

STAR WARS TREASON

04: THE INFILTRATOR

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A ROUTINE PATROL OF A REMOTE REGION OF THE SECTOR TAKES A TWIST WHEN A MYSTERIOUS VESSEL IS DETECTED BUT IS ABLE TO FLEE BEFORE BEING CONFRONTED. NOW THE CREW OF THE SWORD OF JUSTICE JOIN THE HUNT FOR THIS SHIP THAT IS SOMEHOW ABLE TO STAY ONE STEP AHEAD OF ANY SHIP LOOKING FOR IT...

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

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1.

Captain Jarren Kain, commanding officer of the Venator-class star destroyer *Sword of Justice* stood looking out of the forward viewport of one of the kilometre-long ship's bridges. When the vessel had first been commissioned during the Clone Wars it had been given two such chambers so that the command and control operations of the hundreds of attack craft it was designed to carry could be carried out separately from the operation of the ship itself. However, the Galactic Empire did not place the same emphasis on starfighter operations as the Republic had done and now the *Sword of Justice's* hangars stood largely empty with only two active fighter squadrons as well as a handful of shuttles. There were also a number of old Republic vintage starfighters in the hangar that were no longer serviceable but had yet to be disposed of. With so few attack craft to direct the command and control function for them could now be carried out from the same bridge as was used for the ship's general operations and as a result this second bridge had been deactivated, most of its consoles now dark and there were no other members of the ship's crew present with Kain.

The *Sword of Justice* was currently in interstellar space, several light years away from the nearest settled system in the sector, deployed to watch for any illicit shipping activity beyond the established trade routes so all that was visible were countless stars set against the blackness of space. This changed though when there was a flash of light from ahead of the star destroyer and a second vessel appeared, too far away for Kain to be able to identify its class with only his eyes but close enough that he was able to see it unaided.

"We weren't supposed to be expecting company." Kain said, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

Just then his comlink sounded and he took the device from his pocket before lifting it up to his face.

"Kain." he said into it simply.

"Captain where are you?" the voice of his first officer, Commander Adas Coroll asked, "We tried your quarters and you weren't there."

"No, I went for a walk. This is a big ship commander and it helps me relax. Plus I get to see some of the less well trodden parts of the ship that maintenance crews may skip if they think they won't get caught." Kain replied.

"Well I'm sorry to disturb you so soon after your shift finished captain but we have company." Coroll told him.

"Company?" Kain commented without bringing up the ship he could see outside.

"Yes captain. The *Hammer of Reason* just dropped out of hyperspace. Apparently Line Captain Morco wants to speak to you. He's requested permission to come aboard." Coroll said and Kain's eyes widened for a moment, The *Hammer of Reason* was the command ship for the attack line that the *Sword of Justice* was part of and was another old Venator-class star destroyer and Line Captain Morco was Kain's superior. Requesting permission to come aboard was merely a courtesy, as the commanding officer of the line Morco was entitled to board either of the other Venator-class vessels under him whenever he pleased.

"Tell the *Hammer of Reason* that we will be expecting the line captain at his earliest convenience commander. Then get Lieutenant Commander Erranes and Lieutenant Krostas to meet me in the hangar with an honour guard. Kain out." Kain replied before he turned off his comlink and turned away from the viewport, looking back along the length of the disused bridge, "I have to go." he said and then he walked away.

Since Kain was still wearing his full uniform he made his way straight to the *Sword of Justice's* hangar where he was soon joined by the ship's navigator and his adjutant Lieutenant Commander Erranes.

"Captain. Do you know why the line captain wants to see us in person rather than just use the com?" she asked.

"Sorry commander but your guess is as good as mine." Kain responded before the door to the storage hangar assigned for visiting craft opened again and the two officers present turned to see a third officer enter. Unlike the green uniforms that they wore though this man wore one that was solid black and behind him followed two squads of troops. One of these was made up of stormtroopers from the ship's marine contingent while the others were black uniformed fleet troopers, "Ah Lieutenant Krostas." Kain said to the officer.

"Captain. I have the honour guard you requested." he replied as the squads of soldiers formed two lines ahead of the officers and looking directly at one another while the officers positioned themselves in a line looking along the honour guard. Kain stood in the centre with Erranes to his right and Krostas to his left. It was then that a magnetic shield activated across the entrance that separated the storage hangar from the main launching bay itself. This bay ran for well over half the length of the *Sword of Justice* and the individual storage hangars were located along either side of it.

"Here we go. Look sharp." Kain said as the massive doors above the launch bay opened to reveal just space beyond them.

Before too long a small shuttle descended over the *Sword of Justice* and entered the hangar. Rather than the Lambda-class shuttle typically used for long range personnel transit this was a smaller TIE shuttle designed for short ranged transit. Only slightly larger than a TIE bomber this easily fit within the confines of the storage hangar and set down on the edges of its wings so that the docking port at the front of its passenger pod was aligned between the two rows of soldiers in the honour guard that had been assembled.

As soon as the TIE shuttle's engines had shut down the docking port opened to reveal Line Captain Morco and Kain, Erranes and Krostas all snapped to attention before he disembarked. The line captain then walked between the lines of soldiers and came to a halt in front of Kain.

"Captain." he said.

"Welcome aboard the *Sword of Justice* line captain. I admit that this visit is something of a surprise." Kain replied and Morco smiled at him.

"Thank you captain." he said, "I have a change to your orders that I felt needed delivering in person."

"In person?" Erranes commented.

"Yes commander, in person. As I'll explain I don't think that this can be trusted to any electronic means of communication." Morco told her.

"Now you have aroused my curiosity sir. If you'd like to come with me then we can talk about this on the bridge." Kain said and Morco nodded.

"Of course captain. Lead the way." he replied.

Making their way to the *Sword of Justice's* bridge Kain and Erranes took Morco to the main control console at the rear of the compartment and Kain waved Coroll over to them.

"Yes captain?" Coroll asked.

"Line Captain Morco has updated orders for us." Kain told him and he frowned.

"Orders that couldn't be transmitted?" he said.

"That's what I thought too." Erranes added.

"I have more of the details here." Morco said and he held up a memory stick that he then inserted into the console. The console then projected a hologram of the cluster of star systems that their attack line had been deployed to patrol, "This is the region that our two ships and the *Blade of Truth* have been ordered to patrol. When we first arrived I discussed what the previous line that had this duty found and I was told that there had been a few unexplained contacts but nothing specific. Since then the *Hammer of Reason* has also detected signs of activity out here. Our probe droids have detected the energy pulses of something large entering hyperspace before it could be positively identified. Other than that the only contact we've had was the discovery of a shuttle adrift. It was totally powered down though and we can't positively link it to the ship that our probes picked up."

"What type of shuttle was it?" Kain asked.

"It was an old H-two that was registered to the Confederacy. It was unmanned and largely shut down so we brought it aboard. There's no way that a ship like that could have got where it was under its own power so our suspicion is that it was abandoned by the other ship before it jumped to hyperspace." Morco answered.

"Why just dump a shuttle? Especially an expensive model like an H-two." Erranes commented.

"Perhaps they were worried that their mothership had been detected by the probe droid and thought that they could slip into hyperspace unnoticed while leaving the shuttle behind in the hope that it would be assumed to be the ship that had been detected." Coroll suggested.

"Yes, that's the assumption that we've been working under commander." Morco said, nodding his head, "The line captain who was here before said that his ships also encountered shuttles left adrift that looked like they were decoys."

"So there's someone out there with a big ship that doesn't want us getting a good look at them and is willing to throw away shuttles to try and stay hidden." Kain said before he turned to Morco, "So what are our new orders line captain?" he asked.

"I want our entire line to move through the cluster, scanning for activity in hyperspace and deploying probe droids as they go. If there is anything out here then I want to drive towards this part of the cluster here before we rendezvous in the Breten system." Morco said and he pointed to part of the hologram, "Admiral Lorr has the *Harbinger* near there now along with our squadron's pursuit line to watch for gun runners trying to smuggle weapons to Ortho that could further destabilise the situation there. If we push them far enough then they'll run right into the admiral. I've already sent a courier to him to explain the plan."

"Avoiding direct communications again?" Kain commented, "Why is that?"

"I think that our target, whatever it may be has excellent electronic warfare capability. Obviously it was able to detect our probe droids and I think that it may be using this capability to stay ahead of our capital ships. It may be monitoring communications and hyperspace jumps remotely. That's why we haven't been able to get a good look at it." Morco explained.

"Excuse me sir, but listening in on communications in another system is incredibly difficult. Our best listening posts can barely manage that." Erranes pointed out.

"I am aware of the limitations of our technology lieutenant commander." Morco said sternly, "Nevertheless, this ship and its occupants seem to have an uncanny knack of evading us."

"There are other methods of predicting an enemy's movements." Kain said.

"Do you really want to go there Captain Kain? Especially without a shred of evidence to back it up." Morco said.

"No sir. I just didn't want to-" Kain began.

"Well for now we will proceed on the basis that there is a technological explanation for why we haven't been able to locate and identify this ship. Nothing more. Now you have your orders so I'll be returning to the *Hammer of Reason*. I'll transfer all of the available data to your computer." Morco interrupted.

"Of course sir. I'll escort you back to your shuttle." Kain replied and after copying a number of files to the *Sword of Justice's* computer Morco removed his memory stick from the console before the two men left the bridge.

"Commander Coroll." Erranes said when they were gone.

"Yes Erranes?" Coroll asked.

"Do you know what the captain meant by other means to predict where an enemy would be?" Erranes replied and Coroll smiled.

"I think so, yes." he said.

"Well what was it?" Erranes added.

"The Force." Coroll said, "During the Clone Wars the Jedi would sometimes claim to be able to divine the intentions of the Separatists. The captain believes that they could."

"And do you?" Erranes said.

"If they could then why couldn't they win the Clone Wars and why didn't they realise that their attempted overthrow of the Galactic Senate would fail?" Coroll responded, "Trust me Maye, the Jedi weren't all they were cracked up to be."

2.

Kain watched Morco's shuttle leave the *Sword of Justice's* hangar and waited for the hangar doors to close before he took out his comlink and activated it to contact the bridge.

"This is Kain." he said.

"Yes captain?" Erranes' voice responded.

"Commander I want you to plot a series of jumps that will take us to the Vreten system. We'll deploy a single probe droid with each jump to scout one system ahead." Kain ordered.

"Yes captain. I thought you'd be wanting that so I've already started work on a route." Erranes said and Kain smiled.

"Excellent work as always commander. I'm going to grab a couple of hours of sleep and I'd like the route prepared Kain out." Kain said before he shut off the comlink again and returned it to his pocket.

As he had said he would, Kain returned to his quarters after leaving the hangar to get some sleep before the *Sword of Justice* was required to begin its sweep of the cluster. However, he had not been asleep long when he was woken by the sound of someone at his door.

"Yes?" he called out as he sat up.

"Captain it's Agent Embrance. I'd like a quick word with you." a woman's voice said from the corridor outside and Kain sighed. Embrance was an ISB agent assigned to the *Sword of Justice* and although her department had no authority over military personnel she could still make life difficult for Kain if she wanted to. Ordinarily Kain would simply have treated her with professional courtesy while limiting contact with her as much as he could but after witnessing some of the extreme measures that she was willing to go to in carrying out her work, Kain had developed a strong dislike of the woman and wanted nothing to do with her at all. Unfortunately she and Coroll were romantically involved with one another so freezing her out of command decisions was almost impossible.

"Hold on agent." he said as he got up and grabbed his trousers, pulling them on before he went to the door and opened it, "Come on in." he said.

"I'm not disturbing you am I captain?" Embrance asked as she entered.

"Kind of, yes. I was just getting some sleep before we have to begin our next assignment out here." Kain said.

"Then I'll try not to keep you too long captain." Embrance said.

"Just get on with it agent." Kain said.

"I was just speaking with Adas – I mean Commander Coroll." Embrance said.

"I know what my first officer is called Agent Embrance. Please continue." Kain interrupted.

"The commander told me that you raised a point with Line Captain Morco about the target of your new assignment potentially tracking us through the Force. I was wondering how likely you think that might be." Embrance said and Kain smiled, realising what her motive was for asking about this.

"Ah of course." he said, "A rogue jedi would come under the jurisdiction of the Imperial Security Bureau wouldn't it? And I'm sure that your superiors would be very pleased if you were able to bring in a jedi's head wouldn't they?"

Embrance smiled back at Kain.

"Exposing a jedi would look good on my record, yes captain." she said, "Of course even if that weren't the case I'd still want to do everything I could to bring a jedi to justice. As long as there is the potential for even a single jedi to still be alive there is a danger that they could act as the focal point for insurrection against the lawful rule of the Emperor. At least two members of the jedi's high council remain unaccounted for."

"Well I'm sorry to disappoint you agent but I have no proof at all that there is a jedi involved. I haven't seen any jedi since their order was brought down in the great purge at the end of the Clone Wars. The last jedi that I saw had just been gunned down by the clone troops on the bridge of the ship I was serving on as a navigator back then. It happened right in front of me in fact. One moment we were discussing with the captain how we'd exit hyperspace close to our target so that they wouldn't have the chance to take any defensive action and the next it was the jedi who was struck down without the chance to defend himself when a squad of clones stormed the bridge and shot him." Kain responded, "I heard later about how there had been some grand conspiracy to overthrow the Republic and how several members of the jedi high council had tried to assassinate the Supreme Chancellor as he was back then."

"So why did you suggest the possibility that someone could be using the Force to Line Captain Morco?" Embrance said.

"Because Lieutenant Erranes was correct when she pointed out that the electronic warfare capability that he was crediting this mystery ship gives it superior capability to pretty much all of our own ships. I doubt if even

our dedicated EW cruisers could match it. Given that such technology seemed unlikely to be in the hands of outlaws I brought up something else that was just as unlikely." Kain replied.

"A surviving jedi?" Embrance said.

"Exactly. Consider this Agent Embrance, if you had the entire Imperial military as well as every law enforcement agency in the known galaxy on your trail would you court attention by riding around in a gigantic starship or would you go to ground somewhere that no-one is ever likely to want to go to? Say the middle of a desert or a swamp?" Kain said.

"I'd run away and hide captain." Embrance said.

"Exactly. Now if you don't mind I'd like to get another couple of hours sleep before I go back to the bridge."

Kain said, opening the door to his quarters for Embrance.

"Of course captain." she said before leaving and Kain closed the door behind her.

Rather than go straight back to bed Kain first made his way to the drawers that held some of his personal belongings and opened the second one down. Inside this drawer were numerous items of civilian clothing he wore when off the ship but these were not what he was interested in. Instead he inserted his hand into the drawer and reached under the clothing to remove a battered metal box and he opened this to look inside at the object it contained. A cylinder about thirty centimetres long the weapon still possessed the crystal for focusing the blade at one end and there were several small spots of blood on the grip that ran for most of its length.

"Don't think I've forgotten you my old friend." he said before he put the box away again, hiding it beneath his clothes and then going back to bed.

Returning to the bridge when he was rested Kain found Erranes on watch.

"Commander, what's our status?" Kain asked.

"I've programmed the series of jumps you requested into the navigation computer captain." Erranes told him before she indicated the main console towards the rear of the bridge, "I can show you them here."

"Very good." Kain replied and they both made their way to the console and Erranes activated a hologram similar to the one that Line Captain Morco had called up earlier. Now though several of the star systems within the cluster were highlighted.

"This route will take us from here to the Breten system captain. Each jump had to be a little under twice the maximum range of our sensors so there are several points that will land us in interstellar space." Erranes explained, "I've also studied the data that Line Captain Morco left about the encounters with the target ship and the shuttles so far by his ship and the previous patrols in the cluster."

"And did you find anything interesting commander?" Kain said.

"Well so far a total of four of our ships have picked something up in the cluster and each of them subsequently encountered a drifting shuttle. All hyperspace capable themselves and all unmanned. Two of them were old enough that they were registered with the Bureau of Ships and Services under the Republic and both became part of the Confederate fleet. The other two were newer and never registered with BoSS." Erranes said.

"Really? BoSS let someone get away with that?" Kain commented and Erranes nodded.

