical crews ejected themselves into space, trusting that the navy would not fire on the tiny vehicles for no reason and waiting to be rescued.

However, not all of the technical crews were so keen to escape. In a compartment on one of the star destroyer's lower levels the head of one of the technical team, a burly enlisted man, blocked the exit as his men started to move towards it.

“Where do you think you're going?” he asked and the other men looked at him blankly, “This is an Imperial vessel and we are men of the Imperial Navy. That means this is our ship, not this stuck up terrorist's. Now you ought to know as well as I do that there is a hope in hell that any of our other ships will be able to stop this one from getting away so the way I see it, it's our job to make sure that it never gets to where these rebel scum are planning on taking it.”

The *Justice* dropped out of hyperspace far from anywhere. Though technically it was still within the heavily travelled space of the Trade Corridor that ran from one end of the sector to the other the nearest star system was still several light years away. This was not the final intended destination of the ship, instead it was intended as a brief stopover that would allow the vessel to throw off pursuit made possible by tracking the path along which it had been travelling when it left the capital system of Estran.

Just over half of the rebels responsible for stealing the star destroyer were on its main bridge. Three of them, Mace Grayle, Kara Larcus and Inra Vayne sat at the helm stations. Two more, Owen Halowan and Brak Laeven occupied the comscan position and Vorn Larcus himself was still at the navigation console. This left Dayle Kord, the highest ranking of the rebels and Cass Grayle, Mace's adopted teenage daughter standing near the viewports at the front of the bridge an looking out into space. Most of the rebels wore the uniforms of Imperial gunners, minus their helmets, that had helped them escape captivity aboard the sector group's headquarters station except for Vorn who had escaped disguised as a stormtrooper and Owen and Cass who wore Imperial officers' uniforms.

“Star patterns indicate we came out of hyperspace right on target.” Vorn called out.

“Knew you could do it boss.” Kara responded.

“How about bit more of a margin of safety next time though major?” Mace added.

“Well we appear to have plenty of breathing room for you to plot out next jump.” Dayle said.

“Already working on it.” Vorn replied as he started calling up data from the navigation computer, “I'll put us about half a light year away from headquarters.”

“Are you sure you can plot a direct jump from here?” Owen asked, “That computer hasn't been updated in a while.”

“Anything big enough to damage us will trip the hyperdrive safeties and drop us back to realspace anyway.”

Vorn pointed out, “I'll fly us in a straight line and if we have to move around something we can do it at sublight while I plot another jump.”

"Oh great." Inra said, "Flying blind and hoping for the best." then she looked at Mace, "I guess this is what comes of relying on obsolete equipment all the time huh?"

Inra and Mace were both the owners of light freighters used to transport rebel field teams and Inra never let Mace, or any of the other such captains for that matter, forget that her ship was the most modern available to the Alliance. However, Mace ignored the jibe and instead focused on the helm controls in front of him.

"You should have the numbers now." Vorn said.

"Right here boss." Kara replied, "Hopefully we'll be back home before Vorn has to spend another night in the care of his evil sister." The Vorn she referred to was her and Vorn's son, born around half a year earlier and left in the care of his much older half sister Lyssa. In fact Lyssa was older than Kara herself, "I pity the kid she's going to have." Kara muttered.

"What, you mean your grandchild?" Cass asked, smirking and Kara scowled. Bringing up the fact that she was now Lyssa's stepmother or that she was technically a grandparent was a sure way to anger her.

"You know, there's a guy on Estran that I can get you that old lady candy from at cheap rates." Mace added and Kara snarled at him as well. Then she looked back at the console before her.

"Engaging hyperdrive." she said, "The sooner I'm away from you lot the better."

"Ah, the older generation. Always complaining about the youth of today." Brak commented as Kara went to engage the hyperdrive. However, when she pushed the lever the stars outside the viewport remained just as they were rather than blurring as the star destroyer jumped into hyperspace.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Dayle said.

"Commander I'm picking up a transmission." Owen called out.

"Source?" Dayle asked.

"Us." Owen answered.

"Kill it!" Vorn snapped.

"Already done. But someone just sent a transmission somewhere." Owen said.

"And since that doesn't look like hyperspace it appears we're stuck here." Dayle added, pointing out of the window.

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

Fleet Admiral Praus Vretan coughed, raising a hand to his throat as his face turned bright red and his eyes widened. Then the man sat beside him, General Julius Dern slapped him on the back and he stopped coughing.

"Better?" General Dern asked and Admiral Vretan nodded, setting down the cup of caf that he had inadvertently gulped too quickly.

"Apology accepted Fleet Admiral Vretan." Moff Horatian said. The moff was sat on the opposite side of the desk that dominated the office the men were in while Rodge Larrs, sector chief of COMPNOR sat beside him. It was the early hours of the morning in Estran's capital city and Moff Horatian, Rodge and General Dern had been roused from their beds to hear how rebel agents had not only been able to escape from the orbiting fleet headquarters with a kilometre long capital ship but had also inflicted massive damage to the station's dry dock facilities and the surrounding areas simply by firing the stolen ship's ion drives inside the dry dock itself, "However," the moff went on, "your offer to resign is not. The rebellion in this sector is becoming more bold, I mean striking at our own naval headquarters? Who do these terrorists think they are? That means I need an experienced man like you to lead my sector group fleet admiral."

"I'm sure you could find a replacement untouched by this debacle." Fleet Admiral Vretan said.

"And who would you suggest?" Rodge asked, "Admiral Trent? He was in command of fleet headquarters so it was his security measures that failed. Admiral Hall is loyal enough but let's not forget that he was how the rebels were able to infiltrate your headquarters to begin with. Admiral Sayer lacks experience and Admiral Trell may be experienced but I doubt that she could inspire our crews as well as you are able to."

Just then the office door opened and a woman in an Imperial Intelligence uniform entered. Gayal Tharr was the head of Imperial Intelligence for the sector and although Admiral Vretan had not contacted her directly about the loss of the *Justice* it was inevitable that she would find out sooner rather than later.

"Ah Miss Tharr." Moff Horatian said, "I take it you have news?"

"Indeed I do moff." she replied, "Signal have intercepted a transmission from the *Justice*." and she handed Moff Horatian a mem-stick. The moff promptly inserted this into the terminal on his desk and accessed the recording it held.

"This is Chief Petty Officer Cal Levens." the voice on the recording said, "My men and I are aboard the venator-class star destroyer *Justice*. The vessel has dropped out of hyperspace and we have disabled its hyperdrive to prevent it from escaping again. I request-."

"That's where the signal was cut off at the source." Gayal said, "But Signal were able to get a lock on the bearing."

"What? No range estimation from the signal strength?" General Dern asked.

"No. It was transmitted at a reduced amplitude to try and disguise it." Gayal replied.

"Unsuccessfully it would seem." Fleet Admiral Vretan said, "So in fact what we have here is a bearing that we already had. Look, it's just the exit vector recorded when the rebels escaped the Estran system." and the admiral pointed to the holographic display above Moff Horatian's desk that showed the course taken by the *Justice* as it escaped, only narrowly avoiding being shot down by a line of Imperial light cruisers that had been able to launch their missiles at it before it jumped to hyperspace.

