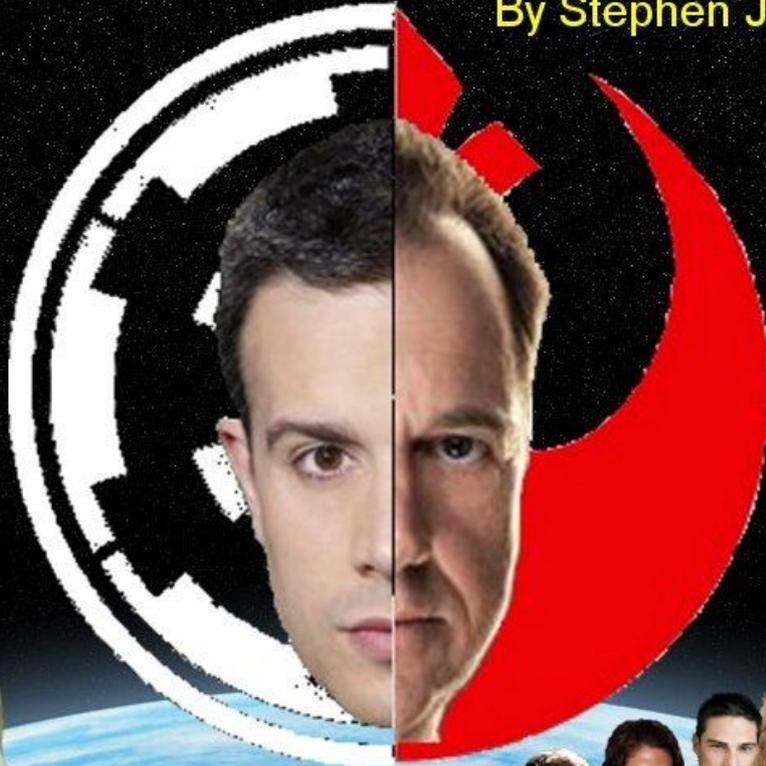


STAR WARS

4-05: Pre-emptive Strike

By Stephen J Dutton



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Civil war turns father against son

IT IS A TIME OF CRISIS. REBEL FORCES FIGHTING AGAINST THE EVIL GALACTIC EMPIRE ARE OUTNUMBERED AND OUTGUNNED BY THEIR FOES. THEY MUST INSTEAD RELY ON GUERILLA WARFARE AND HIT AND FADE STRIKES BY SMALL GROUPS AGAINST STRONGER FORCES.

ONE SUCH GROUP IS LEAD BY THE EXILED NOBLEMAN VORN LARCUS III WHO, WITH THE HELP OF THE SMUGGLER MACE GRAYLE, CAPTAIN OF THE FREIGHTER THE *SILVER HAWK* TAKE THE FIGHT TO THE EMPIRE.

FACING THEM ARE A MULTITUDE OF ENEMIES, BOTH SEEN AND UNSEEN AS THE EMPIRE PLOTS TO BRING DOWN THE REBEL ALLIANCE AND FOREVER EXTINGUISH HOPE AND FREEDOM IN THE GALAXY...

PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKE

A RAID ON AN IMPERIAL OUTPOST WARNS THE REBELS OF AN IMPENDING ATTACK ON THEIR HEADQUARTERS. VORN LARCUS MUST LEAD A DARING RAID TO BUY TIME TO GET THE REBELS THERE TO SAFETY...

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

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1.

Fleet Admiral Praus Vretan and his aide were shown directly through the section of the Imperial capital building dedicated to Imperial Intelligence and into the office of its local head, Gayal Tharr.

"Ah admiral, good to see you." She said, getting up and rounding her desk to greet the admiral, "I take it that the information I have provided to you has proved useful?"

"Somewhat." Admiral Vretan replied, "Though your agent's method of getting the information meant that it was somewhat out of date."

"Unfortunate." Gayal commented and she made her way to a caffeine maker and poured herself a cup, "Caf?" she asked.

"Please." The admiral replied and he looked at his aide.

"Yes sir." The aide said.

"That's two then." Admiral Vretan said.

"Excellent. Do take a seat admiral and I'll explain why I asked you here."

Admiral Vretan and his aide sat down and Gayal handed them their drinks before returning to her seat.

"Do you recall my spy reporting the location of the rebel headquarters for this sector?" she asked.

"I do." Admiral Vretan answered, "I also recalled that it turned out to be a total waste of time. My ships inspected every single jump beacon in the sector and found nothing more than a handful of outlaws and vagrants. Wherever the rebels are hiding they aren't making use of the Republic's old beacon network."

"As a matter of fact they are." Gayal said and she reached forwards to activate a holographic projector.

Instantly a three-dimensional image of a space station was projected into the air above her desk, "There you go admiral, the rebels are there."

"Do go on." Admiral Vretan said and he sipped at his drink.

"It seems that the Republic was building another jump beacon in the Shadow Region at about the time self contained shipboard nav computers became widespread. With no need for the beacon network any more they shelved the project. But the station itself had already been built, even if it had not been added to the network. My people have found a few references to it in some very old reports from some of the outlying worlds of the sector, though nothing remains in Estran's records."