"It looks that way, yes captain. We know that some of their more secret vessels weren't registered to keep them from being identified by the Republic until they were seen in combat and the auxiliary craft they carried were often assembled at the same shipyards that BoSS had no access to so that the existence of the larger vessels wouldn't be determined from their registries. Of course some of the unregistered shuttles may have ended up on other, less clandestine ships."

"So all signs point towards a Confederate ship that survived the war and the droid shutdown signal that could be a mundane vessel that somehow ended up with shuttles meant for a top secret project or could be a super weapon that no-one has seen before." Kain said and Erranes smiled nervously.

"That just about sums it up, yes captain." she said, "I really don't get what they hope to achieve by ejecting these shuttles though. Even the limited data that has been collected already proves that the target ship must mass several million tonnes. There's just no way that we'd mistake a shuttle for it."

"Maybe not lieutenant commander, but the Empire has invested a considerable sum of time and money in training us to be the most effective military force that the galaxy has ever seen. The beings that we're hunting may not be quite so professional." Kain said, "Now what about our probe droids?"

"We have more than enough probe droids in our stores to be able to send one ahead of us each time we jump from here to Breten and be able to afford to lose them all." Erranes answered and Kain hesitated.

"That sounds expensive lieutenant commander. I know those things are supposed to be considered expendable but I'd like to recover them and their hyperspace pods if we can." Kain said, "The droids should be programmed to return to their pods and signal for pickup when we arrive after them. If we do that could we handle sending them out in groups of three? One to about where we're going to jump in and the others a few light hours out?"

"I'd need to check that with Lieutenant Ventern sir. The engineering department will have to overhaul the hyperspace pods before we can reuse them." Erranes pointed out, "On the basis of sending out three probe droids ahead of each jump we can get about forty percent of the way through the cluster before we ran out of fresh droids though so that should give our engineers the chance to get the first ones ready for redeployment. Of course if we're going to recover all three droids rapidly then we're going to have to run our hyperdrive equipped shuttles pretty much continuously. Two Kappa-class shuttles making two micro jumps each time we jump is going to put a lot of pressure on our engineering teams at the same time as they are trying to turn around our probe droids."

Kain considered this for a moment before he nodded.

"Okay. We'll start by running your route with three probe droids operating in advance of each jump. Liaise with Lieutenant Ventern to see whether his team are able to keep pace. If not then we'll reassess our strategy. Now what about Commander Coroll?" he said.

"The commander's shift ended so he went to get some rest captain." Erranes said.

"I get that." Kain commented, "Why don't you go and take a break too? Put in a call to your parents on Kerast. This could well delay our return home so you may want to speak with them and your son before we get too busy for anyone to make personal calls." then he smiled, "Unless they come from the sector moff of course." he added, referring to his own relationship with Moff Erian Tollof, the sector's regional governor.

"Yes, I thought your relationship with her might at least keep us closer to home instead of sending us out here to the edge of settled space captain." Erranes replied.

"She can't be too obvious with her favours Maye. I'd take an entire tour of border patrols after she intervened to deal with my ex-wife's attempt to take me for everything I have. Now go and call your family. I can handle things here just fine." Kain said.

"Yes sir." Erranes replied before she hurried from the bridge.

"Engineering ready captain." Lieutenant Ventern, the *Sword of Justice's* chief engineer reported when the star destroyer was prepared to begin its journey along the length of the star cluster. Kain had waited to begin the series of jumps until both Coroll and Erranes were on duty again and he stood at the front of the bridge with his first officer while Erranes monitored operations in one of the crew pits behind them. From here the two men could see the two large hangar doors stretching out ahead of the bridge, currently open to reveal the hangar itself.

"Thank you lieutenant." Kain replied, "Lieutenant Commander Erranes are our probe droids ready?"

"Yes captain. Hangar reports that droid hyperspace pods one through three are ready for deployment." Erranes said from within the crew pit.

"Very good lieutenant commander. Deploy the probe droids." Kain ordered.

"Aye captain. Deploying probe droids now." Erranes said and in rapid succession three small objects accelerated out of the *Sword of Justice's* hangar before vanishing in flashes of light as they entered hyperspace, "Hyperspace entry confirmed captain. ETA in target system seven minutes." she added as she checked the sensor readouts in front of her, confirming that the exit vector of the hyperspace pods matched the vector required to reach the first star system along the route plotted through the cluster.

"Are we ready to jump?" Coroll asked.

"Yes commander. Jump co-ordinates are programmed." Erranes answered.

Although Venator-class star destroyers were known for their fast hyperdrives Kain knew that the hyperspace pods carrying the probe droids ahead of them were faster still and it would take twice as long for the *Sword of Justice* to make each jump than it would take for the probe droids.

"Helm engage hyperdrive." he ordered and moments later the star field outside the bridge viewports blurred into the light of hyperspace.

3.

The star system that the *Sword of Justice* dropped out of hyperspace into was largely empty. The star at the heart of it was small and relatively cool, emitting very little light. Combined with the handful of objects orbiting it being far away meant that there were no habitable planets and the system was devoid of life. However, as soon as the star destroyer arrived in the system it began to detect the transmissions from the three probe droids that had been sent on ahead.

"Receiving probe droid telemetry captain." Erranes announced.

"One of them should be right here." Coroll commented as he looked through the viewport ahead of him to see if he could spot the probe droid or the pod that had carried it through hyperspace.

"Well lieutenant commander?" Kain added, looking down into the crew pit where Erranes stood and she nodded in reply.

"Yes captain. Droid one is three thousand kilometres off our port bow. Two and three are each approximately four light minutes either side of us." she told him.

"Are there any other contacts?" Kain asked.

"No captain. No energy signatures anywhere in the system other than this ship and our probes." Erranes answered.

"Well I suppose it was a bit much to hope for that we'd stumble across the target on our first try." Coroll commented and Kain smiled.

"We'll just consider this a practice run." he said before walking to a nearby intercom panel and activated it, "Bridge to engineering. Lieutenant Ventern are you there?" he said into it.

"Ventern here captain." The chief engineer's voice responded.

"How are our engines looking lieutenant?" Kain said.

"Functioning as expected captain, no unexpected power spikes. We can jump again at any time." Ventern said.

"Very good lieutenant. We'll be recovering our probes first so expect them to be sent down to you for servicing. Bridge out." Kain told him before shutting off the intercom and looking back to the crew pits, "Okay everyone, let's get our droids back. Navigation start plotting the next jump."

"Captain the next batch of probe droids is ready to launch. Do you want to deploy them now?" Erranes asked.

"No, not yet commander." Kain responded, "If the target ship is in the next system then I don't want to give them any more warning than necessary. We'll wait to launch the probes until we're ready to go as well. The only advance notice anyone will have of our arrival will be the difference in travel time between us and our probes."

"Yes captain." Erranes replied.

While the nearby probe droid and its accompanying hyperspace pod were being brought back aboard the *Sword of Justice* a pair of Kappa-class shuttles were launched from the star destroyer's side hangars. Each of these flew a short distance from the kilometre-long vessel before jumping into hyperspace, carrying out micro jumps that saw them return to real space almost immediately just a few light minutes away from their starting point and positioned close enough to the locations of the other two probe droids for the crews to be able to begin recovering them and their hyperspace pods. Only once both of these shuttles and all of the probe droids were back aboard the *Sword of Justice* were the next trio of probe droids launched, vanishing into hyperspace almost immediately and followed a few moments later by the star destroyer itself.

The next point in the route through the cluster that Erranes had plotted was in interstellar space, a waypoint between systems from where the *Sword of Justice* and its probe droids could take sensor readings of the surrounding area before repeating the process of recovering these probe droids, launching another three into hyperspace and then immediately following them with the star destroyer.

This process was repeated twice more, taking the *Sword of Justice* into two more star systems devoid of any signs of civilisation. However, when the ship exited hyperspace again after that there was an alert from one of the probe droids still several light minutes distant.

"Captain we have a contact." Erranes said.

"The target? She's still in the system?" Kain responded.

"I don't think so captain but there is definitely another ship here with us." Erranes told him.

"A scout for the target perhaps?" Coroll suggested.

"Possibly." Kain said, "Lieutenant Commander Erranes, what can you tell me about this other ship?"

Erranes looked at the screen she was standing close by while the crewman sat by it filtered out the data being sent by the probe droid regarding the mystery vessel.

"It looks like the probe droid has built up a full profile on the ship sir. It doesn't appear to know that we're here yet. Or our probes." she said.

"A full profile? Then let's take a look at it." Kain ordered and he and Coroll both made their way to a console towards the back of the bridge that had a large screen mounted above it where Erranes joined them just as the screen changed to show a diagram of a spacecraft shown from the front, top and side along with a list of key physical details.

"A mining ship." Coroll said and Kain nodded.

"What's her location Erranes?" he said.

"In a low orbit around one of the system's gas giants captain. A very low orbit in fact, barely outside the atmosphere. Sensor scans indicate that she's using her repulsorlifts to maintain position." Erranes answered.

"So not exactly hiding then." Kain commented.

"No captain." Erranes replied with a smile.

"Gas miners?" Coroll said and Kain nodded.

"That's my assessment, yes. Of course just to be sure I think that we should check them out more closely. Tell Lieutenant Krostas to prepare a boarding party. Just a single squad will do." he said.

"Do you want me to accompany them captain?" Coroll said and Kain thought about this for a moment.

"Yes, I doubt there'll be much trouble but having a command presence will be useful. Just find out what they're doing all the way out here and whether they've seen anything odd." he said, "Erranes we'll need a micro jump to get us closer to them. As close to the gravity well as possible. Then we'll launch our assault shuttle and a pair of TIEs as escort just in case the crew of that ship decide to try something stupid like running away."

"And if they do try to get away captain?" Coroll asked.

"A few warning shots from the fighters ought to give them something to think about. If not then we'll just have to block their escape with the *Sword* and get them in a tractor beam." Kain answered, "Erranes can you plot us the jump. I'd like to have been above them but I don't see how we can do that in a single jump so just get us in the best position to manoeuvre over them after we drop back out of hyperspace."

"What about Agent Embrace?" Coroll said and Kain frowned for a moment.

"What about her?" he said.

"Well that is a civilian ship captain." Coroll pointed out, "So technically the Imperial Security Bureau has jurisdiction over anyone aboard."

"Very well, if she wants to join you then she can but make sure she knows that we have a specific mission and I've no intention of wasting any time on dealing with any minor infractions that these beings may have committed." Kain told him.

Krostas already had his boarding party consisting of a single squad of stormtrooper marines aboard a Kappa-class shuttle in the *Sword of Justice's* starboard hangar when the star destroyer came out of hyperspace as close to the gas giant as its mass shadow would allow.

"We're clear to launch sir." the shuttle pilot told Coroll who was sat beside him in the cockpit when the hangar door slid open ahead of them and the *Sword of Justice's* first officer nodded.

"Okay let's go." he replied.

The pilot pulled back on the flight controls and the shuttle rose up off the deck before flying forward through the magnetic field that held the atmosphere in the hangar and once in space the shuttle's wings unfolded as it turned towards the mining ship. Behind the shuttle the *Sword of Justice* moved around the planet, maintaining a constant distance from the gas giant until it was positioned directly above the civilian mining ship. From here the star destroyer was perfectly placed to intercept the mining ship if it tried to flee, no matter what direction its crew tried to go in. at the same time a pair of TIE fighters emerged from the ship's main hangar before rolling to head towards the mining ship as well, passing by the assault shuttle so that they could act as a screen for it just in case the mining ship turned out to be armed and decided to put up a fight.

"Captain, I don't mean to be disrespectful but are you sure that letting Commander Coroll take Agent Embrace with him was a good idea?" Erranes said softly as she and Kain watched the shuttle and its escorting starfighters flying towards the mining ship.

"Maybe not but by putting her on that shuttle with Coroll gets her further from me. Several thousand kilometres away." Kain replied.

"Of course captain." Erranes replied before one of the bridge's junior officers spoke up from a crew pit.

"Captain we've got a signal coming in from the civilian vessel." he said.

"Put it through lieutenant." Kain told him.

"Yes sir." the lieutenant said before a voice spoke over the *Sword of Justice's* communication system.

"This is the mining vessel *Silver Lining*, we surrender! Don't fire! We surrender!" a panicked voice shouted and Kain and Erranes exchanged looks.

"They might think that we're pirates." Kain said. While the Venator-class of star destroyer had been largely removed from naval service many ships of the class had fallen into the hands of renegades after they had been simply abandoned. These ships had been largely disarmed but they could still function as effective carriers for smaller combat craft.

"Perhaps we ought to identify ourselves." Erranes replied.

"Good idea. Lieutenant tell them that we're a naval vessel and intend to board them." Kain told the officer in the crew pit.

"*Silver Lining* this is the naval vessel *Sword of Justice* you are ordered to hold position and prepare to be boarded. You are warned that attempting to flee is a class three infraction and will result in your vessel being engaged. Signal your compliance." the lieutenant told the mining ship.

"Navy? When we saw your ship we thought you were pirates." the voice from the mining ship said, "Of course we will comply."

4.

The *Silver Lining* held its position as the shuttle and its fighter escort approached and the two TIE fighters sped past the mining ship, their pilots carrying out a brief visual inspection to look for signs of an ambush being set for the more vulnerable shuttle. Although a Kappa-class shuttle was armed and shielded it would have to drop its shields to dock with the mining ship and at that point it would become vulnerable. Although the mining ship was intact and all sensor readings suggested that it was structurally sound its appearance showed that the vessel was old. Mining ships frequently suffered cosmetic damage from exposure to debris caused by mining or corrosive atmospheres and their appearance would degrade rapidly just as that of the *Silver Lining* had done.

With no indication of any threat to the shuttle though its pilot brought it in closer and decelerated to make it easier to align the two vessels' docking ports.

"Take us in." Coroll told the pilot as he got to his feet and exited the cockpit, entering the passenger compartment behind it. Here the boarding party had already prepared their equipment and were positioning themselves by the docking port. The marines were standing closest to the hatch, ready to storm the mining ship as soon as the shuttle was fully docked then behind them were Krostas and Embrace. Like Coroll, both of them had blaster pistols holstered on their hips but were unarmoured.

The airlock of the *Silver Lining* was not sealed so the hatch slid open as soon as it was instructed to and a pair of stormtrooper marines burst through it, aiming their weapons at the three startled crewmembers waiting just inside.

"Don't move! Hands up!" one of the two armoured troopers snapped at the crewmen and they quickly raised their hands as the rest of the squad came through the hatchway and proceeded to spread out, checking the various approaches to the compartment to ensure that there was no-one lying in wait with a weapon.

"I'm Talon Mysta, the captain of-" one of the crewmen began but the stormtroopers ignored this.

"The area is secure commander, you can come on through." The squad leader said into the comlink built into his armour.

A few moments later Krostas stepped through the hatchway behind the stormtroopers, followed by Coroll and then finally Embrace.

"Did they offer any resistance?" Embrace asked one of the stormtroopers.

"No ma'am. None." he replied.

"You may lower your hands now and tell me who is in charge of this vessel?" Coroll said and the crewmen lowered their hands.

"I'm the captain. Talon Mysta." the mining ship's captain responded. Looking at Mysta there was nothing to tell him apart from the other two crewmen standing before Coroll. All three wore well worn coveralls that had numerous grease stains on them along with a logo on their chests that Coroll did not recognise. The only obvious difference between their clothing were the name tapes located beneath the logos where the names of the men had been written rather than properly printed. However, even here there was nothing to specifically identify Mysta as the ship's captain.

"I'm Commander Coroll, first officer of His Majesty's star destroyer *Sword of Justice*." Coroll said looking straight at Mysta, "With me are Lieutenant Krostas the head of our security division and Agent Embrace of the Imperial Security Bureau. Do you have your registration and manifest?"

What? Of course here you are." Mysta said and he handed Coroll a datapad that contained the details of the *Silver Lining* including the ship's home port and the names of its registered crewmen, "Commander, I'm sorry but you gave us quite a scare when you came out of hyperspace almost on top of us. We thought you were pirates. But what have we done to attract the attention of the navy and the ISB?" Mysta added while Coroll read through the datapad.

