

STAR WARS TREASON

03: THE SCOURGE OF PIRACY

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THE CREW OF THE SWORD OF JUSTICE ARE PLUNGED INTO A HUNT FOR PIRATES RESPONSIBLE FOR A SERIES OF ATTACKS THAT A LOCAL OFFICIAL HAD ATTEMPTED TO KEEP SECRET FROM IMPERIAL AUTHORITIES. THIS HUNT TAKES A MORE DANGEROUS TURN THOUGH WHEN IT LEADS TO A WORLD AT THE CENTRE OF RUMOURS CONCERNING BURIED TREASURE AND THE POSSIBILITY RAISED OF SOMETHING FAR MORE SINISTER AND DEADLY BEING HIDDEN BENEATH THE SURFACE.

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<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.html>

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1.

Captain Jarren Kain, commanding officer of the Venator-class star destroyer *Sword of Justice* smiled as his kilometre long vessel exited hyperspace and he looked at the taller man standing beside him at the front of the vessel's bridge.

"Feel that Commander Coroll?" he asked his first officer.

"No captain. What is it?" Coroll responded, frowning.

"Exactly." Kain said, "No shaking, grinding or sudden alarms. It's been almost a month now." Kain said and Coroll smiled back at him.

"Yes, those spare parts seem to have done the trick, don't they?" he said.

"Lieutenant Ventern made a good call in plundering that old space station." Kain said.

"I'd hardly call it plundering captain. They were the Empire's supplies to begin with. Well the Republic's, but you know what I mean." Coroll replied, "Such an easy solution to our technical issues."

"Easy for you maybe commander, but it was rather more uncomfortable for me." a female voice called out from one of the crew pits and both Kain and Coroll looked around to where Lieutenant Erranes, the ship's navigator and Captain Kain's adjutant was looking back up at them.

"Okay, so maybe you were taken hostage, but you're fine now." Coroll said.

"What's our status lieutenant?" Kain then asked the woman and she glanced at a nearby display before looking back up at Kain.

"We're in Ortho's commercial traffic arrivals zone captain. Right where we should be." she told him.

"Any signs of other ships?" Coroll added.

"We're reading three bulk freighters heading towards the orbitals on our side of the planet along with a number of smaller transports. We're also reading a lot of orbital facilities." Erranes answered.

"Yes, each nation on Orthos probably maintains their own orbital stations to give them a permanent presence in space. What about warships lieutenant?" Kain said.

"There are at least a dozen holding station close to the arrival zone. Most look like gunboats but there are a couple of corvettes as well. We're easily within their passive sensor range but none of them have reacted to our arrival." Erranes explained.

"That sounds about right." Kain said, looking at Coroll again, "Each of those ships is probably from a different nation, just like the orbitals."

"Ah the joys of planets made up of competing states. Everyone duplicates what everyone else is doing but none of them are able to do it properly." Coroll said and Kain nodded in agreement.

"Those corvettes are probably the best they can produce." he said.

"Our scans show limited power output from the ships captain." Erranes added, "I doubt that even the corvettes they can generate enough combined to run weapons that can threaten us. Unless they have missiles or torpedoes of course."

"We can probably destroy them all in a couple of minutes." Coroll commented.

"Now, now commander, let's not get too trigger happy. We're here to support our diplomatic efforts to stop a war breaking out, not start one." Kain said.

"Of course captain." Coroll said.

"Navigation set a course for planetary orbit." Kain ordered, "I want a line opening to our primary embassy on the surface. Let them know that we've arrived in system and ask for an update on the local situation. Then get hold of Mister Fenus and tell him that his team can deploy as soon as we're in orbit."

"Yes captain." Erranes replied.

"What about those local warships captain?" Coroll asked.

"What about them commander?" Kain responded as he turned to look out of the bridge's forward viewports, "They're hardly a threat to us. If they hail us we'll simply tell them that we're on a diplomatic mission. If they target us with their weapons then we'll open fire. I'm sure that after we destroy the first of them the rest will have second thoughts."

Kain watched as the star field outside the ship began to move as the *Sword of Justice* turned towards Ortho and its ion drives engaged to propel the ship towards the planet. He did not have long to do this though before Erranes spoke up.

"Captain I have the ambassador for you." she said and Kain nodded.

"Hologram?" he asked.

"Yes sir." Erranes answered.

"Okay, I'll speak to him now." Kain said as he started to make his way towards the back of the bridge where the command console was located. Once there he activated the communication system and a ghostly hologram of the Imperial ambassador to the planet Ortho appeared in front of him, "Ambassador." he said.

"Captain Kain, I'm glad you've finally arrived, we've been waiting for you anxiously. Is the team ready to deploy?" the ambassador asked.

"I haven't spoken with their leader yet ambassador. I know that all their equipment was already aboard their shuttle when it docked though so I expect that they'll be ready by the time we enter orbit. What's your situation?" Kain replied.

"Precarious captain." the ambassador told him, "The embassy remains secure but there are regular protests outside that we think are intended to pressure either our security staff or the city's law enforcers to open fire. Several of the consulates in other nations have reported similar gatherings as well."

"What do they have against The Empire?" Kain said.

"My consuls and I are heavily involved in the diplomatic efforts to avoid war here captain and there are groups in many nations that would rather just get rid of us and fight it out. I suspect that there may be some co-ordination behind them. That's why I requested support from Imperial Intelligence, if they can expose whoever is sponsoring the protests and violence then maybe this planet can avoid going to war." the ambassador explained.

"Well we should be in orbit in few minutes ambassador. As long as there are no issues with getting clearance to enter the airspace around you the team from Intelligence should be with you within the hour." Kain told him.

"Don't worry about that captain. Landing clearance is already arranged. Hopefully I won't keep you from your regular duties for long." the ambassador said.

"It's no trouble at all ambassador. That's what the navy is for." Kain responded.

"Thank you captain. Now I must get back to my duties. Orthos embassy out." the ambassador said before his hologram faded away.

Kain then looked towards the front of the bridge.

"Lieutenant Erranes have you informed Mister Fenus that we're approaching Orthos?" he asked.

"Yes captain. He and his team are on their way to the hangar now." Erranes answered and Kain nodded.

"Very good. I'll meet him there. Don't let them leave before. Coroll, the bridge is yours." he said.

Like all Venator-class star destroyers the *Sword of Justice's* hangar bay was vast. Originally designed to carry more than three hundred starfighters and bombers plus the shuttles needed to move the troops that the ship carried to the surface of a planet. Now though the ship was only assigned two squadrons of TIE fighters and a variable number of shuttles that never exceeded a dozen. This left most of the hangar empty and many of the individual hangar bays had been used as additional storage, mainly for the large number of spare parts that the crew had recently obtained but some of the individual bays still held a number of Clone Wars vintage craft that had simply never been removed when they were declared obsolete and replaced in Imperial service.

The spare hangar capacity had also meant that there was more than enough room to store the shuttle that had brought the Imperial Intelligence team aboard. This had been kept separate from the other craft in the hangar and guarded by agents from Imperial Intelligence's own internal security division rather than any of the naval troopers or stormtrooper marines from the *Sword of Justice's* own compliment.

When Kain entered the hangar bay that held the Intelligence shuttle he found Fenus standing at the bottom of the access ramp talking to the two guards on duty and the agent turned towards Kain when he noticed the captain approaching.

"Captain, I heard you wanted to speak to me." he said.

"Yes, I just wanted to check in before you depart with whatever it is that you've got aboard your ship." Kain replied and he leant sideways slightly to try and look into the ship but Fenus stepped in front of him and he straightened up again, "I spoke with the ambassador and he's expecting you. Apparently you're already cleared all the way down."

"That's how it was supposed to be arranged. Our primary embassy is in a nation that is pretty friendly to The Empire." Fenus replied.

"Friendly?" Kain commented, recalling what the ambassador had told him about events on Orthos, "From what the ambassador said nowhere down there is particularly friendly towards us."

"Don't worry captain, we're pretty sure that there the trouble is being stirred up from another nation. Our equipment should let us track who's giving the orders and funding it. Then if our assessment is correct, which it normally is, exposing that will trigger a backlash against the protests." Fenus said.

"I hope you're right agent. Having to use a warship to make sure that you got here safely is bad enough without having to evacuate you under fire as well." Kain said.

"And we appreciate the ride captain, but trust me, things on Orthos are going to change." Fenus replied before Kain stepped back.

"Then I'll wish that fortune is with you agent." he said, giving the agent a brief salute and Fenus returned the gesture before he turned to walk up the shuttle's access ramp. Meanwhile Kain took out his comlink and activated it, "Kain to bridge, I'm on my way back now. You may clear our guests for launch." he said into the

device while behind him the shuttle's repulsorlift engines fired up, then just as he was exiting the hangar the shuttle also rose up off the deck and passed through the magnetic field that held in the atmosphere before flying out into space.

"The shuttle has entered the atmosphere safely captain. If anyone out there intended our people harm then having us watching over them seems to have deterred any attack." Coroll told Kain when he returned to the *Sword of Justice's* bridge.

"Very good. In that case we can get back to our regular patrol route." he responded, "Lieutenant Erranes I want a course laid in for the Myseron system. The Lebast Cluster to be precise."

"Not the planet itself captain?" Coroll commented and with a smile on his face he added, "I thought maybe you'd found a treasure map."

The planet of Myseron had undergone a purge of its Confederacy supporting population following the Clone Wars and there were many tales of how some of them had been able to hide their valuables around the planet before being arrested. These tales were enough to draw a stream of treasure seekers to the world despite no vast hauls of valuables ever being found.

"No, you can go and hunt for lost treasure on your own time commander. I want to make sure that no-one is up to no good around the mining colonies." Kain told him.

"Course laid in captain." Erranes announced moments later.

"Very good lieutenant. Inform Line Captain Morco that we are returning to our patrol and will be on station within the hour then make the jump to hyperspace." Kain ordered.

2.

When the *Sword of Justice* exited hyperspace in the Myseron system it was far from any of its planets. Instead the star destroyer had arrived relatively close to a dense asteroid field that was the main focus of mining operations in the system. During the Clone Wars these mines had fed raw materials to the Confederacy but now they were controlled by a number of labour guilds whose loyalty to the Empire was absolute. The field was named for the largest asteroid within it, Lebast, a forty-six kilometre wide lump of unremarkable rock that acted as a base of operations for the miners and the navigational beacon for this base showed up clearly on the star destroyer's sensors.

"Lebast base confirmed at one hundred thousand kilometres captain." Erranes announced.

"Excellent work as always lieutenant. Helm take us in and hold at ten kilometres." Kain replied. Then he smiled and added, "Oh and try not to fly us into any asteroids. Any damage to our paintwork will come from your wages."

This prompted smiles from many of the bridge crew. The route through the asteroid field to Lebast while avoiding large objects was easily large enough for a Venator-class star destroyer to pass through safely, while the *Sword of Justice*'s shields were strong enough to absorb the impact of any smaller pieces of stray debris and the ship's helmsman took the ship towards the base without significant concern about damage. However, as the ship flew through the field one of the crewmen noticed something out of the ordinary on his screen.

"Captain sensors are picking up a significant energy field." the crewman called out from one of the pits and both Kain and Coroll walked towards it and looked down at him.

"Can you be more precise than that crewman?" Coroll asked.

"Not really sir. Its showing up as a region of broad spectrum interference." the crewman answered.

"Too powerful to be emission from mining equipment I take it." Kain commented and the crewman nodded.

"Yes captain. I'd say that it covers a volume about twelve hundred kilometres across." he said.

"Confirmed captain." Erranes added as she studied a different console in the other crew pit, "The field appears to cover the frequency band used by sensors and communications." she added and Kain and Coroll looked at one another.

"Somebody's jamming us." Coroll said.

"Jamming somebody anyway." Kain replied, "Erranes can we get to the source of those emissions ourselves?"

"I've got the source pinpointed to within twenty kilometres captain, there is some reflection from the asteroids that is distorting the field from a regular sphere. I wouldn't want to take the *Sword* in too close though. Our charts show asteroids in that area large enough to penetrate our shields at a spacing of less than five thousand metres." Erranes told him.

"That would be cutting things close. One nearby collision and our hull could be ripped open." Coroll commented.

"I agree." Kain said, nodding his head, "Helm come about and take us as close as possible. Flight control I want a squadron of our fighters ready to launch. We may not be able to safely navigate between asteroids but fighters are far more manoeuvrable."

When Venator-class ships had first been commissioned during the Clone Wars they had operated using two bridges at the tops of the towers towards the rear of the vessels. One of these had been used to control the star destroyer itself while the second had been used exclusively for controlling the hundreds of starfighters that were housed in their hangars. However, now that the number of operational starfighters aboard the *Sword of Justice* had dwindled to a mere two dozen this function could also be handled from the flight bridge and the secondary bridge mothballed. This meant that Kain was able to give orders to launch fighters directly to the crew responsible for them rather than having to use the intercom to communicate with the second bridge.

As the *Sword of Justice* continued to fly through the asteroid field twelve of the ship's starfighter compliment rose up out of the vast forward hangar and sped on ahead of the larger capital ship and even as the spaces between asteroids narrowed from the hundreds to tens of kilometres or less they carried on while the *Sword of Justice* itself came to a dead stop.

"Comscan keep a lock on those fighters. I don't want to lose them in the asteroids or jamming." Kain said sternly as he watched the fighters proceeding through the asteroid field on a screen.

"I doubt any jamming field is strong enough to hide our fighters' engine emissions captain." Coroll commented, knowing that a close pass by a TIE fighter could cause massive disruption to sensitive electronics.

"I'm just concerned about what will happen to our pilots if they run into trouble out there commander. They may not be able to call for support if we need to send in a rescue ship." Kain told him.

"Of course captain. Perhaps we should have a shuttle prepared, just in case?" Coroll suggested and Kain considered this for a moment.

"I don't see why not. Have a rescue ship prepared as a precaution. Oh and have a boarding party ready as well. Just in case." he said.

"We should be coming up on the target location now. Anyone see anything?" the fighter squadron leader broadcast to the other craft of his squadron. The twelve TIE/In starfighters were close enough to one another that the abnormal energy emissions in the area could not block their short-ranged communications but there was still some interference on the channel.

"Nothing Grey Leader. The sky is clear." one of his pilots replied before another spoke up.

"Grey Leader I have what looks like a transport craft ahead. It could be the source of the emissions. Range one hundred and sixty kilometres." the second pilot reported.

The squadron leader focused his sensors on the spot identified by the second pilot, using his fighter's optical detectors to get around the electronic interference and zooming in as much as possible. Sure enough this revealed a lone spacecraft in the asteroid field ahead of the starfighters. This vessel was small enough to be able to manoeuvre though the asteroids despite lacking a powerful military drive and the combination of what looked like a thickly armoured hull along with equipment needed to connect to, handle and drill into asteroids indicated that it was one of the many mining vessels that operated in the system. Significantly though there were no running lights visible and from what the squadron leader could see of it, it was dead in space.

"*Sword* this is Grey Leader, do you read me?" the squadron leader signalled but although he was able to maintain contact with the other fighters of his squadron the jamming was too strong for him to be able to contact the *Sword of Justice* through it, "*Sword* this is Grey Leader, do you read me?" he tried again but he still could not break through the jamming, "Okay grey squadron I can't reach the *Sword*. Grey Three and Grey Four turn back. Get out of range of the jamming as quickly as you can and tell them that there's an abandoned mining ship out here. I'm going in for a closer look but we'll need marines to go aboard."

"Understood Grey Leader." the voice of another pilot responded as two TIE fighters turned sharply to head back the way they had come from while the squadron leader himself continued to head towards the mining ship.

Although the mining ship had appeared fully intact when the fighter pilots first saw it, signs of damage became visible as they got closer and they saw that a sizeable hole had been made in the side of the ship. This was circular in shape and far too regular to have been caused by an accidental strike by an asteroid. Therefore, the only conclusion that could be drawn from this was that the ship had come under attack.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." the squadron leader said to himself before he addressed the other pilots of his squadron again, "This is Grey Leader, form into pairs and look sharp. It looks like this ship was attacked. The jamming could mean that whoever is responsible is still in the area."

The remaining ten fighters did as the squadron leader had instructed, breaking up into pairs so that it was much harder to take them all by surprise while they were able to search a larger area of the asteroids visually while they waited for support from the *Sword of Justice*.

"I can handle this myself if you want commander." Lieutenant Krostas told Coroll as the two men walked towards the Sentinel-class shuttle that had been prepared to carry a boarding party. The sentinel was easily capable of carrying more than fifty well armed troops in addition to more than a hundred tonnes of cargo so there was ample room for technical and medical support personnel in addition to the platoon of stormtrooper marines who were aboard, along with all of their equipment. Krostas wore a uniform identical in style and cut to the one Coroll wore, but unlike the fleet officer's green uniform his was black to indicate his position as the head of the *Sword of Justice*'s security and stormtrooper compliment.

"No, I need to come along." Coroll replied, shaking his head, "Engineer Ventern thinks that the shuttle's tight beam laser comlink will cut through the jamming but if it doesn't then a command level officer needs to be present just in case."

"Very well commander." Krostas said as they walked up the shuttle's access ramp, "Though I'd appreciate it if you'd keep down if we get into a firefight."

"Oh don't worry about that lieutenant, I'll let your stormtroopers have the glory." Coroll replied as they then entered the shuttle's cockpit and sat down in seats located towards the back.

"We've already received clearance to launch commander. The tug will follow us." the shuttle's pilot said as he sealed the access ramp and glancing over his shoulder at the two senior officers.

"Very good. You may launch when ready." Coroll told him.