"Why wouldn't it be mentioned in the capital's records?" the admiral asked.

"I think it was." Gayal replied, "But I think that all mention of it was erased by a rebel sympathiser. However, they figured without my being able to infiltrate an agent into their organisation who sent me this data from the station's own files. Including its exact location."

Gayal then smiled as both the admiral and his aide looked at one another.

"I'll need that data immediately." Admiral Vretan then said, leaning towards Gayal.

"I thought you might. I've gathered up everything we found in that droid from the station and put it on this."

And Gayal handed the admiral a mem-stik, "How do you intend to handle this?"

"We know that the rebels have several major capital ships at their disposal." The admiral replied, "And the debacle at Tarlen proved they know how to use them. A major assault will be needed, but if I just start pulling heavy units away from their regular duties then the rebels may get wind of something. I think a force using only one or two destroyers plus a number of cruisers and frigates for escorts will be suitable."

"Excellent. I'll leave you to it then admiral."

"Was your meeting Gayal productive then admiral?"

Admiral Vretan turned when he heard the question, recognising the voice.

"Ah, Moff Horatian." He replied, "Yes it was."

"I see you're planning an operation." Moff Horatian then said and he shifted his gaze to the large holographic projector that dominated the centre of the naval command centre orbiting the world of Estran. Right now it showed an image of the rebel headquarters plus several Imperial vessels, "A large one by the looks of it. Though not so large that anyone who wasn't looking for it would notice."

"That's correct sir." The admiral replied.

"So what is your plan?"

"I've diverted several lines of strike and gladiator-class cruisers from their regular patrols to a location in deep space. They'll be joining the secutor-class *Frightener* to form a task force that will assault the rebel headquarters."

Moff Horatian frowned.

"Secutor-class? But that ship's a carrier." He said.

"Yes sir, which is why I believe the rebels will be less suspicious when she disappears from her patrol. I'd like to have used Captain Naje's venator-class ships, but all three are still in dry dock after Tarlen. The *Frightener*

is the largest ship in our sector group and carries over seven hundred fighters. Combined with the squadrons carried by the cruisers we'll have more than a thousand to keep rebel fighters away from the capital ships while they deal with the space station." And Admiral Vretan pointed to the holographic image.

"What of the rebel fleet?" Moff Horatian asked, "If the ships they had at Tarlen are present they could present a threat to even the force you've assembled here."

"I expect them to flee sir. I've purposely left out any interdictors so they will have no trouble in jumping to hyperspace."

"You plan on letting them escape?"

"In the short term yes. Without their headquarters they'll lack co-ordination and a re-supply network. Its possible they may even leave the sector entirely."

"Making them someone else's problem." Moff Horatian said, a smile appearing on his face.

"That's even if they're present when we attack." The Admiral went on, "The fleet will attack as soon as all units are in position regardless of rebel dispositions."

The moff frowned again.

"That's leaving a lot to chance isn't it?"

"Not really. I've got ships from the exploration service checking out the area. They're jumping in a few light hours from the target and sneaking in at sublight. My ships will have a complete picture of what they're facing before they jump."

From his position at the peak of the dusty hill Major Jym Shrell of the Alliance to Restore the Republic peered through his macrobinoculars at the base in the valley below him. In theory it was a military installation, but it belonged to the Imperial Scout Service rather than the navy so security was not as tight. The Alliance considered it a 'soft' target, though in this case soft still meant sensor towers, armed guards and a perimeter power fence. Located within the region of the sector known as the Shadow Region, that area below the neighbouring nebula the base was relatively close to the rebel headquarters and made a tempting target for stealing starships.

"So do you think you can get in their Tayal?" he said to the young woman lay beside him.

"Easy." She replied, "I can already see the blind spots in their sensor grid and their patrols are easy to predict. But getting in isn't the problem."

"Then what is?" the man on the other side of Jym asked. This was Travis Jesler; a former imperial bounty hunter who had thrown his lot in with the rebellion when he found himself in possession of knowledge the Empire did not want him to have.

"Well we're here for the ship right?" Tayal said, pointing to the row of scout ships lined up neatly in the landing zone, "But how are we going to get them all out?"

"She does have a point major." Travis agreed, "There were only supposed to be a couple of them. I'd fly one and we'd get Lannaye here to fly the other. But there are six ships down there and they're going to come after us. They'll have four fully crewed ships against our three with no gunners and the *Scarlet Knife* isn't exactly a gunship anyway."

"Then we'll just have to sabotage the others." Jym said.

"How?" Tayal asked, "We don't have the time to be ripping control lines before they spot us and we don't have the firepower to take them out directly."

Jym sighed.

"Then we head back to the *Knife*." He said, shaking his head, "We need to report in and let headquarters know that the mission's a bust. Again."

The *Scarlet Knife* was an old barloz-class vessel that had seen much better days. Its current owner, Captain Anzar Deller a tall, dark skinned human, was a former mercenary who even with the help of his first mate Lannaye Curve was barely able to keep it running.

"Back so soon?" Anzar said when he saw Jym and the other two rebels returning from their scout mission, "I thought you were going to survey the entire base."

"We didn't need to." Jym replied, "Tayal's got the measure of their security but there are more ships than we expected. We can get in but we'd we never make it out before getting shot down."