"Oh this is just a routine check for now captain." Coroll told him, "The *Sword of Justice* has been assigned to patrol this star cluster and look for anything out of the ordinary and frankly seeing a vessel such as yours all the way out here is somewhat out of the ordinary. You're a long way from help if anything goes wrong and most mining vessels tend to stick closer to civilisation. What brings you to this system?"

Mysta hesitated for a moment, glancing at Embrace before he answered Coroll's question.

"Frankly commander there just isn't much profit to be made in settled systems. We're not associated with any of the mining guilds you see and-" he said.

"And the guilds have a hold over all of the minerals in settled systems." Krostas interrupted and Mysta nodded.

"Exactly. If you don't pay their dues then you can't mine. On the other hand the Empire doesn't care where

we get whatever we are able to gather just as long as we pay the duty on them when we off load them in port." Mysta continued.

"What exactly are you mining Captain Mysta?" Embrance asked.

"The *Silver Lining* is equipped for gas mining operations agent and we can store a wide variety of them in our hold." Mysta told her.

"I'd like to see this hold captain." Embrance said and Mysta glanced at the crewmen with him.

"Of course. Come this way and I'll show you to it." he said.

"Lieutenant we'll take half your squad with us. You remain here with the others." Coroll ordered and Krostas nodded.

"Yes sir." he responded.

Mysta led Coroll, Embrance and half of the stormtroopers deeper into his ship. Here and there they encountered other crewmen dressed in the same style as Mysta and the other two men who had greeted the Imperial boarding party. They watched the boarding party nervously as they walked past before getting back to their work.

"Here we are. The main storage hold." Mysta said when the door to the hold opened to reveal several massive pressurised tanks, "We can direct the gases into each tank individually. This allows us to collect up to a dozen different types of gases and keep them separate."

"Very interesting." Embrance said and while the others remained just inside the hold she walked up to the control panel set into the nearest of the tanks, "So this tells you everything about the tank and its contents, yes?" she added, looking back over her shoulders at Mysta.

"That's right." he said.

"And according to this display this tank contains tibanna. In fact it's full of it." Embrance added as she tapped the screen for more information.

"Yes. Be careful though agent, you don't want to-" Mysta said.

"Don't worry captain. I know enough not to release the contents of a tank of tibanna this size." Embrance interrupted, "I just wanted to get a feel for how well you're doing out here." Embrance then made a note on her datapad before she walked from one tank to the next, checking the contents of them all and making more notes on her datapad before she returned to join the rest of the boarding party, "Well I've got everything I need." she told Coroll.

"And the ship's data was in order. Given our schedule is rather tight I suggest that we get back to the *Sword*." Coroll said.

"That sounds good to me." Embrance replied and Coroll looked at Mysta.

"In that case captain I shall thank you for your co-operation and we will be getting back to our ship." he said.

As soon as the shuttle's hatch closed behind them Coroll turned to Embrance.

"Teylin what was all that about? With the gas tanks and your datapad I mean." he said and Embrance smiled.

"The *Silver Lining's* captain seemed very keen to tell us that he pays all the taxes due on the gas his ship collects once he gets to port. I've no reason to believe that that isn't true but there is also the possibility that they could offload some of the gas before they even get to port." she said.

"You mean a direct transfer to another ship?" Coroll said and Embrance nodded.

"Exactly. I just made a note of all of the levels of the tanks. Captain Mysta has almost a full load so he'll be heading back to port soon. Of course if he's planning to rendezvous with a buyer before then unless he brings his ship back out here to refill them he'll have less gas in the tanks by the time he gets to port and that will delay his arrival. I'm going to pass these figures on to his home port so that the ISB there can double check his taxes." she said.

"That's brilliant." Coroll said, grinning as he thought about Captain Mysta either having to disappoint a customer looking to buy tibanna gas without going through the regular channels or explain how he managed to lose so much of a restricted substance, "I love you."

"I know." Embrance replied.

"Here they come." Kain said when he saw the assault shuttle flying back towards the *Sword of Justice*, "How long until we've recovered our probes?"

"Two are already aboard. The third should be back aboard within ten minutes." Erranes said, checking her datapad.

"Good. Coroll ought to be back by then so we can get going. Is the next set of probes ready for launch?" Kain said and Erranes nodded.

"Yes captain. They can be deployed as soon as you give the word. Our next jump is loaded into the navigation computer as well." she told him.

The starship's comscan operator sat at his console reading from a datapad to pass the time, with his console set to provide an audio warning if it detected anything unexpected. He lowered the datapad in surprise when

he heard this alert, then set it down on top of the console as he searched for the source of the alarm. "What's going on?" the watch officer asked as he turned towards the comscan console. "Three ships just dropped out of hyperspace in the system commander. Looks like a four light minute spread." the comscan operator replied. "Do you have an ID on them?" the watch officer asked. "Not yet sir but from the size of the energy pulses I'd say that they were small. Perhaps starfighters of some sort." the comscan operator said. Then he paused for a moment before adding, "Or probe droids." "It's a fair bet that the Empire knows we're here." the watch officer said, "Get the captain up here now and prepare a shuttle for launch. We may not have long." It did not take long for the ship's captain, an elderly Neimoidian to enter the bridge. "What is happening?" he said. "Three contacts just dropped out of hyperspace captain." the duty officer told him, "They could be Imperial probe droids." "Do we know of any Imperial vessels in the area?" the captain said. "No sir, nothing within at least ten parsecs. If they are probe droids then they're from a ship we haven't encountered before. I've already ordered a shuttle prepared." the watch officer explained. "We are using too many shuttles recently." the captain said. "Should we just jump?" the watch officer asked. "No. We have to leave the shuttle but I want ideas on ways to replenish our supply before we drop below fifty percent of our original number." the captain ordered. "Hangar reports shuttle ready for launch captain." another of the bridge officers announced and the captain turned towards him. "Then get it out there." he ordered. Rather than launching under its own power the shuttle was ejected from the ship's cavernous hangar bay using the tractor beams intended for cargo handling, sending it out into space where it drifted away from the ship. "Stand by to jump." the Neimoidian captain said, "Is our destination programmed in?" "Yes captain. The emergency jump co-ordinates have been determined and entered into the navigation computer." the watch officer said and the captain walked over to the command station in the middle of the bridge. As he sat down there he activated the intercom built into the chair. "This is the captain," he announced, his voice being broadcast throughout the ship, "stand by for emergency hyperspace jump." then he shut off the intercom and nodded at the helmsman, "Get us out of here." he ordered and moments later the ship vanished into hyperspace, leaving the drifting shuttle behind. The energy pulse created when the ship entered hyperspace was immediately detected by the three probe droids and in accordance with their programming the three machines now focused their attention on the area surrounding its source. Even though the shuttle was entirely shut down the probe droids were able to locate it quickly and they began to move towards it to investigate further. However, before any of them could get close there was another flash of light and pulse of energy as the *Sword of Justice* arrived in the system with them right on schedule. "Captain the probe droids are signalling another contact." Erranes announced from one of the crew pits as soon as the *Sword of Justice* had returned to real space. Then she smiled and added, "Along with a large burst of cronau radiation shortly before we dropped out of hyperspace." "Our mystery ship?" Coroll suggested. "Let's find out." Kain said, "Lieutenant commander, what can you tell me about the new contact?" "Vessel is small and powered down captain. It looks like a shuttle. Location is three and a half light hours from here. The size of the ship is incompatible with the size of the energy pulse registered by the droids. The ship is far too small." Erranes said. "Keep studying that energy pulse. If it was a ship leaving rather than arriving then maybe we can get an exit vector from it and find out where they went." Kain told her. "Surely it has to be an outgoing ship doesn't it captain?" Coroll commented, "If there was a bigger incoming ship then we'd be able to see them." "I don't want to fully rule out the possibility that someone could be using a cloaking device commander." Kain said, "That shuttle out there could be acting as a relay point of some kind." "You mean the shuttle's sensors give the cloaked ship the ability to scan the system fully even from behind its cloak? Using a point-to-point link between the two for data transfer?" Coroll said. "Exactly." Kain responded, "I'm not sure how having the shuttle shut down would help exactly but it's still something that we need to consider and I think that the answers are aboard that shuttle out there." he added, pointing through the bridge viewports. "Looks like another micro jump then." Coroll said. "Perhaps, but let's not be too hasty about this." Kain replied, "Helm bring us about and lay in a course towards that shuttle at full sublight speed. Comscan focus everything we've got onto it. I want to know

absolutely everything about that ship before I risk sending anyone across to it.”

“You do intend to board it then?” Coroll asked and Kain nodded.

“Definitely. We’ll send some marines over with an engineering team to make sure that it’s not a trap of some kind. Just because the previous drifting shuttles haven’t been filled to the brim with detonite doesn’t mean that this won’t be the first. Once we’re sure that it’s safe then we’ll tractor it aboard the *Sword* and take a full look at every part of it. No-one throws away a valuable shuttle without a very good reason.”

The *Sword of Justice* flew towards the drifting shuttle, focusing its active sensors on the much smaller craft in the hope of revealing some clue to its origin and purpose. Moving at about half the speed of light the ship’s crew perceived only about a sixth of the time it took to close on the shuttle but this was still long enough for a shuttle to be prepared to carry a fire team of stormtroopers wearing armour rigged for extended use in the vacuum of space as well as a team of engineers that included Lieutenant Ventern himself.

“Are you sure about this lieutenant?” Kain asked as he watched the boarding party load the shuttle that was to take them to the drifting craft, “You could just send another of your men?”

“My men have enough to be doing here on the *Sword* captain. Plus I’ve got experience at this sort of thing.” Ventern answered. Despite being only a lieutenant the *Sword of Justice*’s chief engineer was older than Kain was, having joined the Republic’s Judicial Department forces as an enlisted man and working his way up through the ranks and gaining his commission much later on and this meant that he had far greater experience than most other officers of his rank.

Despite having the stormtroopers to protect them the four engineers that made up Ventern’s team, including Ventern himself, all wore armoured vacuum suits of their own just in case the shuttle was intended as a trap to lure in unwary investigators.

“Sir we’re fully loaded.” another of the engineers told Ventern.

“Okay I’ll be right there.” he responded before he looked back at Kain and added, “With your permission of course captain.”

Kain nodded.

“Yes of course.” he said, backing away as Ventern boarded the shuttle and he stood and watched as the craft lifted off the deck of the hangar before flying out through the magnetic field into space.

5.

The shuttle from the *Sword of Justice* matched its course and speed with the drifting shuttle and the pilot angled his craft so that the airlock faced it. He did not move in too close though, aware that the drifting craft could have been left behind as some kind of booby trap that would go off when approached. Instead his passengers would have to travel the final part of the way using the propulsion packs built into their armour and vacuum suits.

"In position now." he told the waiting stormtroopers and engineers, "Range is twenty kilometres."

"Understood. Deploying now." Ventern replied as he lowered the visor of his vacuum suit and sealed it shut. The shuttle lacked an airlock so instead the entire passenger compartment was decompressed to allow the boarding party to exit the craft. The stormtroopers were the first to exit through the open hatchway, pushing themselves off into space in the general direction of the drifting shuttle that was just about visible to them from this distance. Making use of their propulsion packs the stormtroopers accelerated towards the drifting shuttle before coming controlled stops on its hull where powerful electromagnets in their boots clamped them to it.

"Spread out and look for anything that looks like a trap." the team leader ordered and the stormtroopers began to walk across the hull, searching for anything that looked as if it had been added to the shuttle after it was constructed. The squad leader himself moved to the front of the shuttle and looked in through the cockpit viewport. Normally for a shuttle in flight the interior of this would be illuminated by at least the light given off by the various consoles and display screens needed to operate the craft but the interior of this shuttle was so dark that only the image intensifying system built into his helmet enabled the stormtrooper to see anything inside at all and it was clear to him that the cockpit was empty. When no signs of traps were found though the squad leader looked back towards the shuttle that had brought them most of the way from the *Sword of Justice*, "The outer hull looks clear. You and your team can come across now." he signalled and Ventern's engineering team then stepped from their shuttle into space.

The engineers used their own propulsion packs to move and guide themselves through the space between the two shuttles, watched over by the stormtroopers who were already attached to the drifting craft's hull. The engineers steered themselves towards the shuttle's hatch that was visible to them as they neared it and when they attached themselves to the hull around it the nearby stormtroopers walked over to them.

"I take it that you haven't tried the hatch." Ventern said.

"No lieutenant. We left that for you. We just checked for external traps." the stormtrooper squad leader replied.

"Well let's see what we've got." Ventern said as he squatted down to study the control panel to the air lock. This was the only part of the shuttle that showed any signs of being powered from the outside and he inspected the panel for any signs of tampering. As far as he could tell though no-one had made any changes to the panel and he moved his hand over it, "Okay everyone stand back. It looks clear but if it is rigged then the blast is going to come right out through the hatch when I open it."

The other engineers and stormtroopers stepped back from the hatch before Ventern pressed the control to open it. There was no explosion or rush of escaping air when the airlock door slid open and two of the stormtroopers quickly disengaged from the hull of the shuttle and used their propulsion packs to move in front of the now open hatchway, aiming their weapons inside the craft.

"Clear." one of them broadcast to the rest of the boarding party, "The internal door is open too."

"Interesting. The entire ship must be depressurised." Ventern said.

"Move in." the stormtrooper squad leader ordered and the two stormtroopers floating away from the shuttle both flew forwards into the air lock where they set down on the deck and with their weapons still pointing ahead of them they advanced further into it, followed soon after by the other two stormtroopers.

"There's a droid in here." one of the stormtroopers reported when they entered the main rear compartment of the shuttle. With the lights out they had to make use of the optics in their helmets but this was enough for them to be able to make out every detail of the shuttle's interior. The craft looked to be configured to allow a variety of roles with folding seats running along each side of the main compartment that in their current folded position left plenty of room for cargo while the droid the stormtroopers had reported stood motionless at the back of it.

"What type of droid?" Ventern asked.

"A labour droid lieutenant." the stormtrooper answered.

"Lieutenant there are no signs of danger in here. This ship is secure." the stormtrooper leader added.

"Okay we're coming in." Ventern said and he beckoned for the other engineers to follow him inside.

When he entered the shuttle's main compartment Ventern saw the droid that the stormtroopers had found. This was a standard ASP labour droid of a type that had been available for centuries throughout known space. The droid was standing in an alcove that appeared to have been configured as a charging port.

"What do you think sir?" another engineer asked as they both looked at the droid.

"I want it disconnecting from that charger. Everyone knows how easy it is to modify an ASP droid so I don't want it suddenly coming to life and going crazy." Ventern told him. Then he turned to the other two engineers and added, "One of you check the cockpit, the other is with me. We're going to check the reactor to make sure it's stable. If it is then we'll contact the *Sword* to bring this ship in." he told them.

"Captain, Lieutenant Ventern is calling." one of the *Sword of Justice's* comscan operators announced and Kain looked down into the crew pit at him.

"Put him through crewman." he said, "Go ahead lieutenant." he added when the channel was open.

"Captain there's nothing about this shuttle to suggest that it's a trap of any kind and pretty much everything is powered down. If I'm going to go through the computer then we'll need to bring it aboard the *Sword*." Ventern said.

"Understood lieutenant. Is there anything aboard at all?" Kain asked.

"Just a droid captain." Ventern told him and Kain and Coroll looked at one another.

"A droid? What sort of droid?" Kain asked.

"It's not a battle droid is it?" Coroll added.

"No commander, it's just a labour droid in a charging port. It's as dead as everything else aboard this ship for the time being." Ventern responded, "We might be able to reactivate it but I'd like to check it properly for modifications first."

"Very well lieutenant, if you're confident that there's no danger I'm going to clear bringing that shuttle aboard the ship. Then you can take it apart and tell me why someone left it drifting out there. *Sword of Justice* out."

Kain said and then he looked at Coroll, "Can you handle bringing that shuttle aboard? Put it in the forward hangar. If there is anything wrong with it we'll just eject it back into space." he said.

"Of course captain." Coroll replied, nodding his head, "What will you be doing?"

"I need to speak with Line Captain Morco again. I've got a bad feeling about this and I want to see if he has anything more to add." Kain told him.