The pilot pulled back on the flight controls and the shuttle rose up off the hangar deck before flying forwards through the magnetic field. A second small craft equipped with a tractor beam also exited one of the hangar

bays and both then flew out into space where the two TIE fighters from the squadron sent to investigate the jamming joined them.

"Sentinel this is Grey Three, fall in behind us and we'll guide you to the target." one of the pilots signalled.

"Understood Grey Three. Taking up position now." the shuttle pilot responded as the two starfighters took up positions ahead of the shuttle and tug. Then just as the pilot had said the two TIEs moved off, heading back towards the stricken mining ship.

It took just a few minutes for the flight of small craft to reach the mining ship where the rest of the TIE squadron still waited, circling around the disabled ship while watching for threats.

"So that's it. Blasted open and adrift, just like the fighter pilots reported." Coroll commented as the shuttle pilot took his craft in close, "Any life signs?"

"Impossible to tell with the jamming sir." the shuttle's co-pilot answered.

"How many crew would a ship like that have?" Krostas added, "Twenty? Thirty maybe?"

"Maybe. Or maybe just one or two living beings and a lot of droids." Coroll replied, "Pilot do we have a link to the *Sword*?"

"Yes commander." the shuttle's pilot said, looking at his communications panel and seeing that it indicated a direct link to the *Sword of Justice* using the shuttle's communications laser.

"Good. Then send them a feed of what we're looking at here. Maybe Engineer Ventern can give us some more information." Coroll ordered.

Aboard the *Sword of Justice* both Kain and Erranes stood by the console at the rear of the bridge to look at the feed coming from the assault shuttle. With them was a tall grey haired man in overalls rather than an officer's uniform, despite his rank. Lieutenant Ventern was the star destroyer's chief engineer, his relatively low rank for a man of his age due to having started his career under the Republic as an enlisted man and only being granted a commission after many years of service.

The holographic image that they were all looking at was clear, the shuttle's communication laser being unaffected by the jamming field just as Ventern had hoped.

"That's a mining ship alright." Ventern said, "Equipped to recover raw ore and then separate out the valuable minerals, all without the crew having to suit up and go outside themselves."

"So it did have a living crew then?" Erranes asked and Ventern nodded.

"It's designed for organics, yes." he answered, "Of course I'd still expect there to be a number of droids aboard as well. A mix of power droids, load lifters and astromechs for technical and labour support."

"Commander Coroll do you read me?" Kain said into the communications system.

"Yes captain." Coroll's voice responded, his voice as clear as the holographic feed.

"Commander you are clear to proceed. Send in the droid." Kain ordered.

"Yes captain. Deploying probe droid now." Coroll replied.

Like most Imperial capital ships the *Sword of Justice* carried a number of Arakyd Viper probe droids for reconnaissance purposes. These could be launched in hyperspace pods that could carry them to other star systems but the machines could just as easily be released directly into space and this was how one of the droids exited the shuttle's airlock. The droid quickly located the mining ship and using its repulsorlift unit pushed away from the shuttle before drifting towards the other vessel.

The droid's powerful transmitter was enough to cut through the jamming as far as the shuttle, when its feed could then be relayed to the *Sword of Justice* and the crew were able to see the mining ship in much greater detail as the droid moved across its hull.

"Wait." Ventern said sudden as he watched the feed with Kain and Erranes.

"What's wrong?" Kain asked, pausing the feed.

"That equipment on the hull right there." Ventern said, pointing to a part of the hologram that showed a piece of equipment clamped to the mining ship's hull, "That's not standard for a mining ship. In fact I'm pretty sure that it's a Confederate electronic warfare module."

"The source of the jamming?" Erranes suggested.

"There's one easy way to find out." Kain said, "Commander Kain, instruct the probe droid to destroy that equipment."

"Yes captain." Coroll responded.

Kain switched the holographic feed back to real time and the gathered officers saw the probe droid backing away from the suspicious equipment for about ten metres. Once this distance was reached there was the sudden flash of blaster fire as the droid opened fire on the module. Three energy blasts struck the module in rapid succession before there was an explosion that consumed it.

"Captain the interference has stopped." one of the bridge crew reported from a crew pit and Kain smiled.

"Good call lieutenant." he said to Ventern.

"Captain," Coroll reported from the shuttle, "now that the jamming is gone we're picking up multiple life signs aboard the ship."

"Can you establish contact?" Kain asked.

"We're trying captain, but there's no response so far. The life signs we're picking up aren't very strong." Coroll answered.

"Okay commander I don't think we can risk waiting any longer. Send the droid into the mining ship and have your platoon follow. If there's someone alive aboard it, we'll find them." Kain ordered.

"Yes captain. Sending them in now." Coroll replied.

3.

The probe droid moved across the hull of the mining ship until it reached the large hole that had been burned in the side. The machine paused momentarily as it conducted a scan of the area just inside the hole as a precaution against a trap or ambush. However, detecting nothing it deemed dangerous the probe droid then proceeded inside.

While the probe droid was entering the mining ship the assault shuttle also moved closer but it did not dock directly with the larger vessel. Instead it came to a relative halt about fifty metres before its airlocks opened to permit the stormtrooper marines that it carried to exit the craft. All stormtrooper armour was hardened against environments such as the vacuum of space but the suit worn by the marines had been further modified with rocket powered propulsion packs that enabled them to cross the remaining distance between the two vessels without the need for a physical connection joining them.

"The probe droid has cleared the breach in the hull." Krostas told his men.

"Understood sir. We'll follow it through that way then." the stormtrooper platoon leader responded and from the shuttle's cockpit Coroll and Krostas saw the white armoured figures all change their heading towards the hole that had been cut in the hull before they too proceeded inside. All of the lights were out forcing the stormtroopers to rely on their helmet optics to be able to see clearly there was still gravity inside the mining ship which meant that they could walk normally on the decks instead of needing to continue using their propulsion packs, "Divide up by squads. First squad come with me and we'll secure the bridge. Second squad take the engine room, third has the hold and fourth can take the crew quarters. Those are the most likely places for any on board to be." the platoon leader ordered and the stormtroopers divided up to make their way to the different areas of the ship assigned to them.

Having a head start on the stormtroopers, the probe droid was already deeper inside the vessel and the feed it sent back to the assault shuttle soon revealed worrying details.

"That's carbon scoring from blaster fire. It looks recent too." Krostas said, pointing to a scorch mark in the image that he and Coroll were looking at.

"As if we didn't need any further proof that the ship was attacked." Coroll commented, "It's not like mynocks use electronic warfare packages and hull breaching equipment." he added before the droid turned a corner and discovered a body.

"One of the crew?" Krostas said.

"I think so. The logo on the sleeve is the same as the one on the hull. Probably a corporate badge." Coroll replied.

"Interesting." Krostas added.

"What is?" Coroll asked.

"The burn on the jacket suggests that this man was killed by a blaster but obviously the condition of the body shows decompression damage." Krostas answered.

"Well it is in a vacuum lieutenant." Coroll pointed out.

"Yes commander but I think that the ship was still pressurised when this man died." Krostas replied, "Most likely whoever boarded this ship established a seal when they broke through the hull and then just let all the air out when they disengaged. Any survivors are probably trapped in sealed areas."

"Which means they can't make any repairs. If life support is off line then they could be running out of air."

Coroll said before he reached for the communication system, "This is commander Coroll to all marine units. I want this ship made habitable. Seal all air tight doors as you pass. If you find a life support panel then try to engage it." he said into the system and one by one each of the stormtrooper squad leaders confirmed the order.

"This isn't good." Kain said when he saw the body in the relayed feed.

"Have there been any reports of piracy in the system?" Ventern asked, looking at Erranes but she shook her head.

"No, nothing recent." she answered.

"Well it looks like there are pirates here now." Kain said, frowning, "Which means we're going to need that rancor cow from the ISB up here." he added before he reached for the intercom, "Agent Embrace." he said into it and he waited for a response.

"Yes captain?" a woman's voice said a few seconds later.

"Agent Embrace we appear to have come across an incident of piracy. The ISB's input could be useful." Kain told her.

"I'll be with you in five minutes captain." Embrace replied before she closed the channel and Kain sighed.

"Five minutes." he said, "At least I have some time to prepare for that woman."

"Don't let Commander Coroll hear you talk about her like that captain." Ventern said, knowing that Coroll was involved in a personal relationship with the ISB officer assigned to the *Sword of Justice*.

"Don't worry, he knows what I think of his girlfriend lieutenant." Kain replied.

As promised it was just a few minutes before Senior Agent Embrance of the Imperial Security Bureau arrived at the bridge, her black and white uniform standing out from the green worn by the fleet officers present as she walked up to the console where the senior officers were gathered.

"Captain, you said you have a piracy problem?" she said and Kain nodded.

"Yes, take a look at this." he said before he brought up the image of the corpse aboard the mining ship for her to see, "This body is aboard a mining ship we found at the centre of an area of electronic jamming. Right now we've got a probe droid and a marine platoon aboard her. There are life signs but so far this is all we've seen of the crew."

"Unpleasant." Embrance said as she studied the condition of the corpse in the image and Kain exchanged a brief glance with Erranes, both of them aware that the ISB agent was not at all squeamish when it came to inflicting pain or suffering on a being that she was interrogating.

"Quite. None of the navy's reports have mentioned pirate activity in this system but we thought it possible that the ISB could have more information." Erranes said.

"No, nothing." Embrance answered, shaking her head. Then she frowned for a moment before adding, "Though the mineral output of the mines has seen a reduction in recent months that can't be explained. The ISB has considered the possibility of corruption among the labour guilds being responsible. Perhaps this is the real answer."

"Well you'll have the chance to find out now agent." Kain said, "We've sent out a tug as well so we'll be towing that ship to Lebast where you and I will have a word with the station administrator."

"Captain I think you should see this." Ventern said suddenly. The engineer had been watching the relayed feed from the probe droid as it continued through the mining ship. Now this showed a hatch that, unlike all of the ones encountered so far was still sealed and through a small window set into it a crewman could be seen hammering on the other side.

"The life signs." Kain said.

"Captain that's the bridge on the other side. The command crew must have sealed themselves in there when the ship was attacked." Ventern said before Kain reached for the communication system.

"Commander Coroll, I take that you're seeing the feed from the probe droid." he said.

"Yes captain." Coroll responded.

"How far are your troops from the bridge?" Kain asked.

"About five minutes captain. They're sealing doors as they go so we ought to be able to repressurise most of the ship as long as the life support system itself is functional. Once engineering is secure we'll send over the repair droids we brought along to see what they can do." Coroll answered.

"Very good commander. Now what about the people that must have carried out this attack? Have you found anything to identify them yet?" Kain said.

"Sorry captain. None of the boarding party have seen anything that would tell us who was responsible for this attack and even with the jamming stopped we haven't picked up any other ships on our sensors. Whoever did this made sure to be long gone before we got here." Coroll responded.

"Okay commander. Carry on as you are for now. Once the ship is ready to be taken under tow we'll take it to Lebast station and you, I and Agent Embrance will speak with the administrator there. I've got a feeling that he may be able to provide some insight into what's going on, though I don't think he'll be keen to do so.

Sword of Justice out." Kain told him.

Aboard the mining ship the probe droid hovered outside the door to the bridge while several crewmen clustered around the window to look out from the other side and one of them pointed excitedly when the squad of stormtroopers sent to secure the area appeared around a corner. This was confirmation for the crewmen that rescue really was at hand rather than their ship having been discovered by a probe droid operating from an Imperial Navy vessel that was possibly still in another star system.

"Platoon leader to shuttle, we have visual contact with the survivors." the stormtrooper commander signalled to the assault shuttle.

"Do they appear to be injured?" Krostas responded.

"I don't think so sir." the stormtrooper leader answered as he peered through the window, "I can see seven crewmen, all of them human and they all seem to be in good shape. Although there could be medical issues that aren't obvious."

"This is Second Squad, engineering is secure." the leader of the unit sent to the mining ship's engineering section, "It's a mess down here. There are bodies and serious physical damage to the machinery. We'll need the droids to see whether the life support can be reactivated."

"Understood sergeant. The droids are on the way." Coroll told the stormtrooper, "First squad let the crew know what's happening."

With no direct means of communication with the bridge the stormtroopers' leader resorted to the use of a datapad to tell the trapped crewmen what was happening, typing a brief message onto the device and then holding it up to the window so that they could read it. In response one of them nodded and gave a thumbs up signal.

"Commander I think I got the message through." the stormtrooper leader signalled.

"Captain Kain, being able to interview those men would be extremely beneficial. Especially if we can do it before they reach Lebast station." Embrance said.

"Why the urgency agent?" Kain asked in reply.

"I'd like to be able to keep them as isolated as possible captain. Obviously they've had plenty of time to agree on a story with one another but it would be best to know what happened here before the station administrator or anyone associated with him has the chance to make any claims of jurisdiction over them." Embrance explained.

"Are you treating them as suspects Agent Embrance?" Kain said.

"No captain, but they are material witnesses and I'd like the information that they have to be kept as secret as possible. The more people know what they have or have not told us, the more likely the culprits will be able to take steps to evade our investigation."

"Our investigation?" Ventern commented.

"So the ISB isn't going to claim jurisdiction over this?" Kain added.

"Captain I'm sure that I could get the authorisation for the ISB to take over the investigation entirely but that would mean waiting for a full team to arrive here. We're all here now so it makes more sense for the navy to share in the operation as well." Embrance answered.

"Okay then agent, we'll do it your way. But I want it made clear that those survivors are not to be subjected to any form of mistreatment aboard this ship. Is that understood?" Kain said sternly.

"Captain I-" Embrance began.

"Just yes or no will do Agent Embrance." Kain interrupted, "Now which is it?"

"Yes captain." Embrance replied.

"Good. Now if we're not towing that ship to Lebast station we'll bring it here instead. Lieutenant Ventern, do you think that we can fit it in our hangars?" Kain said, turning to his chief engineering.

"Easily captain. She's too big to fit in any of the individual bays or side hangars but she'll fit along the main bay." Ventern told him.

"Then we have a plan. I'll speak to the crew of that ship when they arrive." Kain said.

"You captain? But I-" Embrance began.

"This is my ship agent. If they are going to be questioned then I want to hear their answers." Kain interrupted.

4.

Kain and Embrace stood in one of the *Sword of Justice*'s hangar bays, watching as first the Sentinel-class shuttle returned and landed in an adjacent bay before the tug appeared above the star destroyer's long main hangar with the mining ship in tow. Using its powerful tractor beam, the tug manoeuvred the mining ship into position before carefully lowering it to the deck.

"Captain." Coroll called out as he approached Kain and Embrace from where the Sentinel-class shuttle had landed.

"Commander. Is everything as expected?" Kain asked and Coroll nodded.

"Yes captain. The ship is largely intact though the life support system couldn't be repaired." he said.

"That's why I had them come along as well." Kain said and he looked to where a number of medical droids waited close by, "We'll take the survivors to the infirmary to be checked out before we question them. I don't suppose that the marines found anyone other than the bridge crew aboard did they?"

"No captain. Though there are still some sealed areas of the ship that we haven't been able to gain access to." Coroll told him.

"Well our scanning crew should be able to determine if there's anyone inside them." Kain commented, glancing towards the two technicians who also stood close by.

"They also need to sweep for any DNA that doesn't match the crew, dead or alive." Embrace added.

"You think that the raiders could have left us clues to their identities?" Coroll asked and Embrace smiled at him.

"Hopefully, yes." she said.

"Well I wouldn't get your hopes up too high Agent Embrace. Pirates tend to wear vacuum suits, just in case." Kain pointed out.

"There's no harm in trying captain." Coroll added and Kain smiled for a moment, knowing that his first officer was just saying that to appear supportive to Embrace.

Then there was a rumbling sound as the large doors above the main hangar moved towards one another. Unlike the individual bays along the sides of the main hangar or the two side hangars that could be protected with magnetic fields, the main hangar could only be sealed against the vacuum of space and it was only after these huge doors slammed together that there was a loud 'hiss' as air was then pumped into the main hangar. The magnetic fields isolating the individual hangar did not shut off until the main hangar was fully pressurised as a precaution but as soon as they did Kain started to move towards the mining ship.

"The bridge is easiest to reach through this airlock captain." Coroll told him, pointing him towards one of the mining ship's airlocks as he and Embrace followed Kain towards the mining ship but the airlock door then opened in any case to reveal one of the stormtroopers who had remained aboard the ship while it was towed back to the *Sword of Justice*.

"Captain we're just about to force open the bridge hatch." the stormtrooper told Kain as he entered the ship.

"Force?" Kain asked.

"Yes sir. The crew welded the hatch shut so we're going to have to blow it open. Of course we were waiting until we wouldn't decompress the bridge in the process." the stormtrooper answered.

"Okay. Take us there." Kain said.

"Yes captain. This way." the stormtrooper replied before he turned to lead Kain and the others to the bridge. As the group neared the bridge there was a loud crashing sound as the marine squad burned through the hatch and it dropped to the deck.

"Sounds like they're in captain." Coroll commented.

When the entrance to the bridge came into view Kain saw that it had indeed been burned through with a thermal charge and two more stormtroopers were stood outside, the rest having gone inside.

"Is everyone inside?" Kain asked one of the guards.

"Yes captain." the stormtrooper replied and Kain stepped through the hole in the door before looking around the bridge.

The crewmen who had been sheltering in the bridge were all sat at various duty stations, though their chairs were turned away from the consoles while they spoke to the stormtroopers who had entered the bridge and Kain saw that there were a number of emergency oxygen masks scattered around the compartment.

"Is one of you the captain?" Kain asked and one of the survivors raised his hand.