"I don't believe it." Anzar said and he slammed a fist against the hull of his ship.

"Hey captain I just fixed that." A voice called out from inside the ship and a woman made her way down the access ramp. She stopped when she saw Jym and the others, "What's wrong?" she asked.

"There are three times as many ships as we expected." Travis told her, "So unless you can fly and fight at the same time there's no way we're getting any of them out of there."

"I warned you captain." Lannaye said looking at Anzar, "The information we had was too old."

"I'm calling it in." Jym said as he headed for the ramp.

"Another mission gone sour." Anzar muttered.

"Devid was convinced that our luck had to change eventually." Tayal said.

"Well Devid's dead isn't he?" Travis replied.

The YT-1300 class transport ship *Silver Hawk* stood in the main hangar bay of the space station that served as the rebellion's headquarters in the sector. As Shyla Nerin, the sector's head of Alliance Support Services approached the vessel she saw no signs of movement but the access ramp as down and so she began to walk up it.

"Hello?" she called out into the darkened ship's interior, "Is anyone here?"

"I'm here." Another woman's voice called out and as Shyla stepped into the *Silver Hawk's* lounge a rebel she recognised as Kara Bilstran emerged from the corridor leading to the crew cabins. Kara wore a robe and was clutching a dress in each hand.

"Not interrupting anything am I?" Shyla asked.

"Which do you think?" Kara asked, holding first one and then the other dress in front of her.

"What's the occasion?"

"Oh nothing really, but the boss promised to take me dancing a few months ago and there's another dance tonight."

"Yes, I organised it. Its for officers you know?"

"The boss is an officer. I'll be his guest and no, I'm not planning on hitting anyone. Not unless they tell me I'm not allowed in anyway." Kara said, "Now which dress?"

"Well I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news but I don't think you're going to make it. I'm here with a mission for you. Where's Vorn?"

"Visiting his little princess and Sergeant Hubby." Kara replied, "Captain Mayan's just getting out of the infirmary so Mace is with her and Tobis and the klutz are doing whatever it is they do on their dates. That leaves little old me here alone. Well not old."

"How soon can you get them back here?"

"Jeeves!" Kara yelled at the top of her voice and Shyla flinched.

"Oh yes mistress Bilstran, how may I assist you?" a gold coloured protocol droid asked as it shuffled into the lounge from the direction of the ship's cockpit.

"Shyla wants the others back here." Kara replied, "Send them a signal would you?" and then she turned around and disappeared into the corridor behind her.

"Err, where are you going?" Shyla called out after her.

"To get dressed." Kara shouted back, "I'll go on your mission but I'm not going on it naked. The boss says it distracts the others too much."

"So what's the mission?" Major Vorn Larcus III, commanding officer of the rebel field team assigned to the *Silver Hawk* asked when the entire team and ship's crew was sat in the lounge in front of Shyla.

"I sent a team out to infiltrate an Imperial base and steal us a couple of scout ships. They found the base all right but there were more ships than expected. They don't have the capability to destroy or disable the ships they can't steal and if they leave them intact without risking getting shot down by the others."

"So you want us to help steal some more?" Mace asked.

"Yes and destroy whatever's left. You can handle that can't you?" Shyla said and she looked at a young woman sat with her arm linked with that of the ship's engineer Tobis.

"Possibly." The woman replied.

"Possibly? Is that the best you can do Jaysica?" Vorn said.

"Oh come on boss," Kara added, "we all know she can destroy them. Especially if we tell her not to."

"She can do it." Vorn then said to Shyla, "So who's team are we backing up anyway?"

"I bet its Commander Kord's." Kara said and she looked at Mace, "Aren't you looking forwards to working with Inra again?" she said to him, smirking. Inra Vayne was the captain of the ship that transported Commander Kord's team, essentially Mace's opposite number and the pair detested one another.

"No it's not. The commander's team is elsewhere." Shyla answered, "You'll be supporting Major Shrell."

The rebels around the table groaned.

"What's wrong?" Shyla asked.

"Err, they don't exactly like us." Tobis said softly.

"It's not that they don't like us," Vorn corrected him, "It's just that the last time we encountered one another in the field they lost a man and they seem to have the feeling that we shouldn't have put them in the situation to begin with."

"It's her fault." Kara said, looking at Jaysica.

"It was not." Jaysica protested, "It was my sister who told the Empire we were there."

"Yes and I had to spend several hours with a rubber ball stuck in my mouth because you had to go and say hello to her in the first place." Kara snapped back.

"I wish it was still in there." Jaysica muttered.

"Right that does it." Kara exclaimed and she began to stand up.

“Sit down.” Vorn said sternly, pulling her back down then he added, “And behave the pair of you.” Then he turned back towards Shyla and said, “I’m sorry. Go on.”

“You’ll be backing up Major Shrell and his team.” Shyla repeated, “They are expecting you and Major Shrell will have tactical authority on this mission.”

“Oh this just gets better and better.” Tharun said.

2.

The *Silver Hawk* entered the atmosphere and rapidly descended. Flying at low level Mace picked his way through the planet's network of valleys until he reached the co-ordinates given to him as the landing site of the *Scarlet Knife* and upon seeing the ship he set the *Silver Hawk* down beside it. When the rebels descended the ship's access ramp they found only Tayal waiting for them, the young woman sitting at the base of the *Scarlet Knife*'s ramp.