"Ah Captain Kain, what do you have to report?" the hologram of Line Captain Morco said when it appeared in front of Kain.

"Sir our probes picked up what we think was the target vessel. It jumped to hyperspace before we arrived but not before leaving behind a shuttle, just like you described in your encounter and of the ships that have encountered it before." Kain explained.

"Have you investigated the shuttle yet captain?" Morco asked.

"Yes sir. I put some marines and an engineering team aboard and they have indicated that they think it's safe. No hidden boarding party or explosives. The closest thing to an occupant aboard was a labour droid." Kain answered.

"Ah yes, my crew found a labour droid aboard the shuttle we boarded and so did the other ships. Every ship checked the droids out fully and nothing was found to be amiss with them, no modifications to turn them into battle droids or espionage units so they were just added to our ships' compliments." Morco told him.

"Another droid can always be useful." Kain agreed, "We're going to bring the shuttle aboard now and my people will go over it. We've got all the data from your encounter so we'll run a comparison." He continued before he noticed Erranes approach, "Ah I think my adjutant may have something extra to add." he said.

"Let's hear it then." Morco said and Kain waved for Erranes to step into the area covered by the holographic communication system's pickup so that her image would also be transmitted to the *Hammer of Reason*.

"Go ahead commander." Kain said and Erranes glanced at the datapad she held before speaking.

"I've compared the readings taken by our probe droids with the data supplied from the *Hammer of Reason's* logs and they confirm that the ship that is withdrawing is much larger than a shuttle, vastly larger in fact. From the profile I think that we are dealing with a vessel up to five kilometres long." she said and Morco nodded.

"Yes, that's what my own comscan people told me." he replied.

"Getting three different viewpoints from our probe droids has shed some more light on this sir." Erranes continued, "Although five kilometres is the upper range of vessel size I think that we're dealing with a shorter ship that is significantly wider than is usual for the proportions used in starship design. Specifically I think that the profile matches that of a Lucrehulk-class ship."

Kain winced.

"Oh that's just great." he said, "A Lucrehulk-class could mean almost anything. A freighter, a pre-Clone Wars battleship or a late war dreadnought."

"This is serious." Morco said, "Even a Lucrehulk configured as a freighter could be filled with hundreds of starfighters."

"I don't suppose that you were able to glean enough information out of all the available sources for us to be able to run anything through BoSS and get a definitive ID were you lieutenant commander?" Kain asked hopefully but Erranes smiled back at him nervously.

"I'm sorry, no captain. None of the sensor contacts lasted more than a couple of minutes, not enough time to build up an energy profile on the ship and it wasn't broadcasting an identity code." she said.

"Then they have to be hostile." Morco said sternly, "Captain I want a copy of everything you've found sending to me as soon as possible. I'll review it all and pass it along to the admiral. If we're dealing with a dreadnought then he needs to know now."

"Excuse me sir but there is one more piece of information that I think is significant." Erranes said and the hologram of Morco turned to look directly at her.

"What is it lieutenant commander?" he said.

"I've been able to piece together an exit vector sir." Erranes answered.

"Excellent work lieutenant commander, is it enough to know where they went?" Morco responded.

"Not exactly sir, no." Erranes said, "Given the star density of the cluster there are more than a dozen possible systems that they could have jumped to when they left. That assumes that their jump wasn't just an intermediate one before they headed off in another direction too."

"It's still a good starting point." Kain said.

"Yes it is." Morco agreed, "I want those systems divided into three groups. The *Sword of Justice* will investigate the closest third to you, I'll take the *Hammer of Reason* to the next third and Captain Kyung can take the *Blade of Truth* to the final third."

"Of course sir. We'll get the data sent to you right away and we'll be underway just as soon as we've carried out a preliminary check on the shuttle and droid." Kain said.

"See that you do captain. I'll be waiting to hear from you. Hammer of Reason out." Morco said before his hologram faded away to nothing.

"Nice work on getting the exit vector." Kain said, turning to look at Erranes, "I'm going down to the hangar to take a look at this shuttle for myself. You get that information to Line Captain Morco and plot a jump that will take us to the closest system likely to be the target ship's destination."

"Yes captain." Erranes replied.

6.

Before bringing the recovered shuttle aboard the *Sword of Justice*, Ventern had been able to restore enough power to be able lower its landing gear so it could rest in a stable manner on the hangar deck and a portable ramp had been placed to lead up to the open air lock hatch by the time that Kain entered the hangar.

"Ah captain, come to inspect our prize?" Ventern asked when he noticed Kain appear.

"Yes, I thought I'd come and get a look first hand." Kain answered.

"Doesn't look like much does she?" Ventern said, looking back at the shuttle.

"Maybe not but this shuttle could hold the key to tracking down a dangerous warship." Kain said and Ventern frowned for a moment.

"A warship? Then you've identified the ship we're after?" he said.

"Not exactly, no. But Erranes has narrowed down the class to being one of the Lucrehulk types." Kain replied.

"Ah. I see. So just as it could be a bulk freighter it could also be a dreadnought filled with hundreds of droid fighters." Ventern commented.

"Exactly. Anything that you can learn from this shuttle would help." Kain told him.

"Of course captain. Just in case there is something hidden inside the computer I'll make sure that it's kept isolated from our network." Ventern said before a pair of technicians emerged from the shuttle with the inactive labour droid lying on a repulsorlift cart, "What about the droid?" he asked.

"Check it out as well. I know there's not a lot that can be done with a basic machine like that but check it anyway. Then if it checks out wipe its memory, enter it into our system and put it into storage with our own droids. Be very sure though. Something here isn't right and I won't be happy until I figure out what it is." Kain answered.

"Don't worry captain, after all the trouble we had getting the parts needed to keep this ship running smoothly I'm not about to let a random droid screw things up again." Ventern replied.

Coroll and Erranes were both in one of the crew pits as Erranes plotted the jumps through hyperspace needed to take the *Sword of Justice* to the systems assigned to the ship by Morco when a voice called out from the other pit.

"Commander we've got a priority holonet signal coming in from Aran." a crewman called out. Aran was a moon that served as the sector capital and was home the sector's civilian government as well as the headquarters of the navy's forces in the sector.

"This can't be good. Keep working on those jumps. I'll handle this." Coroll said to Erranes before he hurried up the steps at the back of the pit and towards the rear of the bridge, "Okay put the message through to me." he ordered once he was in the area where the holographic communication system could detect him and almost immediately the holograms of two people appeared in front of him. The first of these was a woman in an Imperial uniform with the rank markings of a moff on her chest while beside her stood an older man in formal robes.

"Moff Tollof." Coroll said.

"Commander." Tollof replied, "I take it you know Senator Corrus?"

"We haven't met though of course I know who he is." Coroll said. Olthor Corrus was the sector's elected representative in the Imperial Senate and was the link between the sector government and the Empire itself.

"We need to speak with Captain Kain. Where is he?" Tollof asked.

"In the hangar. We've just seized a shuttle that-" Coroll began

"Yes, I've heard about the shuttle. That's why I need to speak with him. Go and get him now." Tollof interrupted.

"Of course moff." Coroll said before he stepped out of the transmission area and returned to the edge of the nearest crew pit, "Let the captain know that we need him up here right away." he ordered and one of the crewmen in the pit nodded before activating the intercom to contact the hangar while Coroll returned to Erranes' side.

It took a few minutes for Kain to return to the bridge from the hangar where he had been talking to Ventern and he rushed to stand in front of the two holograms that were still being projected.

"Moff Tollof. Senator Corrus. I apologise for not being here when you called but I-" he said.

"That's quite alright captain. You have duties to attend to." Tollof said, smiling at him.

"Moff Tollof speaks very highly of you Captain Kain." Corrus added.

"Thank you sir." Kain replied.

"Captain we're calling about the ship you're hunting. I understand that it's a Lucrehulk-class ship." Tollof said.

"Its profile matches that class of vessel, yes. However, we haven't been able to confirm what model of ship it is. It could just be a freighter." Kain told her.

"In this case captain a freighter could be more dangerous than a battleship." Corrus said.

"I'm not sure I understand senator." Kain said.

"What the senator is trying to say is that we believe that the ship you are hunting may be responsible for supplying advanced weapons to various factions on Ortho." Tollof said.

"Ortho?" Kain commented. Ortho was a planet made up of various competing states that were currently on the verge of open war with various militant groups carrying out attacks on one another's territory. Although the planet was not part of the Empire the *Sword of Justice* had recently deployed a team from Imperial Intelligence to try and uncover these groups in an attempt to stabilise the world.

"Yes, Imperial Intelligence has reported that weapons too advanced to be produced on Ortho are being used by some of the terrorist factions. They must be coming from off world and a surviving Separatist vessel could be a source of them. The shuttles that have been recovered could be the transports for these weapons and the labour droids used for loading and unloading." Corrus explained.

"So the weapons are of Separatist origin then?" Kain asked.

"Some are, yes. Others were obviously built for the Republic during the Clone Wars but they obviously aren't of local manufacture. Ortho's technology level is centuries behind the wider galaxy's. Right now we are considering the likelihood that a holdout faction of Separatists are arming groups on Ortho to try and destabilise the entire sector. They know that a war there could spread and want to try and trigger one." Tollof answered.

"I take that there is a plan to prevent that." Kain said.

"Yes, though I can't discuss that even over the holonet." Tollof told him, "In the meantime we need to take this opportunity to cut off the flow of arms to Ortho."

"Of course. I don't know whether Line Captain Morco has told you but my navigator was able to plot the target ship's exit vector and we have identified the systems lying along this. Our line will be searching them all." Kain said.

"Well that's excellent news captain." Tollof said, "I want to be kept informed of all developments. Then when you get back to Ortho I'd like you to report to me personally."

"Of course Moff Tollof." Kain said before the hologram faded away.

"A personal report." Coroll said to Erranes quietly, "I suppose you know what that means."

"Another private swim." Erranes responded, rolling her eyes, "With or without swimsuits. Probably without."

Ventern stood by an R3 astromech droid that was plugged into the recovered shuttle's main computer while Ventern held a datapad that allowed him to understand what the droid said.

"Are you sure?" he said and the droid chirped at him before a line of text appeared on the datapad's screen, "So the core has been purged?" he added and the droid chirped again.

"Trouble sir?" a voice asked from behind Ventern and he looked around to see one of his engineering staff there.

"Ah Chief Horran. Someone purged the computer of all data. Only the operating system and basic functional commands are left. On the other hand all the logs and the navigational database have been wiped." Ventern said, "Have you had any luck with that droid?"

"No, we've drawn a blank lieutenant." the other engineer replied, "We opened it up and found no modifications at all. There were a few repairs that had replaced parts but everything was up to factory spec. That thing is as dumb as the day it walked off the production line. It just doesn't have the capability to conduct any sabotage operations. It can carry crates and work load lifters but that's about it. It does have some user specific standing instructions but without extra processing power it can't do anything more complicated than push a few buttons."

"As long as those buttons aren't on a turbolaser control panel." Ventern commented and Horran smiled.

"I doubt it sir." he said, "We checked and the life preservation lock is still well and truly in place so it's not a secret assassin droid either. What do you want us to do with it?"

"What's its general condition?" Ventern asked.

"Pretty good I'd say. There are a few knocks and scratches of course but everything still runs." Horran answered.

"You powered it up?" Ventern commented.

"Just briefly and we made sure that security was there with us. If it had freaked out it would be scrap metal by now. We just got it to walk around the room and pick up a few things so we could monitor its operation. All the power readings looked good so it doesn't look like anything is worn out." the engineer told him.

"Okay in that case give it a full memory wipe and fit a restraining bolt then add it to the roster. Make it a reserve unit for now though. I'd rather not chance it being used for anything critical just yet. People don't just throw away perfectly good droids and shuttles." Ventern said.

"Maybe we just interrupted something lieutenant. Maybe whoever owned these didn't mean to abandon

them. That's why they wiped the computer first, to stop us finding out what they were doing." Horran suggested.

"Maybe, but I've got a very bad feeling that we're missing something." Ventern said, "Let's hope that things look clearer in the morning."

Coroll smiled at Embrance when she opened the door of her quarters to find him standing outside and he held up a bottle of wine.

"Care for a nightcap?" he said.

"Of course, come on in." Embrance told him and as Coroll entered her quarters she added, "So how are things going up on the bridge?"

"About as well as you could expect. We're getting ready to start searching through our share of systems that the target could have jumped to." Coroll replied while he took a pair of glasses from a cupboard and poured them each a drink.

"How long do we have then? I'm assuming that the captain will want you on the bridge for when we jump." Embrance said, taking a drink from Coroll.

"Actually he's decided to wait until the morning. Lieutenant Pittal has the night shift tonight so that means that the captain, Erranes and I will all be available and alert for a jump when the morning shift starts." Coroll told her, "Will you be joining us?"

"I think so. It's not like I have much else to do around here. I've already made my reports about the gas miners." Embrance said and Coroll smiled.

"Well in that case since we both have to be up at the same time it makes perfect sense for us to spend the night together." he said.

"I thought you'd never ask." Embrance replied.

Kain was walking back to his quarters when he encountered Ventern coming the other way.

"Ah captain, there you are. I just tried your quarters." Ventern said.

"I just took a quick walk before turning in." Kain replied, "Did you find anything on the shuttle?"

"Nothing captain. Everything was purged so there are no clues to where the target may be in its navigational logs. My team took a look at the droid as well and found nothing more than a few basic work instructions. It's in good shape though so they've wiped its memory and put into storage." Ventern told him.

"Well if nothing else at least we have something to show for this trip." Kain said, "By the way we'll be jumping to hyperspace first thing in the morning."

"That's not a problem captain. Engineering will be ready. Sleep well." Ventern responded.

In a storage room filled with other labour droids the droid recovered from the drifting shuttle stood motionless, plugged into the power distribution system to be recharged. All of a sudden the droid reached out an arm for the charging cable and disconnected it before looking around the room. Being intended for storage of droids there was little more than numerous charging cables present. There were portable fire extinguishers mounted on the walls just in case any of the droids suffered catastrophic faults but there were not even any tools for repairing them, that was something that would be carried out in another compartment. The droid walked to the door and opened it, the room was not considered a restricted area and so the door was unlocked and unguarded which permitted the droid to leave freely. The machine then walked through the corridors of the *Sword of Justice*, ignored by the crewmen it passed as being nothing but another droid running a trivial errand. It continued to do this until it reached a computer terminal that was unmanned and had no-one close enough to see or hear the droid as it brought the terminal online.

Although ASP series labour droids were basic machines that did not have significant computer operation skills programmed into them what the droid needed to do was very simple, consisting largely of selecting options from menus that accessed the *Sword of Justice's* subspace communication system. The droid then entered a few basic commands into the system, using only the unsecured portion of the communication system generally used for the crew's personal messages rather than the secured military channels.

As soon as the necessary commands were entered the droid logged out of the communication system again and shut down the terminal. It then turned around and began to retrace its steps to the storage room where it paused to make sure that it was not being watched before it went back inside and took its place among the inactive droids inside. Taking hold of the charging cable again the droid plugged this into itself before finally shutting back down.

7.

Aboard the Lucrehulk-class starship a comscan operator turned towards the Neimoidian captain who was sat in his chair at the centre of the bridge.

"Sir we've just received another set of jump co-ordinates." he said.

"Anywhere near us?" the captain asked.

"Not exactly, no. But they are in a system that is along the vector we took from the last system we were in again." the comscan operator answered.

"That's too much of a coincidence." the captain said, "Navigation I want another jump plotting, take us at least five parsecs off our last vector. If the Empire did manage to plot our escape route then we'll leave them chasing an empty trail."

"Aye captain. There's a system five point two parsecs away. It has a planet with a type two atmosphere we may be able to gather resources from but it is uninhabited." the navigator responded.

"Very good. Get us there before the Empire can catch up with us." the captain ordered and less than two minutes later the massive vessel vanished into hyperspace.

When the *Sword of Justice* came out of hyperspace it immediately began to scan the system with its active sensors. These could gather information at faster than light speeds and enabled the star destroyer to determine that it was alone in the system.