"Yes, I'm Captain Levo." he said.

"Captain Kain, *Sword of Justice*. This is my first officer Commander Coroll and Senior Agent Embrace of the Imperial security Bureau." Kain said, pointing out the officers who followed him into the bridge.

"We owe you and your crew our lives captain. I doubt we had more than a few hours left." Levo said.

"Even with the masks?" Kain said, looking at the nearest of the emergency oxygen masks.

"Yes, even with them. We were lucky to have those and that they were fully charged." Levo replied.
"Captain we must get these men to the infirmary." one of the medical droids said as they entered the bridge.
"Of course." Kain said, "Captain Levo, you and your men should go with the droids. They'll make sure that you're not suffering any lasting effects. Then we need to talk to you about what happened here."

The *Sword of Justice's* infirmary was staffed entirely by medical droids, overseen by a 2-1B type that was known to the crew simply as 'Doc' thanks to its full designation of DC-2-1B and it was this machine that informed Kain and Embrace of the results of the tests carried out on the crew of the mining ship.

"None of the crew are in any danger captain." the machine reported, "Though neither are they in perfect health."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Embrace snapped at Doc, her arms folded in front of her.

"I'm sure Doc will tell us if we just give him chance. Kain commented, "Carry on Doc."

"Yes captain. Despite having access to a limited supply of emergency oxygen this was not enough to prevent the surviving crewmembers from being exposed to an elevated level of carbon dioxide. Now that they have been released from that environment though they should all recover very rapidly. However, there are some indications that their stress levels are higher than those expected for humans in their situation. This may just be due to their recent experience, but I would like to run further tests at regular intervals to see how they progress." Doc explained.

"Hopefully they won't be here for much longer Doc. We'll be passing them off to the authorities on Lebast. For now though, are they well enough for us to question?" Kain asked.

"That depends on what you mean by question captain." Doc replied, "The standard of questioning I have seen you carry out differs vastly from the more extreme measures Senior Agent Embrace has carried out aboard this vessel."

Embrace glared angrily at the medical droid when it said this and Kain smiled.

"Why you-" Embrace began.

"Don't worry Doc." Kain interrupted, "These men are witnesses, not suspects. I guarantee that no harm will come to any of them from either of us. Isn't that right Agent Embrace?"

"Of course captain." Embrace responded.

"In that case I have no objections to the patients being questioned captain. Will you be taking them from the infirmary?" Doc asked.

"Yes. We'll speak with them one at a time." Kain answered, "We'll start with Captain Levo."

"You may use my office if you wish captain." Doc suggested, pointing towards a door that led away from the main infirmary to what was referred to as Doc's 'office'. If the *Sword of Justice* had had a living chief medical officer assigned to it then that door led to the room that would have been their office, however as a droid Doc was able to simply upload all of his findings directly to the ship's computer as well as directly monitoring the status of every other medical droid aboard as well as supply levels so he had no need of anywhere to carry out administrative tasks. Therefore, the room called his office had instead become a small maintenance area where the star destroyer's engineering staff could work on the medical droids.

"Thank you, yes. If you want to be present to monitor the condition of the men while we question them you can." Kain said.

"Yes captain, that is a good idea. I will bring Captain Levo to you." Doc responded.

While Doc went to fetch the mining ship's captain Kain and Embrace made their way to the adjoining room. There were several chairs in the room but they were all lined up along one wall out of the way so Kain quickly repositioned three of them more centrally before Doc brought Levo into the room as well.

"Captain Levo. Please take a seat, we'd like to ask you some questions." Kain said.

"Of course Captain Kain, I was expecting this." Levo replied as he sat down and Kain and Embrace then sat down in the other two seats while Doc remained by the door, "Is the droid staying?" Levo added, looking at the medical droid.

"Yes, he wants to monitor your condition. Is that a problem?" Kain asked.

"I suppose not." Levo answered, "So what do you want to know captain?"

"Who attacked your vessel?" Embrace asked directly, "We need names. A species will do if nothing else."

"If that's what you need then I can't help you. We didn't see anyone." Levo replied.

"You and your men welded yourself in your bridge." Kain pointed out, "Why do that if you didn't know that you were under attack?"

"Oh we knew about the attack alright. First all our communications and sensors failed and then we heard the sound of the pirate ship making contact with our hull before they burned through. But whoever the pirates were, they didn't come aboard our ship so we never saw them." Levo said.

"Then who caused the damage and casualties we found Captain Levo?" Embrace said and Levo looked towards Doc.

"Droids." he said before turning back to face Kain and Embrace again, "As soon as the hull was breached what must have been a hundred battle droids came marching aboard my ship."

"Battle droids?" Kain commented and Levo nodded.

"That's right captain, battle droids. Just like the ones from the Clone Wars. I'm talking about the lightweight ones introduced well before the war by the Trade Federation. They just marched through the breach in the hull and spread out around the ship. They killed absolutely everyone that they saw, regardless of whether or not they tried to surrender. We had no weapons aboard so I did the only thing I could think of. I put out an order for everyone to find whatever hiding place they could and seal themselves in. Of course there were seven of us close to the bridge and we welded ourselves inside, then hid out of sight when the droids came. They must have known that there was someone inside but they didn't consider it worth breaking in. Instead they just smashed the life support system and opened all the internal hatches so that they decompressed the ship when they left. I take it that you didn't find any other survivors aboard?"

"No I'm sorry. Everyone else we found aboard your ship was dead. Those battle droids were very thorough. It's how they're programmed." Kain told him.

"Seven men out of almost thirty." Levo said, "I suppose that the Force was just with us."

"The Force?" Embrace said with a stern expression, "You're not a jedi sympathiser are you Captain Levo?"

"It's just a saying. Some people still use it." Kain said before Levo could say anything.

"Yes, I didn't mean anything by it, just that we were lucky not to end up like all the others." Levo added.

"Yes, I've lost crewmen myself. I know how it feels." Kain replied and Levo looked directly at him.

"No captain, not my crew. I'm talking about the other ships that have been hit. The ones where everyone died before they were found." he said.

"Other ships? You mean that there have been other attacks before your ship?" Embrace said and Levo nodded.

"Yes, there must have been at least six other ships hit. I'm assuming that they were boarded by battle droids as well. Everyone aboard those ships was killed." Levo said.

"Captain Levo, no other attacks have been reported to Imperial authorities." Embrace told him.

"I swear they happened Agent Embrace." Levo said, "I can't believe that the Empire isn't hunting the pirates."

"The *Sword of Justice* is here only as a part of our regular patrol." Kain said, "As Agent Embrace said, nothing has been reported to Imperial authorities about any attacks."

"Take it from me captain, they happened." Levo responded.

"How do you know?" Embrace asked.

"Because I've seen what's left of the ships that were brought back by the guild security forces Agent Embrace." Levo told her, "Every mining crew knows what's happening."

"But you still go out and conduct mining runs when you know about pirates in the area." Kain commented.

"If I don't then I'll lose my guild licence. I have a family to feed captain and I can't do that if my ship is laid up in dock or worse yet if the guild have seized it because I failed to make my quota to keep my licence. The guild has assured us that they're patrolling the asteroid field and that the pirates will be caught soon."

Kain then leant towards Embrace.

"I think I've heard enough." he said softly and Embrace nodded in return.

"I agree." she said clearly before looking at Levo again, "Captain thank you for your assistance. You may go."

"Shall I bring in another of the mining crew captain?" Doc asked and Kain glanced at Embrace again before he replied.

"No thank you Doc, I think Agent Embrace and I need to discuss what the captain has told us first." he said.

"As you wish captain." the medical droid replied before it led Levo back into the main infirmary.

"Well there you have it Agent Embrace, if what Captain Levo told us is accurate then the authorities on Lebast are covering up pirate activity in the system." Kain said.

"They must be concerned about the Empire nationalising their operation if they can't meet their obligations to provide resources." Embrace replied.

"Well I need to report this. Especially if there's even the slightest chance that these pirates could be a group of Separatist hold outs." Kain said and he got to his feet.

"Report it to who captain? I can make sure that the ISB is properly informed once we've dealt with the pirates ourselves. A few battle droids are no match for a star destroyer." Embrace said.

"Maybe so but the navy does have its procedures and I need to tell Line Captain Morco about what we've found. It'll be up to him whether or not to bring the rest of the line here to run these pirates down." Kain responded.

5.

Kain and Embrace entered the bridge together and Coroll smiled.

"Ah captain, we'll be at Lebast in a few minutes. Did you get the answers you needed from the miners?" he said.

"Yes I think we did." Kain replied before announcing, "I want a channel opening to the *Hammer of Reason*. I need to talk to Line Captain Morco as soon as possible."

"It's that serious?" Coroll commented.

"I don't think so." Embrace replied, "We're just dealing with a few battle droids."

"Battle droids?" Coroll repeated and Embrace nodded.

"Original B-ones if Captain Levo is to be believed." she told him.

"B-ones? You can get those things for about fifty credits a piece in surplus stores." Coroll said.

"Not functional ones and especially not ones that are still armed." Kain pointed out.

"Captain we have your link." one of the bridge crew reported and as Kain straightened up a hologram of Line Captain Morco, commanding officer of the attack line that the *Sword of Justice* was a part of and Kain's immediate superior.

"Captain Kain." Morco said.

"Captain Morco." Kain replied, "We may have a situation in the Myseron system. At least seven vessels here have been attacked by pirates making use of separatist battle droids."

"There's not been anything in the reports about pirate activity around Myseron. Is your information accurate?" Morco said.

"I've no reason to doubt it sir. It comes from a survivor of a ship we found adrift in the Lebast asteroid field. The ship's captain claims that the guilds on Lebast are aware of the problem." Kain said.

"This is concerning. If the guilds are covering up pirate activity in space that they are responsible for, who knows what else they could be covering up?" Morco said.

"We'll be docking at Lebast soon captain. Agent Embrace and I will confront the administrator in person." Kain said.

"Embrace? Oh yes, the ISB spy you've been lumbered with." Morco said and Kain was barely able to contain his smile at the dismissive way that he had described Embrace, "I'll pass the word up to Admiral Lorr and alert Captain Kyung to be prepared to bring the *Blade of Truth* to Myseron but for now I want more than just a claim from a single source before I redeploy the line. Do you think you can handle things there for now?"

"Yes sir." Kain answered, nodding his head, "So far there is no indication that the pirates have got the firepower to threaten the *Sword of Justice*. If we need reinforcements it's likely to be to prevent them from escaping."

"Of course. Carry on and keep me informed. *Blade of Reason* out." Morco said and then his hologram faded before vanishing.

"There we have it." Kain said as he turned his attention back to Coroll and Embrace, "Once we reach Lebast we'll see what the administrator has to say for himself."

"Captain I recommend bringing the administrator aboard the *Sword of Justice* rather than confronting him on Lebast." Embrace said.

"Why? What difference does it make?" Kain responded.

"Lebast is where the administrator has authority captain. Here he has nothing so it will put him off guard when we confront him with his failure to deal with piracy in the system." Embrace said.

"You mean he could get worried that we're about to arrest him and put Lebast under direct sector control?" Coroll asked.

"Exactly." Embrace answered.

Kain had quickly become disgusted with Embrace's methods of interrogation when she had first come aboard the *Sword of Justice* to question a pair of anti-Imperial insurgents and this was the cause of his dislike of the woman, but this time he could not find anything wrong with her suggestion.

"Okay we'll do it your way. Lieutenant Krostas can take a squad across to Lebast and invite the administrator to come aboard." Kain said before he glanced at the chronometer on his wrist, "It's around lunch time so we'll meet him in the dining room."

"We' captain? Do you want both of us there with you?" Coroll said and Kain nodded.

"Yes I do. If we're trying to keep the administrator off balance then outnumbering him three to one should help. Especially if we're lulling him into a false sense of security by seemingly inviting him to dinner." Kain said, "How does that sound to you Agent Embrace?"

"Perfect captain." Embrace said, "We may just make an ISB agent out of you yet."

"I'll try not to take that to heart agent." Kain said.

Even from a distance it was easy to tell that Lebast was more than just a mundane asteroid. The extensive structures constructed with the asteroid broke the surface in many places and there were too many places where light was cast out in to space for them to be anything but artificial. Being the hub of mining activity in the asteroid cluster meant that the base needed to have significant docking and repair capacity for the swarms of mining ships that worked the asteroids. This meant that there was plenty of hangar space for the lambda-class shuttle launched from the *Sword of Justice's* starboard hangar bay. Even though the flight between the star destroyer and asteroid base was just a few kilometres the shuttle's wings still unfolded as soon as it left the *Sword of Justice* only to fold again before passing through the magnetic field that protected the hangar that served the administrative section of the asteroid base.

The lambda-class of shuttles were often used for transporting high ranking Imperial officers and so a small delegation consisting of three members of the base's administrative staff were waiting at the base of the shuttle's access ramp when it lowered. However, instead of the senior officer that they expected to descend the ramp Lieutenant Krostas strode down it with a fire team of stormtroopers marching in step behind him.

"Welcome to Lebast lieutenant." one of the base staff said when Krostas halted in front of them.

"Take me to the station administrator." Krostas said sternly.

"I am afraid that Administrator Lox is rather busy at the moment lieutenant and he doesn't see anyone without an appointment." the other man replied and Krostas took a step closer to him.

"Busy?" he said, "I don't care how busy he is. My orders are to escort him to the *Sword of Justice* immediately. Now are you going to take me to him or do my men need to locate him themselves?" he said and the three station staff all glanced towards the four stormtroopers standing behind Krostas silently while he placed his hand on his blaster.

"Of course lieutenant. If you'd like to come with me I'll take you right to Administrator Lox." the man Krostas faced responded nervously.

"Lead the way." Krostas said as a smile spread across his face.

The man Krostas had spoken with then turned to lead him and his stormtroopers from the hangar while the other two just watched, unsure of what to do. Beyond the hangar Krostas and the stormtroopers were led a short distance to a turbolift cluster where their guide summoned a car.

"The administrator's suite is located near the core of the asteroid. This will get us there directly." he said but Krostas did not reply before the turbolift door slid open and the group stepped inside.

Just as the man had said the turbolift car took the group all the way to the core of the asteroid where the administrator's personal suite was located, deep enough to be almost invulnerable to damage if the asteroid base came under attack and as soon as the turbolift doors slid open again Krostas knew that they had arrived right where he had been told they were going.

So far the areas of the base that Krostas had seen had all had a very plain industrial look to them, not too dissimilar to the construction pattern of Imperial warships and space stations but the rooms here at the core of the asteroid were far more luxurious in appearance with polished walls that were decorated with art.

"So what did those buffoons from the navy want Dorlo?" a voice called out from nearby and Krostas turned to see the back of a large chair that obviously had an equally large individual sat in it.

"The lieutenant wished to speak with you in person administrator." the man addressed as Dorlo responded.

"A lieutenant, really? I think we'll let him wait a while." the man in the chair said.

"Waiting is not in my orders administrator." Krostas said and the chair suddenly spun around to reveal Administrator Lox, his jaw hanging open in surprise and a datapad dangling from his hand.

"Lieutenant." he said, "I-"

"Administrator Lox you will accompany us to the *Sword of Justice*." Krostas interrupted.

"Accompany you? Impossible, my schedule here-" Lox began before Krostas signalled to his stormtroopers and the four armoured soldiers hurried across the room to surround the administrator.

"Now administrator." Krostas said sternly.

"Of course lieutenant." Lox replied nervously as he got to his feet, "Dorlo, kindly inform my other appointments for the day that I have been called away."

"The shuttle is on its way back now captain." Erranes reported when the lambda-class shuttle left the asteroid base.

"Good. Commander Coroll, Agent Embrace we should get to the dining room. Lieutenant Commander Erranes the ship is yours." Kain replied and Coroll smiled.

"Just make sure that your glasses are clean Maye." Coroll commented using Erranes' first name, "I'd hate for you to mistake a bit of grit on them for an asteroid and have the ship take evasive action while we're being served soup."

"Oh ha-ha." Erranes said.

"I'm sure she'll do fine commander." Kain told him.

No-one in the shuttle's passenger compartment spoke on the flight back from Lebast to the *Sword of Justice*. Krostas stared at Administrator Lox while in return the administrator did his best to avoid eye contact entirely and the four stormtroopers simply stood close by where they could see any move that Lox made. As soon as the shuttle landed aboard the *Sword of Justice* Krostas led Lox and the stormtroopers down the access ramp.

"This way please administrator," he told Lox before leading him through the corridors of the star destroyer to a large but nondescript door that he opened using the control panel beside it. As the door opened it revealed the executive dining room on the other side where four places had been laid out on the large central table. The nearest of these places to the door was vacant while Coroll and Embrace sat on either side and Kain himself sat at the far end.

"Ah Administrator Lox," Kain said as all three at the table got to their feet and he pointed to the vacant place, "We would be honoured if you would join us."

Lox hesitated, looking at the two navy officers and ISB agent in the room to try and get some idea of their intentions.

"Is something wrong administrator?" Embrace asked.

"No of course not. Thank you for your invitation captain," Lox replied and he sat in the vacant seat in front of him.

"Thank you lieutenant, that will be all," Kain added, looking at Krostas.

"Yes captain," Krostas responded before he and his stormtroopers left the room and the door closed behind them. Then Kain activated the intercom set into the table beside his seat, "You may serve the first course now," he said and another door opened to permit service droids to enter with a large bowl of soup as well as several smaller bowls that they began to distribute.

"So administrator how are operations in the Myseron system?" Embrace asked, looking at Lox.

"They are fine thank you Agent- I'm sorry I didn't get your name," Lox replied.