"So you're here then." She said as she got to her feet, "Well I suppose you should come inside. The major's waiting for you."

Behind the rebels from the *Silver Hawk* an R5 astromech droid let out a short burst of chirps and whistles. "I don't know what you mean Harvey." Jeeves responded, "She seemed quite happy to me." And Harvey let out a single extended tone, "Now that was rude. You should be ashamed of yourself." Jeeves said. Vorn team followed Tayal into the other ship where they found Jym and the rest of his team waiting. Anzar and Lannaye were eating food out of foil packets while Travis focused on cleaning a blaster rifle.

"They're here at last." Tayal announced as she sat down beside Jym.

"Jym, good to see you again." Vorn said, doing his best to appear friendly.

"Major Larcus." Jym replied in a sterner tone, "Take a seat and Red here will fill you in." and he glanced at the bright red protocol droid standing quietly in the corner of the compartment, "Go ahead Red."

"Certainly Major Shrell sir." The droid replied and it took a step forwards before handing out datapads to Vorn and Mace, "As you can see from these we have already conducted a full survey of the target installation and its defences. Miss Lineer has determined that there are exploitable weaknesses in its defences that will allow us access, but the presence of more enemy vessels than accounted for is why you have been despatched to assist us."

"Which means I have command." Jym added.

"Yes, we were informed." Mace said, barely looking up from the datapad he now held.

"There look to be several different types of ship here." Vorn noted, "Do you have a preference for which ones we take?"

"That mu-class shuttle looks tempting." Kara noted, leaning in to look at Vorn's datapad.

"That ship takes two to fly." Jym said, "Lieutenant Curve and I will be taking it. Now I believe you can commit one more qualified pilot to this—"

"Two." Vorn corrected him, "Mace can fly one of the ships and Kara another."

Jym frowned.

"It is my understanding that Specialist Bilstran's flight status was revoked following her court martial." He said.

"I can still fly." Kara replied.

"Can you keep quiet when it's appropriate?" Jym said, glaring at her.

"Yes sir." Kara said, bringing her hand up to her head in a mock salute.

"If you're willing to take my advice on this Jym, you'll use her." Vorn said, "I have when it's appropriate."

Kara bit her lip.

"Yes I heard it too." Tharun whispered to her.

"Very well, the pair of them can each take one of the TIEs and Travis will take the zed ten. The other TIE and the pacifier are to be sabotaged."

Jaysica reached out and pulled Vorn's datapad closer to her so she could see the image of the Imperial scout vessels lined up.

"They're close together." She commented, "I'll have to use charges in the cockpit to destroy their control systems without risking a chain reaction. Unless we can wait until the ships we're stealing are off the ground." And she looked up at Jym.

"Charges in the cockpit will be fine. I'd rather not risk the Empire discovering anything else before we can trigger it. Now are there any more questions?"

"Just when do we start?" Tharun replied.

"Local nightfall is in three hours." Jym said, "Tayal thinks its best to wait until then."

"Sneaking through the gaps in their sensor net is straight forward enough, but it won't count for anything if the Imperials can just look outside their fence and see me."

"So you'll be making the breach then?" Mace asked her.

"She's the best qualified." Jym said, "And in all honesty, this is our show. We've spent days scouting this place out. You're just here to drive."

"Well its nice to be wanted for something." Kara said and Jym glared at her.

"I suggest you all head back to your ship." Jym went on, "Study the details we've given you and if you have any more questions you can ask them on the way."

The sun was just beginning to set when the two groups of rebels gathered outside their ships. Only Anzar and Tobis did not join them, these two would instead be piloting their own vessels back to the rebel headquarters. Or needed providing an emergency airlift to evacuate the rebels undertaking the attack on the Imperial base. Tayal had changed from the casual attire she had worn when the *Silver Hawk* had landed into a close fitting black bodyglove that possessed a hood. Her equipment was hung from various linkage points built into this.

"What's with the get up?" Kara asked.

"It's a dead suit." Tayal replied, "With this I'll be able to get right up to the perimeter fence without triggering any of the heat sensors."

"Yeah I've seen 'em used." Tharun commented, "Now I get why you were waiting for darkness. That thing should give you pretty good visual camouflage as well."

"That's the idea." Tayal said as she pulled on a set of night vision goggles and adjusted their fit.

"Enough chatter." Jym called out, "Tayal you've got point. Travis and Tharun next, make sure she's safe. The rest of you are with me. Now let's move out."

The rebels moved quickly across the barren landscape. The hills surrounding the Imperial base kept them hidden from its line of sight sensors and its non-military occupants obviously saw no need to mount any patrols or add detection systems capable of seeing over or around obstacles. Approaching the crest of the final hill Tayal dropped to the ground and crawled the last few metres, peering over the top at the base below. Behind her the other rebels remained below the peak.

"What do you see?" Jym asked.

"Pretty much the same as last time." Tayal replied, "Only fewer people moving about. I guess they all turned in early."

"More like they're off somewhere drinking." Kara said, "There won't be much else to do around here."