"But still it's something to go on isn't it?" General Dern asked.

"Yes, yes it is." Fleet Admiral Vretan replied. Then he looked at Moff Horatian and added, "In which case sir I'd like to start despatching probe droids and search vessels along the route. If the *Justice* really has been disabled we ought to be able to recover it rapidly."

"And what of the rebels admiral?" Rodge asked.

"What of them?" Fleet Admiral Vretan replied, "If they surrender that's fine but if they don't I see nothing wrong with killing them all."

"Sir one of the rebels aboard that ship is a high value target." Gayal said, "Vorn Larcus was a member of-"

"I know who Vorn Larcus is." Moff Horatian interrupted, "The fleet admiral and I knew him personally before he became a traitor."

"Then you know how important it is that we-" Gayal began before Rodge interrupted her.

"This is a military operation Miss Tharr." he said, smiling. There was no love lost between COMPNOR and Imperial Intelligence so Rodge was only too happy to remind Gayal that she had no authority to determine how the navy conducted its operations.

"Quite." Moff Horatian added, "Now admiral I believe that you have work to do and Miss Tharr, I am sure that if Vorn Larcus can be persuaded to surrender himself then the navy will hand him over to you. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Admiral Vretan responded.

"Agreed." Gayal added, sounding much less eager.

"How long have you been waiting here Mister Kellesen?" Gayal said to the figure sat waiting in her darkened office. Ibram Kellesen was an Imperial Inquisitor. Before the Clone Wars he had been a Jedi knight, but his decision to carry out summary executions had led to his expulsion from the order. Now though he was perfectly at home as an Imperial agent.

"Long enough to have seen everything relevant." the man said without looking up when Gayal turned on the lights.

"So you know that the navy had Vorn Larcus in their hands and let him go? And now we're just expected to sit back and watch them blast him to atoms along with a star destroyer. Even if it is an older model."

"And you intend to just let them do this?" Ibram asked.

"I can't exactly stop them." Gayal pointed out as she sat at her desk and looked directly at Ibram.

"Perhaps not. But I assume that the navy will be deploying probe droids yes?"

"Yes, that's right."

"In which case as the head of Imperial Intelligence you can order the programming of those droids modified so that rather than just locating the missing star destroyer they will board the ship, locate Vorn Larcus and inform us of his location before signalling the navy."

Gayal smiled.

"And then we can despatch a unit from IntSec to retake it." she said.

"Returning the ship to the navy afterwards of course." Ibram added.

"Oh of course." Gayal said.

2.

Three more rebels sat in the engineering monitoring station. It was from here that they had reactivated the star destroyer's engines prior to their departure and now two of them, Sen Verid and Tobis Dorfus were examining the technical readouts to try and determine where the problem lay along with Tobis's R5 astromech droid, Harvey. Meanwhile the third, Coll Jurven, stood by the sealed door. It had been necessary to seal the door to prevent any of the Imperial technical teams aboard from storming the control room to shut down the engines again and although no-one had attempted to gain access again since the ship had made the jump to hyperspace the rebels here were taking no chances. The simple fact that someone had sabotaged the hyperdrive and sent a transmission was proof that the rebels were not alone on the ship.

"Oh, err." Tobis began.

"Found something?" Sen asked and Tobis nodded, "So give us a look." Sen added and Tobis pointed to a display that showed line after line of brief messages, each one providing the status of a particular component aboard the star destroyer. With several billions components used the construction of such a vessel it was not possible to carry out a full check without the use of a computer and even then it was a laborious task that more often than not would be left to droids to carry out instead.

"There, ah, there's a null reading on the hyperdrive motivator." Tobis said.

"A null reading?" Sen repeated, frowning, "But that means it's just plain gone."

"Or, or, or it's out of alignment." Tobis suggested and Sen activate the intercom.

"Bridge this is engineering." he said.

"Go ahead Sen." Inra's voice replied.

"Sergeant Dorfus has found the problem captain." Sen told her, "The hyperdrive motivator is showing as missing."

"Missing?" Inra repeated in surprise, "But the thing must weigh a couple of tonnes."

"Oh, err, about eight hundred kilograms." Tobis corrected her.

"I don't care." Inra responded, "Is there any indication of where it's gone?"

"We're just looking at a status readout here captain." Sen said.

"Then go take a look. If all that's happened is the thing has been knocked out of alignment then you can put it back in place and we can go. But take Coll to watch your back." and then the channel went dead.

"Why don't we use the sublight drives?" Cass asked, looking at the older rebels all around her on the bridge, "If the Empire knows we're here then we could at least get further away before they get here."

"Doesn't work like that I'm afraid." Vorn replied, shaking his head, "If we use the ion drive then any Imperial ship that arrives anywhere near us will see the engine flare and possibly pick up the ion trail we'll be leaving in our wake. Right now the best thing we can do is just sit tight and wait and hope that the Empire doesn't actually know our exact position."

"Would it not be a good idea to try sending a distress signal?" Vorn's golden coloured protocol droid, Jeeves, asked, "The Alliance could send a rescue ship."

"For us maybe." Dayle said, "But I doubt that headquarters has any spare star destroyer hyperdrive motivators lying around."

"Plus the Empire could detect the transmission." Brak added.

"Major we need to do something about our security situation." Mace pointed out, "Right now there's the eight of us in here, Tobis, Coll and Sen in engineering and Tharun, Jaysica and Marse in the forward turbolaser. But the rest of the ship may as well still be under Imperial control."

"He's right." Dayle added, "Too many campaigns in history have been lost because armies just sat behind fortress walls while weaker opponents outmanoeuvred them. We need to start hunting for whoever sabotaged the engines."

"Could be the easiest way to get the component back." Kara pointed out.

"How about I take Mace and we go hunting then?" Vorn asked Dayle, "Plus Tharun's group in the turret can start searching from the front of the ship. Maybe there's a spare motivator somewhere in that hangar."

"Take Brak with you as well." Dayle said.

"What about me?" Cass asked.

"You stay here." Mace told her, "It's safer."

"But I-" Cass began.

"With the klutz out there it really is safer in here behind that blast door." Kara interrupted, "So do as your father says." and Cass frowned.

"We will take your comlink though." Vorn said, "Only you and Owen have them so it'll allow us to keep in touch with the bridge."

"We'll take good care of her, don't worry." Dayle then told Mace.

"Excuse me Major Larcus sir." Jeeves said, "But what are we to do if Master Dorfus informs us that the hyperdrive motivator has been replaced before you return?"

"Engage the hyperdrive." Vorn replied, "All the numbers are already in the computer."

"Until then just use your own initiative." Mace added as he, Vorn and Brak headed for the blast door at the rear of the bridge.

Three rebels had been sent to the turret located at the prow of the star destroyer so that they could use the powerful weapon to punch several holes in the dry dock door preventing the ship from escaping from the Imperial space station. Weakened, it had then just been a matter of accelerating the star destroyer sufficiently to smash right through the door and out into space. An exhilarating experience that the three rebel gunners had been given a front row seat to.