"Ah that's my fault," Kain said, "Administrator Lox, I am Captain Kain, commanding officer of the *Sword of Justice* and this is Commander Coroll my first officer and Senior Agent Embrace of the Imperial Security Bureau, on secondment to my ship."

"Thank you captain, as I was saying operations here are rather mundane. We will of course meet our quota for the Empire this quarter, perhaps with an excess of about ten percent," Lox said before he began to eat.

"Mining asteroids must put stress on equipment though," Coroll said, "Accidents do happen and it only takes one strike on an unshielded vessel from fast moving debris to put it out of action."

"Fortunately our crews are very experienced commander," Lox replied, "They are used to the careful manoeuvring that operating in a relatively dense asteroid field requires."

"And what about other hazards administrator? Pirates for example?" Kain said just as Lox was taking another mouthful of soup and the administrator almost spit it back out.

Looking at Kain, Lox then laughed.

"Is something amusing administrator? I fail to see the humour myself," Embrace said.

"I'm sorry, but pirates?" Lox replied, feigning ignorance, "Whatever gave you the idea that there are pirates operating in this system captain? Guild security may not have the resources of the Imperial Navy but my corvettes are quite capable of adequately policing Myseron."

"That's good to know administrator," Kain said.

"It's just that in our experience systems like this one tend to draw in outlaws," Coroll said, "For starters you have the mining operations that mean ships laden with valuable and easy to sell minerals but in Myseron's specific case there are also the rumours of hidden treasure on Myseron itself."

"Yes," Kain commented, "stories like those will draw in anyone looking for a quick profit without having to work for it."

"Just the sort of beings who would turn to piracy," Embrace said.

"I'm sure that is all true, but fortunately there are no such beings here," Lox replied before the door to the dining room slid open again and Ventern entered.

"I'm sorry to interrupt your meal captain but I have the report you requested," the engineer said.

"Don't worry lieutenant, come in and show me," Kain replied, "Administrator Lox allow me to introduce Lieutenant Ventern my chief engineer."

"A lieutenant?" Lox commented, "I thought chief engineers of vessels of this size were usually of higher rank."

"Don't let Lieutenant Ventern's rank fool you administrator," Coroll said, "He came up through the ranks and has more experience than any of the rest of us."

Ventern walked around the table and stood beside Kain, the captain looking up at him while he began to read from his datapad.

"The device was badly damaged by our probe droid but I was still able to determine that its design and date of manufacture fit with the Trade Federation some time around thirty to forty years ago," he said.

"So it's original? Not something that someone has manufactured recently to the original design?" Kain asked.

"That's unlikely captain." Ventern replied, shaking his head, "I found date markings on several components that indicated when they were made. If someone assembled this recently then they would have to have located supplies of components that were all of the correct vintage."

"Someone seems to have found quite the museum collection." Coroll commented.

"Yes they do. The question is of course exactly how much have they found?" Kain said before he looked at Lox and added, "Perhaps you could help us with this problem administrator."

"Me? I'm afraid I have no idea what you are talking about captain." Lox responded.

"Is that so?" Kain said, "Because the device that my chief engineer has been studying was an electronic jamming module produced some time prior to the Clone Wars for the Trade Defence Force. We found it attached to the hull of a mining ship that was adrift in this asteroid cluster after having been attacked and boarded by battle droids."

"One of my ships was attacked?" Lox said, "Captain this is serious, if pirates have moved into this cluster then I need to send my force to find them."

"Your forces haven't had much luck finding them so far administrator." Embrance pointed out.

"As I said Agent Embrance, there have not been any pirate activity in this system previously. This attack represents the first." Lox responded.

"Is that so administrator?" Kain said with a smile, "Because that's not what we've been told by survivors of the attack."

"Survivors?" Lox commented, his eyes widening in fear.

"Some of the crew were able to seal themselves in when they were boarded and we reached them just in time to save them." Coroll explained.

"I understand that everyone aboard the previous vessels attacked was killed." Kain said, "Luckily that wasn't the case this time, though only just and we now have witnesses."

"What have they reported?" Lox asked.

"Their vessel was boarded by battle droids that killed any crewmen they encountered before decompressing the ship as they departed. Fortunately the command crew were protected and had sufficient oxygen to survive until a boarding party from our ship was able to rescue them." Coroll answered.

"As well as being able to tell us what happened to their ship, they were also able to give us some information regarding a number of earlier attacks. Why haven't these been reported to sector authorities administrator?" Embrance added.

"I saw no need to report them. The incidents so far have been minor and-" Lox began.

"Administrator," Kain interrupted, "just a few moments ago you were claiming that there was no pirate activity in this system."

"A very good point captain." Coroll commented, "Though I'm also interested to find out what the administrator regards as minor."

Lox hesitated before he smiled at Kain.

"Captain Kain, perhaps you would allow me to explain the complex nature of mining operations in the Myseron system." he said.

"Oh do please go ahead administrator. I'm all ears." Kain replied.

"Well captain, despite the undeniable improvements in efficiency that my period as administrator has seen there are still some mining teams that struggle to meet their individual quotas and sometimes they have been known to resort to extreme measures to make up the shortfall. Given the complete lack of survivors in the past the loss of the mining ships was put down to accidents caused by mining crews pushing themselves too hard, while missing cargos were considered to be due to other mining teams looting the abandoned ships. Of course mining crews are known for exaggerating events during their time aboard station in cantinas and rumours started that there were pirates at work." Lox explained.

"Are you buying this captain?" Coroll said, looking at Kain.

"Commander I wouldn't buy that story if I got another one free with it." Kain responded, "What about you Agent Embrance?"

"I didn't believe a word of it captain. As far as I see things the administrator here knows that he has a pirate problem but is worried that if he reports it to sector authorities without having already dealt with it then the guild will lose its licence to operate here. The navy will be brought in to hunt down the pirates and an Imperial governor will be appointed for Lebast station itself. That would of course mean the end of a cushy job for Administrator Lox. I doubt that the Mining Guild would reward him with another such position after he cost them this one." Embrance said.

"I agree captain." Coroll added.

"Yes that does sound far more likely to me as well." Kain said, "Now administrator, how many ships have been lost in total?"

"Captain I must protest, I am not on trial here." Lox said.

"No, not yet." Embrace commented, "Though if your negligence is shown to have delayed the eradication of these pirates then the deaths caused by their attacks could see you charged with manslaughter."

"So if I were you then I'd be doing everything I could to help us catch these pirates as quickly as possible. Including giving us access to every bit of information that you have on the previous attacks." Kain said.

"Of course captain. If you'd like to come to my command centre then I'll give you full access-" Lox began.

"I don't think so administrator." Kain interrupted, "We can establish a link to your computers from our bridge and you can assist us from here."

"But my enforcers are-" Lox began before Kain interrupted him again.

"A representative of your enforcers will be brought aboard as well to brief us on their activities administrator." he said before the intercom sounded and he reached for it, "Kain." he said.

"I'm sorry to disturb you captain," Erranes' voice said, "but there is a signal coming in for you."

"Did you tell them that I'm occupied?" Kain replied.

"Captain it's Moff Tollof. She wants to speak with you immediately and in private." Erranes told him.

"Very well, I'll take it in my quarters." Kain said before he shut off the intercom and looked at the others sat at the table, "I'm afraid that it looks like dinner is over. Commander Coroll please escort our guest to the bridge so that he can summon his head enforcer."

"Captain perhaps we should consider activating the secondary bridge as an operations centre." Embrace suggested but Kain shook his head.

"No I don't think so. I'd rather not have to split my time between two different bridges. Without three hundred attack craft to direct we can handle our normal operations as well as strategic planning in a single bridge." he said as he got to his feet. Then he looked at Ventern and added, "Thank you lieutenant, you may get back to your duties now."

6.

As the *Sword of Justice*'s commanding officer Kain's quarters included a communication system that allowed him to send or receive signals privately. This was intended to allow classified matters to be discussed without the entire bridge crew overhearing them and as soon as Kain closed the door behind him he activated it using one of the code cylinders he carried in his tunic. The moment he did this a hologram of a woman in an Imperial uniform with the rank badge of a moff on her chest appeared in front of him.

"Moff Tollof." Kain said, standing up straight.

"So formal Jarren." she said, smiling, "We are alone aren't we?"

"Yes, I'm in my quarters. No-one else is here as you requested." Kain replied.

"So call me Erian." Tollof told him.

"As you wish Erian." Kain said.

"That's better. Now I hear that you've been busy poking your nose into other people's business Jarren. Not only have you discovered a campaign of piracy but you've also uncovered corruption in the Mining Guild." Tollof said and Kain smiled.

"It does look that way." he said, "In fact I've just spoken with Administrator Lox and let's just say that his explanations were less than convincing. I'm pretty sure that he knows that there are pirates operating in the Myseron system for some time but failed to report it because he didn't want sector authorities moving in and taking over any of his operation."

"So what's he been up to during this time?" Tollof asked.

"Trusting in his own forces to try and locate the pirates while exploiting the terms in the miners' contracts to make sure that they keep on working." Kain answered.

"And what's your assessment of the pirates? Your initial report to Line Captain Morco mentioned that they were using battle droids." Tollof said and Kain nodded.

"Yes, the survivors said that they were boarded by battle droids and the electronic warfare module we took from the hull was also of Separatist origin. Obviously someone has access to a lot of their old equipment. I wouldn't be surprised if their ship was an old Separatist one as well. Though if they just found the droids then they could be using a more modern civilian transport." he explained.

"So nothing you can't handle?" Tollof commented.

"There's nothing to suggest that they have any large capital ships, no. Of course from our own experience bringing a large vessel into the asteroid field is a complex operation. If there is a larger base ship somewhere then we don't have any specific intelligence about it." Kain said.

"So do you have a specific plan?" Tollof said.

"Not yet, no. I need to hear what the guild's enforcers have to say about their investigation so far before deciding what to do next. If we do find something too big for us to handle alone or a larger fleet that could just scatter then we'll call in the rest of the line to assist us." Kain said.

"Well keep me up to date, don't worry about the chain of command. If there's even the slightest chance that we could be dealing with a Separatist hold out cell then I want to know immediately." Tollof told him.,

"Yes moff- I mean yes Erian." Kain replied and Tollof smiled.

"And then once you've dealt with the pirates I think I'd like a report in person captain. I look forward to hearing it." she said before she blew Kain a kiss then ceased transmitting and her hologram faded away.

The holographic display in the *Sword of Justice*'s bridge showed the most recent chart of the Lebast asteroid field available and within it there were several small points of light. One of these was where the star destroyer had discovered the mining ship most recently attacked by the pirates while the others were the locations recorded by the guild enforcers for the locations of the previous attacks. As well as providing the information in the hologram the head of the Mining Guild's enforcers for the Myseron system had come aboard the *Sword of Justice* in person to explain to its senior officers the measures that he had taken so far in trying to locate the pirates. As well as Kain, Coroll, Erranes and Embrace, the group assembled to hear what the enforcer has to say consisted of Ventern, Krostas, both of the ship's TIE fighter squadron leaders and four stormtrooper platoon commanders were gathered to hear what the chief enforcer had to say while Administrator Lox stood further back, hoping that he would not be called upon.

"As you can see the attacks appear to have taken place at random within the asteroid field. The first was in this section about twelve hundred kilometres deep, the second towards the sunward edge and the third nearer the base of the orbital plane. This suggests that rather than simply making their way through the asteroid field they are adopting a more random flight path, probably to avoid our patrols." the chief enforcer explained.

"What's your strength?" one of the TIE squadron leaders asked.

"We have four corvette class ships and a wing of six V-wing squadrons. The fighters always remain at Lebast station though. We have surface mounted weapons but the fighters give us an additional layer of protection when the corvettes are all deployed." the enforcer answered.

"Combined with your shields that makes Lebast itself a hard target to crack. You'd need an entire line of warships to mount an assault." Coroll said.

"Then I think that we can rule that out. Or least I hope we can." Kain said before an idea occurred to him and he added, "Have your sensors picked up any unexplained cronau radiation flares?"

"No, we considered the possibility that they were jumping in from another system but there's been nothing like that. Wherever the pirates are hiding they're in this system." the enforcer told him.

"These attacks took place more than a week apart at least though. Even at sublight speed a ship could cross the entire system in that time. That gives us a lot of space to cover." Erranes pointed out.

"Surely your sensors would detect ships approaching the asteroid field though. Why not just watch for them?" Embrance said.

"Unfortunately the very metals that are mined here disrupt our sensors." the enforcer said, "We can see approaching ships only in a very narrow corridor. Of course legitimate traffic has to follow that corridor but the pirates can easily get around it. We tried deploying one of our corvettes to function as a sensor picket but without knowing which direction they are coming from it's difficult to select the optimum position."

"A ship running silent could be hard to detect anyway and running silent with a crew of nothing but droids is very easy. The hull will absorb emissions from the droids themselves and you can even shut down life support and artificial gravity without worrying about your crew suffocating or freezing to death." Ventern pointed out.

"If they fired their sublight engines correctly they could swing around a planet and come in on an almost entirely ballistic course." Erranes added.

"But unless we know where they're coming from that doesn't really get us very far now does it?" Coroll said.

"How many mining ships are typically operating in the cluster at any time?" Kain asked.

"Anywhere between a dozen and about thirty." the enforcer answered.

"Then you have enough fighter strength to provide a pair of escorts for them all." Embrance said and Kain winced.

"No agent, he doesn't." he said and she looked at him and frowned.

"V-wings are short ranged attack craft, not intended for missions lasting more than about a day. A mining run could easily last a week and starfighters also need a lot of down time for maintenance." Coroll said to her quietly though it was still loud enough for Ventern to overhear.

"If you'd like to head down to our own hangars I can arrange for you to shadow one of our ground crews." he said.

"I think I'll pass." she replied without looking at him.

"I take it that you can't track the mining ships because of the density of the asteroid field?" Kain added and the chief enforcer shook his head.

"No captain. Active communications are just about possible. Unfortunately this cluster has been mined for about five hundred years. Initially the mining ships operated in the vicinity of Lebast itself but over time the nearby asteroids were worked out of valuable minerals and now they have to move further away." he explained.

"So we have to find a way of protecting up to thirty mining ships in dense asteroids where the *Sword of Justice* can't go." Coroll said.

"Maybe." Kain responded, "I need to know the mean and maximum masses of the asteroids."

"Oh you can't be serious captain." Coroll exclaimed.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Erranes added.

"Do you have a better idea commander?" Kain said, looking at Coroll.

"Will someone please explain to me what is going on?" Embrance said.

"The captain wants to know whether our deflector shields will withstand impacts from the asteroids." Ventern said.

"And will they?" Embrance responded but Ventern shrugged.

"Depends on the size of the asteroid and the speed we hit them at." he said.

"Full burn." Kain said, "If we can keep tabs on the mining ships either from a clear spot in the field or maybe just outside it then we can move in as soon as an attack takes place."

"But by then it will be too late." Administrator Lox said unexpectedly, "The pirates will have boarded another ship."

"I don't think so administrator." Kain replied, "The pirates are using electronic warfare modules to jam their victims' communications and sensors. That means that they must be deploying these before they move in for docking, probably using a droid craft of some kind. As soon as that is deployed then we'll know that the pirates are about to strike and we can move in."

"Providing the asteroids are not so dense that we tear our ship apart in the process." Coroll commented.

"The mean mass of asteroids in the cluster is about a thousand tonnes captain. About five percent are over ten thousand tonnes and the largest one percent about a million." the chief enforcer said.

"We can take a thousand tonne hit at typical operating velocities as long as the shields have at least thirty seconds to regenerate captain." Ventern said.

"As long as we don't encounter too many larger asteroids in close proximity then we should be able to break them up with our turbolasers. That will lessen the strain that our shields need to bear." Coroll said.

"In that case I think we have a plan." Kain said, smiling, "Just in case I'd like to limit the number of mining ships operating at one time to twenty though so we can keep them in a more confined area of the cluster."

"But that will reduce the amount of ore we can gather. What about our quota?" Lox exclaimed.

"Take it up with the sector authorities administrator. Remember them? They're the same authorities that you should have informed after the first attack." Kain told him.

The *Sword of Justice* took up a position in a clear area of space within the asteroid field with its shields raised. There were still enough asteroids moving through this area that the ship was hit numerous times but none of the rocks here were more than about a metre across and they inflicted no damage against the star destroyer's shields. One consequence of having to keep the ship's particle shields raised constantly was that it was not possible launch or retrieve any craft from the ship's hangars, including its complement of TIE fighters. Because of this it was known that the *Sword of Justice* would be undertaking this mission without fighter support.

Although positioning the *Sword of Justice* had been relatively straight forwards it had taken time to get all of the mining ships then operating in the cluster to return to Lebast before just twenty of them left port again. All of these were configured to emit brief communication pulses at varying intervals that the *Sword of Justice* was monitoring for.

"In position now captain." Erranes reported from within one of the crew pits and Kain nodded as he looked out of the viewports at the front of the bridge with Coroll beside him.

"What's our status?" Kain responded.

"Shields are registering impacts captain but no damage so far. Gun crews have orders to target any object massing at least a thousand tonnes on a collision course for us." Erranes told him.

"What about the pings from the mining ships?" Coroll added.

"Coming in as expected commander. Each pulse is being sent at intervals between twenty and thirty seconds." Erranes said.

"With luck the pirates won't notice anything out of the ordinary with them." Kain commented.

"Lieutenant Ventern seemed pretty sure that they would look like active sensor pulses captain." Coroll replied.

"Then I guess that now we just have to wait. The pirates haven't stuck to an exact timetable so far but the interval since the last attack means that another should come within the next day or so." Kain said.