Jym and Vorn moved forwards and took up a position beside her.

"Certainly does look quiet enough." Vorn said softly, using his macrobinoculars, "But there's a lot of ground to cover between here and there."

Jym looked at Tayal.

"Go." He said simply. Tayal nodded and immediately began to crawl down the slope towards the base. As fast as she was able to move it was still several minutes before she came close to the power fence and halted. The fence carried a low level electrical charge designed to deter intruders, but this charge was bolstered by a detection system designed to watch for anyone attempting to scale it. Should anyone disturb the fence then the energy level within that particular section would be increased suddenly and the fence itself would become the emitter for a localised stun pulse.

Tayal dragged her fingers through the ground beside her and picked up a handful of loose dirt that she tossed towards the base of the fence. Spreading out as it fell the dust cloud produced revealed a narrow red beam running around the outside of the fence at about ankle height. Picking up a rock Tayal scraped at the ground just in front of this beam while it was still visible to her, marking its location for the others. Cautiously she then got to her feet and stepped over the beam to approach the nearest fence post. She took both her knife and its scabbard from her belt, removing the blade and then connecting it to the rigid scabbard to form a compact wire cutter that she then used to begin cutting a hole in the fence.

When she believed that the hole was large enough for even the biggest of the rebels to pass through, far larger than what she needed, she packed away the knife and crawled through the hole before darting into the shadow of the nearest structure.

"Okay I'm in." she said into her comlink, "No sign of any guards, but watch for the sensor beam. I've marked its location."

"Copy that." Jym replied, "Good work Tayal." Then he looked around at the other rebels, "Okay we move in pairs. Half of us have rifles so they each pair up with someone who's without. Lannaye you're with me, Mace go with Travis, Jaysica with Tharun and Kara with Vorn. We go one pair at a time starting with mine." And he and Lannaye promptly scabbled over the top of the hill and began to rush towards the hole in the fence.

Unlike Tayal they had no need to crawl. Tayal would provide advance warning of anyone approaching from inside the base while the other rebels would be able to provide covering fire if necessary. From his position at the top of the hill Vorn saw Jym and Lannaye leap over the sensor beam and then duck down to crawl through the hole in the fence.

"We're in." Jym signalled, "Travis you're up next."

"You know what to do?" Travis asked, looking at Mace.

"Yes, I've done this sort of thing before." Mace replied as he checked his weapon, a bulky stunner that fired a blast of expanding energy. Though designed for boarding action the weapon could be useful against any large group of individuals.

"Good. Let's move." Travis snapped and he leapt up over the top of the hill and began to run and Mace scabbled after him.

Mace and Travis were also soon leaping over the sensor beam and then making their way through the hole. Moments alter Jym signalled again.

"Jaysica and Tharun, you next." And Tharun set off.

"Hey wait for me." Jaysica called out, trying not to shout as she ran after the bigger man.

As he had done with the others Vorn watched them through his macrobinoculars until he realised that Kara had crawled up right beside him and was pressed up against him.

"What are you doing?" he asked when he looked around and saw that she was holding her recording rod, pointing the device down the hill.

"We both know the klutz is going to fall and trigger the alarm." She said, "I want to get a record of it."

"Oh really?" Vorn asked.

"I'd bet on it. In fact I do, I bet she falls and the alarm goes off."

"Fifty credits?"

"Fifty it is." Kara agreed and she and Vorn shook hands before Vorn went back to watching Jaysica and Tharun.

Ahead of Jaysica by a considerable margin Tharun ground to a halt just as he reached the beam and crouched down, his rifle raised and ready. Jaysica ran up behind him and saw the mark on the ground indicating the position of the beam, but as she looked down she caught her foot on a rock and let out a sudden squeal. However, before her fall could break the beam Tharun simply reached out and gave her and shove. The extra momentum carried her over the beam and instead she just lay face down sprawled across the ground. Tharun then simply hopped over the beam and pulled her back to her feet.

"Lose your footing there little lady?" he asked as he dragged her towards the hole in the fence.

"What the hell was that?" Jym hissed as the pair crawled through the hole and then made for the shadows.

"Well that beam wasn't very well marked." Jaysica replied, "It wasn't my fault."

Jym sighed and activated his comlink.

"Okay Vorn, just you and Kara left now." He said and he put the device away.

Up on the hilltop Kara was frowning.

"She fell." She said.

"But the alarm didn't go off." Vorn pointed out, "You bet that she'd fall and the alarm would go off. It didn't so you owe me fifty credits."

"Fine. I'll pay you when we get back. Now are we going to do this?"

"I suppose we should." Vorn replied and the pair of them began to run down the hill. Both easily cleared the sensor beam and were soon through the hole in the fence.

"That was some nice footwork there." Kara said to Jaysica.

"It wasn't my fault." Jaysica replied. Meanwhile Tharun edged closer to Vorn.

"Well?" he asked quietly.

"Fifty credits." Vorn replied, "I'll give you your cut when she pays up." And Tharun smiled and nodded.

"Well now we're all here," Jym said, "or just about anyway, " and he glanced at Jaysica who frowned, "we should get moving again. The landing strip is that way. Tayal, you've got point again."