While the bridge crew were scanning the system though, the engineering department monitored the *Sword of Justice's* own systems to check for any faults that could threaten the ship's operations and among the multitude of system readings Ventern found something that caught his attention.

"Has anyone been running any tests on the communications system?" he called out across the engineering compartment.

"No lieutenant." his deputy responded from close by, "The last time anyone looked at it was the diagnostic you ran three days ago. Why?"

"Because we've got a power spike in the system just before we jumped. It looks like someone sent a message on the open network but no-one should have been using it that close to a jump." Ventern said.

"A message to where though?" his deputy asked.

"I can't tell from this. I can't tell exactly what was sent either. In fact I don't think I'd even have spotted it if we hadn't put all those extra traps into the power distribution system when we were blowing out the gridduring hyperspace jumps." Ventern answered.

"Could it be an external problem? Maybe the ship was hit by a solar energy pulse that reflected off the antenna." the other engineer suggested and Ventern considered this. Any antenna was vulnerable to picking up stray energy emissions and the amount of disruption caused to the *Sword of Justice* was negligible this time but something about the spike still not sit well with him.

"I don't think so. I don't think that this was just a flare prompting the transmitter to come to life. I'm certain that this signal originated from within the ship somewhere. I just can't tell where right now." he said, before the intercom sounded and he reached out to activate it, "Engineering." he said.

"This is the bridge." Kain's voice said, "Are our engines good for another jump?"

"Yes captain, everything's good down here." Ventern told him.

"Good. This system is empty and Erranes will have the next jump plotted soon so be ready for the hyperdrive to engage. Bridge out." Kain said before he shut off the intercom from the bridge.

"Okay everyone stand by for another jump." Ventern called out before his deputy brought his attention back to the screen he had been studying previously.

"Lieutenant did you see that?" he said.

"What?" Ventern responded.

"The communication system just spiked again. Not much but it was definitely there, I saw it." the other engineer told him and Ventern looked at the screen for himself.

"You're right. Another brief spike from the transmitter." he said before the engineering compartment was filled by the sound of the ship's hyperdrive powering up and the *Sword of Justice* entered hyperspace again.

"Captain one of the Imperial ships just jumped again. It is still following the vector we followed when leaving the last system we left a shuttle in." the comscan operator aboard the Lucrehulk-class vessel told the captain.

"Excellent. Keep me informed of their movements." the captain responded, "If the Imperial ships vary from their current pattern then I want to know immediately."

Arriving in the next star system the crew of the *Sword of Justice* repeated the process of scanning for other ships while in engineering Ventern watched for any further energy spikes in the communication system and he was rewarded with such a spike just after Kain had contacted him from the bridge to inform him that they would be jumping again soon. Seeing this he reached to reactivate the intercom.

"Engineering to bridge." he said.

"Go ahead lieutenant." Kain's voice responded.

"Captain is everything running smoothly up there?" Ventern asked.

"Anyone seeing any problems with their systems?" Kain's voice called out across the bridge and was picked up by the intercom, "No lieutenant, everything appears normal up here." he added into the intercom directly when he received no positive responses, "Why?"

"Because I've just picked up a spike in our communications system. The third one we've seen recently and every one of them came just before we jumped." Ventern answered.

"Captain a transmission coming from inside the ship is a clear security threat." Embrance commented.

"She's right captain." Coroll added, "Maybe someone was aboard that shuttle that we didn't know about."

"If they could hide from us aboard a shuttle then finding them aboard a star destroyer is going to be impossible." Erranes said.

"Unless we track the equipment they're using to access our communication system." Coroll pointed out.

"Okay I'm going to hold our jump." Kain said, "Lieutenant Ventern I want you to go through our system logs and see if you can spot a pattern in them. In particular I want to know where our system is being accessed from."

"Yes captain I'll get right on it." Ventern said before he shut off the intercom.

On the bridge Coroll looked at Kain.

"Captain if there's even a chance that we do have an intruder then we should lock down the ship and start organising a search immediately." he said and Kain nodded.

"Yes commander I agree. Alert Lieutenant Krostas and have him assemble search teams." he responded and Coroll reached for the intercom, "No wait." Kain said suddenly before Coroll could touch the controls.

"What's wrong?" Coroll asked,

"If our intruder does have access to our systems then they could be monitoring our communications. Krostas needs to be told in person. Stormtrooper comlinks can be isolated so our marines should be able to coordinate their operations securely but I want all the ship's internal communications kept to a minimum until we can be sure that our system is secure." Kain said.

"I'll go." Embrance said.

"Very good agent." Kain said, "Oh and tell Krostas to secure that labour droid that was pulled off the shuttle. I know it checked out as normal and maybe it was just a decoy but I want it kept under guard from now on."

Mobilising the entire compliment of stormtroopers aboard the *Sword of Justice* without making use of the ship's intercom took some time. Each platoon had to be contacted in person and told to isolate their communications before they could be deployed.

This gave Ventern the time to begin his investigation of the ship's system logs, comparing how each system acted just prior to and simultaneously with the energy spike in the communication system. His aim was to try and determine two things, firstly what it was that was being sent in these unauthorised transmissions and secondly where they were being entered into the communication system from.

It was the second of these that showed something interesting, according to all of the *Sword of Justice's* system logs the content of the messages was not coming from any outside source. Instead it was coming directly from within the ship's own computer network.

"Chief Horran!" Ventern called out and Horran hurried across the engineering compartment to where he sat.

"Yes lieutenant?" he asked.

"That droid, what sort of checks did you run?" Ventern asked.

"The usual. We looked for any parts that were after market upgrades and ran a diagnostic of the core command structure. Everything checked out just like I told you sir." Horran answered.

"And where is it now?" Ventern said.

"Security took it away. The captain asked for it to be secured so it's with them now." Horran told him and Ventern started to get to his feet.

"Grab a droid repair kit and come with me. We're going to crack that thing open and take another look." Ventern told Horran.

With Horran carrying a tool kit optimised for maintaining and repairing droids the two engineers made their way to the *Sword of Justice's* security section where they found Lieutenant Krostas and several other members of his security staff who were reviewing schematics of the *Sword of Justice* along with a stormtrooper who was present to use the comlink built into his armour to relay messages to the squads that were searching the star destroyer for an intruder.

"Lieutenant Ventern, is there a problem?" Krostas asked when he saw the engineers enter the room.

"Where is that droid you impounded?" Ventern asked and Krostas pointed to the door that led to *Sword of Justice's* brig.

"In there. We couldn't figure out what to do with the thing and didn't want it getting in the way so we just stuck it in a holding cell." he said.

"I need to take a look at it." Ventern said.

"Be my guest." Krostas told him.

Ventern and Horran made their way into the adjoining detention section where three armed fleet troopers were on duty.

"Which cell is the droid in?" Ventern asked.

"Number four. Do you want me to open it up?" the trooper at the main console asked.

"Yes please. I want to examine it again." Ventern said and the trooper opened one of the cells directly from his console.

Entering the cell Ventern and Horran found the droid standing on a repulsorlift cart in the middle of the room, suggesting that the droid had not been activated to take it from the storage room to the security section.

Horran set down the tool kit he carried and opened it.

"So where do we start sir?" he asked.

"We open it up. I want to see what's inside." Ventern said and from the tool kit he took out a tool needed to open up the droid's casing to expose the circuits and mechanisms within.

"But we did all this earlier lieutenant." Horran pointed out.

"Yes but I think that something was missed. We need to pull the main circuit board." Ventern said and Horran frowned.

"The main circuit board? What for?" he asked.

"Because I think that someone tampered with it." Ventern said before he slid a circuit board from inside the droid. This board was square in shape and had numerous connectors around the edge that enabled power and data to flow to and from it and Ventern began to unplug these. The connectors were the only components on the board that were visible, the rest being covered by an opaque layer that covered most of the board. The presence of this layer was not unusual, most electronics intended to operate in extreme environments were given such coatings. Ventern knew enough about such circuit boards to be able to identify some of the components only by their size and shape even without being able to see the components themselves and so he knew where to look for the details he suspected to be present.

"Tampered with it? How?" Horran said.

"I think that someone swapped out an active memory chip." Ventern said.

"What good would that do?" Horran asked.

"Normally it wouldn't do anything. At least not if they just swapped it for another chip of the same type. A droid's active memory is cleared every time it is restarted and the memory wipe would have cleared the long term storage drive. On the other hand if someone swapped a memory chip for a non volatile one that was write protected then they could have used it to store instructions that would survive a memory wipe without any errors appearing. Replacing a rewritable memory chip with one that was locked would reduced the droid's processing ability but with an ASP I doubt anyone would notice. It's not like they are often run at full capacity." Ventern explained before he noticed what he was looking for, "A-ha. Take a look at this." he said and he held out the circuit board towards Horran and pointed to where one of the memory chips was located beneath the protective coating but the coating here had a slightly different appearance, with the coating on the rest of the board duller.

"Someone replaced the environmental coating here." Horran said and Ventern smiled.

"I think we should run an active memory diagnostic." he said, "Pass me the memory reader."

Horran took a device from the tool kit that resembled a small data pad fitted with a set of probes that he then handed to Ventern. Using the cell's bunk as a work surface Ventern connected the device to the circuit board, plugging the probes into some of the board's connectors. This provided power to the board's memory chips and when Ventern tapped a control on the memory reader the device started its diagnostic process. The pattern reader was designed to run a series of simple tests on memory devices to determine whether they contained any errors. First it interrogated all of the available devices to determine their capacities before writing repeating patterns of data that would fill all of these and then reading it back to reveal any errors. As Ventern had expected the memory reader labelled all of the memory in the changed chip as faulty, none of it able to be written to.

"Just as you thought hey lieutenant?" Horran commented.

"Exactly. We need to take a closer look at this chip. I think we've just found the source of the intrusion into our system." Ventern replied.

8.

Ventern took the circuit board he had removed from the droid back to the *Sword of Justice's* engineering section and handed it to one of his more junior subordinates.

"Crewman I need a full check done on this chip here." he told the man, "Tell me exactly what it's intended to do. I need to run a few more checks on our computer network so I'll need you to bring the results to me in my office when you're done."

"Yes sir." the man replied as he took the circuit board from Ventern and carried it away while Ventern returned to his own office and sat back at the desk he had been working at to continue with his regular duties.

He had been working for just under an hour when all of a sudden the crewman that he had given the circuit board to rushed into his office.

"Sir I think you should come and see this." he said.

"You've figured out that chip?" Ventern asked as he got to his feet and the crewman nodded.

"Yes sir and you're not going to believe it." he said.

Ventern followed the crewman to a workstation that was designed for examining individual pieces of data in memory devices and this raw data appeared on a nearby screen. The crewman had then processed this data to determine exactly what effect it would have on the droid. The ASP droid was only a basic fifth degree droid that was capable of carrying out the most basic of tasks and instructions but when Ventern saw the list of instructions that the droid had been given he could not help be impressed at the ingenuity of whoever had written them in order to get it to carry out a task that an ASP droid would not normally be used for. By giving the droid a long series of basic commands the programmer had told the machine how it could access the *Sword of Justice's* computer and write a simple program to run on it.

"Have you checked the computer for this code?" he asked, looking at the crewman.

"Chief Rylan ran a check. He found it right where these instructions suggest it would be, monitoring our nav computer and transmitting anything loaded into it off the ship through our open comms subspace antenna. Somebody out there knows every jump we make before we even make it." the man answered.

"What about our shuttles?" Ventern asked.

"Clean as far as we can tell sir. Whatever this code is for it's confined to the *Sword's* computer network only. It looks like the droid was only instructed to access our computer, not our shuttles." the crewman said,

"Should I wipe it? It's not exactly well hidden once you know it's in there."

Ventern hesitated. He was about to order his subordinate to remove the malicious code from the *Sword of Justice's* computer when he decided otherwise.

"No, not yet. Let me speak to the captain first." he responded.

When Ventern entered the bridge he saw Kain, Coroll and Erranes all gathered together by the command console close to him and he walked up to them.

"Lieutenant Ventern, you have something to report?" Kain asked and Ventern smiled.

"You could say that captain. You can stop worrying about a stowaway, I've found the source of the intrusion into our communication system." he said.

"What was it?" Coroll said.

"That labour droid that was aboard the shuttle. Someone found a way to give it a command that couldn't be wiped and wouldn't show up in a conventional check by swapping out a memory chip. They had it program a simple set of commands into our computer network." Ventern said and Kain sighed.

"What does it do?" he said.

"I'm pretty sure that every time a set of co-ordinates is programmed into our navigation computer they are copied and transmitted to someone. Most likely the ship that we're hunting." Ventern said.

"So they can stay ahead of us." Erranes said, "Every time we jump they know where we're heading for."

"Actually I don't think that making the jump is required. The last spike was when you last programmed a jump and we haven't initiated it yet. I'd bet that if you programmed a new set of co-ordinates then they would be transmitted as well." Ventern said before he looked at Kain and added, "I wouldn't recommend doing that though captain. It might tip off the target that we've found their little slicing attempt."

"Can we still deploy probe droids without them being tracked?" Coroll asked.

"Not if we follow the standard procedure commander." Ventern answered, "The targets for our probe droids are set using our nav computer and the sliced code will pick that up. If we really need to launch a probe without that Lucrehulk finding out about it though it shouldn't take long to rig up a system using the nav computers from one of our shuttles instead. My men have confirmed that their systems are clean. This code wasn't designed to spread through any linked systems."

"Well that's one thing at least." Kain commented.

"I suspect that it was meant to help hide the presence of the code captain. If it tried to spread between separate computers then it would have to get past their security programs and I'm pretty sure that even a basic commercial datapad security program would detect it, it really is that simple. It had to be so that an ASP droid could enter it into our computer." Ventern explained.

"How easy will it be to purge the commands from our system?" Kain asked.

"Very easy captain. My men have pinpointed the location of the code and the applications that it is interfacing with." Ventern told him.

"Then what are we waiting for? We need to secure our system." Coroll said.

"Yes we do but I don't want to act too hasty commander." Kain responded, "If we purge our system of the sliced code then the crew of the target may start to wonder why they aren't getting any more messages about our location." then he paused for a moment before he smiled, "Lieutenant could you use these transmissions to run a connection trace?"

"With Lieutenant Commander Erranes' help it should be possible, yes." Ventern answered, "It will take some time mind you. We won't get a result straight away."

"In that case carry on. For the time being we'll keep acting as if we don't know anything about this code while we see if we can turn it to our advantage." Kain ordered.

When the Neimoidian captain entered the Lucrehulk's bridge again he made his way over to the comscan position.

"What is the status of our hunters?" he asked.

"They are still following their previous pattern captain." the operator replied, smiling, "Moving along our initial retreat vector."

"I wouldn't celebrate yet." the captain said, "Sooner or later they are going to have searched every system along that vector and spread further out. Remember that there is also a third star destroyer out there that we aren't able to track so easily."

"Captain we've evaded the Imperial Starfleet for so long. Do you really think that they will catch us now?" the comscan operator asked.

"During the war the Republic's Jedi were relentless in rooting out every last Confederate outpost, operative and vessel. The Empire may have purged the Jedi from its ranks but over the years I have seen that they have inherited the Jedi's resolve. The only way that they will stop hunting us is if we either surrender or are destroyed and you know as well as I what surrender would mean. The Empire will offer us no amnesty. Even if they would I don't think that I would accept it. I fought to be free of the Republic's domination and the Empire is even worse so I would not underestimate their will to hunt us down. Our only hope is to keep beyond the Empire's reach until it inevitably collapses."

"We could move further out captain. Into the Outer Rim or even beyond that into Wild Space and the Unknown Regions." another of the bridge officers suggested and the captain turned towards them.

"You would risk the thousands of lives we have aboard in the Unknown Regions?" he said, "No, while I command this ship we will remain here in territory that we are familiar with. Yes, there is the risk that the Empire in its continual expansion may find us but as long as we remain vigilant we can always flee from their ships and we are familiar with all of the systems in this cluster as well as the hazards they may contain. On the other hand who can say what awaits us in the Unknown Regions? Aggressive alien species or dangers to navigation await us out there. Plus there is the matter of supplies. Here we can still rely on smuggling goods from nearby worlds to replenish our stores but out there is nothing but what we take with us. How long will this ship that we call home continue to function when we run out of the materials our machine shops need to manufacture replacement parts?"