"That certainly indicates that there are living beings controlling the operation. You can generally set your watch by droids." Coroll added.

The bridge crew continued to monitor the asteroid cluster and the mining ships operating within in it for several hours before another signal appeared on the *Sword of Justice's* sensors.

"Captain we may have something." Erranes announced.

"Can you be more specific than that lieutenant?" Coroll asked.

"An energy flare, looks like an ion drive firing just outside the asteroid field." Erranes said and Kain and Coroll looked at one another.

"Our pirates slowing down after coasting through clear space?" Kain commented.

"That's what it sounds like to me captain." Coroll responded.

"Lieutenant, which is the closest mining vessel to the new reading?" Kain said and Erranes checked a nearby screen.

"The *Lo/ost* captain." she said.

"If we warn them then it may scare the pirates off." Coroll pointed out.

"I know. If our plan works then the pirates won't make it to them anyway." Kain replied, "Comscan keep monitoring for any more energy readings and make sure that we don't lose the signal from the *Lo/ost*."

"Aye captain. Scanning now." Erranes said.

The density and composition of the asteroids in the Lebast cluster made running detailed scans more difficult but not impossible and further energy readings were picked up as the mysterious vessel that had just arrived began to make its way through the asteroids cautiously, seemingly unaware that it was being monitored. Of course there was nothing to stop any civilian vessel from entering the asteroid field so this in itself was not enough to justify Kain giving the order to attack, however it was not long before the newly arrived vessel began to act more suspiciously.

"Captain we've got another engine flare." Erranes said, "It looks like the unidentified vessel is altering course towards the *Lo/ost*."

"They've seen her and are moving in." Coroll commented.

"Yes but they haven't deployed that electronics package yet." Kain pointed out.

"Another flare captain. Smaller this time. It could be a launch but from these readings it's impossible to tell whether it's a shuttle, fighter or missile." Erranes said.

"Okay whatever they just launched this is starting. Action stations." Kain ordered.

As starfighters, Vulture Droids had never been expected to be top of the line, always relying on superior numbers to overwhelm foes of superior quality but it took just one to carry out this particular task. A lone Vulture droid made its way through the asteroid field towards the *Lo/ost*, using the manoeuvrability that remained impressive even compared with more modern starfighters to weave between the asteroids surrounding it without colliding with any of them. The droid fighter manoeuvred behind the mining ship and made its final approach using minimum power to avoid detection before landing on the hull, its wings unfolding into legs that now allowed it to stand on the surface of the mining ship. The droid remained in place just long enough to deposit an electronic warfare package before it detached from the hull and folded its legs back into their flight configuration. As soon as this was completed the droid activated the device it had just attached to the hull of the mining ship, jamming both its sensors and communications before accelerating away.

7.

"Captain we've lost the signal from the *Lolost* and we're picking up interference matching the pattern from the electronic warfare module the pirates used on the previous vessel they attacked." Erranes announced as soon as the repeating pulses from the *Lolost* ceased.

"Do we have a fix on the enemy vessel?" Coroll asked.

"Yes commander. She just powered up fully and she's moving towards the *Lolost*." Erranes answered.

"Helm engage full sublight power towards the target." Kain ordered.

"Aye captain. Full power." the helmsman replied from within a crew pit and the *Sword of Justice* immediately started to move off in the direction of the newly arrived ship. Almost straight away more asteroids began to strike the star destroyers shields and as it moved through the cluster and there were flashes of turbolaser fire as the ship's gun crews targeted the larger objects before they could collide with it.

"Can we identify the target yet?" Kain asked while the *Sword of Justice* continued to blast its way through the asteroids.

"We're still getting a lot of disruption from the asteroids captain but it looks like the target is a Gozanti-class cruiser." Erranes replied.

"As used by just about everyone for the last thirty years or so." Coroll commented.

"Which makes it a very good choice for pirates. Easy to obtain, easy to maintain and hard to pin down where it came from." Kain added before he glanced down into the crew pit where Erranes was still studying the sensor readings being taken of the pirate ship, "I don't suppose there's a transponder is there?"

"Sorry captain, no. They've silenced that." Erranes said.

"Oh well I suppose one Gozanti comes apart the same as any other." Coroll said.

Despite the disruption caused to sensors by the asteroid field it was not possible for a vessel the size of a Venator-class star destroyer to move through it at full power with its shields raised and using turbolasers to clear a path to do so without being noticed and although a Gozanti-class vessel was referred to as a cruiser it was not a capital warship, instead it was little more than an armed transport ship less than a hundred metres long. Therefore, as the *Sword of Justice* ploughed through the asteroids towards it the pirate ship abruptly turned and began to head back out of the cluster.

"Captain she's running." Erranes said, "Full burn out of the asteroid cluster."

"Give me a channel." Kain ordered, looking down into one of the crew pits and a junior officer looked up and nodded at him to indicate that the communication system was ready, "This is Captain Kain of the Imperial navy vessel *Sword of Justice*. You are ordered to hold position and prepare to be boarded. Any resistance will result in a harsh response." then he nodded at the junior officer to let him know that he was finished.

The message had no effect on the crew of the pirate vessel though and the ship continued to flee. However, despite the star destroyer's vastly greater size and mass its engines were far more powerful and the *Sword of Justice* easily kept pace with the smaller ship even as it smashed its way through the asteroids ahead of it.

"If they get beyond the asteroids they could jump to hyperspace captain." Coroll pointed out.

"Yes, I know." Kain replied, "Weapons I want a firing solution on that ship. Lock tractor beam on target and activate as soon as you have a clear shot. Don't wait for my order, just do it."

"Captain we have more contacts. The enemy vessel is launching fighters." Erranes called out.

"How many?" Kain asked.

"I'm counting eight captain. Vultures." Erranes answered.

"Eight vulture droids? Nothing to worry about there." Coroll said, "Weapons order point defences to fire at will."

"They're desperate, they're throwing everything that they have at us to try and keep us off their backs until they can make the jump to hyperspace." Kain said.

"Incoming!" one of the bridge crewmen suddenly exclaimed.

"Confirmed captain." Erranes added, "Missile launches detected from all fighters. Telemetry suggests that they'll all over shoot though."

"They must have launched too soon. They didn't wait for a lock." Coroll said.

"No, they have their lock commander." Kain replied, "Those aren't concussion missiles they're firing. I'll bet that they're loaded with buzz droids. They know that our shields are up so the missiles will pass by us and then swing around to come past again and match our forward velocity before releasing them. They're betting that if the speed differential is small enough then the droids will be able to pass through and start attacking our hull. Eight Vulture droids can't be carrying more than a couple of hundred of them so we'd be probably able to deal with them before they did too much damage but they'd slow us down enough for that cruiser to escape."

"Weapons ignore the fighters for now, adjust fire to take out those missiles." Coroll ordered.

As the missiles and their droid cargoes closed in on the *Sword of Justice* the gunners manning the star destroyer's lighter laser cannons began to track them and as soon as they came within range the cannons opened fire, sending streams of energy blasts into space. For all their speed the missiles were not programmed with evasive flight patterns and hitting them was just a matter of calculating how far the missiles would travel in the time taken for the energy blasts to reach them, a function carried out easily by the *Sword of Justice's* fire control computers and one by one the missiles exploded along with the droids they contained.

Meanwhile the pirate ship continued to flee from the *Sword of Justice* but unlike the larger vessel that was just smashing its way through the asteroids the smaller Gozanti-class ship had to fly around them and this slowed it down enough that by the time it emerged into open space the *Sword of Justice* was not far behind. Suddenly presented with a clear shot the *Sword of Justice's* gun crews engaged their tractor beam just as Kain had ordered and the beam seized hold of the pirate ship, bringing it to a relative halt to the star destroyer.

"Captain we've got them." one of the bridge officers reported, "Should we open the hangar and bring them aboard?"

"No." Kain responded, "That ship may not be able to escape but it's still armed and I don't want the crew getting any ideas about shooting up our hangar from the inside. Have Lieutenant Krostas put together a boarding party and if they don't surrender we'll take the ship by force."

"Captain we're picking up increased energy emissions from the pirate ship." Erranes said, "It looks like they're still running their sublight drives at full power."

"They can't really think that they can break out of our tractor beam." Coroll said.

"Lieutenant Erranes are there any life readings aboard that ship?" Kain asked and Erranes checked the sensors again.

"No captain, there's no-one alive over there." she told him.

"Weapons target that ship and fire. Now!" Kain snapped and moments later there was a volley of fire from the *Sword of Justice's* turbolasers that slammed into the pirate vessel in rapid succession. The multiple powerful energy blasts easily punched through the smaller ship's shields before tearing the ship itself apart and it was consumed in a short lived ball of flame.

"Target destroyed captain." Erranes said.

"I thought the idea was to try and take the ship intact." Coroll said.

"Yes it was, but if they'd continued running their engines like that then they would have overloaded their reactor and the blast could have damaged us as well. If there had been living pirates aboard then someone could have lost their nerve but not droids. They must have been programmed to avoid capture at any cost. Destroying it was the only thing we could do." Kain explained.

"So what now captain?" Coroll asked, "Our only lead is floating in about a million different pieces out there."

"Now it's up to Lieutenant Ventern. With luck something will have survived among the wreckage that can tell us where that ship came from." Kain replied and then he looked down into a crew pit at Erranes, "In the meantime I need an analysis of the pirate ship's flight path. See if you can track it back to its point of origin." he told her.

"Yes captain." Erranes responded and Kain turned around again to look out through the viewports.

Some pieces of the wreckage of the destroyed pirate vessel were still glowing brightly enough to be visible from the bridge of the *Sword of Justice* but most was now cool and dark enough to be invisible.

"We should get a salvage team out there." he said.

"Do you think that there could be something useful left in wreckage captain?" Coroll replied.

"Possibly. Even just an image or data file on a datapad thrown clear could be enough. There could even be memory cores from their navigation computer or droids." Kain answered.

"If they survived the explosion then some of those droids could still be active captain." Coroll pointed out and Kain nodded.

"We better make it an armed salvage party then. A squad of marines ought to be enough to protect them from a few battle droids." he said.

A single shuttle carried the bulk of the salvage team that was made up of several of the *Sword of Justice's* engineering crew in vacuum suits and a number of maintenance droids. The engineers had all been issued with blasters for self defence but the main component of their protection came from the squad of stormtroopers that had also been assigned to accompany them. In addition to this a single viper probe droid moved through the still expanding cloud of debris ahead of the shuttle, monitoring for energy signatures that could indicate functional battle droids.

The only battle droids that were discovered among the ruins though were already smashed and inoperable, posing no threat to the salvage team as they picked their way through the wreckage though the stormtroopers still remained close at hand just in case any turned out to be not quite as inactive as they initially seemed. The engineers did not ignore the droids though, instead they inspected the robotic corpses

and recovered any intact heads they came across just in case they still retained any intelligence. These combined with a number of datapads and computer drives that had survived the destruction of the pirate ship were all gathered together for return to the *Sword of Justice* where they could be examined more closely. The salvage team also examined any sections of the outer hull that they came across, hoping to find something that might carry some sort of identifying marks that would expose the origin of the pirate vessel. Unfortunately the sheer destructive power of the *Sword of Justice*'s turbolasers had scoured any such markings from what was left of the hull meaning that the only chance of identifying the ship lay in the electronic components that had survived.

8.

"This is everything that survived the explosion captain." Ventern said as Kain looked at the workbench on which the items salvaged from the wreckage of the pirate ship were all laid out. These amounted to half a dozen droid heads, five datapads, about twenty memory sticks and two computer drives. Only the memory sticks looked perfectly intact, having been protected from the explosion in cases while everything else showed at least some signs of damage whether it was cracks, dents or scorch marks.

"Not much then." Kain said and Ventern shook his head.

"Turbolasers aren't really designed to leave much behind captain. Especially not when you're firing weapons that are meant for engagements between star destroyers at a light patrol ship." he said, "I've not been able to go through the full contents of all the drives yet but I have done basic scans and there's something interesting about the droids captain."

"Interesting how? Aren't they standard B-one battle droids?" Kain asked.

"Yes captain though the size of their memory chips suggests that they are the later pattern that doesn't require an external control signal to operate but the serial numbers all come from the same production batch." Ventern answered and Kain frowned for a moment.

"The same batch?" he said, "So they were part of the same company. If that was a Separatist ship we blew up then they could have been the original crew during the Clone Wars."

"Unlikely captain. Production batches of droids like this ran into the tens of thousands and although all of these droids came from just one their serial numbers are not within a thousand of each other. They came from a much larger force than just the crew of a Gozanti-class ship." Ventern said.

"How large a unit?" Kain said and Ventern hesitated for a moment and took a deep breath before he answered.

"Possibly the division normally assigned to a Lucrehulk-class battleship captain." he said and Kain's eyes widened briefly.

"A division?" he exclaimed, "Are you telling me that someone around here could have control of more than three hundred thousand battle droids? Not to mention an entire battleship?"

"I can't say just yet captain. With luck enough of the droids' memories will have survived to tell us. I thought I ought to warn you about the possibility of us facing such a large force as soon as possible though." Ventern said and Kain nodded in agreement.

"Yes, you did the right thing. Our torpedoes can inflict serious damage to a Lucrehulk, even with just a single salvo but if the pirates have got the full complement of vulture droids to go with it then we're in big trouble. We just don't have enough fighters of our own to counter them. I'll need to inform Line Captain Morco about this, we'll need the *Hammer of Reason* and *Blade of Truth* to back us up if that's what we're up against. Plus Moff Tollof has asked for personal updates." he said. Then he pointed to the recovered objects from the pirate ship and added, "Continue with your examination of all of these. I want the full results as soon as possible."

"Of course captain." Ventern responded.

"Let me get this straight Captain Kane," the hologram of Moff Tollof began, using Kain's rank and surname instead of the more informal tone she had earlier now that he was calling her from the *Sword of Justice's* bridge rather his quarters, "you're saying that there could be an entire battleship's worth of droids out there? Infantry, armour and fighters?"

"That is a possibility moff." Kain replied after a short pause, "Though I should point out that so far all we've seen is a single Gozanti-class cruiser. It's also possible that there are no more droids at all. We destroyed their ship and it could have been the only one that the pirates had. We'll know more once we've tracked them to their point of origin." he continued before he noticed Erranes approach and wait just outside the area covered by the holographic scanner that was sending his image to the moff on the sector capital moon Aran.

"How long will that take?" Tollof asked.

"I can't be certain but I think that my navigator may have some information for me." Kain answered.

"Very well. I'm going to confer with Fleet Admiral Kellear. Let me know as soon as you have anything certain." Tollof said before her hologram faded away and Kain looked at Erranes.

"You have something for me lieutenant?" he asked and she held out a datapad.

"Not much I'm afraid captain. I'm pretty sure that the droids were leaving on the same vector that they approached from." she said and Kain nodded.

"Makes sense. Droids lack the imagination to come up with something new." he said.

"Yes captain." Erranes said, "The odd thing is that the vector they followed took them deeper into the system. Most ships trying to get into hyperspace will move either outwards or more commonly off the orbital plane to avoid the gravity wells of other planets and the system's sun."

"That's assuming that they were going to jump to hyperspace. Calculating a jump would take time, even for a droid designed for that purpose." Kain pointed out.

"But they couldn't outrun us in realspace captain." Erranes responded.

"Maybe not, but they did deploy those vulture droids to try and distract us. If they were able to slow us down even slightly then they could have gone silent and we might have lost track of them. Where exactly does this vector lead?" Kain said as he studied the datapad that Erranes had handed him.

"Towards the centre of the system captain, just like I said. In fact it goes really close to the very centre." Erranes answered.

"Close enough to be able to sling shot around the local sun?" Kain asked, looking up from the datapad.

"Yes captain, I think it would be that close." Erranes said with a smile.

"So what's on the other side of the sun at the moment?" Kain said and Erranes held out her hand.

"May I captain?" she said and he returned her datapad to her. Erranes then quickly called up a local navigational chart on the screen and held the device so that Kain could see it, "Extrapolating the pirate ship's course as a sling shot around the sun leads right to Myseron itself captain."

"A planet that was controlled by the Confederacy for the entire duration of the war." Kain commented, "I think we just found out where the pirates found their droids."

"Treasure hunters?" Erranes suggested.

"It's as good a suggestion as any lieutenant. There have been enough people digging holes down there that someone was bound to find something left over from the war other than unexploded munitions sooner or later." Kain replied.

"What are your orders captain?" Erranes said.

"Plot a course to Myseron. Use a micro jump to get us there without the pirates seeing us coming. There's still a chance that they don't know about the loss of their ship yet and I'd like to get the drop on them before they find out." Kain told her.

"Aye captain. I'll get right on it." Erranes replied.

"Myseron?" Embrance said when Kain told her and Coroll where he intended to take the *Sword of Justice* and he nodded.

"Tracking the pirate ship's course back shows that it most likely came from there. It coasted close to the star and performed a sling shot around it before coasting the rest of the way here." Kain told her.

"That explains the significant gaps between successive attacks." Coroll commented, "Coasting while running silent may be good for stealth but it limits their speed massively."

"Which is why I'm hoping that we can take them by surprise by jumping as close to the planet as the gravity well will allow us." Kain said.

"Does Administrator Lox know that we're planning to withdraw from the cluster captain?" Coroll said.

"No. No-one not on this ship knows." Kain replied.

"Captain I'd recommend keeping it that way. The pirates could have informers on Lebast who would warn them if we announced our departure ahead of time." Embrance pointed out. Ordinarily Kain would have regarded Embrance's suspicious nature negatively but on this occasion he could not help but see the logic in her point.