"Hang on a moment." Vorn said as he rummaged through his pockets and he took out a pair of mem-stiks, "To speed things along I've plotted the hyperspace jumps back to headquarters and included an initial phoney jump to throw off any sensors." And he held the mem-stiks out to Lannaye and Travis. Travis took one but Lannaye just glared at him.

"I know how to plot a jump you know." She said.

"Well now you don't need to lieutenant." Vorn said.

"This is my op major." Jym said, "If Lannaye's happy calculating her own jump then I'm happy with that as well."

"Fair enough." Vorn replied, returning the other mem-stik to his pocket.

"Tayal, lead the way if you please." Jym then said.

The landing zone was a simple wide-open space that had been levelled out and covered in ferrocrete to provide a stable surface for the scoutships and assorted ground support vehicles. Watching from the shadows the rebels saw that there were in fact several figures moving about beside one of them, the pacifier-class that was to be one of the ships sabotaged.

"Looks like a late night inspection." Jym said, "Probably a crew checking their craft before taking them out tomorrow."

"Well shooting them's out of the question." Tharun said, "The noise will bring the entire security detachment running."

"Then it's fortunate we came prepared." Vorn said and he looked at Jym, "Jaysica and I have Imperial uniforms stowed. We can get close to them and take them out quietly."

“Okay do it.” Jym replied.

“Need any help boss?” Kara asked.

“No thank you.” Vorn replied as Tharun handed him the package containing the stolen uniform that he had been keeping in his backpack, “I can dress myself even in the dark.”

3.

A few minutes later with hold out blasters concealed in the pocket of their Imperial uniforms Jaysica and Vorn headed towards the crew of Imperial scouts.

There were four scouts in total, the full crew compliment of the MRX-BR Pacifier.

"Aren't these ships supposed to be fast?" Jaysica whispered as they approached it.

"Yes they are." Vorn answered, "They have almost starfighter levels of performance. If you ask me we should be taking this ship instead of one of the lone scouts."

"Then why aren't we?"

"Because Major Shrell is in charge here and I'd rather not rock the boat on this occasion. Anything I can do to calm things down between our teams is for the best as far as I'm concerned." Then Vorn called out to the scouts, "You there!" he shouted and the scouts all turned towards him.

"What is it sir?" one of them asked when they noticed the ranks badge on Vorn's chest indicating that he was a major.

"Part of the perimeter fence has gone down. Maintenance can't tell if its just a bug in the system or if its been sabotaged. Have you seen anyone around here?"

"Only you major." The scout answered and then a look of confusion appeared on his face, "In fact I don't recall seeing you around here before now. Who are you?" and he began to reach towards his pocket. Not willing to take a chance Vorn drew his weapon, pressed it against the scout's chest and fired.

"Stang!" another scout exclaimed, reaching for the blaster holstered at his waist. But before he could draw the weapon Jaysica fired, putting a blaster bolt through his skull and he too collapsed. Both rebels then swung their weapons around and took aim at the remaining scouts, both of whom just raised their hands.

"Very good gentlemen." Vorn said, "Now if you'd both just like to step behind this ship where we can't be seen from the control tower. Oh and bring those along too." And he nodded at the bodies on the ground.

Then he turned and waved towards the rest of the strike team who dashed from the shadow of the buildings and towards the parked scoutships.

"Secure them." Jym ordered, pointing to the two Imperial prisoners and Travis stepped forwards to apply binders to them both, "Okay now we all know what we're doing here so get to it. Tharun I want you to watch them, don't hesitate to shoot if they give you any trouble."

"Oh don't worry about that major." He replied, brandishing his rifle in front of the prisoners.

"Jaysica, go set the charges." Vorn ordered as Jaysica took her backpack from Mace before darting inside the pacifier.

"Okay everyone else get into these ships, we need to be out of here before anyone notices these guys are missing."

The rebels split up, two of them boarding each ship they planned on stealing while Jaysica finished setting charges in each of the others. The small amount of explosives used would be enough to destroy their internal command systems while containing the blasts entirely within the confines of the ships.

The prisoners were loaded aboard Mace's ship, with both Tharun and Jaysica when she was done setting the charges being assigned to guard them. Each of the other vessels had two rebels a piece, as had been decided earlier Jym and Lannaye took the mu-class shuttle, a variant on the common Imperial lambda-class vessel while Travis and Tayal took the zed-ten seeker, a sleek looking vessel fitted with a pair of bulbous cargo pods.

This left Kara and Vorn to take the other lone scout. Built by Santhe/Sienar systems this ship had the appearance of an oversized TIE fighter. As soon as they were inside Kara rushed to the pilot's seat and sat down before inserting the mem-stik holding navigation data into the nav computer's interface.

She frowned.

"Hey boss come take a look at this." She said.

"One moment." Vorn replied as he sealed the rear hatch and then went to see what Kara wanted, "Okay, what is it?"

"The nav computer." She replied, "I just plugged your jump data into it and it says its already got it. Well something similar anyway." And she tapped the computer's display.

"That's odd." Vorn said as he looked at the co-ordinates shown there, "Those co-ordinates are only a few light hours from headquarters."

"So if someone jumped to them and then ran silent at sublight they could get pretty close without being seen right?"