"Captain I didn't mean-" the other officer began but the captain held up his hand for him to stop.

"Do not apologise for offering a suggestion." he said, "Just remember that I am in command here and my orders are to be followed. Nevertheless I want a contingency plan prepared. Sooner or later the Empire will withdraw those particular star destroyers from this star cluster. It is too costly to keep them here permanently and then we will have another respite before more patrols come here by which time they will have to start their search for us from scratch again. We know the movements of two of the star destroyers currently hunting us but not the third and it is possible that this vessel could find us before being forced to withdraw. If this happens I want to jump out of the sector for a time. Not too far though, just beyond the jurisdiction of this sector group will be enough. We will stay there while the two sector governors try to organise a co-ordinated response. That should give us enough opportunity to return to this cluster unnoticed."

"At least we only need to worry about one star destroyer." the comscan operator commented as the captain walked towards his own chair.

Erranes and Ventern stood in front of one of the *Sword of Justice's* navigation consoles and he watched when Erranes entered the next set of jump co-ordinates into the ship's navigation computer.

"There we go." she said.

"And there's another spike, right on cue." Ventern added, pointing to a nearby screen that had been configured to monitor the status of the *Sword of Justice's* subspace communications.

"Do we have a connection trace yet?" Kain asked as he and Coroll walked over to the console as well.

"No, not yet captain." Erranes replied with a shake of her head.

"This is taking too long." Coroll commented.

"The problem is that there just isn't a lot of data to get a fix on commander." Ventern said, "To look at the data in a set of hyperspace co-ordinates may seem complicated but it's still just a relatively short stream of numbers, rarely more than a hundred characters as plain text. I can tell you that we're looking at a location about eight or nine parsecs away from the strength of the echo but right now that's about it."

"And how many systems are within that range band of our position?" Coroll said.

"On average more than two hundred." Kain responded. Then he looked at Erranes and added, "Plot another jump. Take us to the same system but a different point in it. Make it look like we changed our mind about where we'd drop out of hyperspace. In fact, plot to jump to put us above the orbital plane of the star." he ordered.

"Yes captain." Erranes responded and she began to make the adjustments to her calculations.

"Captain what are you doing?" Coroll asked.

"If another signal is sent every time a new set of jump co-ordinates are entered into the nav computer then let's add another set and see if we can speed things up in establishing a connection trace." Kain answered.

"It should work." Ventern added.

"At least as long as we don't do it too often. I doubt that a one-off change to our pattern so far will attract too much attention but if we do it in every star system we visit then whoever planted that droid may start to get suspicious." Kain said.

"What about a jump within a system?" Coroll suggested, "It ought to look like we found something that attracted our attention and we moved in for a closer look."

"Good idea." Kain responded with a smile, "We'll wait two jumps before we try it though. I don't want too many 'one-off' changes at once."

"Modified jump calculated captain." Erranes announced, "This will put us six light minutes above the orbital plane."

"Okay, put it into the nav computer and let's see what we get." Kain told her.

9.

The sudden receiving of a second set of hyperspace jump co-ordinates from the *Sword of Justice* took the Lucrehulk's comscan operator by surprise.

"Captain we've just received a second set of jump co-ordinates from one of the Imperial vessels." he announced, "The same one we received data from about five minutes ago."

"That's not enough time for them to have completed a jump. Are you certain?" the captain responded as he turned to face the comscan operator and the operator nodded back at him.

"Yes sir. Two sets of co-ordinates from the same vessel." he said.

"How much have they changed?" the captain asked, concerned that this could be an indication that the Imperial ships knew that his own vessel had departed from the vector they were currently following in their search pattern.

"They are still planning on jumping to the same system captain, only now they will be above the orbital plane instead of within it." the comscan operator said.

"So they think that they can search the system faster from off the orbital plane." the captain said, nodding slowly. Then after a brief moment's hesitation he added, "This is nothing. Ignore it for now but pay attention for any other unexpected changes to their hyperspace jumps. They may be beginning to suspect that we are not on the vector they are following any longer and are considering spreading out their search. I want to know immediately if they do."

Erranes and Ventern exchanged brief glances when the echo from the connection trace they were attempting to run came back to the *Sword of Justice*.

"That narrows it down." Erranes said and Ventern nodded.

"Yes, these signals are definitely coming from a coreward direction. They've definitely moved off the vector they followed when our probe droids encountered them." he said.

"As every good captain would do to evade pursuit. How much longer until you can get an exact fix on their position?" Kain asked.

"At this rate maybe four or five more attempts." Erranes replied.

"So given how long we're leaving between jumps we can maybe call it an hour." Ventern added.

"And how close will that be?" Coroll said.

"Given that every system in this cluster is charted we'll be able to tell you whether they're in orbit around a planet or trying to hide from casual traffic by positioning themselves in interplanetary space." Ventern told him.

"Very good." Kain said, "I think we've given it long enough since our last jump now not to look suspicious. Helm execute hyperspace jump."

"Aye captain." The *Sword of Justice*'s helmsman responded from within one of the crew pits and as the ship's senior officers looked towards the front of the bridge they saw the starfield outside blur as the star destroyer entered hyperspace.

Given that the distance that the *Sword of Justice* was travelling consisted of just a few light years to the next star system along the vector the ship was following the trip through hyperspace lasted just a few minutes before once again it exited hyperspace for realspace and the crew found themselves in yet another unremarkable system.

"Exit from hyperspace confirmed captain. No sensor contacts." Erranes said when she looked at the ship's sensors and saw no indications of any other vessels in the system.

Even though the crew were certain that the vessel they were hunting was not present in the system they still waited before entering another set of co-ordinates into their navigation computer and carrying out another hyperspace jump. With each set of co-ordinates that were programmed being forwarded to their target in real time, too many such jumps in rapid succession would show that they were not making any serious effort to examine the sensor data they gathered each time they entered a new system. The process was then repeated, with Erranes and Ventern examining the information they were able to gain from the connection established between the *Sword of Justice* and the Lucrehulk-class ship that they were hunting each time their jump co-ordinates were transmitted to it until finally they were able to lock onto the ship's exact position.

"Captain you need to see this." Erranes called out across the bridge and Kain and Coroll both made their way over to where she and Ventern still stood by the navigation console.

"You have a location for me?" Kain asked and Ventern nodded.

"The Protocol system." he answered.

"To be precise in orbit around the second planet. It's a rocky world with a type two atmosphere, so habitable but unpleasant." Erranes added.

"Excellent work." Kain said, smiling.

"Yes but now we have to figure out how to get there. As soon as we put co-ordinates into our nav computer they'll be sent to the enemy." Coroll pointed out.

"Give me twenty minutes and I'll have that sliced code purged from our system entirely captain." Ventern said.

"No wait." Kain said, "Lieutenant Ventern, how easy would it be to alter the code that droid implanted into our computer network?"

"Well that depends on how you want it modifying captain. The code that the droid implanted had to be pretty basic just for the droid to be able to replicate it using its own processors so amending it ought to be just as simple as whatever task you want it to carry out." Ventern explained.

"I want to keep sending navigation co-ordinates to the target ship, just not real ones. I want it to look like we're staying on our current course. Kain told him and Coroll grinned.

"Oh I like that." he said, "They think that we're heading in one direction, right up until the point where we drop out of hyperspace right on top of them."

"That's the idea. Ideally I'd like to pin them between us and the planet they're orbiting." Kain said before he looked at Ventern again, "Well lieutenant, can you do it?" he asked.

"It should be straight forwards enough captain. All I need to do is replace the source that the added code is pulling its data from. Instead of our nav computer it needs to get data from a table that we can populate with whatever numbers we want." Ventern answered.

"In which case it seems that Lieutenant Commander Erranes is going to have the difficult task." Kain said as he turned to Erranes, "Commander I need you to plot a series of hypothetical hyperspace jumps that continue along our current course with each one following on from the last. When you're done give those numbers to Lieutenant Ventern so that he can put them into his table."

"Yes captain. How many do you want?" Erranes responded.

"Not many. Three to be safe but a fourth one wouldn't go amiss if you have time. That should last us an hour and if we need more I'll come back to you." Kain told her.

"What about Line Captain Morco? Shouldn't we let him know what we've found captain?" Coroll pointed out.

"Of course. We'll give him the co-ordinates of-" Kain began.

"Actually sir I'd recommend against communicating with the *Hammer of Reason*." Ventern interrupted.

"Oh really? And why is that lieutenant?" Kain asked.

"I can tell you precisely how much of our network was sliced and the code that was added to it captain," Ventern explained, "on the other hand I can't tell you whether the network aboard the *Hammer of Reason* was sliced any differently. It's possible that the line captain's ship is also having its communications monitored or there could be additional fail safes built into the sliced code that would alert the target if it was tampered with."

"And if we alert the *Blade of Truth* then Line Captain Morco may start to wonder what all his ships are doing." Coroll pointed out, "It looks like we're going to be doing this alone."

"But what if the ship we're hunting is a dreadnought? We'll be outgunned won't we?" Erranes asked.

"If the *Sword* was the only capital ship facing them then yes, we would be." Kain said, "Luckily though we won't." then he turned towards the crew pits, "I want a holonet channel opening to the *Harbinger*. Get me Admiral Lorr."

Aboard the Imperial-class star destroyer *Harbinger* Admiral Lorr was in the middle of a meal when the intercom sounded.

"Yes what is it?" he said into the intercom, clearly irritated at being interrupted during his meal.

"Admiral I'm sorry to disturb you but Captain Kain of the *Sword of Justice* is calling on the holonet for you. He says that it is important." the voice of the *Harbinger's* captain told him and Lorr sighed.

"Oh very well. I'm on way now." he said before he shut off the intercom. Then he glanced at the nearby serving droid and pointed to his plate, "Make sure that this is kept warm for me. I doubt that this will take long."

Admiral Lorr made his way to the *Harbinger's* bridge where he found a hologram of Kain waiting for him and he stood in the scanning area for the holographic communication system.

"Admiral Lorr, I hope I'm not disturbing you." Kain's hologram said,

"As a matter of fact you are captain. So how about you tell me why you are calling me and why you are doing it directly rather than going through your line captain." Lorr said.

"As I'm sure you're aware admiral the *Sword of Justice* is currently hunting for a Lucrehulk-class vessel that has been sighted in the cluster." Kain said.

"This would be the ship that you are supposed to be driving towards the *Harbinger* and the pursuit line here with us, yes?" Lorr replied and Kain nodded.

"Yes admiral. However, my officers have discovered that we aren't driving anything. The target ship has jumped off its original vector into an orbit around the second planet of the Protol system." Kain told Lorr and

the dark skinned admiral frowned.

"The Protol system? How have you obtained this information captain?" he asked.

"We recovered an abandoned shuttle with a labour droid aboard it admiral, just as Line Captain Morco did aboard the *Hammer of Reason*. Initially the droid checked out as harmless but my engineers were able to uncover a hidden command that made it implant code into our computer network. This has been sending every hyperspace jump we program into our nav computer to the target vessel sir. Basically they know every move we've been making up until now. Right now my chief engineer and navigator are preparing a way to send false data while we prepare to jump to the Protol system. We think it's likely that the *Hammer of Reason's* computer network has been compromised as well but without knowing exactly how badly we can't risk communicating with Line Captain Morco and potentially warning the target that we're on to their slicing and have identified their location." Kain explained.

"I see." Lorr said, "You did the right thing in bringing this to me directly captain. I assume that you want the *Harbinger* to jump to the Protol system and support you?"

"Yes admiral. If we are dealing with a dreadnought then the *Sword of Justice* doesn't have the firepower to take it on alone. We'll plot our own jump there but we'll need the firepower of the *Harbinger* to tilt the balance of power in our favour." Kain said.

"Very well captain. I'll have my navigator plot a jump to take the *Harbinger* to the Protol system. You are closer and your vessel is faster through hyperspace than we are so you'll have to give us a head start before making your jump." Lorr told him, "We'll let you know when we're about to make our jump."

"Thank you admiral and I'll see you in the Protol system." Kain said before Lorr shut off the holonet transmitter.

"Navigation." he called out, "I want a jump plotting for the second planet of the Protol system. Comscan update sector command on our situation."

The hold of a Lucrehulk-class vessel, no matter what function the vessel had, transport, battleship or dreadnought, was vast with space for tens of millions of tonnes of cargo or hundreds of starfighters and shuttles. The hold of this particular vessel had been given over to a rather different purpose though, with large sections of it used to expand the living quarters of its occupants. Habitats had been converted from cargo containers while some of the secondary holds normally used to contain cargos that required specific environmental conditions or as workshops aboard military vessels now served as hydroponic gardens that provided fresh food to the thousands of people now living aboard the ship.

The neimoidian captain walked through this unconventional settlement, greeting some of the inhabitants as he went. Here and there were men in the uniforms of various forces that had been aligned with the Confederacy of Independent Systems during the Clone Wars but now functioned as a police force among the largely civilian population. The captain had not come to the hold just to make himself seen by the general population though and he walked all the way through the inhabited area of the hold to where it was divided by a large blast door that blocked the entire width of the hold. A smaller door was set into this huge barrier and it slid open when the captain presented a pass key to the sensor beside it.

On the other side of the door a pair of B-1 battle droids briefly raised their weapons to challenge the being who had opened it but they stood down as soon as they recognised the captain. This area of the hold was not as crowded as on the other side of the blast door, it having been configured as a hangar and various small transport craft could be seen in the servicing hangars either side of the main chamber while far above the captain's head the ceiling had been fitted with racks to store Vulture droids. These were largely empty now but there were still several dozen of the automated starfighters held in them.

"Where is Chief Olast?" the captain asked the two battle droids.

"He's over there sir. Working on the shuttles." one of the machines responded and it pointed into a side hangar where three shuttles stood with their hatches and access ramps open. Around them were an assortment of other droids, mainly basic ASP labour droids but there were also several astromech and other more advanced repair droids among them.

The captain walked towards the shuttles and as he approached another member of the ship's crew emerged from one of them.

"Captain, what brings you down here?" he asked.

"I wanted to check on the status of our auxiliary craft chief. Those two star destroyers still appear to be hunting us and we know that there is a third with them somewhere. I would rather not chance another encounter with any of them which means we have to be able to track that third ship somehow. If we send out a reconnaissance flight to try and find it then how long could it stay out?" the captain asked.

"A long duration flight? That's tricky. We don't have any dedicated scout craft and all of our droid fighters are sublight only. That means using one of our shuttles instead and their range is limited by whatever fuel cells we can spare." Olast replied, "How many systems would we be talking about searching?"

"Between a dozen and twenty. The Imperial ships are following our previous vector and have divided the systems that they think we could have retreated to between them. Tracking the movements of two of the

Imperial ships indicates the systems assigned to them so by a process of elimination the third ship must be covering the remaining ones." the captain told Olast.

"Up to twenty jumps? Twenty-one counting the return trip, unless you're planning to write off the shuttle and to do that we'd have to lose an astromech droid too." Olast said.

"No, I want the shuttle to return to us. Abandoning it could mean the Empire capturing it and examining its navigation logs. We can't rely on skuttling the ship to destroy everything of intelligence value to them." the captain pointed out.

"Of course not captain." Oblast said, "Okay I'll try to come up with something but it may take some time. We might be able to rig one of our larger shuttles to act as a carrier for some of our droid fighters. That would increase the chances of rapidly searching a system as well as providing some protection for the shuttle while it withdrew if it did come across the other destroyer."

"Good, see what you can do and report back to me chief." the captain ordered, "But don't take too long about it. We don't know how long it will be before those Imperial ships change their search pattern."

10.

Kain was leaning on the edge of one of the viewports at the front of the *Sword of Justice's* bridge when Erranes approached him and adjusted her glasses.

"Captain we're ready." she said and he stood up straight and turned around.

"All systems are set then?" Kain asked and Erranes nodded.

"Yes captain. Our fighters are prepped and can be launched as soon as their pilots embark. All the *Sword's* systems have been checked and are operating at full capacity." she said.