Two of them, Tharun Verser and Marse Horkin, were both experienced soldiers and double checked their weapons before leaving the turbolaser turret. The third rebel, Jaysica Horbid, went to do the same but in the process of drawing her blaster pistol inside the confines of the turret she accidentally knocked the power pack release catch against the turbolaser itself and ejected it.

"Hang on." she called out, bending down to retrieve the power pack.

"Just load a spare." Tharun said.

"I don't have one." Jaysica replied, "Wait, I've almost got it. A-ha!" and she stood up suddenly, a move that was accompanied by the sound of tearing cloth.

"Oh you've got to be kidding." Marse said.

"Nope." Tharun responded. Then he looked at Jaysica and asked, "Need a hand there little lady?"

"Look at this." Jaysica exclaimed and she held up her arm and turned around to expose the large tear in her Imperial gunner's uniform that went from her armpit around her back to her waist .

"How the hell did she manage that?" Marse asked.

"Don't bother asking. She just did." Tharun replied before he looked at Jaysica again, "Look, just roll the overalls down to your waist. You're wearing a shirt under it aren't you?"

"Fortunately yes I am." Jaysica said, undoing the overalls so that she could do as Tharun suggested, "But these were a good set of overalls. I was going to hang onto them."

"Yeah, because nothing could go wrong with wearing an Imperial uniform at HQ could it?" Marse commented. He and Tharun then set off away from the turret, heading for the massive hangar deck that took up more than half of the length of the venator-class star destroyer and Jaysica scurried after them, tying her overalls around her waist, her torso now just covered by an oversized shirt that was obviously several sizes too large for the small statured rebel.

"Hang on." she called out, "I need to catch up." and then there was another tearing sound as one of the sleeves caught on a bulkhead. Tharun winced and leant closer to Marse.

"I bet you fifty credits that she's down to her underwear by the time we get to the bridge." he whispered.

"No bet." Marse replied.

"How about a hundred she's naked by the time we reach headquarters?" Tharun added.

"Still no bet."

When the *Justice* had been an operational warship for the Republic the central section of the hangar had been kept clear to allow starfighters and other smaller craft a clear run as they landed or took off. But when the ship had been consigned to be scuttled the entire hangar had been loaded with equipment that the Empire considered too out of date to keep but too dangerous to sell on the open market. Now the entire space was filled with vehicles and crates of weaponry and other equipment and the three rebels began to hunt through these in search of a hyperdrive motivator suitable for use in the star destroyer.

"Do you even know what a hyperdrive motivator looks like?" Marse asked, glancing at Tharun.

"Don't have a clue." he replied, "But I'm hoping that the crate will be clearly marked. Failing that I'm sure Jaysica will know. Sleeping with our engineer must have some benefits."

"Tharun!" Jaysica exclaimed, "You shouldn't talk about me like that to other people. That's private."

"Private. Right." Tharun commented, "It's not like I can talk about my own private life. It freaks the major out to hear about what I get up to with his daughter. Kara too."

"Then maybe you should just not talk about that sort of thing." Jaysica said as she looked up to the top of a stack of crates and noticed the the uppermost one was not aligned with the ones below it, sticking further out, "That's odd." she muttered to herself and reaching up she began to climb the stack.

"Well if don't talk about-" Tharun responded but he stopped and gasped when he looked around to see Jaysica climbing up the crates, "Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." he said and he dashed towards her,

"Little lady, I don't think that's such a good-"

"Oh I'm fine." Jaysica said, "It's not as if I'm going to-" and then as she grabbed hold of the misaligned crate it toppled from the top of the stack and Jaysica lost her grip entirely, plummeting to the deck.

"Stang!" Marse exclaimed as Jaysica screamed, "It's a wonder the entire ship doesn't know where we are."

"Are you okay little lady?" Tharun asked as he looked around the fuselage of a starfighter that had been beside the stack of crates.

"Oh, I tore my overalls again." Jaysica replied, sat on the deck and looking at the large tear running all the way down her right leg, "Now what do I do?"

"Be glad that shirt's too big." Tharun replied. Then he looked around for Marse, "Hey Marse! You almost owed me fifty." he called out as Jaysica removed what was left of the overalls. As Tharun had said the shirt she wore beneath them was far too big and so was equivalent to a dress on Jaysica.

"Hey look." she said, glancing towards the fallen crate as she fastened her belt around her waist, "Blasters." "Let me see." Tharun said, rushing forwards just as Marse arrived as well.

"DC-fifteens." Marse commented when he saw several carbines scattered on the floor near the crate.

"Not as good as this." Tharun said, holding up his Blastech E-11 rifle, "But better than just pistols." and he and Marse each took hold of one end of the crate and turned it right side up, spilling more weapons out as they did.

"We should just take this to the bridge." Marse said and he opened up the lid of the crate to put the spilled weapons back in. But he paused when he saw that it was now empty, "This isn't right." he said.

"What's wrong?" Jaysica asked.

"This crate should hold twenty blasters plus three power packs for each one." Marse told her, "But how many do you see?"

"No more than a dozen." Tharun said, "And no ammunition."

"Well maybe they were never there." Jaysica suggested.

"Oh I think they were." Marse said, "I think that we're not the first ones to come here."

"Whoever's aboard this ship is armed." Tharun said.

"And rather well." Marse added, "We better warn the others."

"Then see if we can find out what else they've taken from in here." Tharun added.

With Coll keeping watch just in case there were any Imperial personnel loitering in the area Sen and Tobis looked up at the vacant space where the hyperdrive motivator had been.

"No way just one or two people walked off with that." Sen said.

"Err, no. Err, what about the back up?" Tobis replied.

"Good point." Sen said and the two engineers looked around, trying to figure out where the star destroyer's back up hyperdrive was located, "There, that looks like it." Sen added, pointing and he and Tobis hurried down a nearby set of steps, Coll following them in silence and continuing to keep watch.

"Oh." Tobis said when they reached the bottom of the steps and found the back up hyperdrive not far in front of them. The mechanism intended to take over should anything go wrong with the main hyperdrive had also been sabotaged. However, rather than just removing the motivator the culprits had chosen to destroy it with several burn marks that looked very much like the damage inflicted by close range blaster shots spread out along its length, "Err, maybe we should call this in." Tobis added.

"Really?" Sen replied sarcastically.

"Yes I, err, that was a joke wasn't it?"

"Yes." Sen said, "But since we left the space station without any comlinks we'd better find an intercom panel somewhere." and again he and Tobis started to look around. Before they saw what they were looking for however, Coll whistled and when the two engineers looked up at him he pointed to a nearby control post that they had not noticed.

"Nice one Coll." Sen said, hurrying to the panel and smiling when he found it to be intact, "Bridge come in." he said, activating the intercom built into it.

"Bridge here." Owen's voice replied, "What have you found?"

"The main hyperdrive motivator is gone and the back up's a wreck." Sen told him, "Someone definitely didn't want this ship going anywhere soon."