"Very. Certainly close enough to get a good look at the station and any ships nearby." Vorn answered her and he took out his comlink, adjusting its frequency to the one his team used instead of the one used by Jym's team that was the set frequency for this mission, "Mace come in."

"Go ahead major." Mace responded.

"Mace have you plugged the jump data into the nav computer yet?" Vorn asked.

"Yes just now."

"Did it report anything odd?"

"Define odd. It seemed to recognise them at first, but it turned out to be different after all. For a moment I was worried."

"Well keep worrying. Look at the older co-ordinates closely."

"Oh no." Mace said after a brief reply, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"Me too." Vorn replied, "Look, I'm going to adjust our jump slightly to bring us out close to this other co-ordinates. I want to see what's out there."

"Major Shrell won't like that boss." Kara pointed out.

"My orders were to help him steal these ships." Vorn replied, "Nobody said anything about the route we had to take back to base. Besides, I bet he and Lieutenant Curve take a slightly different one as well. Now let me see that nav computer."

It was a few minutes later, just as Vorn completed plotting the new jump that Jym signalled to the rebels in the others ships.

"Okay we're ready." He broadcast, "Let's let the Empire know we're here."

With that the rebels all began to power up their ships. The base control tower noticed the activity.

"Lieutenant Ferrick what's going on down there?" the controller signalled, believing that the scouts were responsible.

"Jaysica do it!" Mace snapped and Jaysica triggered the charges she had laid.

Now alert to the fact that the base was under attack a klaxon began to sound and the entire landing zone was lit up by floodlights. The sound of repulsorlifts filled the air as the four rebel controlled ships rose up off the ground even as their crews were rushing towards them. Unable to do anything else the Imperial scouts on the ground just looked up into the air at their ships as they disappeared into the night sky.

"Couple of contacts behind us boss." Kara said as their ship cleared the atmosphere.

"Pursuit?" Vorn asked.

"Nah. Too slow. It's just Tobis and Anzar in the *Hawk* and *Knife*."

"Are we free to jump to hyperspace yet?"

"Almost." Kara told him, "About a minute or so."

"Good. Make the jump as soon as you can."

"Okay. Then what?"

"Then we find out what's at those co-ordinate the Empire is interested in." Vorn replied.

"Yes, but it's a twenty minute flight."

"So?"

"So is that going to be one of those times you told Major Shrell about?"

"What times?"

"Those times when you find it appropriate to use me as you see fit?"

"Just fly the ship."

The lone scout came out of hyperspace in what appeared to be the middle of nowhere. They were light years away from any planetary system and a considerable distance from the rebel headquarters. But almost immediately Kara spotted something.

"Ship ahead boss," She said, "and its not one of our patrol ships either."

"Let me see." Vorn said, peering over Kara's shoulder at the control console, "Have they seen us?"

"I don't think so. They're just sat there directing their sensors at the station from the looks of it. Passive only though, so I suppose they could have seen us but think we're just another one of their own ships." Kara told him, "Looks like another pacifier. I'd recognise that fly wing configuration anywhere."

"Then we can't risk engaging it can we?" Vorn said, now looking at Kara who shook her head.

"Not in this bucket boss." She replied, "That ship's faster, more manoeuvrable and better armed than us. We may have a chance in the *Silver Hawk*, but that's only because of the turret and those new shields Mace has installed."

"Then just get us back to headquarters." Vorn said, "We have to warn them that it's a fair bet the Empire knows we're here."

Kara executed a micro jump through hyperspace that brought the lone scout out close to the rebel headquarters. Piloting an Imperial vessel Kara and Vorn were challenged immediately, a squadron of X-wing fighters zooming past.

"Lone scout this is blue leader. Identify yourself immediately."

"Captain Tarl its Major Larcus." Vorn responded when he heard the familiar if not friendly voice.

"Copy that Major, you are expected."

"Thanks. Listen captain how many ships have made it back from the mission?"

"You're the last major."

"Good, I need you to check out another contact. There's an Imperial pacifier at the co-ordinates I'm sending you. I think they're watching the station. Can you disable it? I mean disable only, I'd rather not have it shot down."

"Got it major. Consider it done."

There was a brief pause and then a rapid succession of flashes as the X-wings jumped into hyperspace.

"Think there's any chance that pacifier will do us a favour and put a torpedo through his canopy?" Kara asked as she guided the lone scout towards the station ahead of them, but Vorn just sighed and shook his head.

When the scoutship entered the station's hangar she saw the other stolen Imperial vessels clustered together and as Kara and Vorn exited the vessel they saw that the Imperial prisoners were being taken into custody by a group of fleet troopers.

"Colonel Collis!" Vorn yelled to the officer standing behind the marines. The colonel turned around and looked Vorn up and down.

"Larcus what the hell are you wearing?" he asked.

"What? Oh the uniform. I didn't have time to change on the way back." Vorn replied, "Look colonel there's an Imperial ship out there watching the station. Captain Tarl's taken his squadron out to disable it but I think you ought to get some men out there to board it."

Colonel Collis plucked his comlink from his belt.