"What about the nav computer? Has Lieutenant Ventern made sure that the target won't know about our real destination?" Kain said.

"Yes captain." The code sliced into our network has been transmitting the fake jump co-ordinates just as planned. Whether the target's crew have fallen for them or not is something we can't know." Erranes replied.

"Then all we're waiting on is the word from the *Harbinger* that they're jumping into hyperspace. How much longer after that will we need to jump?" Kain said.

"About eight minutes captain. Then our flight time through hyperspace should be perceived as about six more. Given that our aim is to pin the target in place I've calculated the numbers for us to arrive between ten and fifteen seconds ahead of the admiral in the *Harbinger*." Erranes said.

"Good, we should be able to hold out that long without suffering significant damage even against a dreadnought." Kain responded, "Keep monitoring for the *Harbinger's* signal and let me know as soon as it arrives."

Aboard the *Harbinger* Admiral Lorr entered the bridge to find the ship's captain standing at a nearby console along with another officer whose rank badge identified him as an army colonel rather than a naval officer. Colonel Brinnack commanded the regiment of troops garrisoned aboard the *Harbinger* and would direct any boarding action necessary. This was not considered likely though, the firepower of an Imperial-class star destroyer was enough to be able to despatch most vessels from a distance without leaving anything behind to board. This was especially true when the target was a relic of the Clone Wars more than a decade earlier and as well as possessing a technological advantage the crew of the *Harbinger* also knew all of the weakness of the Lucrehulk design.

"Gentlemen I take it that we are ready?" Lorr said to the other two senior officers.

"Yes admiral, all stations report ready and the jump co-ordinates have been loaded into our nav computer." the ship's captain responded.

"In that case let's proceed. Comscan alert the *Sword of Justice* that we are entering hyperspace for the Protol system and that they should time their own jump accordingly." Lorr ordered and less than a minute later the massive star destroyer *Harbinger* entered hyperspace.

"Captain the *Harbinger* has entered hyperspace." Erranes called out when the signal from the squadron flagship reached the *Sword of Justice*.

"Begin your countdown lieutenant commander and get our pilots to their fighters." Kain ordered, "Then inform Commander Coroll and Agent Embrance. I'll need Coroll here on the bridge and I suspect that Agent Embrance will want to be present when we deal with these enemies of the Empire."

"Yes captain. Starting countdown to hyperspace jump at seven minutes and thirty seconds." Erranes responded and Kain turned to look out through the viewports at the front of the bridge again, hoping that he had made the correct decision and that in a little under a quarter of an hour the *Sword of Justice* would finally encounter the mysterious Lucrehulk-class ship that had been sighted roaming the star cluster.

It took several minutes for Coroll and Embrance to arrive at the bridge, the pair entering together and approaching Kain.

"So we're all set then?" Coroll commented.

"Yes all set. Lieutenant Commander Erranes what's the countdown at now?" Kain responded.

"Just over two minutes captain." Erranes answered.

"Excellent. We have them now." Embrance said with a smile.

"We're still not sure who they are agent." Kain pointed out.

"Whoever they are they are flying around in a Separatist vessel and they sabotaged our computer network captain." Coroll pointed out.

"Yes and they'll pay for that attack." Embrance added.

"I'd still like to know who they are." Kain said, "Have either of you considered that there could be more than just one Lucrehulk out here? For all we know it's just one ship of an entire fleet and the more we can discover about it before we blow it up the happier I'll be."

"Of course captain." Coroll replied.

"And depending on exactly what's waiting for in the Protol system we may end up just being the distraction for the *Harbinger*." Kain added.

The *Harbinger* lurched violently and alarms began to sound as the Imperial-class star destroyer dropped out of hyperspace unexpectedly and it was immediately clear to the command staff that they had not arrived at the Protol system as they had intended to.

"Report!" Admiral Lorr yelled as Colonel Brinnack reached out to help him steady himself.

"Hyperdrive safety systems cut in and brought back to realspace about two parsecs short of our destination admiral. There was an unspecified mass shadow in our path, possibly a rogue asteroid. Something not on the charts." the ship's captain told him.

"Well find it and confirm what it is!" Lorr snapped back at him.

"Asteroid confirmed. Mass twenty million tonnes dead ahead admiral." One of the *Harbinger*'s comscan operators responded.

"Helm take us around it." Lorr ordered, "Navigation log the asteroid's location on our charts and plot us a new jump to the Protol system. And somebody alert the *Sword of Justice* that our arrival will be delayed."

"Admiral," the *Harbinger*'s captain said, "the *Sword of Justice* will have already made the jump to hyperspace. We can't get a signal to them now, it's too late."

"Then it looks like Captain Kain is going to be on his own." Lorr said.

As soon as the *Sword of Justice* dropped out of hyperspace in the Protol system Kain and Coroll found themselves looking directly at the Lucrehulk-class ship that they had been hunting. The massive vessel, almost three times the length of a Venator-class star destroyer sat motionless in space in between the *Sword of Justice* and the system's second planet. The ship's hull still carried the prominent markings of the Confederate fleet that dated back to the years of the Clone Wars and large weapon emplacements were just about visible.

"That's a damned dreadnought!" Coroll exclaimed.

"Then it's a good job that the *Harbinger* ought to be right behind us." Kain said before glancing towards the crew pits, "Shields up." he ordered, "Tell the hangar to launch our fighters but hold them in a defensive formation for now."

The Lucrehulk's long range sensors detected the approach of the *Sword of Justice* but the Venator-class star destroyer moved so rapidly through hyperspace that they had no time to react before the ship dropped back into realspace with a brilliant flash of light.

"Star destroyer!" one of the bridge officers exclaimed when he saw the Imperial starship, "They've found us!"

"It must be the third ship but they should be following the same search pattern as the other two. What are they doing here?" the captain said.

"Actually captain I don't think that this is the third ship at all." The comscan operator responded, "All this data points towards it being one of the ones we have been tracking."

"They why didn't we get any warning that they were coming here?" the helmsman said.

"They obviously found a way around our surveillance but never mind that now." the captain replied, "Just get our shields up and get our fighters out there."

Being fully automated, the Vulture droid fighters carried aboard the Lucrehulk-class ship did not need to wait for pilots to reach them and as such every one of them was ready for immediate deployment. The dreadnought's large hangar doors also enabled the relatively small Vulture droids to launch in a swarm and it took less than a minute for well over a hundred of them to fly out into space where they formed up in rows ahead of the dreadnought to form a defensive screen.

"There must be more than a hundred of them." Embrance said as she watched the Vulture droids deploy beside Kain and Coroll.

"Sensors indicate one hundred and sixty-eight fighters." Erranes said from within one of the crew pits.

"A ship like that could carry almost ten times that many." Coroll pointed out.

"Which raises the question of why launch fewer than two hundred?" Kain said, "Is it because this is all they have or are these just a first wave. Maybe just what the crew are willing to sacrifice to either escape or destroy us."

"Captain the other ship has raised its shields and is targeting us." Erranes said and Kain nodded.

"As is to be expected." He commented, "Commander what can you tell me about their weapons? Are they fully functional?"

"It looks that way captain. Their power distribution system is showing hot spots at the weapon emplacements. There are also-" Erranes began before she suddenly stopped.

"Also what lieutenant commander?" Kain asked, walking to the edge of the crew pit she was in and peering down into it.

"Captain I'm picking up an abnormally large number of life readings for a ship of this class." Erranes said.

"How large?" Coroll asked.

"Well over sixty thousand." Erranes answered.

"On a ship that normally has a crew well under five hundred. Most of the work is done by droids." Coroll said.

"Then why all the extra organic beings?" Embrance said.

"That's a very good question. One that I think we should put to them." Kain said and Embrance frowned.

"You're going to talk to them?" she said in amazement.

"Agent Embrance my first officer was right when he said that that ship out there is a dreadnought." Kain replied, pointing through the viewports towards the Lucrehulk-class ship, "It outguns us and even if it doesn't have any more fighters aboard the ones that it had already launched are enough to overrun our mere two squadrons. Now they haven't fired on us yet and talking to them might just buy us time for the Harbinger to arrive. Who knows, maybe we can even end this without a shot being fired."

"Where are those jump co-ordinates?" the Lucrehulk's captain demanded, staring at the ship's navigator.

"The enemy vessel occupies our path of retreat captain. They must have known our exact location." the navigator responded, "I'm trying to plot a—"

"Just get it done!" the captain snapped at him before he could finish.

"Captain the Imperial ship is signalling us. They want to talk." the ship's comscan operator announced unexpectedly and the captain looked at him, hesitating for a few moments while he decided how to respond.

"Put them through. Let's hear what they have to say." he said.

Turning towards a large wall mounted screen the captain saw it activate and show an image of Kain standing on the bridge of the *Sword of Justice*.

"This is Captain Kain of His Imperial Majesty's Starship *Sword of Justice*. You are ordered to identify yourself." he said sternly.

"I am Captain Tarro of the independent starship *Glory of Derjat*." The Lucrehulk's Neimoidian captain replied, "We are not in an Imperial system captain. Now get out of our way while we leave."

11.

Back aboard the *Sword of Justice* Coroll, Erranes and Embrace all stood close by Kain while he spoke with Tarro and the moment that the Neimoidian captain gave his name and that of his vessel Erranes entered them into the console in front of her. Although the *Sword of Justice*'s computer did not hold records of every ship to have operated within the sector all the way back to the Clone Wars it did still hold intelligence reports stretching back that far and it was those reports that she now checked this new information against while Kain continued to talk to Tarro.

"This system may be uninhabited captain but this entire star cluster is under the authority of the sector government on Aran and your ship needs to be registered with those authorities. As far as we can tell there isn't even a record of your vessel with BoSS. Perhaps you can explain that." He said.

"I don't answer to you." Tarro replied before Kain noticed Erranes signalling to him.

"Just one moment captain." he said before he paused his transmission and turned to face Erranes, "Yes lieutenant commander, you have something?" he asked her.

"Captain I've run that ship and the name of its captain through our system and I've found something." she answered.

"Then let's hear it commander." Kain responded.

"First of all is the captain, Tarro. Obviously he's Neimoidian and he was considered a significant figure in the Confederate fleet in this region of space during the war. The Republic's intelligence service indicated that he played a prominent role in the bombing of Paratus." Erranes explained. Prior to the Clone Wars the planet Paratus had been the sector's capital planet but during the conflict Separatist forces conducted a large scale assault on the world that included widespread bombing from orbit. Now the planet was largely a wasteland and the sector capital relocated to the planet's moon Aran, "He was thought to have been lost with his ship when it was shot down later in the war. Obviously he wasn't though."

"Not very bright of him to use his real name if he's a wanted war criminal. Could he just be using the name of a dead man without realising what we know about him?" Coroll suggested.

"The image looks like him." Erranes replied and she pointed to a nearby screen that had an image of a slightly younger Tarro shown on it.

"Neimoidians all look alike to me." Coroll added.

"If it is him then he's a war criminal captain and it is our duty to bring him to justice." Embrace said.

"For now I don't think I'll mention that to him." Kain replied, "Telling him that we're preparing to put a rope around his neck is the sort of thing that could sour negotiations somewhat. Now what about this dreadnought, the *Glory of Derjat*, do we know anything about that?" he added, looking back at Erranes.

"The *Glory of Derjat* appears to be one of the few Lucrehulk-class warships that was built from scratch rather than converted from an existing transport captain. She was known to be either just finished or very close to it in the shipyards orbiting Derjat when the war ended but she was taken out of dock before the Empire could secure them. That was the last anyone saw of her officially." she told him.

"What about all those extra beings aboard her?" Coroll said.

"My guess would be that they fled the planet before we moved in to secure it. Which means there could be tens of thousands of civilians over there who'll be killed if this does come down to a shooting match." Kain said and Embrace scowled.

"More war criminals." she said, "They should be returned to Derjat so that they can work off what their planet owes for its actions during the war with the rest of the population."

"Again that's probably not something that will improve negotiations agent." Kain said

"How much longer until the admiral's ship is due to get here anyway?" Coroll said, looking at Erranes.

"Given the difference in our travel times through hyperspace and the distances we needed to cover the *Harbinger* should be here already." Erranes said, "Something must have gone wrong with the jump."

"Just something?" Coroll said.

"They may have tried to signal us after we jumped into hyperspace." Erranes said.

"Whether they did or didn't the fact is the *Harbinger* is not here like she ought to be if everything had gone to plan." Kain said.

"Then it's up to us to deal with this on our own." Embrace said and Kain sighed.

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

"What are they waiting for?" the comscan operator aboard the *Glory of Derjat* said while the ship's command staff waited to see whether the *Sword of Justice* would re-establish communications or simply attack.

"We should attack them now." the helmsman said, "We can easily destroy them."

"But at what cost?" Tarro responded, glaring at the helmsman, "Right now there is a single line of Imperial ships patrolling the cluster and hunting for us. Destroy one of their capital ships and we will be lucky if there is only a squadron coming after us. Not only that have you considered what will happen when that star destroyer returns fire? We have thousands of civilians aboard who are at risk and we cannot dry dock to repair any damage. Keeping this ship running is difficult enough even without repairing the damage from proton torpedo strikes." then he looked at the ship's navigator, "What is the status of your calculations?" he asked but the navigator shook his head.

"The relative positions of the enemy ship and the planet's moons are blocking our entry into hyperspace along all the vectors I've tried so far. I'm trying to find a gap but I'm running out of options."

Tarro then turned back to the helmsman.

"Helm stand by to engage at full sublight power. We can't outrun an Venator-class ship but we might just be able to get into clear space." he said before the comscan operator looked up from his console again.

"Captain the Imperial captain is calling again." he said.

"Put him through." Tarro said and Kain reappeared on the viewscreen, "Well captain, are you prepared to allow us to leave?"

"I'm afraid not Captain Tarro. Despite your protests to the contrary you and your vessel are subject to Imperial law which is why I'm going to have send over a boarding party that will take your ship to the nearest Imperial port." Kain said before there was another bright flash of light as the *Harbinger* finally emerged from hyperspace.

From the bridge of the *Harbinger* Admiral Lorr could see both the *Sword of Justice* and the *Glory of Derjat* with its prominent Confederate markings, neither of which showed any signs of damage.

"Comscan, report." he said.

"Both vessels have their shields raised admiral. No signs of damage to either ship." one of the bridge crew responded from one of the crew pits.

"Captain Kain managed to hold them long enough for us to arrive. Excellent." Lorr said with a smile.

"I'm also picking up two squadrons of TIE fighters and one hundred and sixty-eight droid starfighters. They all appear to be in defensive positions around their ships. I'm picking up large life form readings on the enemy vessel." the crewman added.

"It's carrying an army." Brinnack commented from close behind Lorr.

"Weapons, target the Lucrehulk with our turbolasers and open fire. Scramble all fighter squadrons to target their fighters." Lorr ordered.

"Captain the *Harbinger* just dropped out of hyperspace." one of the *Sword of Justice's* comscan operators announced when Admiral Lorr's flagship dropped back into realspace and Kain turned away from the console.

"Get me a channel to the admiral. I need to speak to him now." he said.

"The *Harbinger's* shields just went up captain. I'm picking up an energy spike in their weapon systems and she's launching her fighters." the comscan operator reported.

"Get me that channel now!" Kain yelled but before his bridge crew could let him talk to Admiral Lorr there were sudden flashes of green light from the *Harbinger* as its turbolasers opened fire on the *Glory of Derjat*. The first few blasts were absorbed by the Lucrehulk's shields but the modern weapons were powerful enough that they soon overwhelmed the shields and the massive vessel was rocked by explosions.

"Shields have failed captain!" one of the *Glory of Derjat's* bridge officers called out, "Severe damage to port side."

"It's a trap!" Captain Tarro exclaimed before he glared at the communications screen on which Kain's face still appeared and he pointed at it, "You did this Captain Kain! You lied to buy time for your reinforcements to arrive. May the Dark Side take you Captain Kain!"

"Captain Tarro I-" Kain began before all of a sudden the screen in front of him went blank, "What happened?" he exclaimed.

"Their communications antenna was just hit captain. We can't talk to them." Erranes told him.