"But, err, but they did want to be able to repair it quickly if they needed to." Tobis added.

"Tobis, how can you tell that?" Dayle's voice then asked.

"Oh, err, because they – they just removed the main motivator. If, err, well, if they wanted to permanently disable the hyperdrive they could have just destroyed it. Err, like they did to the back up." Tobis explained.

"Question is how did they shift the thing?" Sen said, "It's kriffing huge."

"Never mind that now." Dayle said, "Where exactly are you?"

"Right by the hyperdrives." Sen answered.

"Then get back to the monitoring station. If anyone decides to indulge in any more sabotage I want to know about it right away."

"Yes commander." Sen replied before deactivating the intercom and then he snarled, "Hey sergeant," he said, turning to Tobis, "ever notice how it's always us engineers get stuck sitting around in burning hot engine rooms?"

3.

Sen had only just broken off communication with the bridge when the intercom sounded again and Dayle activated.

"Sen?" he said, wondering what would cause the engineer to call again so soon.

"No commander, it's me." Marse said.

"Marse. What's your situation?" Dayle asked.

"I'm in the main hangar with Jaysica and Tharun." Marse told him, "We've found something."

"We?" Jaysica's voice called out in the background.

"Commander, there's a crate of DC-fifteens that's been opened and several of them removed." Marse said, ignoring Jaysica.

"Can you give me an exact number?" Dayle asked.

"Looks like eight. Plus ammunition." Marse answered.

"Eight." Dayle repeated, "Well at least that gives us a number of hostiles."

"Commander Kord sir," Jeeves exclaimed, "it also means that each of our individual groups is outnumbered by the enemy. They can pick us off one group at a time."

"Marse, our stowaways have made off with the main hyperdrive motivator and disabled the back up." Dayle said, "I don't suppose that you've been able to find a spare down there in that hangar?"

"No sir, sorry. At least not as far as I can see. This place is crammed with stuff and most of it's in crates. It'll take the three of us hours to find it."

"Very well. Keep searching and let us know what you find. Bridge out." Dayle said and he sighed and looked at Owen, "Give me that comlink." he said, holding out his hand.

"Of course." Owen said, handing him the device and Dayle turned it on.

"Vorn are you there?" he asked.

"Right here." Vorn answered, "Here being the galley at the base of the control towers."

"Any food down there?" Dayle asked, suddenly curious.

"Doesn't look like it. I think there were some stocks of survival rations aboard when the ship was sent into deep space but it looks like rats got in and ate the lot before turning on each other before they starved."

"Well Marse just called in and he says that someone looks to have taken eight carbines from a crate in the hangar, so I'd say that's how many we're dealing with."

"Sounds reasonable." Vorn commented, "Not good odds though it we run into them."

"No they aren't. But there's something else. Sen's confirmed that the hyperdrive isn't working because someone stole the motivator and the back up's been sabotaged. Your Tobis suggested that it looks like whoever did it wanted to be able to fix the ship again. I'm guessing right after they've dealt with us." Dayle told him.

"I take it that there are no signs of where the motivator has been taken?" Vorn asked.

"None." Dayle answered.

"Never mind. I think I can figure something out. I'll call back later." Vorn said and then the channel went dead.

"I know that look." Mace said, glancing at Brak after watching Vorn while he spoke to Dayle.

"I've got an idea." Vorn replied, smiling.

"Why do I have such a bad feeling about this?" Brak asked.

"Because most of his plans are insane." Mace replied.

"Hey, it's me." Vorn said, "I've got everything under control."

"Like how to find the hyperdrive motivator?" Brak said.

"As a matter of fact yes." Vorn said, "Look, I served on a ship like this during the Clone Wars so I'm familiar with the layout. The hyperdrive motivator is a big piece of kit and even eight men couldn't carry it very far. But since there's equipment missing from the hangar my guess is that whoever stayed on this ship after being given the chance to get off got themselves a loading droid from there and is using that to move the missing motivator."

"That's 'how', but what about 'where' major?" Mace asked.

"Well even on a ship this size there are only so many corridors big enough to allow a loading droid carrying a motivator to move along them. If we start with the one nearest to where the motivator was taken from we should be able to track where it was taken."

"And run right into eight Imperial crewmen." Brak pointed out.

"We'll deal with that when it comes to it." Vorn said, "Now come on, the quickest way to engineering is this way." and waved for the others to follow him.

"Keen to get your new ship back to HQ?" Mace asked as he followed Vorn.

"What?" Vorn replied.

"Do you think that command will give her to you?" Mace asked.

"What do you mean by that?" Brak added, confused.

"When we were handling the defection of Admiral Rosten about a year ago the major had been offered command of his star destroyer, the *Primarch*. The mission went wrong and the ship never made it to the Alliance but I wouldn't be surprised if high command offered him command of this one instead." Mace said. "I honestly hadn't considered it." Vorn replied, "And after what happened to the *Primarch* we may want to consider not counting our kaadus before they hatch."

"Fair enough. But I still want to be first officer." Mace said.

Vorn led the other two men as far as a large door that led into the star destroyer's engineering section, close to where the hyperdrives were located. The appearance of the wall around the doorway indicated that it was possible to close a reinforced blast door over the standard one but at present this was retracted. Crouching down Vorn began to inspect the deck plating that led up to the door.

"What are you looking for?" Brak asked.

"Scuff marks. The dirt on the floor should mean that a big droid carrying heavy equipment would leave a trail." Vorn replied, "Though I admit this would be easier if I was younger and my eyesight better. Give me a hand both of you." Mace glanced at Brak and Vorn frowned, "Clap and I'll make Kara my first officer instead." he said.

"Bloody nepotism." Mace muttered, smiling as he knelt down to assist Vorn in inspecting the deck plates, followed by Brak.

"There's something over here major." Brak called soon after out when he found a patch of the deck where a large foot had dragged across it and scraped away some of the grime that had been deposited there in the years that the ship had been adrift.

"Can you tell which way it's heading?" Vorn asked.

"That way I think." Brak replied, "Though Coll's really the one you want for this. The only tracks I know anything about are musical."

"You're doing just fine." Mace told him as he looked at the marks as well before looking at Vorn, "Yeah, I agree. That way." he added, pointing.

"So what's down there?" Brak asked.

"A cargo hold." Vorn replied, "Plus the main reactor and a life support station."

"So they could sabotage the reactor or the air reprocessing system." Brak said.

"Why would they?" Mace replied, "Without power they'd freeze as fast as us and they need air to breathe as well."

"On the other hand if that hold is as crowded as the hangar then hiding the hyperdrive motivator inside it may be a possibility." Vorn added, "We better check it out. But make sure you've got your blasters ready and remember that there shouldn't be anyone else wandering around the ship so if you do see anyone feel free to shoot first."

"I always do." Mace said.

A bleeping sound alerted the rebels on the bridge to a sensor contact and they rushed to the comscan stations to see what it was.

"Something just dropped out of hyperspace." Owen said, "Something small I'd say."