"Captain." Erranes then said as she approached the trio.

"Ah Lieutenant Erranes, have you plotted our jump to Myseron?" Kain asked her.

"Yes captain, well two jumps actually. We can't jump there directly because of the system's star so we'll need to carry out two jumps in rapid succession." she answered.

"Won't the pirates be able to detect when we come out of hyperspace the first time? They'll know that we've carried out a jump." Embrance said.

"If they have suitable detection equipment then, yes they'll pick up our entry to and exit from hyperspace but as long as our engines are ready we can jump again in under a minute. They just won't have enough warning to do anything before we arrive at Myseron." Erranes reassured her.

"And what exactly is the plan for when we enter orbit around Myseron captain?" Embrance asked, turning her attention back to Kain, "It's an inhabited planet administered by an Imperial governor and he's never reported anything about armies of battle droids."

"The Imperial settlements are all concentrated on a single continent Agent Embrance. That leaves plenty of room for facilities dating back to the previous habitation that the new inhabitants would have no knowledge of. Those are the places where the treasure hunters head for." Kain began, "Once we're in orbit we'll run a high altitude scan to see if there are any obvious readings, though I doubt that there will be. If wherever the droids had been concealed was so obvious then our forces would have detected them when they moved in

at the end of the war. After that we'll deploy a spread of probe droids to follow up on any leads while we remain in orbit to block any ships from leaving."

"So when do we jump captain?" Coroll added.

"As soon as our fighters are ready for deployment. Two micro jumps in rapid succession won't take us more than five minutes to execute so the pilots will have to be in their ships before we start." Kain told him, "Any more questions?" he added, looking around but no-one spoke up, "Then let's get started. With luck we'll be finished here within a day."

Alert klaxons sounded throughout the *Sword of Justice*, instructing the crew to report to action stations before the star destroyer jumped to hyperspace.

"All sections reporting ready captain." Erranes announced from one of the bridge crew pits while Kain, Coroll and Embrace stood by the viewports, "Both fighter squadrons are manned and ready for launch as soon as the hangar opens."

"Engine status?" Coroll asked.

"Engineering reports sublight and hyperdrive engines operating at full readiness commander. We can make both plotted jumps without needing to reset the hyperdrive." Erranes answered.

"Are the jumps programmed into the navigation computer?" Kain added.

"Yes captain. We can jump on your command." Erranes replied and Kain nodded.

"Then commence jump." he ordered.

Moments later the stars outside the *Sword of Justice's* viewports blurred as the kilometre long warship accelerated into hyperspace. However, rather than remaining in hyperspace the *Sword of Justice* dropped back into realspace again almost immediately. Such things could happen if there was a fault with a vessel's hyperdrive engines but in this case it was a controlled deceleration designed to bring the ship back into realspace in a position that would allow it to make a second micro jump directly to Myseron. There was a brief delay as the *Sword of Justice* turned towards the system's primary inhabited planet and its navigational computer processed the co-ordinates for a second jump through hyperspace before the process was repeated. Yet again jumping from one point to another in the same star system took just a few seconds and this time when the *Sword of Justice* returned to realspace there was a planet directly ahead of the ship. Myseron had never been particularly densely populated, instead it had been home to the mega-wealthy who resided on large tracts of private land while most of the system's workers lived in asteroid clusters. The inhabitants of Myseron had sided with the Confederacy during the Clone Wars, seeing this as the best way to maintain the system's social order. Following the end of the war though the Empire had moved in and conducted a purge of the population, imprisoning everyone who failed to flee in time and seizing their property. This was the source of the rumours about buried treasure on Myseron with beings across the sector claiming that they knew of particular individuals who had gone into hiding before they could be arrested by the Empire's agents but not before concealing their wealth somewhere that they could retrieve it from later. These rumours had led to a steady stream of treasure hunters coming to the planet over the years to try and locate some of this buried wealth but so far no-one had been confirmed to have found so much as a single buried credit.

While these treasure hunters had been in the process of digging up remote areas of the planet though the Empire had been busy repopulating it, replacing the old multispecies population with one that was entirely human. The land that had been carefully tended gardens and managed forests was now steadily being replaced by farmland as the world was turned over entirely to agriculture, overseen by an Imperial planetary governor who ruled from the single city that remained.

"Jump complete captain. We're right where you wanted us, just outside the limit of the gravity well over the uninhabited side of the planet." Erranes reported.

"So no-one can leave without either us or the local governor spotting them." Coroll commented and Kain nodded.

"That's the idea commander." he replied, "Open hangars and launch fighters. Comscan, commence surface sensor sweeps."

The massive hangar doors that extended most of the length of the star destroyer moved apart, opening the main hangar to space and as soon as it was fully open the pilots of the TIE fighters inside flew their craft out of it, the two squadrons spreading out either side of the star destroyer and watching for any other craft. At the same time the *Sword of Justice's* comscan operators directed their sensors towards the surface of the planet below, searching for any signs of battle droids or other active military technologies.

"Well have you found anything yet?" Embrace asked impatiently as she grew tired of waiting for the comscan operators to report their findings.

"Nothing conclusive so far agent Embrace." one of the comscan officers responded.

"What do you mean nothing conclusive? Is there something down there or not?" Embrace said, glaring at the man below her in the crew pit.

"Relax Agent Embrace." Kain told her, "He means exactly what he said. Nothing showing up on the sensors is screaming out that it's a legion of battle droids."

"Time to launch the probe droids?" Coroll commented and Kain turned towards the crew pits.

"Are there any abnormal readings lieutenant?" he asked the comscan officer.

"Yes captain. We have three minor EM fields and two thermal sources that don't match with any known natural phenomena or Imperial installations." he responded.

"Okay then set the co-ordinates of those readings into the launch controls for our probe droids. Target one droid per reading with a set down distance of ten thousand metres. If the pirates are down there then they've probably seen us by now but I don't want them to know for certain that we're on to them." Kain said.

"Droid targets set captain." another crewmen announced and Kain nodded.

"Launch probe droids." he ordered.

Five probe droid capsules immediately rose up out of the *Sword of Justice's* hangar and there were several flashes in rapid succession as their sublight engines ignited, sending them all towards the planet on slightly different headings. After this initial burst from their ion drives the pods coasted through space, making them almost undetectable until reaching Myseron's atmosphere and they each produced fiery trails as they entered it.

"First impact confirmed captain." Erranes announced when the first capsule hit the ground, "Droid deploying."

The first probe droid capsule to make landfall created a crater ten metres wide and five metres deep. From within this there was the sound of a repulsorlift engine as the droid itself exited the capsule and rose up out of the crater, already scanning the surrounding area for energy signatures or signs of intelligent life. Then once the droid had confirmed its position it headed towards the location assigned for it to investigate before it launched.

This was repeated at the other four landing sites chosen for the probe droids, the only difference being the size of the crater that depended on the firmness of the ground and within just a few minutes of one another the five probe droids were making their way towards their targets.

9.

"Tarrak! We've got trouble!" a voice called out as Tarrack continued to try and crack the encryption of the computer core he was working on. Gaining control of the core was all that prevented his group from being able to add the ship he was aboard to their little fleet but so far even with the help of his R4 series astromech droid he had been unable to do so.

"What is it Felk? Can't you see I'm busy? This ship alone will more than triple our firepower." Tarrack responded.

"I know but you need to see this." Felk told him and Tarrack sighed before he left the compartment that contained the computer core and entered the ship's bridge. All of the consoles here were still dark without the main computer to activate them but a temporary control station had been set up using portable terminals and monitors that connected to the transport vessel that the group had travelled to Myseron aboard.

"Okay so what is it?" he asked and Felk pointed to one of the displays.

"A star destroyer. She just dropped out of hyperspace." he said and Tarrack looked at the screen.

"Sleemo!" he snapped, "That's a Venator-class ship. An antique as old as the stuff here. You had me thinking you meant a real star destroyer. Imperial-class."

"It's still a star destroyer and it carries hundreds of fighters." Felk said but Tarrack let out a laugh.

"Hundreds? Don't bet on it. The local sector group has only three of those and all of them have had their squadrons run down. They're used in a cruiser role, not a carrier one." he said.

"Yes and they're still very effective in that role. That ship up there outguns even this one if we can get it working. We should get out of here." Felk replied.

"Evacuate? Felk what we've found here will make us all very rich. Look at how effective that Gozanti-class ship has been with just a platoon of battle droids. Now imagine what a light destroyer can do with tens of thousands and since the droids can do everything themselves we don't even need to risk our own lives when they can do all the dangerous work for us." Tarrack said, "Besides, they may not even know that we're down here."

"Oh they know all right, just look at where they've come out of hyperspace." Felk said, pointing to a display that showed the position of the *Sword of Justice* in space above the planet, "They're above us. If they were here to visit the colony then they'd have come out of hyperspace on the other side of the planet or further out so they could get a line of sight faster. No, they came here to look for us I'm certain of it."

Keep monitoring them then. Let me know the moment they take any action. I'm going to get back to work. This ship may not be a match for that one but if I can get the computer working then maybe we can still get out of here with something to show for all this." Tarrack replied.

When deployed to distant star systems probe droids would report to their mother ships only to report specific findings. However, with the *Sword of Justice* in orbit above them the five droids deployed to Myseron instead established continual links to the star destroyer and in the bridge Kain, Coroll and Embrace monitored the live feeds coming in. All five droids had landed in remote and uninhabited areas, far from the current civilisation of Myseron but every so often the feeds would show some indication that someone had already been where the droids now were. Sometimes this was an abandoned structure or piece of wrecked machinery that dated back to before the Imperial purge of the world but there were also traces of the numerous treasure hunters who continued to visit the world, leaving their waste behind when they eventually gave up and left. This pattern was first broken by a probe droid assigned to investigate an unexplained electromagnetic signature and the feed from the droid showed a landspeeder parked beside the remains of a structure that had several beings of varying species excavating around it.

"Looks like treasure hunters to me." Kain commented.

"Aliens." Embrace added, scowling, "The Empire's policy is that Myseron is to be resettled by humans only."

"We're not here to deal with illegal immigration issues agent." Kain pointed out.

"I've logged their location captain." Coroll said, "We can let the planetary authorities know where they are and they can deal with them."

"If you want to commander but I'm more interested in finding those pirates than I am in arresting people for digging in the middle of nowhere." Kain responded.

"Captain I think that one of the other droids may have a lead." Erranes called out from the crew pit where she had been monitoring the feed from the probe droids as well.

"I want proof not leads!" Embrace snapped at her and Kain glared angrily at the ISB agent for a moment.

"What have you found lieutenant?" he asked, walking over to the steps that led down into the crew pit and descending them to stand beside Erranes rather than continue to stand with Embrace.

"It's this droid here captain." she replied, pointing to a screen in front of them where she had ordered one of the probe droids on the surface to hold its position, "Its sensors haven't picked up anything yet but if you look here you can see that the ground has been damaged by something heavy at several points."

Looking at the display for himself Kain saw that the area of empty ground had been flattened in several places and although it was difficult to be certain from the angle and distance that the droid was viewing them the outlines of the flattened ground looked to be about the same size and shape as one another.

"Landing gear?" he asked.

"That's what I was thinking captain." Erranes answered, smiling at Kain.

"Get the droid to measure the distance between the different areas." he told her.

"Do you want me to check them against the size of a Gozanti-class cruiser captain?" Erranes responded and Kain nodded.

"Exactly. Droids would keep landing in as close to the same place as possible so if these marks were made by the pirate ship then the measurements should still match the dimensions of the ship that made them." he said and Erranes tapped at a nearby keyboard, instructing the probe droid to move in closer to the flattened ground.

As the distance decreased the shapes of the flattened patches of ground became more identifiable and graphics appeared on another screen when the probe droid began to calculate the relative positions of the different patches to create a virtual model of them.

"So do we have a match lieutenant?" Kain said and Erranes smiled at him again.

"Yes captain." she replied, "The size and spacing match that of a Gozanti-class cruiser with better than a ninety percent level of confidence."

"That's it. The pirates are there. Order the droid to continue its search. We need the precise location of their base." Kain said and he climbed the stairs back out of the crew pit to rejoin Coroll and Embrance.

"Tarrack I think we've got company." Felk called out from his console and a few moments later Tarrack reappeared in the open hatchway of the bridge.

"Another star destroyer?" he asked.

"No, that's not what I mean. I picked up several atmospheric entries a few minutes ago. They were spread out pretty widely so it doesn't look like they've isolated our position yet." Felk responded.

"Good. So what's the problem then?" Tarrack said.

"This." Felk said and he pointed to a sensor display that showed a small energy signature on the surface several kilometres from their position. I think it's an Imperial probe droid. I'm picking up a continuous data stream coming from it so it must be sending a live feed to the star destroyer in orbit."

"Heading this way?" Tarrack said and Felk nodded.

"Yes. If we don't do something then it's going to find us and that star destroyer can just bombard this place from space or land an army." he said.

"We have an army too." Tarrack commented.

"Yes but most of them are inactive." Felk pointed out.

"We have a platoon on alert though don't we?" Tarrack said and Felk nodded again.

"Yes, forty B-ones. The ones we kept just in case anyone else stumbles across this place." he said.

"Well I think that this counts so let's get them out there. They can head off the probe and-" Tarrack began before he suddenly stopped.

"And what?" Felk asked after a brief pause, "Do you want them sent out or not?"

"Yes, but not just the alert platoon. There's something else I'd like to try out as well." Tarrack answered.

The probe droid paused between the flattened patches of ground to scan the surrounding area. It was about to continue towards its target when it detected energy emissions entering the range of its scans and it paused to study them further as they came closer. Individually the energy signatures were small and they began to spread out as they advanced, prompting the probe droid to retreat and take cover before the approaching droids could come within visual range. Then the probe droid detected another pair of energy signatures, stronger than the first ones and moving more rapidly towards it from another direction entirely. The probe droid focused its sensors on these new contacts and quickly identified them as a pair of destroyer droids. According to the probe droid's programming it should retreat from such a threat but the initial group of droids now blocked that retreat.

"It's a trap." Coroll said as he watched the feed from the probe droid, "The pirates must have detected the probe and sent more battle droids to destroy it."

"Then all they've done is confirm their presence here." Embrance said.

"They're playing for time." Kain said, "They'll have seen us enter orbit and they obviously detected the probe droid when it came down. They know that we'll find their base eventually but by destroying the probe droid

before it locates them they can keep their true strength hidden from us for longer. What's the range between our probe droid and the enemy?"

"Nine hundred metres and closing." Coroll said and Kain sighed.

"That's too close." he said.

"Too close? Too close for what?" Embrace asked.

"Orbital fire support." Coroll told her, "We could use our turbolasers to pick off those droids while they're out in the open like that but the blast wave would take out our own droid."

"The droid can't escape anyway." Kain added and he turned towards the crew pits again, "Weapons lock onto the enemy contacts and fire when ready." then turning back to the console he, Coroll and Embrace were stood at he added, "That's why we use droids for this sort of work. They're expendable."

The probe droid took evasive action as the pair of destroyer droids unfolded and engaged their deflector shields before opening fire. Firing its own light blaster cannon in return only proved that the probe droid's own firepower was insufficient against their shields and with a large number of battle droids blocking its retreat the probe droid prepared to initiate its self destruct. However, just before it could destroy itself the probe droid detected a massive energy spike from above and there was a clap of thunder as the first turbolaser blast from the orbiting *Sword of Justice* struck the ground where the blocking force of battle droids was located. Barely a second later there was another huge blast of energy as the star destroyer fire again. This time the intended targets were the destroyer droids and despite their deflector shields the two machines were vaporised by the massive energy blast. However, the probe droid was less than a hundred metres away from the destroyers at the moment that this blast hit the ground and it too was consumed in the massive explosion that resulted from the orbital strike.

10.

"Report." Kain said, looking at a screen that now showed two large pillars of smoke rising up from the surface of Myseron where the turbolaser strikes had landed.

"We've lost contact with the probe droid captain." Erranes reported.

"That's to be expected." Coroll commented.

"No signs of enemy activity either." Erranes added, "Targets destroyed captain."

"So now what Captain Kain?" Embrace asked, "As you've pointed out we still don't know where the pirates are."

"Now that we have a rough location we can focus our search in that area agent. We know the direction that the battle droid infantry approached from so we can use that as the centreline for our search pattern. We won't be using individual probe droids now though, from here on we move in force. We'll deploy a full company of stormtroopers plus scouts. One of our fighter squadrons is to enter the atmosphere and provide them with air cover. I doubt the pirates would have sent out those droids if they weren't willing to risk losing them so they must have more and I don't want to be caught outgunned."

"What the hell was that?" Tarrack exclaimed as he burst into the bridge where Felk was still sat at his jury-rigged console. Without warning the ship had been struck by powerful tremors and panicked shouts could be heard in the distance as other members of the gang tried to determine what was happening and if any of their number was injured.

"Turbolasers. That star destroyer just carried out an orbital strike." Felk told him.

"They did what? How could they have found us though? Didn't we stop that probe droid?" Tarrack asked.

"Yes, everything went to plan to begin with. Our battle droids blocked its advance towards us and then the destroyers moved in for the kill, but that's when the star destroyer opened fire. They took out all of the droids we sent even though they also destroyed their own probe droid in the process." Felk explained.

"Obviously they cared more about destroying our droids than they did in preserving their own. If they still don't have our position though then we still have time to get this ship working." Tarrack said, "Just in case though we should get some more droids online. How many do we have available?"

"The last I heard we have just over three hundred battle droids set to obey our commands but still inactive." Felk answered.

"Then let's get them all online before we've got stormtroopers breaking in. Then get the others to see if they can get some more of the heavier droids working too. We may need the extra firepower." Tarrack ordered before he exited the bridge again and returned to his work on the computer core.