"Will someone please get me the *Harbinger*? Maybe I can get the admiral to cease fire." Kain said.

"Captain I'm sure the admiral knows what he's doing." Coroll commented.

"Does he? We didn't know about the civilians aboard that ship until we spoke with Captain Tarro." Kain pointed out.

"We have only his word for their presence captain." Embrance said.

"And nothing to prove otherwise!" snapped back at her, "Now someone get me that channel."

Aboard the *Glory of Derjat* alarms still sounded across the ship as it continued to come under fire from the *Harbinger* and its occupants panicked, fleeing for the supposed safety of the secondary holds that could be sealed off to isolate them in the event of a major decompression to the main hold. As each one filled up the blast doors at their entrances were closed and the crowd moved on to the next one, hoping that they would be able to get inside before it too was filled to capacity.

"Can we return fire?" Tarro called out on the bridge.

"Port side weapons have lost power captain." one of the other bridge officers responded.

"Then bring us about and fire the starboard side weapons instead. Target the Imperial-class ship. Order out droid fighters to engage the *Venator*." Tarro ordered.

"Captain we have incoming. The droid fighters are moving to intercept us." Erranes said when the *Sword of Justice*'s sensors showed the swarm of automated starfighters break off from their defensive position and charge towards the *Venator*-class star destroyer, "The *Harbinger*'s fighters are turning to engage them but they'll reach our fighters first."

"Captain we have to take action." Coroll said.

"Stang!" Kain hissed, knowing that his first officer was correct, "Tell the fighters to break and attack and have our weapons give covering fire but target the droid fighters only, not the *Glory of Derjat*. Comscan keep trying to get me Admiral Lorr."

Kain then dashed to the main command console, accompanied by the other senior officers present and immediately called up a tactical display using the holographic projector built into it. This showed the relative positions of the *Sword of Justice* and *Harbinger* at one side with the *Glory of Derjat* facing the two star destroyers at the other side of the display. Between the *Sword of Justice* and the *Glory of Derjat* the fighters launched by the two ships fought one another. Although severely outnumbered by the Vulture droids launched by the *Lucrehulk*-class dreadnought the TIE fighters launched by the *Sword of Justice* were not only a generation ahead in technology but their living pilots were more highly skilled than the droid brains of the unmanned craft and the Imperial fighters were currently holding their own. The *Sword of Justice* also provided what support it could for its fighters although its heavy turbolasers and proton torpedoes lacked the accuracy to target the nimble Vulture droids the *Venator*-class ship was also equipped with numerous arrays of lighter laser cannons that were designed specifically for anti-starfighter operations and the crews of these targeted the Vulture droids, picking off some one by one. Meanwhile the five squadrons of TIE fighters launched from the *Harbinger* were closing in on this fight to support the *Sword of Justice*'s two squadrons, reinforcements that would easily tip the balance in favour of the Imperial fighters.

Beyond the fighters the *Harbinger* was still firing at the *Glory of Derjat* while the dreadnought turned to bring its operational weapons to bear on the star destroyer while continuing to take fire from it. By the time the *Lucrehulk*-class dreadnought had turned enough to be able to return fire at the *Harbinger* it had already taken significant damage, especially to its forward sections. Fortunately these areas were largely devoid of living beings and so casualties were relatively light but the physical damage to the ship itself was significant with fires burning in both hangars.

The dreadnought's gunners opened fire on the *Harbinger* as soon as the star destroyer came within their firing arc and a salvo of turbolaser blasts slammed into its forward shields.

"Damage report." Lorr said as he saw the flashes of light as the energy blasts struck his ship's shields.

"Shields holding admiral. No damage to ship." the *Harbinger*'s captain responded.

"And what about the enemy vessel?" Lorr asked.

"Damage appears widespread but not critical yet admiral." the captain answered.

"Then continue firing." Lorr ordered.

"Admiral, the *Sword of Justice* is still requesting communication." one of the bridge crew added.

Walking to the closest communication console Lorr looked at the image of Kain standing with the other senior officers aboard the *Sword of Justice* beside him.

"Captain Kain. Well done on keeping the enemy here until we could arrive." Lorr told Kain.

"Admiral you need to cease fire. I have reason to believe that there are thousands of beings aboard that ship." Kain responded.

"Yes we detected their troops with our scans." Lorr said, "But I don't see why we should hold our fire because of them."

"Admiral I'm not so sure that they are troops. I think that they may be civilians." Kain said and Lorr frowned.

"What makes you say that captain?" he asked.

"We've identified this ship as one that disappeared from the dockyards orbiting *Derjat* at the end of the war admiral. I think that the occupants are beings who fled before we could establish control over the planet." Kain said.

"They fled in a dreadnought captain. A vessel of war." Lorr pointed out.

"It may have been the only suitable ship available to them." Kain replied.

“Civilians would be a matter for the Imperial Security Bureau. Agent Embrace what is the ISB’s assessment of this situation?” Lorr said, turning his attention to Embrace instead and she glanced at Kain before replying.

“With all due respect to Captain Kain sir, the information available to us indicates that the captain of that ship was partially responsible for the bombing of Paratus and it seems likely that anyone else on that ship would also have been a part of the Separatist administration on Derjat, or least closely associated with them.” she said.

“I see. So not exactly innocent then.” Lorr commented.

“No admiral. Not in my opinion. If there was to be a widespread rebellion against the Empire then they are the sorts of beings that it would form around.” Embrace replied.

“In that case we will maintain our fire. If the beings aboard that ship choose to evacuate then we will of course recover their escape pods and deal with them but that ship represents a clear and present danger and needs to be destroyed.” Lorr said.

12.

"Captain, fire suppression in the starboard hangar has failed." one of Tarro's bridge officers called out over the sound of the multitude of alarms sounding. Most of the damage reports were being sent directly to the specialised goggles that many of the officers wore but they were duplicated on numerous display screens and everywhere that Tarro looked he could see another report of a system failure.

"Can we decompress it?" he asked.

"Yes captain. Internal seals are still holding." the other officer responded.

"Then do it. Vent the fire into space." Tarro said before adding, "What is the status of our fighters?"

"Only forty-one still operational captain. Do you want me to withdraw them?" another officer answered.

"No, we can't afford the time. Helm lay in a course for open space, we have to try to break out and jump into hyperspace." Tarro said.

"Captain I don't have jump plotted." the navigator told him.

"I don't care. Just get us away from those star destroyers. A one parsec jump in any direction will do, we can work out where to go after that." Tarro said before the ship shook again as yet another salvo of turbolaser fire struck it, "Helm why aren't we moving yet?" Tarro demanded before the *Glory of Derjat* began to move.

"Underway now captain." the helmsman responded and looking out of the viewports at the front of the bridge Tarro saw the two star destroyers grow larger as his vessel lumbered towards them.

"Captain the enemy vessel is moving towards us." one of the *Sword of Justice's* bridge crew reported.

"Is she going to try to ram us?" Embrance said.

"Unlikely. Even without the damage she's suffered we could easily outmanoeuvre a Lucrehulk-class ship." Coroll reassured her. Then he turned towards Kain and added, "Captain we have to open fire on them. You heard the admiral's orders."

"Yes I heard them." Kain replied, "Weapons do we have a lock on that ship?"

"Yes captain, all turbolaser batteries reporting acquiring target." one of the bridge crew replied.

"Give them a warning shot. Single blast across their path." Kain ordered.

"A warning shot?" Embrance exclaimed, "Captain your torpedoes could crack that ship wide open. I'm right aren't I Adas?" she added, looking at Coroll.

"Yes you are. Captain why bother with a warning shot? We can fire for effect." he said.

"Because I'm hoping that we can convince the crew to abandon ship rather than blast them out of existence. Now fire that warning shot." Kain said sternly.

A single flash of turbolaser fire from the *Sword of Justice* shot across space in front of the *Glory of Derjat* and in his command chair Tarro flinched.

"Captain the Venator-class ship is now firing as well." one of the bridge officers said.

I can see that! Helm keep on this course. We have to get past those star destroyers." Tarro responded and the massive Lucrehulk-class dreadnought continued on its path, ignoring the warning shot from the *Sword of Justice*.

The helmsman continued to guide the *Glory of Derjat* closer to the *Sword of Justice* than the *Harbinger*, intending to use the older Venator-class star destroyer as a shield from the firepower of the much larger and more powerful Imperial-class ship. The *Harbinger* continued to fire at the *Glory of Derjat* while it remained out in the open though and the massive vessel rocked again as there was another explosion from within its hull and Tarro gasped when he saw a cloud of shrapnel fly up from where one of the turbolaser hits had blown a hole in his vessel's hull along one of the curved arms of the outer hull sections where the hangars and cargo holds were located. This was accompanied by a rapid plume of escaping gas as the atmosphere within the damaged section was immediately vented into space through the hull breach and by its size Tarro knew that the damage had to be significant. This was not the only hit that the *Glory of Derjat* suffered though and another alarm began to sound across the bridge.

"We're having trouble with the main reactor sir." a panicked bridge officer called out.

"What sort of trouble?" Tarro responded.

"The input regulators are failing sir. We're getting multiple power spikes increasing in intensity." the officer told him.

Tarro knew that this was serious, each spike in energy output represented an excess amount of fuel being pushed into the reactor and the increasing intensity indicated that the regulators that were meant to control the flow of fuel were degrading. If allowed to continue then they could fail entirely and fuel would flow into the reactor without any control at all to produce a massive amount of energy that could not be contained. To avoid the total destruction of the *Glory of Derjat* there was only one course of action that could be taken.

"Can we carry out an emergency shut down?" Tarro replied, even though he knew that this would leave the *Glory of Derjat* effectively dead in space and prevent the ship from escaping.

"I'm trying captain but the control lines to the regulators appear damaged." the other officer told him.

"Then get a droid in there to cut them. If we don't get that reactor shut down then we're all-" Tarro began before all of a sudden there was a huge explosion as the reactor overloaded and the *Glory of Derjat* along with every being aboard it was consumed by the blast in an instant.

The bridge of the *Sword of Justice* was lit up by the exploding *Glory of Derjat* and several of the crew recoiled, shielding their eyes.

"She's gone." Coroll said.

"It looks like the main reactor blew captain." Erranes added.

"Are we damaged?" Embrance asked.

"That's not likely with our shields up." Coroll answered while Kain turned

"Comscan are we picking up any escape pods? Did anyone make it off the ship before it blew up?" he said.

"Even if they did then the blast would have-" Erranes began.

"I want to be certain before I write them all off as dead commander." Kain interrupted.

On the bridge of the *Harbinger* Admiral Lorr smiled as he looked at the floating debris that was all that was left of the *Glory of Derjat*.

"Excellent shooting." he said, turning to face the bridge crew in their pits.

"Your orders sir?" the *Harbinger's* captain asked.

"Recall our fighters. I think that we can leave the *Sword of Justice* to deal with any stray vulture droids now. We're needed elsewhere. Send my compliments to Captain Kain and then we'll depart."

"Sensors aren't reading any life signs among the wreckage captain." Erranes reported as Kain continued to stare out of the bridge viewports, "There are still a few energy signatures from the remaining Vulture droids but that's all."

"Captain the Harbinger is signalling." one of the bridge crew announced, "They are withdrawing from the system and also wish to pass on Admiral Lorr's compliments on a job well done."

"Well done? We just killed sixty thousand beings without any idea of who they were." Kain commented.

"Criminals captain." Embrance responded, "Criminals with a powerful warship at their command."

"If we hadn't destroyed it now then who knows how many Imperial citizens they would have killed later." Coroll added.

"Maybe, but right now that doesn't make me feel any better about it." Kain replied.

Colonel Yal-Paratus and Fleet Admiral Kellar appeared almost comical as they entered Moff Tollof's office side by side. Yal-Paratus, the moff's personal aide was incredibly short for a human male at barely one and a half metres tall while the fleet admiral was close to two metres in height.

"Yes gentlemen?" Tollof asked while sat behind her desk, leaning back in her chair.

"There has been a report concerning the unidentified Lucrehulk-class ship that was sighted in the star cluster on the outskirts of the sector moff." Yal-Paratus replied and Tollof leant forwards, remembering instantly that Kain's ship was involved in the hunt for this vessel.

"Is it good news?" she asked.

"Very." Kellar answered, "The *Sword of Justice* caught up with the ship in the Protol system where it was confirmed to be a dreadnought that was positively identified as the *Glory of Derjat*, missing since the end of the Clone Wars. Captain Kain was able to hold them there long enough for the *Harbinger* to arrive and together they destroyed the *Glory of Derjat*. As far as we can tell there were no survivors while we lost only a handful of TIE pilots fighting against the enemy's vulture droids. I have a detailed copy of Admiral Lorr's report here." Kellar then placed a datapad on the moff's desk and slid it towards her.

"The admiral singles out how important Captain Kain's role was in this moff." Yal-Paratus added, "It was his crew that uncovered the means that the Separatists were using to track our ships hunting them and then turn that method against them to locate their exact position in the Protol system."

"Jarren was key to this?" Tollof commented, smiling as she picked up the datapad and started to read the report shown on it.

"Yes moff." Kellar replied, "This represents the second surviving Separatist vessel that Captain Kain has been instrumental in locating and destroying, not to mention rooting out the renegades aboard the *Inferno*. I've consulted further with Admiral Lorr and given his record we feel that some sort of honour is deserved."

"I see and what sort of honour were you considering admiral?" Tollof said.

"I believe that the Imperial Medal of Honour would be suitable for this level of service moff." Yal-Paratus said

"A Medal of Honour? Really? I like the sound of that. Very well. Make the arrangements for a ceremony colonel. Something like this could provide a boost for morale in the sector. The public needs heroes and I think that Captain Kain is an ideal candidate."

Kain was sat alone in his quarters updating his log when the intercom activated.

"Kain." he said into it.

"Captain we have a priority signal coming in from Moff Tollof for you." Coroll's voice told him.

"The moff?" Kain said, sitting up straight, "Put her through."

"Yes captain." Coroll replied.

"Jarren." Tollof's voice then said.

"Erian, how are you?" Kain responded.

"Better after hearing about your exploits Jarren. I've just finished reading Admiral Lorr's report and both he and Fleet Admiral Kellar are very impressed."

"Thank you Erian. Though I'd rather there had been a way to neutralise that ship without killing everyone aboard. Maybe if the admiral had used his ion cannons instead then we could have-" Kain began

"Jarren," Tollof interrupted, "it's not your fault that we couldn't bring any of those criminals back to Aran for trials and very public executions."

"I'm not one hundred percent sure that they were all criminals." Kain said.

"Collateral damage Jarren, again not your fault so you needn't worry about it being mentioned in your record. In fact Fleet Admiral Kellar has just signed off on the paperwork for your award." Tollof said and Kain frowned.

"Award?" he said.

"Yes, that's really why I'm calling. Jarren you are going to be awarded the Imperial Medal of Honour for your actions in bringing Separatist holdouts to justice. Not just this dreadnought, there was the destroyer as well."

Tollof told him and Kain placed a hand over his face for a moment.

"I really don't think that's necessary." he replied.

"Oh don't be so modest Jarren. The ceremony will be wonderful and then after that we can celebrate together in private." Tollof said.

"Well since you put it like that Erian I suppose that it is my duty to accept a medal when my superiors offer it to me." Kain replied.

"Excellent. You'll receive the details within the next day or so. See you soon Jarren." Tollof said before she ended her transmission.

Kain then sighed and leant back in his chair. After a few seconds sitting like this he got to his feet and headed for the exit from his quarters, opening the hatch and stepping into the corridor outside. He then walked through the corridors of the *Sword of Justice* until he reached an access point to the turbolift that led to the mothballed bridge. Here he paused to make sure that no-one was around to see him as he used one of his code cylinders to open the disused turbolift and went inside. He selected the bridge itself on the control panel and the turbolift car began to move, taking him up the tower that the bridge was located at the top of before opening to reveal the empty bridge.

Exiting the turbolift Kain walked towards the front of the bridge between the two crew pits and stood just in front of the forward viewports, looking out along the length of the star destroyer. Then he turned around and looked back along the bridge.

"Sixty thousand beings dead." he said, "Now they want to pin a medal on my chest for it."