"Could be a scout ship." Kara said, looking at Dayle, "If we could get one of the fighters in the hangar into a clear spot I could-"

"No." Dayle interrupted, "We won't do anything that will call attention to us, including launching starfighters."

"So what are we going to do?" Cass asked.

"Like I said earlier, hope that ship doesn't notice us." Dayle replied.

The pod burst open just after dropping out of hyperspace, allowing the Arakyd viper probe droid to exit. Immediately the droid began to scan the area of space it was in, hunting for the missing star destroyer. But space was very big and mainly empty, so with most of the *Justice's* systems powered down it was not an obvious target right away. However, it did produce enough of a thermal anomaly that the probe droid moved in for a closer look and soon after it positively identified the silhouette as a venator-class star destroyer like the ship it was hunting. Using its visual sensors the droid recorded as many images of the drifting star destroyer as it could before extending a transmission antenna and in accordance with its programming transmitted them back to Imperial Intelligence on Estran.

The door to Gayal's office slid upwards to reveal one of her subordinates.

"Miss Tharr," the woman said before Gayal could berate her for entering unannounced, "we've just got a squawk from one of the probe droids."

"The *Justice*?" Gayal asked and the woman nodded.

"Four parsecs along the Trade Corridor." she replied, prompting Gayal to jump out of her chair and rush towards the door.

"I assume the navy doesn't know yet?"

"No ma'am. As per your orders we haven't sent the information on yet. But we're preparing a team now."

"Good. Take me there." Gayal said.

IntSec was usually used to ensure the physical security of Imperial Intelligence facilities and staff. But that did not mean that the highly trained troopers, most of them veterans from the army or navy before being recruited by intelligence, could not be used for other more covert purposes as well. There were twenty of the armoured troopers readying their weapons as Gayal entered the hangar that was dominated by the standard Imperial lambda-class shuttle. The vessel was ideal for secret operations such as this since although the design was instantly recognisable as an Imperial vessel there were so many of them in service that anyone seeing one would naturally assume that it was involved in some routine duty. Added to which the shuttle's relatively powerful armament and fast hyperdrives made it a useful assault vessel.

"Commander on deck!" one of the troopers yelled when he noticed Gayal and all twenty snapped to attention, holding their weapons at their sides. This revealed more clearly that the troopers were equipped to capture rather than kill. Each man still carried a blaster pistol that could be set to deliver a lethal blast but their primary weapons were designed to incapacitate an opponent. Gayal saw projectile launchers, net launchers and force pikes among them.

"Your target has been located," she announced, walking along the line of troopers, "and you will be launching within the hour. Your orders are simple. Board the ship and subdue all resistance. Remember though, you may damage the Justice if you have to but bring me the rebels themselves. I want them alive." then she paused for effect and glared along the line, "No disintegrations. Do you understand?"

"Yes ma'am!" the troopers called out in unison and Gayal smiled, "Good. Carry on."

4.

Mace held up his hand for the other two men with him to stop when he heard voices from ahead. Using Vorn's directions the three rebels had made it almost to the star destroyer's ventral cargo hold and from the noise up ahead it seemed that they had found the Imperial stowaways. Mace peered around a corner before pulling his head back quickly.

"There's a sentry." he whispered, "Technician's uniform."

"Just one?" Brak asked.

"Just one." Mace replied, nodding.

"But that one could summon the others." Vorn pointed out, "Plus shooting him would get their notice as well."

"So what do we do major?" Mace asked.

"Get Cass down here." Vorn replied and Mace frowned, "I need the helmet that goes with this disguise." Vorn explained, "Then hopefully I'll be able to pass myself off as a stormtrooper that managed to get aboard before we broke out of the dry dock."

"I don't know. I've got a bad feeling about this." Mace said, "It's not like you to involve Cass in a plan so obviously."

"She's the one that can be spared from the bridge the most." Vorn said as he took out the comlink, "Cass are you there?" he asked, keeping his voice low so that it would not carry as far as the sentry.

"Right here major. Still on the bridge." Cass replied and Vorn adjusted the volume of the comlink to make it quieter.

"Cass the stormtrooper helmet." Vorn said, "I need you to bring it to me."

"Where are you?" Cass asked.

"Close to a cargo hold. Take turbolift shaft four down to deck three and head towards the front of the ship. In fact bring Penny with you. She should be able to track my comlink when she gets that close. Can you do that?"

"Sure. I can-" Cass began before Dayle took the comlink from her.

"Vorn what are you playing at?" he asked.

"We've located the Imperials in the main cargo hold." Vorn replied, "They've set a sentry so I want to try a bit of trickery to try and get them to do something stupid. If they've got the hyperdrive motivator in there then we can't risk them damaging it to prevent us from getting it back."

"Okay do it." Dayle said, "I'll try and get hold of Tharun's group and send them to back you up. But be advised, we could have an Imperial ship snooping around out there. We need to be gone as quick as we can."

"Thanks. I'll wait for Cass to arrive with the helmet and let you know when I'm ready to go." Vorn responded before shutting off the comlink and handing it to Brak.

The three rebels waited in the corridor, Mace standing right at the corner and listening to the Imperials that he could still hear inside the hold. Obviously they had left the door open to try and prevent anyone sneaking all the way up on them. But their lack of tactical skill was clear the rebels to see. A single stationary sentry was nothing but a target and they would have been far better off retreating into the hold entirely and then sealing the door behind them.

Cass's arrival was preceded by that of Jaysica's mouse droid, Penny. The tiny droid rolled along the corridor and let out a chirp that made the rebels flinch, worried that the Imperial sentry would hear. Mace risked another glimpse around the corner. Then when he brought his head back he smiled.

"Thank the Force nobody pays any attention to mouse droids." he said and there was a shrill squeal from Penny.

"Shush Penny." Cass hissed as she appeared, "You'll give us away."

"Cass." Vorn said, "Quick, give me that helmet." and Cass hurried up to him with the stormtrooper's helmet. Putting it on, Vorn looked at the other rebels, "Okay, how do I look?" he asked.

"Ready to oppress billions." Brak said and Vorn gave him a thumbs up before turning around and moving to the corner.

Meanwhile Brak activated the comlink again.

"Commander Kord, this is Brak." he transmitted, "Major Larcus is ready to go."

"Good." Dayle responded, "Sergeant Verser and his team is on their way. ETA about five minutes."

The rebels waited again, this time for Tharun to arrive with Jaysica and Marse. When the three other rebels did appear each of them was carrying a pair of carbines slung over their shoulders in addition to the weapons they carried.

"We took the liberty of grabbing these from a crate in the hangar." Tharun explained as he and the other new arrivals handed out the carbines, "Should even things up a bit."

"This isn't loaded." Cass said as she accepted a carbine from Jaysica.

"There wasn't any ammunition left in the crate." Jaysica replied, "The Imperials must have taken it all."

"Not to worry." Mace said, "We can use the power packs from our pistols." and he ejected the power pack from his sidearm and loaded it into the carbine instead. Then he looked at Jaysica, "But dare I ask what happened to your clothes?" he asked and she blushed.