Five Sentinel-class shuttles were prepared for launch aboard the *Sword of Justice*. Four of these each held a full platoon of stormtroopers while the fifth carried a squad of scout troopers with speeder bikes to perform reconnaissance for the infantry company as well as a command and support unit commanded by Lieutenant Krostas.

"Shuttle flight you are cleared to launch. The fighters will escort you all the way down." Erranes told the shuttles over their communication system and the five craft all exited the *Sword of Justice's* hangar. Flying towards the atmosphere of Myseron one of the nearby squadrons of TIE fighters surrounded them and matched their speed and heading.

The entire formation then flew into the planet's atmosphere on a heading that took them towards the area of ground that had been used as a landing field by the Gozanti-class cruiser and the shuttles all landed in the same area. As each shuttle deployed its access ramp the occupants rushed down and formed up in their respective units. As well as ranks of regular stormtroopers this included the fleet troopers and other officers of Krostas' command unit and a squad of scout troopers. Each of the scouts was mounted on a lightweight speeder bike. Stormtrooper units attached to the Imperial Army or major naval formations frequently had access to a variety of transports from lightweight open topped vehicles to much heavier armoured vehicles including AT-AT walkers. However, although the *Sword of Justice* had been equipped with armoured vehicles for its marine compliment during the Clone Wars these had not been replaced with more modern versions and the only transports available were the shuttles that carried the troops from the star destroyer to other the surface of a planet and apart from the scout troopers who had their speeder bikes, the rest of the ground troop compliment could only travel by foot when deployed.

"Take your squad and advance towards the target." Krostas told the leader of the scout squad, "Your orders are to locate the enemy but not to engage them. Just report their strength and positions and do your best to stay out of sight."

"And if the enemy detects us first?" the squad leader responded.

"Then withdraw, lead them back onto our position. The TIEs will be able to give you cover," Krostas answered and he glanced to where several heavy weapons were being unloaded from the shuttles to support the company, "and we'll make sure they get a warm welcome if they get as far as us."

"Yes lieutenant," the scout squad leader replied, nodding his head before he signalled to the rest of his squad and in unison the eight speeder bikes rapidly accelerated and sped off, causing Krostas to flinch as their repulsorlift fields triggered plumes of dust to fly up from the ground. Brushing himself down, Krostas then returned to the rest of his command section just as the five assault shuttles that had brought his force to the surface were rising back up into the sky and unfolding their wings into flight position.

"All ships airborne lieutenant," one of the pilots transmitted to Krostas' comlink.

"Very good. Maintain a visual fix on us but stay back at least five thousand metres. The fighters will give us all the air cover we need, your job is just to provide extraction if it comes to it. Krostas out," he responded as he walked up to his command section, "Are we ready to move out?" he asked.

"Yes sir," an armoured stormtrooper officer with a distinctive red pauldron to illustrate his rank responded, "Support weapons have been distributed and we await your command," he continued.

"Then let's go. The scouts are much faster than us but I'd rather not open up more of a gap between us and them than is necessary," Krostas told him.

"Yes sir," the armoured man responded and the company then began to march in the same direction that the scout troopers had ridden in on their speeder bikes.

On the bridge of the *Sword of Justice* the crew monitored the deployment of the ground force, observing the scout squad moving ahead of the main body of the force moving on foot.

"Well the scouts have reached the impact sites of our turbolaser strike," Coroll commented, "We know that the enemy have sensors that can detect them there."

"Comscan are we picking up any signals from the surface that don't match with our own force?" Kain called out without taking his eyes off the screen that he was looking at.

"No captain, we're not picking up any transmissions or active sensor pulses," a crewman responded from one of the crew pits.

"I'd like to say that that's because the pirates don't have more droids but somehow I doubt it," Kain commented and Coroll nodded.

"They had destroyer droids. Those are a serious piece of hardware, even today and I doubt that whatever store the pirates have got into only had two of them. If there is a Lucrehulk down there then we could be looking at facing hundreds of them," he said.

The crew of the *Sword of Justice* were not the only ones monitoring the steady advance of the force it had just landed. On the bridge of the ship the pirates were trying to reactivate Felk sat in front of his console and watched them come closer. After the destruction of the basic security force that they had reactivated, the pirates had rushed to reactivate as many more droids as they could but Felk knew that just throwing what they now had against this new Imperial force would only result in their destruction. He doubted that the commander of the orbiting star destroyer would be as willing to turn his guns on his own troops now that there were living beings down here rather than mere droids but there was still the issue of the squadron of TIE fighters and also the five armed Sentinel-class assault shuttles that were close at hand.

"Tarrack they're back," he called out, looking towards the hatch that led to the ship's computer core.

"How many?" Tarrack responded from inside the other room.

"A lot. More than a hundred. It looks like a stormtrooper company and they have air cover. There are scouts moving ahead of the main force," Felk told him.

"Hold on, I'll be right there," Tarrack said and a few moments later he returned to the bridge again and looked at the jury-rigged console, "Stang that's a lot of firepower," he said, "What have we got?"

"We can outnumber them but only just. The men have also been able to reactivate some of the heavier droids but if we just send them out there then those fighters will tear them to pieces," Felk told him.

"Then we're going to have to move more cautiously," Tarrack replied, "Deploy the droids to protect the entrances to the base and seal them. This place escaped detection by the Empire when they carried out their purge at the end of the war so maybe we can just stay hidden. If not then at the least we'll probably increase our chances of getting out of this in one piece by forcing those stormtroopers to come to us. Their air cover will be useless for starters. All we need to do is hold out long enough for me to get this ship's computer online, then we can blast our way out of here. That star destroyer isn't going to fire on us while its own troops are down here and our shields will hold long enough for us to make it out of the gravity well into hyperspace."

"You're sure about that? Because if this ship isn't ready to go by the time they reach the hangar then we've got nowhere else to retreat to," Felk commented and Tarrack smiled at him.

"Trust me, I know what I'm doing," he said.

"Where are they? Captain your men ought to have found the pirates by now." Embrance said as she grew more impatient waiting for the forces deployed to Myseron to report back that they had discovered the pirate stronghold.

"Be patient Agent Embrance." Kain responded, "Even narrowing down the search area based on the information we've collected so far it's still a lot of ground to cover. If it was going to be easy then we would have been able to pinpoint the pirates from orbit."

"Wherever their base is, it must be hidden from our sensors somehow." Coroll added, "The EM signature we detected may be a consequence of that."

"A signature that we are still reading and that our scouts are nearing the source of." Kain said, "Maybe you'll have your answer very soon Agent Embrance."

"Range to target now four hundred metres." the scout trooper at the front of the squad's formation reported as they decelerated. At full speed their bikes would rush past any stationary reading so fast that it would barely register even on the advanced optics included in their helmets and so they slowed down to investigate the energy signature more closely.

"It's coming from in there." a second scout trooper said when the squad came to a halt and he pointed towards a large cave opening nearby.

"An ominous dark cave? I've got a bad feeling about this." the squad leader said before he activated the comlink built into his speeder bike, "This is TB-nine-nine-four, we've reached the target location. The energy signature appears to be coming from inside a cave. We are proceeding inside on foot. I'll leave half my squad out here."

The squad leader then picked out half his men who promptly dismounted from their speeder bikes. Most of them drew the compact holdout blasters holstered in their boots but one of the troopers chosen instead unstrapped a larger repeating blaster from his speeder bike to provide the team with some much needed firepower if they came under attack.

The four scout troopers advanced towards the cave mouth in a line side-by-side with their weapons trained on it. As they got closer they saw that the cave went deep within the hillside that it was set into and even with the optics of their helmets the scout troopers could not see to the far end. Moving inside the scout troopers saw that there was a light source deeper within the cave and the squad leader signalled for them to continue towards this. The cave maintained its size as the scout troopers went deeper inside but it went deeper underground so that the entrance ceased to be visible behind them and it was soon after this happened that the source of the light coming from within the cave came into view.

"A ship." one of the scout troopers said as the team came to a halt and quickly dropped into crouching positions to make themselves smaller targets and the squad leader activated his comlink.

"This is TB-nine-nine-four, we've identified the source of the energy signature." he transmitted.

"What is it TB-nine-nine-four?" Krostas responded.

"It's a ship sir. A light transport. There's no sign of life so far but it's systems have been left active." the squad leader told him.

"Move in and secure the vessel." Krostas ordered.

"Yes sir. Moving in now." the squad leader replied and he waved his unit forwards. The transport ship's access ramp had been left wide open and the four scout troopers made their way towards this but as they moved closer a metal hatch set into the cave wall beyond the ship came into view and the squad leader held up his hand for his men to stop, "Lieutenant Krostas, we have something else here." he transmitted.

"The entrance to the pirate base." Embrance said, smiling as she looked at footage of the hatch from the bridge of the *Sword of Justice*.

"It looks that way, yes." Coroll said in agreement.

"What are your orders captain?" Krostas asked.

"You have to order an attack." Embrance said, "Storm the base now."

"I agree captain." Coroll added, "We know that there aren't any settlements in that area of Myseron. The longer we delay the more time the pirates will have to dig in."

"Yes I know that commander and since the way this hatch has been concealed indicates that whatever is behind it is something that someone wants kept hidden I agree that launching an assault is the right decision to make." Kain replied before he reached for the communication system, "Lieutenant Krostas you are to force your way through that hatch and secure whatever is on the other side. You may consider anyone encountered to be hostile until shown otherwise."

"Yes captain, we're moving in now." Krostas responded before he closed the channel.

"They're outside the hatch now." Felk said, "Are you any closer to getting that computer working?"

"Almost. Just a few more minutes. What about our droids?" Tarrack responded from the adjoining compartment.

"Deployed to defend the hatch and the hangar but unless you can get this ship working we don't have a way out. Our transport is in the cave on the other side of that hatch and those stormtroopers control that." Felk pointed out.

"I know. How many stormtroopers are in the cave?" Tarrack asked.

"Just one team of scouts right now but the main force is advancing. They'll be here within the hour." Felk answered.

"An hour? Don't worry, I'll have this working by then and we can be out of here." Tarrack reassured him.

"How can our sensors not detect anything? We've got the exact location of the hatch and we know that something must be on the other side." Embrance said.

"Whatever is down there is obviously shielded from detection. Our forces surrounded this world after the war and they didn't find anything there either." Kain pointed out.

"Hiding something underground is still fairly easy as long as you have access to the correct materials, which the Confederacy definitely did." Coroll added.

"Captain," Erranes said as she approached the console that the other three officers were gathered around and as all three turned towards her she continued, "we may not be able to determine exactly what is down there but there may be a way to at least determine the extent of the facility."

"How lieutenant?" Coroll said, frowning.

"A seismic scan commander. There has to be a void where the facility is so a shock wave will travel differently through it." Erranes told him.

"Seismic?" Embrance commented, "Lieutenant this part of Myseron is not prone to seismic activity. The nearest fault line must be a thousand miles away."

"That may be true agent," Kain said as a smile spread across his face, "but that doesn't mean that we can't make some shock waves ourselves. Nice big ones in fact." then he turned to Erranes again and added,

"Lieutenant I'm going to need a line to Moff Tollof."

"Yes captain." Erranes responded, nodding before she headed for the nearby communications console.

"What do you need to speak to the moff for?" Coroll asked.

"Because I'm not about to fire a proton torpedo at an Imperial world without permission." Kain replied.

11.

"A proton torpedo? Are you insane?" Moff Tollof exclaimed when the hologram of Kain told her of his plan to fire a torpedo at the surface of Myseron.

"No, I'm quite serious. I need to launch a proton torpedo at Myseron. It will have to be a ground burst as well." Kain said and Tollof glanced at the short statured man in a colonel's uniform standing beside her.

"Colonel Yal-Paratus?" she said.

"A ground burst means that the warhead will detonate in contact with the ground moff." he said.

"Yes I realise that, but what is the significance?" Tollof responded.

"It means that the blast will throw a significant amount of debris into the atmosphere, high enough for prevailing winds to carry it over a large area." Yal-Paratus explained, "It could cause significant changes to weather patterns in the affected areas."

"Would it get as far as the colony? Myseron is supposed to be an agricultural world after all." Tollof said.

"It's unlikely." Yal-Paratus said.

"Get Fleet Admiral Kellar in here. I want to hear what he has to say about this." Tollof said and Yal-Paratus nodded before activating the intercom.

"Please ask Fleet Admiral Kellar to report to Moff Tollof's office immediately." he said into it.

"I'm sorry about this moff, but you did tell me to report directly to you." Kain said while they waited for the fleet admiral to arrive.

"And I'm glad you did captain. I'd much rather hear this directly from you than via Line Captain Morco and Admiral Lorr first." Tollof replied before Fleet Admiral Kellar entered the room.

Kellar's build was the opposite of Colonel Yal-Paratus and he towered over both Moff Tollof and her assistant.

"You asked to speak to me moff?" he said and Tollof nodded, then pointed to the hologram of Kain.

"Captain Kain has a plan to fire a proton torpedo at Myseron." she said, "He thinks that it will help him locate the Separatist pirates that he's been hunting."

"A novel idea." Kellar replied before looking at Kain's hologram, "Explain captain." he said.

"The pirates have a base that is shielded from our sensors. Detonating a torpedo on the surface will create shockwaves that we can monitor from orbit and use to map the extents of the base." Kain explained.

"I take it that the torpedo will not be aimed at an inhabited area?" Kellar said and Kain nodded.

"No admiral. The colony is on the opposite side of the planet." he replied.

"Then I don't see a problem." Kellar said.

"The debris in the atmosphere won't affect the colony?" Tollof asked.

"Unlikely. Even if the winds does carry debris we'll have enough warning to do something about it." Kellar answered, "If there's the possibility that we have Separatist holdouts in the sector then we can't afford to be squeamish about dealing with them."

Tollof sighed and looked directly at Kain's hologram.

"Very well captain, you have permission to fire that torpedo." she said and Kain smiled.

"Thank you moff. *Sword of Justice* out." he said before he closed the channel and his hologram faded away.

"There you have it everyone." Kain said with a smile, "We have permission to carry out Lieutenant Erranes' plan."

"My plan?" Erranes replied, her eyes widening.

"It was your suggestion to use a seismic scan lieutenant." Coroll pointed out.

"I didn't think that we'd end up firing a torpedo though. I just thought that we'd get Lieutenant Ventern to rig up a repulsorlift pulse generator to create the shockwaves." Erranes said.

"It would take time to create something like that and it could only cover a limited area anyway. This way we can carry out a full sweep in one go." Kain responded, then he looked towards the crew pits and added, "Is our firing solution plotted?"

"Yes captain." the senior weapons officer responded, "We can fire on your command."

"Thank you. Warn Lieutenant Krostas and our pilots to expect incoming fire then you may fire when ready." Kain ordered

There was a short delay while a signal was sent to warn Lieutenant Krostas and the TIE squadron leaders about the imminent torpedo strike before the weapons officer gave the command to fire and the glowing light of a proton torpedo erupted from one of the *Sword of Justice's* ventral launch tubes and sped towards the planet below.

"We've got another launch from the star destroyer." Felk called out.

"More troops? Forget about it." Tarrack responded from the adjoining compartment.
"No, I don't think it's a shuttle. The profile is wrong." Felk said before his eyes widened, "Oh kriff!" he exclaimed.
"What's wrong?" Tarrack asked, emerging from the other compartment.
"It's a torpedo! They've just launched a kriffing torpedo!" Felk yelled.

"Stang!" Krostas hissed before he looked around, "Okay everyone listen up. The *Sword of Justice* is launching a proton torpedo. It'll hit about ten klicks from here so we need to take cover."
This announcement obviously shocked some of Krostas' command unit but all of the stormtroopers in the company accepted it as if it was nothing more than a regular artillery strike and individual unit leaders directed their men to take whatever cover was available. Being ten kilometres from the target point meant that they would be outside the lethal blast radius but it was still close enough that they would feel the impact as well as be in visual range of the explosion. For the stormtroopers being able to see the explosion was not a problem since their helmets would protect them from the flash but Krostas and the other open-helmeted troops needed to make sure that they were facing away from the explosion.
Above them the TIE fighters and assault shuttles that had been watching over the advancing infantry all turned and accelerated away to escape the area before the torpedo strike made flying conditions extremely dangerous.
There was a clap of thunder from overhead as the torpedo streaked across the sky before slamming into the ground and detonating, creating a huge fireball that rose up into the sky and a strong rush of wind that persisted for almost a minute. Only when this subsided did Krostas look up towards the centre of the blast and he saw that the horizon was now dominated by a massive mushroom cloud and the sky above was dark with clouds of smoke and debris.

The torpedo explosion sent a shockwave through the underground base as well as the ship it contained and Tarrack grasped the frame of the hatchway to steady himself as the ship shook.
"That didn't hit us." he said and Felk shook his head.
"No, it hit a few kilometres away from here. Too far to inflict any damage." he said and Tarrack frowned.
"You don't fire warning shots with torpedoes. What the hell are they playing at?" he replied.

"Impact on target captain. Detonation confirmed." the *Sword of Justice's* weapons officer announced.
"Have our troops on the surface reported?" Kain asked.
"Yes captain." a crewman answered, "They confirm no casualties from the blast and they are proceeding to the target. ETA between ten and fifteen minutes at their current rate."
"That's a relief." Erranes said to the other officers standing close by her "I'd hate to have killed our own men."
"Comscan, do you have the results of the seismic scan yet?" Coroll said.
"Not yet commander, the computer is still collating the data." a comscan officer responded.
"Send the results to this console." Kain told him and moments later one of the monitors on the console that the senior officers were looking at changed to show the results of the seismic scan. Initially this appeared as a random scattering of dots but as the computer processed the data, taking into account how the shockwave from the explosion had moved through the ground as measured by the terrain mapping sensors aboard the *Sword of Justice* a pattern began to form. This pattern placed the dots more densely where the ground was denser. At the other end of the spectrum though the least dense areas had far fewer dots and a large area rapidly formed where there were hardly any.
"Well there's our pirate base." Kain said.
"How big is that?" Embrance asked.
"About two kilometres long." Erranes told her.
"Big enough to fit the *Sword* inside." Coroll commented.
"Though not big enough for a Lucrehulk-class battleship so that's one good thing I suppose." Erranes added.
"No, but there's still enough room in there for millions of droids." Kain pointed out, "Our ground troops may have their work cut out for them."

Two other pirates entered the bridge and both Tarrack and Felk turned to face them.
"What's our status?" Tarrack asked.
"The doors themselves are undamaged and the motors circuits check out so we can open them whenever you're ready." one of the newcomers said.
"Of course that star destroyer will see them opening and they'll have a clear shot." the second newly arrived pilot added but Felk smiled.
"I don't think so." he said.
"Why not?" the other pirate responded, "Those doors are fifteen hundred metres long. How can they not see them opening?"

"Because they used a ground burst for their torpedo strike." Tarrack told both of the newcomers, "It's thrown enough debris into the air that their scans won't be able to see the ground. The first thing they'll know about is when we fire up the engines and they see the energy readings spike on their sensors."

"Assuming we can power up the engines. We need the computer for that, as well as the droid crew. There are less than thirty of us, nowhere near enough to run this ship without them." Felk pointed out.

"Don't panic. I've almost got it." Tarrack replied, "Just make sure that the droids we do have keep those stormtroopers off our backs a while longer."

Squads of stormtroopers positioned themselves in front of the hatch in the cave while some of the specialists that Krostas had brought with him rigged up a thermal charge that would blast through the metal in an instant. The hatchway was the size of a typical personnel hatch aboard a starship so it would have been a squeeze for two stormtroopers to pass through at once but in the absence of any other access points to the base this was the only way that the company could enter it so that they would have to enter it individually. Because this would make the stormtroopers extremely vulnerable as they came through the hatch Krostas organised his men to limit this vulnerability as much as possible. To begin with a grenade would be thrown through the hatchway as soon as it was blasted open to clear out any defenders immediately on the other side. Then a sustained burst from the tripod mounted E-web heavy repeating blaster that had been set up further back would be fired through the hatchway. Between them Krostas hoped that any defenders would be forced back away from the hatch long enough for at least a squad of stormtroopers to be able to make it through safely. Once inside the base this squad would then keep any defenders away from the hatch while reinforcements entered the base behind them. After that it would be a matter of spreading out and locating key areas of the base before securing them and moving on until the entire facility was under Imperial control. "Thermal charge set sir." a specialist told Krostas as they retreated from the hatch and Krostas nodded.

"Go." he called out.

The specialist who had just spoken to Krostas then triggered the charge and there was a brilliant flash of light as the thermal compound applied to the hatch ignited, burning through it in an instant. Then the moment that the hatchway came crashing down a stormtrooper from the squad just beside it pulled the pin from the grenade he had been holding and tossed it through the hole before taking cover. With the stormtrooper now out of their line of fire the E-web team opened fire, sending a stream of powerful energy blasts through the hole just before the grenade exploded.

In response to this there were a few blaster shots that came back through the destroyed hatchway, though these were randomly aimed just as the shots from the repeating blaster were. The difference was that the tripod mounted heavy weapon had a much greater rate of fire and the returned fire soon dropped off as either the shooters were hit or retreated.

"Cease fire and move in." Krostas ordered and the repeating blaster stopped firing.

The moment that the stream of energy blasts ceased the stormtrooper squad positioned close to the hatchway charged through it. The first stormtrooper through the hatchway fired his weapon on fully automatic as he leapt through the hole. At this point the corridor beyond the hatchway was empty though and the armoured marine stepped out of the way and dropped into a crouch just on the other side so that the next stormtrooper would be able to move past him easily.

"They're in!" Felk called out, "The point guards barely slowed them down."

"I'm almost there. Is the second wave ready?" Tarrack shouted back at him.

"Yes, I'm sending them in now." Felk replied.

12.

The first squad of stormtroopers to enter the base found only the broken remains of several B-1 battle droids in the corridor and the following squad advanced rapidly as far as the first junction before turning into a side corridor but it was here that they encountered the first serious resistance to the Imperial assault.

In unison all of the doors along this corridor, of which there were a dozen, slid open and the hulking forms of B-2 super battle droids stepped out into the corridor. Unlike the much lighter B-1 droids, these fighting machines had rapid firing blasters built directly into their arms rather than carrying a more conventional carbine in their hands and as they turned to face the invaders they raised their gun arms and opened fire. This volley of blaster bolts cut down the two closest stormtroopers before the rest of the squad was able to take cover around the corner.

"We're under fire by super battle droids," the squad leader reported while his men returned fire. Unlike B-1 droids the B-2 model's thickly armoured torsos were sufficient to offer some protection from blaster fire and it took repeated hits from the stormtroopers' blaster rifles to bring down even one. The squad's light repeating blaster would have been more effective against the droids but the stormtrooper that carried that heavier bulkier weapon had been one of the men hit by the droids' initial volley and it now lay on the floor of the corridor at the droids' feet, "Our position is not secure."

"Hold on sergeant," Krostas' voice responded, "Reinforcements are coming."

The stormtroopers continued to exchange fire with the advancing battle droids and another of the machines collapsed in a heap as one of its legs was blasted off. This was not enough to incapacitate the droid though and it rolled its body so that it still faced the stormtroopers and continued to fire, hitting another of the armoured marines in his shoulder. Luckily most of the energy of the hit was deflected by his armour but he still let out a cry of pain and fell back before being dragged clear of the corner so that another stormtrooper could take his place.

"That's it!" Tarrack exclaimed and the astromech droid beside him let out an excited series of chirps as the computer core suddenly lit up.

"Consoles are on line," Felk responded from the bridge and Tarrack rushed to join him.

"What's our status? Tell me that this thing is flyable," he said and Felk grinned.

"Fully functional," he replied, "The Separatists just shut this place down without disabling anything. We just need a crew and luckily they are in storage aboard. All I need to do is reactivate them." Felk added before he got to his feet and hurried to another console from where he could control all of the droids stored aboard the ship. This showed that they were all currently dormant and with a single button press he brought them all to life. Meanwhile Tarrack took out his comlink and broadcast to the rest of his men that they needed to get aboard before the ship took off.

Less than a minute later the door to the bridge slid open and a number of B-2 battle droids marched into the room.

"Is one of you the captain?" one of the droids asked, pausing to look at the two pirates.

"Yes, I am," Tarrack responded, "Now get this ship into the air. There's an Imperial – I mean a Republic ship in orbit and we need to get past it into hyperspace."

"Where do you want to go to captain?" the droid said.

"Just get us out of the system. We'll figure out where we need to be then," Tarrack told the machine.

"Roger, roger," the droid said before it walked to the console where Felk's instruments were set up, "Hey, who put all this here?" it added.

"Just get rid of it if it's in your way. We need to go," Tarrack ordered and the droid did exactly as it was told, pushing the monitors that made up the improvised console away while the other droids also took positions around the bridge.

"All systems on line captain," one of the droids reported, "Do you want to take off now?"

"Wait a moment," Tarrack replied as he activated his comlink again, "We're ready to go. Is everyone aboard?" he broadcast.

"Yes captain, we're all aboard and the hatches are sealed," the voice of one of the other pirates responded and Tarrack turned off the device again before looking at the nearby droid.

"Get us out of here," he said.

Opposed by a seemingly endless horde of battle droids, the advance through the underground base of the Imperial troops was slow but steady. The droids were decades out of date and tactics for dealing with each type were well known. Despite this progress though the stormtroopers had yet to reach any area of the base that appeared critical when they felt the base around them start to shake.

"Lieutenant Krostas, there's something going on here." one of the stormtrooper unit leaders reported to Krostas.

"Yes, we feel it too. Keep moving for now but be ready to withdraw if necessary." Krostas responded and the stormtrooper waved his men onwards.

The ceiling of the base hangar consisted of two vast doors that from the outside blended perfectly into the surrounding terrain. When originally constructed the doors had been designed to hold enough soil for vegetation to be planted on them and this had allowed the doors to remain hidden until now. The pirates had already opened the doors once to allow the Gozanti-class cruiser they had reactivated out but the relatively small vessel had only required a partial opening whereas now the doors had to be opened fully and given the size of the doors this attracted the attention of the TIE fighters still loitering several kilometres away.

"Sword of Justice this is Grey Leader, there's activity on the surface. It looks like the ground is opening up. I'd move in closer but atmospheric conditions are still hazardous." one of the squadron leaders reported and Kain turned towards the crew pits.

"Comscan can you get a reading?" he asked.

"No captain, the debris from the torpedo strike is blocking our surface scans." one of the crewmen responded.

"Captain they could be preparing to launch a weapon." Coroll pointed out and Kain nodded.

"Divert engine power to deflector shields." he ordered.

"If it's an ion cannon then we've no defence." Erranes commented.

"An ion cannon would be useless through the debris. If it's a weapon down there then it's either a turbolaser or a missile launcher of some kind." Kain pointed out before the comscan operator called out.

"Energy spike on the surface." he said.

"They're powering a weapon." Embrance said as Kain, Coroll and Erranes all looked at the sensor display themselves.

"No, that's too big for a weapon. Only a ship's engines could cause an energy spike like that." Coroll told her.

"A big ship." Erranes added.

"Looks like we're finally going to see what they had stashed down there." Coroll commented.

The ship that rose up out of the hidden hangar was approximately the same length as the Venator-class *Sword of Justice* but much narrower, with its three engine modules mounted on the even narrower length of hull that projected from the main body of the hull that vaguely resembled a beetle in shape. As soon as it was clear of the hangar the vessel began to ascend through the atmosphere, heading for the dense cloud of debris that blocked the orbiting *Sword of Justice's* view of it. However, even with the poor atmospheric conditions a vessel of this size could not hide from the TIE fighters several kilometres away and they were quick to alert the *Sword of Justice* to what was coming at them.

"*Sword of Justice* this is Grey Leader you have an incoming star destroyer. Recusant-class destroyer heading for you. I say again you have a Recusant-class destroyer heading for you." the squadron leader signalled.

"Stang!" Kain exclaimed.

"I thought that a Venator-class ship was more than a match for a Recusant-class." Embrance said.

"Oh it is. They'd need a three to one advantage in numbers to equal our firepower but that ship could still make a mess of us if it gets lucky." Kain replied.

As the Recusant-class light destroyer continued to gain altitude the layer of debris still in the atmosphere drew closer.

"We can't see what's on the other side of that cloud captain." one of the droid bridge crew said.

"We already know what's up there." Tarrack replied, "Is our jump to hyperspace plotted?"

"Yes captain. We can jump as soon as we're outside the gravity well." another droid replied.

"Then raise our shields and take us through." Tarrack ordered.

"Are you sure you know what you're doing?" Felk asked.

"Our only option is to make a run for it. As soon as we're into hyperspace we'll be safe but we need to move quickly if we're going to get past that star destroyer before it can overwhelm our shields." Tarrack explained and Felk sighed.

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

The interaction of the debris and high level of ionisation in the atmosphere with the destroyer's shields caused what appeared to be a lightning storm outside the viewports as the destroyer passed through it but there was never any danger of the shields collapsing. Instead the destroyer burst through this layer in a matter of seconds, emerging into the uppermost layer of the atmosphere where the stars were clearly visible ahead.

Along with the *Sword of Justice* itself.

"Republic vessel directly ahead of us captain." a droid reported.

"I see it. Full power to the engines, take us under their hull." Tarrack said, knowing that such a course would keep the ship out of the firing arc of most of the *Sword of Justice's* weapons.

"There she is!" Coroll exclaimed the moment that the Recusant-class destroyer emerged from the cloud.

"Weapons fire at will." Kain ordered and there were flashes of light from the *Sword of Justice's* forward turbolasers. However, there were only two of these and they were medium rated weapons that lacked the hitting power of the heavier broadside guns and the blasts did nothing more than produce further flashes as they impacted on the Recusant's shields.

"Use our torpedoes!" Embrace exclaimed.

"They'll be on us before we get a lock." Coroll pointed out.

"Captain their course will take them beneath us." Erranes said as she checked the pirate ship's exact heading.

"Where our main guns can't hit them." Kain said, "Helm adjust our heading. Try to get them above us." he ordered.

"They're turning captain." a droid announced as the *Sword of Justice* began to lower its prow.

"Then match their turn. They're trying to get us into the firing arc of their main guns." Tarrack commanded, "I shouldn't have to tell you to do that."

"I'm starting to see why the Confederacy lost the war." Felk commented.

"What was that about losing the war?" a nearby droid said.

"Never mind that now! Just fly this ship!" Tarrack snapped.

The droid pilots obeyed the command and they matched the *Sword of Justice's* manoeuvre. The Recusant-class destroyer was more manoeuvrable than a Venator-class star destroyer so this was easy even for droids to handle. However, before they could fly under the Imperial vessel there were two massive flashes of light beyond it as another pair of Venator-class ships dropped out of hyperspace.

"Captain the *Hammer of Reason* and *Blade of Truth* have just dropped out of hyperspace to stern." one of the bridge crew announced.

"The entire line's here now." Coroll added.

"Are they positioned to intercept the enemy?" Kain asked, looking at Erranes.

"Yes captain." she replied, quickly checking a nearby console, "They're right in the path of the enemy vessel and turning to bring weapons to bear."

"Evasive action!" Tarrack yelled when he saw the two newly arrived Imperial ships right in their path.

"But captain-" one of the pilots began.

"Just turn!" Tarrack interrupted.

"Yes captain." the droid said as the Recusant-class ship started to turn sharply away from these two new ships.

However, while this turn took the pirate vessel out of the line of fire for the *Hammer of Reason* and *Blade of Truth* it took them past the *Sword of Justice's* main guns at point blank range.

"Captain the enemy is turning. Coming into our broadside firing arc to port." a crewman called out.

"Open fire!" Kain snapped and the four heavy batteries mounted beside the *Sword of Justice's* port control tower all opened fire together right as the Recusant-class destroyer flew past them and the energy blasts all slammed into the pirate vessel's shields.

At point blank range even one of the twin heavy turbolasers carried by a Venator-class star destroyer was capable of penetrating the shields of the lighter Recusant-class and the *Sword of Justice* had just fired four of them together. Impacting at various points along the ship's length Each pair of shots punched through the pirates' shields before striking the hull and there were four large explosions all along its length and the ship rocked violently.

"We're hit!" a droid exclaimed as alarms sounded throughout the pirate destroyer.

"Can we still make it into hyperspace?" Tarrack asked.

"Negative captain. Engines are down. Weapons are down and our shields are collapsing." another droid answered.

"What the kriff do we do now?" Felk said as he and Tarrack looked at one another.

"I think we have to-" Tarrack begun before another blast from a turbolaser fired by the *Sword of Justice* struck the bridge and it was consumed by fire.

Kain and the other senior officers watched as what was left of the Recusant-class light destroyer burned in space.

"Captain, Line Captain Morco wants to speak with you. Captain Kyung as well." a communications crewman said and Kain nodded.

"Put them through." he said and the holograms of Kain's immediate superior as well as the commanding officer of the Blade of Truth appeared in front of him.

"We came as soon as sector command relayed the results of your scans." Morco said, "Though it looks like you had everything under control anyway."

Kain smiled.

"Thanks to your assistance sir." he responded.

"What about the enemy forces on the surface?" Kyung asked.

"My men are still securing the enemy base though I will probably send more men down to be sure. There could still be a lot of battle droids down there. I suspect that everyone who was giving them orders was aboard that destroyer though. They were clearly trying to escape and if you hadn't appeared right where you did then I think they may have done." Kain replied.

"Well good work anyway captain." Morco said, "We'll send troops to the surface as well to help mop up the remaining droids but I think that we can tell the moff that the pirate problem in the Myseron system has been dealt with."

"So do you think that there are any more ships out there with droid crews that the pirates were controlling?" Erranes asked Kain as the pair of them walked towards their quarters following the ends of their shifts.

"I doubt it. If the reports we got from the surface are accurate the Gozanti-class cruiser was the only support ship removed from the base, all the others were still down there and there was only space for one light destroyer." Kain replied, "I think we've seen the last of this particular group. Though I'm sure that sector authorities will be taking a closer interest in Myseron just in case there are any more hidden caches of battle droids and warships."

"Yes who knows what else was buried there. It's not exactly treasure though is it?" Erranes commented before coming to a stop outside the door to her quarters, "Well I'll see you tomorrow captain. Goodnight."

"Goodnight lieutenant." Kain said before Erranes entered her quarters.

Once the door was shut he did not continue towards his own quarters though. Instead he turned and headed in a different direction making his way towards a turbolift. Here he checked that there was no-one watching before he used one of his code cylinders to unlock the door and went inside. The turbolift car took Kain to his destination in mere seconds and he stepped out into a room that was an exact duplicate of the bridge that he had just left. However, this one was devoid of crew and all of the consoles were inactive.

Calmly he walked towards the viewports at the front of the bridge and looked out into space before folding his arms.

"An entire army of droids and a warship just buried under Myseron for decades." he said out loud, "If there are more of them then down there then I'm sure that there are people who will find that very interesting."