"It was an accident." she replied and as Mace sighed and shook his head she added, "I'm still decent though."

"Enough of this." Vorn hissed, "Time to get things moving." and then he moved right up to the corner, "Imperial marines." he called out, "Coming out." and then he stepped out from behind the corner so that the sentry could see him.

Immediately the sentry brought up his carbine and took aim at Vorn but with the figure in stormtrooper armour standing with his rifle at rest he held his fire.

"Who are you?" he asked instead.

"Trill herf xesh one-one-three-eight." Vorn replied, "My squad was supposed to be your rescue. But when the ship broke free of the dry dock the rest of them were blown out of the airlock. I've been looking for you since then."

"What's going on out there?" another voice called out from inside the hold and flanked by two more of his technicians Cal Le vess emerged, all three men aiming carbines at Vorn.

"Says he was sent to rescue us." the sentry said.

"Then where's the rest of your squad?" Le vess asked.

"Burned up." Vorn lied.

"And how did you find us down here?" Le vess then said, obviously suspecting a trap.

"When the ship didn't jump back to hyperspace again I suspected that someone was still on board and had tampered with the hyperdrive. So I headed for engineering and picked up your trail there."

"Our trail?" another of the technicians said.

"You left one." Vorn said, "One that the rebels could have followed easily if they'd found it."

Le vess frowned.

"Well they haven't so far." he said, "And it's thanks to us that this ship isn't going anywhere until we decide otherwise. Come take a look at this." and he waved for Vorn to follow him as he retreated back into the cargo hold.

Vorn followed, paying as much attention as he could to the positions of the Imperial personnel he saw despite the limitations placed on his visibility by the stormtrooper helmet. As far as he could tell they were all technicians rather than front line troopers. But they still had an advantage in numbers over the rebels waiting just a short distance away. Added to which any damage to the hyperdrive motivator would render it useless and strand the rebels here permanently. It was easy to see how the massive device had been brought to the hold though, it was still being held by a loading droid. The large bipedal machine stood motionless between two large towers of unlabelled cargo containers and Vorn guessed that this had been taken from the hangar where the Imperials had obtained their weapons.

"We liberated this from the hyperdrive." Le vess said, slapping the side of the hyperdrive motivator, "Just walked in and removed it. We disabled the back up at the same time, more permanently that we did for this. After all there's no point in preventing the rebels from getting away with this ship if we end up stranded out here with them."

"Quite." Vorn replied, "But your security is weak. Just one sentry is not enough, you need to have someone patrolling the corridors nearby."

"I don't have comlinks for my men." Le vess pointed out.

"You don't need them. If they stay close enough you'll be able to hear anything that happens and the idea is just to disrupt a rebel attack, not stop it entirely." Vorn said, "Give me one of your men and I'll take the first duty."

Le vess turned to one of the men flanking him.

"Go with him." he said, "Call out if you see anything."

"Yes petty officer." the man replied.

Vorn then nodded at the man.

"With me." he ordered, leading the man back into the corridor outside the cargo hold. Once there he began to slow down just enough that the technician overtook him, "Take a right at the end of the corridor." Vorn instructed as he slowed down some more and he made sure that he spoke loud enough that his voice carried around the corner to where the other rebels were waiting.

"Get back." Tharun hissed as he positioned himself as close to the corner as he could. Then looking at Marse he added, "Be ready." and Marse nodded, moving beside Tharun.

The technician appeared around the corner and just as he was starting to turn around Tharun lashed out, striking him in the throat as hard as he could and then snatching his carbine away before it could fall to the floor. At the same time Marse reached out to grab hold of the man himself by his overalls and pulled him

around the corner before the sentry by the cargo bay door could notice something wrong. Vorn had made sure to place himself so that he blocked the sentry's line of sight but that would not matter if the technician fell to the floor choking to death. But with the man pulled around the corner Tharun, Marse and Mace were all able to leap on him, pinning him to the deck while Tharun wrapped an arm around his neck to further restrict his breathing.

When Vorn followed the technician around the corner he sidestepped this and removed his helmet as he waited for Tharun to confirm that the technician was dead.

"So what did you find major?" Mace asked as he stood up.

"The hyperdrive motivator is in there all right." Vorn replied, "But guarded obviously. I counted eight of them just like we thought so with this guy out of the way that takes us down to seven."

"And only six of us." Mace said.

"Seven." Cass corrected him.

"Hey, I don't want to involve you in a frontal assault." Mace told her and she frowned and folded her arms.

"Actually I was thinking we could use her." Vorn said and both Cass and Mace turned to stare at him in surprise, "Look," Vorn went on, "there's a ventilation shaft that runs across there," and he pointed upwards, moving his finger sideways to indicate the path of the shaft, "it's narrow but I think that Cass and Jaysica could fit. They can make their way through it to the cargo hold. Then when we draw the Imperials' fire from out here they can attack from the other direction."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Tharun said.

"Yes it does." Mace agreed, "Cass are you-"

"I'll do it." Cass replied, smiling.

"Then let's get you up into that vent." Vorn said, "Though perhaps Jaysica should go first. She's had more practice at this sort of thing."

The access to the shaft was a grill set into the ceiling that came away easily when Brak, supported by Marse and Tharun pulled on it. Then he climbed down so that Jaysica could climb up, reaching into the vent and pulling herself inside.

"Mind out there little lady." Tharun warned her, "It looks like there are a lot of-" but before he could finish there was a tearing sound from inside the vent and down below the other rebels winced.

"Err major." Jaysica said from inside the vent.

"Don't worry." Vorn replied, "We'll go get the overalls from that technician and be right back."

"Thank you." Jaysica said.

5.

"Sling your blaster over your back." Jaysica told Cass before she began to crawl along the shaft, "It'll stop it banging against the sides of the vent and giving us away."

"Sure." Cass replied, adjusting the position of her carbine before following Jaysica along the vent. Though somewhat cramped the vent was easily wide enough for the two young women thanks to their small size and even while taking care not to make too much noise they were able to make good progress and soon they found themselves beside the grill leading down into the cargo hold. Peering through this Jaysica could see that there was no-one in the area immediately below and also that when they dropped from the vent they would land with crates between themselves and the Imperial technicians.

"Okay this is it." Jaysica whispered, crawling past the vent and then turning around, "You need to get right in front of the grill and place your feet flat against it."

"What? You mean I'm going first?" Cass asked and Jaysica nodded.

"You need to push the grill off with your feet and then just slide straight out of the vent. When the grill hits the deck everyone out there will hear so you want to already be out by the time it does. That way you'll be in cover before anyone can react. Then I'll follow while you cover me."

"Okay." Cass replied, squeezing into position. But just as she was about to kick the grill free Jaysica stooped her.

"Cass no!" she hissed, "Wait for the major and your father first."

"Okay that should have been enough time for them to get into position." Vorn said. Then he looked at Tharun, "So you know the plan?"

"We take out the sentry and anyone else that comes running for a look." he answered.

"Exactly. Carry on sergeant." Vorn said.

"And try not to hit Cass." Mace added.

"What about Jaysica?" Tharun asked.

"Her either. I'd never here the last of it from Tobis." Mace said.

Tharun and Marse both unfolded the stocks of their weapons and braced them against their shoulders.

"When I give the word we go." Tharun said and Marse nodded, "Okay go!" he snapped and both men leapt around the corner and fired short bursts of blaster fire into the startled sentry. Then they rushed down the short stretch of corridor leading to the entrance to the cargo hold, hoping to make it to the door before any of the technicians inside the hold could and when they saw movement from inside both opened fire again, hitting another of the technicians as he ran across the doorway. But Le vess himself made it to the door and rather than returning fire down the corridor he slammed his hand down on the control panel beside it and there was a hissing sound as it began to slide shut.

"Don't let it close!" Vorn called out as he, Brak and Mace followed the two more experienced rebel soldiers down the corridor, "Jam it with something!"

"My carbine." Marse responded and he tossed his weapon along the floor, hoping to get it between the two halves of the door before they could slam together. But the throw was too late and the sound of the doors closing echoed down the corridor was followed by the sound of the carbine bouncing back off them.

"Krifff!" Tharun yelled as he rushed to the control panel on the near side of the door only to find it inoperative, "They've rigged it not to open from this side."

"Tobis could get it open for us." Mace suggested but Vorn shook his head.

"No." he said, "Tobis and Sen are needed right where they are, "We'll have to rely on Cass and Jaysica to open the door."

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Brak said.

"Listen." Cass said, still poised inside the vent, "The shooting's stopped."

"But they can't have taken out the Imperials already." Jaysica replied. Then they heard more noise from inside the cargo hold.

"Get those crates into position." Le vess called out to his remaining men, "That door may not keep those rebel scum out for long."

"They've closed the door." Cass whispered.

"Then we need to get it open again." Jaysica replied.

"How?"

"My guess is that it will just open if we can get to the panel. This isn't a secure area or getting through the vent wouldn't be so easy."

"But there are Imperial soldiers out there all looking right at the door." Cass pointed out.

"They're just a technical crew." Jaysica replied.

"They've got blasters haven't they? How do we even get out of here unseen?"

"Carefully." Jaysica said and she reached forwards and stuck her fingers through the grill to grip it, "Okay now press gently but firmly with your feet." she added and Cass began to try and straighten her legs against the grill. After just a few seconds of pushing the grill popped out of place and was prevented from falling to the floor only by Jaysica holding on to it. Then she carefully turned it around so that she could bring it back inside the vent.

"My finger's stuck." Jaysica said, attempting to pull her hand free of the grill, wincing.

"Let me help." Cass said, reaching out.

"No, I've got it." Jaysica replied as she pulled as hard as she could on the grill before it finally came free. Then slammed into the side of the vent.

"Oh no." Cass said as Jaysica just smiled nervously.

"What was that?" someone said from inside the hold.

"Go check it out." Levesse ordered and knowing that they would soon be discovered Cass jumped from the vent, landing behind the crates and rolling across the floor.

Picking herself up she scurried away from the vent and the Imperial technicians. However, she could not stay hidden forever and she was soon spotted.

"Over there!" someone shouted and Cass threw herself to the floor as she heard the sound of blaster fire and felt the heat of the energy blasts passing above her.

"There's only one of them." she heard someone shout, "Surround her."

Cass crawled to a nearby crate and using it as cover she fired her carbine around it, taking just enough time to make sure that she was not firing towards the hyperdrive motivator that was easy to pick out among the regular shaped crates in the hold, but not concerning herself with accurately aiming at any of the technicians. The semi-random blasts from her carbine had the effect she wanted though, drawing the Imperials' attention towards her while also forcing them to take cover.

Watching from the vent Jaysica saw her chance and jumped down, unnoticed by any of the Imperial technicians who had abandoned their position by the door in favour of trying to hunt down Cass. Jaysica darted from one behind one crate to another, heading steadily towards the door. She paused when she reached the last piece of cover between the vent and the door and looked around. The technicians were steadily gaining ground on Cass and it would not be long before they got a clear shot. But not one of them was looking in Jaysica's direction and she ran for the door, rushing up to the control panel and pressing the button that would open it up.

"The door!" Levesse yelled when the sound of the door opened was heard across the hold but it was already too late. Prepared for the likelihood that Cass and Jaysica would find a way to open the door the other rebels had already been prepared in the corridor outside and the moment it started to move they took action.

The carbine taken from the dead sentry was slid into the path of the door just in case someone was able to make it to the control panel in time to try and close it again and both Marse and Tharun began firing through the widening gap. Like Cass, they just made sure that the precious hyperdrive motivator was not in their line of fire but otherwise just used their fire to keep their opponents away. Then when the gap was wide enough to admit them both side by side they burst into the hold and split up.

"Nice work little lady." Tharun said as both he and Jaysica crouched down behind the barricade that the Imperial technicians had set up to defend against an assault coming through the door but now proved just as useful to the rebels themselves.

"Thank Cass." Jaysica replied, "She drew them away for me."

"Perhaps leave that out when you tell Captain Grayle about this later." Tharun told her.

"Leave what out?" Mace asked as he suddenly appeared beside Tharun.

"Nothing." Jaysica said.

"Good. Because I want to know everything. Now get moving, we need to flush out the rest of these Imperials." Mace said before vaulting over the barricade and rushing into the maze of crates.

Fortunately the remaining Imperial technicians had all been attempting to close in on Cass and this put them all in one area of the cargo hold.

"Cass!" Mace called out.

"I'm here dad!" she replied, "I'm fine."

"Stay down, we're coming." Mace told her before shooting a technician that stepped out in front of him.

"Not planning on going anywhere." Cass responded.

Now it was the turn of the rebels to try and surround their opponents. Marse and Tharun took opposite flanks while the others spaced themselves out in between in pairs, Jaysica going with Mace while Brak accompanied Vorn and the Imperial technicians' lack of combat experience now began to show. The remaining four acted as individuals as they tried to slip away, not making any attempts to co-ordinate their actions. One decided that he would try and head for the hyperdrive motivator, reasoning that the rebels would not shoot at him if it risked hitting the vital piece of equipment. But he failed to take into account what it

would take to get there in the first place and as he ran as fast as he could Tharun heard him coming, dropped into a kneeling stance and was ready to fire a burst into the man the moment he appeared between two stacks of crates. Another tried to climb up onto some of the crates in the hope that by gaining height he would gain some sort of advantage. But while he was still pulling himself up the side of the stack he suddenly felt a hand grip his ankle and he looked down to see Vorn holding onto it.

"You wouldn't be trying to leave us would you?" Vorn asked before pulling the technician from the stack and jumping back to let the man fall. Smashing into another stack of crates as he fell the technician brought these crashing down on top of him and just as Brak and Vorn were considering checking to see if he had survived a dark red pool began forming from underneath and Vorn waved Brak onwards.

A third technician tried firing bursts of blaster fire around each set of crates before darted to a new hiding place. But he overlooked that although even slightly out of date weapons such as the DC-15 could be fired a hundred times without reloading this did not last long firing on fully automatic all the time and Marse waited until he heard the sound of a spent power pack being ejected before jumping out in front of the technician and aiming his own carbine at the man.

"Drop it!" he snapped. But the technician slammed another power pack into the weapon and began to raise it, falsely believing he could fire before Marse put a single shot into his chest.

Now only Le vess remained and he had continued to work his way cautiously towards Cass's position. Cass had also been firing her weapon for an extended period of time, though not as rapidly as the technician killed by Marse. But just as Le vess was closing on her position she pulled the trigger of her carbine only for nothing to happen.

"Stang." she hissed, hurriedly searching for a spare power pack. But this was where Le vess saw his chance and he rushed forwards, leaping over the crate Cass was using for cover and then swatting the empty carbine from her hands.

"Get up!" he snapped, dragging her to her feet by her hair. Then he spun around and held Cass in front of him just as the other rebels appeared in front of him, "Stay back or I vape the little loth-rat!" he yelled, "I mean it. She's bantha poodoo if any of you make a move."

"No need for that." Vorn said, "Just let her go and you'll be treated fairly."

"Fairly? By terrorist scum like you? No thanks." Le vess replied, scowling.

"Dad." Cass said, looking in Mace's direction.

"Don't worry Cass. I've got everything under control." Mace said.

"Dad?" Le vess said, grinning, "Well look here dad, me and your little girl are going for a walk. We're heading for the nearest escape pod and I'm getting off this ship. Then you can take it wherever you want for all I care."

"Cass stays here." Mace said sternly.

"You think I'm some nerf herder? I give her to you and I'm dead before I take a step." Le vess said, "She's the only thing keeping me alive right now."

Then there came an electronic squeal and Penny suddenly zoomed out from between the crates, hurtling towards Cass and her captor. The tiny mouse droid had its heavy manipulating arm extended and as it rolled past Le vess it slashed at his leg, opening up a deep gouge in his thigh that spurted blood. Screaming in pain Le vess let go of his grip on Cass and clamped his hand over the wound. But this gave Cass an opening and she quickly elbowed him in the stomach as hard as she could before diving away from him. The response from the other rebels was instant, all of them firing their blasters into Le vess until he fell to the floor.

"Quick!" Vorn yelled, "Let's get that loading droid back to engineering with the motivator. Brak, let Commander Kord know we've dealt with the Imperials and have the motivator. Tell him to let Sen and Tobis know we're on our way."

6.

"Vessel exiting hyperspace." Owen called out from the comscan station.

"Can you identify it?" Dayle asked.

"Looks like a shuttle. Lambda-class." Owen replied.

"It's the Empire, they're here." Kara exclaimed.

"Contact engineering." Dayle ordered, "Let them know we have an Imperial shuttle inbound." then he looked at Inra and Kara, "In the mean time let's not make it easy for them. Power up the ion drive and see if we can put a bit more distance between us."

In the cockpit of the shuttle the pilot quickly acquired the star destroyer on his sensors and he saw the engines begin to glow as they were brought back on line.

"Looks like they're going to try and make a run for it." he said to his co-pilot, "Go tell our passengers to hold on to something, I'm going to open her up and give her all she's got. Oh and tell them five to ten minutes to target."

"I don't like the sound of that major." Mace said when they heard the ion drives firing up.

"You and Brak should get back to the bridge and see if you can help them." Vorn ordered, "We'll call as soon everything's ready." and Mace nodded before turning around and running in the direction of the turbolifts. Unfortunately the labour droid was not built for speed, especially when weighed down by a large piece of machinery and its movement towards engineering was painfully slow.

"Can't we make it go any faster?" Cass asked.

"Not without a major redesign." Vorn answered, "We just need to hope that Commander Kord can keep the Empire off our backs long enough to allow us to get this back into place."

Sen, Tobis and Harvey were waiting at the entrance to the engineering section.

"Come on!" Sen called out, "We've got everything ready."

"Is the motivator damaged?" Vorn asked.

"Can't tell." Sen replied, "We'll have to find out when we try plugging it in."

The rebels then guided the loading droid to the star destroyer's hyperdrive and instructed it to put the motivator back in place while Harvey plugged in to the engine.

"Err, run diagnostic." Tobis ordered as he and Sen acted as quickly as they could to fix the motivator in place. Harvey whistled while running the diagnostic and Jaysica rushed to a nearby control console where the results of the tests were being shown.

"Everything's working." she said.

"Don't tell us." Vorn replied, "Tell the bridge."

"Oh yes." Jaysica said and she reached for the intercom, "Bridge this is engineering. Hyperdrive will be on line shortly."

"It's done!" Sen snapped.

"Go!" Jaysica then exclaimed into the intercom.

"Engaging hyperdrive." Kara said as she reached for the control lever and then the stars outside the ship blurred into the lines of hyperspace.

Meanwhile in the cockpit of the Imperial shuttle the pilot's jaw dropped as the supposedly disabled star destroyer escaped right in front of him.

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

"You're sorry?" Moff Horatian yelled, leaping to his feet and slamming his hands down on his desk so suddenly that Fleet Admiral Vretan, General Dern and Gayal Tharr all flinched simultaneously.

"Yes sir." Gayal said, "As I said my team was just thirty seconds from-"

"Shut up!" the moff shouted, "The rebels now have in their possession another star destroyer. It may not be the most modern ship available but can you imagine the damage they could do with it? That ship is a mobile raiding platform." Then he looked at Admiral Vretan, "How far away were your ships fleet admiral?" he asked. "The *War Machine* and *Curass* were six minutes away." Admiral Vretan replied.

"Six minutes." Moff Horatian repeated as he sat down, "Six minutes Miss Tharr. Yet after your department modified the programming of the probe droids being operated by the navy's search vessels you failed to inform anyone of the *Justice's* location for more than two hours."

"I promise you it won't happen again." Gayal replied.

"No it won't." Moff Horatian said in agreement, "You have failed me for the last time Miss Tharr. I expect your resignation to be lodged with my office within the hour."

"Resignation?" Gayal said, her eyes widening.

"Yes. Resignation. I assure you that it's far better than any of the alternatives." Moff Horatian said.

"But who will replace me?" Gayal asked before the door to the moff's office slid open and Rodge Larrs entered.

"Ah Rodge." Moff Horatian said, "I take it you found him?"

"Yes sir. He's here now." Rodge replied as he approached the moff's desk and then Ibram stepped into the office as well.

"Good afternoon Moff Horatian," the Imperial Inquisitor said, "I would like to thank you personally for this vote of confidence in my abilities." then he looked at Gayal and smiled as he sensed her reaction.

Rage.

"You have something to say Miss Tharr?" he asked.

"Perhaps she'd like to wish you good luck." General Dern said.

"She doesn't have time." Moff Horatian said, "Miss Tharr I suggest you get out of my office now. Or perhaps you'd prefer I had my guards remove you."

"Of course not." Gayal said before turning around and walking out of the office, watched by the men gathered around the moff's desk.