"Aurek team to the hangar." He snapped, "I want you here with full weaponry and equipped for EVA combat in ten. Collis out." Then, without pausing to speak further with Vorn he ran across the hangar towards a row of shuttles and began yelling orders at the ground crew.

"What's this about another Imperial ship?" Mace asked as he wandered up to Vorn.

"It was waiting at those other jump co-ordinates." Vorn replied, "I think that scout base we just raided has been watching us."

"So why haven't they attacked yet?" Tharun asked as he approached after handing over the Imperial prisoners.

"Hopefully Colonel Collis and his men will bring back the crew and we can ask them." Vorn said.

"Ask what?" Jym called out as he walked over. Then he looked directly at Vorn and added, "What took you so long to get here?"

"Kara noticed an anomaly with the nav computer of the ship we took." Vorn told him, "It had already been near here so I adjusted our destination so we could check out the co-ordinates and we found another ship waiting. I've asked Captain Tarl and Colonel Collis to deal with it."

"What the hell are you playing at?" Jym snapped, "This was my mission and you should have consulted with me first."

"With respect," Vorn responded as the two officers' respective teams began to form up behind them, "all I did was vary the route we took back to the station. I might also remind you that had it been up to you the ship I was in wouldn't even have been in our hands. Now perhaps you should get that damned chip off your shoulder and quit acting like we're out to get you."

For a moment it appeared that Jym was actually about to strike Vorn, he glared at him and clenched his fists. Behind Vorn Kara, Mace and Tharun all edged closer to their leader, ready to support him if necessary.

"Major Shrell!" a gruff voice called out across the hangar and both rebel units looked around to see a cluster of mon calamari heading towards them. At the front of these was Lieutenant Colonel Shintal Sallir, the team's leader. The highest-ranking member of any rebel field team in the sector he had overall command of all such units.

"Yes colonel?" Jym replied, relaxing.

"Major I need your report on the mission."

"Of course, I was just—"

"I know, but I'd rather do this now. Before we have more pressing matters to deal with."

"Yes sir." Jym said and then he looked back at Vorn, "We'll finish this later." He hissed before he and his unit headed away with the mon calamari.

"Tobis," Vorn said as he watched them leave, "I want you and Harvey to help me take a look at that ship Kara and I flew here."

"Err, right." Tobis responded, then after a brief pause he added, "Why?"

"Because I want to know where else it's been."

"Ahh, err, major." Tobis said, looking back over his shoulder while sitting in the lone scout's pilot's seat, "I think Harvey may have something."

The astromech droid was connected to the vessel's computer and was busy sorting through the vast log of navigational data it held.

"Show me." Vorn said as he joined Tobis at the front of the ship.

Harvey let out a short series of chirps and the droid projected a hologram of a region of space into the air. Set between the stars, located far from any place where commercial shipping could stumble across it was a point marked by a pulsing light.

"This ship as has visited that location several times recently." Tobis said, "The log suggests that it headed there after spending some time observing the station here and from there it headed back the base we stole it from."

"So they were checking in with someone." Vorn said, "Where is this?"

Tobis looked back at the ship's nav computer.

"Here." He told Vorn, pointing to a list of spatial co-ordinates.

"That's in the Heart." Vorn said referring to the central region of the sector, located between the Shadow Region and the Trade Corridor where the capital world of Estran was located.

Tobis smiled nervously.

"Yes sir." He said.

"We need to go and take a look." Vorn said and he began to search through his pockets, looking for his comlink, "Mace, are you there?" he asked.

"Right here major. I'm in the infirmary."

"Sorry to disturb you. How is Mallia?"

"I'm fine, but they won't let me leave." A woman's voice called out in the background and Vorn smiled.

"Well treat it as a well deserved holiday." Vorn replied, then he addressed Mace again, "Look Mace Tobis has pulled some more jump data from the lone scout-"

A sudden coarse sound from Harvey interrupted Vorn at this point, the droid taking offence to having its efforts overlooked.

"I'd like to go and take a look." Vorn added, frowning at the droid, "How soon can the *Silver Hawk* be ready?"

"I can be there in a few minutes." Mace said.

"We can be there in a few minutes." Mallia added, "Just give me chance to get dressed."

"Oh no," Mace told her, "until the doctors say otherwise you're staying here – Ow!" then the channel went dead."

"Mace is on his way." Vorn said to Tobis, "Can you have Harvey copy those jump co-ordinates and get them loaded into the *Silver Hawk's* nav computer? I need to go and round up the others."

4.

Expensive looking clothing hung from every conceivable location in the room where Tharun sat eating. The small table at which he sat had a single candle placed in the middle and there was a second chair opposite his own.

"Why now daddy?" The woman addressing Vorn as he stood in the doorway was his daughter and also Tharun's wife Lyssa, "I worked really hard to get everything I needed for this meal."

"It's really good." Tharun chipped in, still chewing a mouthful of food and he raised a wine glass before taking a sip.

"Not with your mouth full Tharun." Lyssa said.

"Sorry." Tharun said after swallowing what he was eating. Then Lyssa looked back at Vorn, "What do you need him for that justifies ruining my romantic dinner?" she demanded.

"Well, I'm not exactly sure. But there are some jump co-ordinates in deep space that—"

"Deep space daddy? Tharun's a soldier, not a spacer."

"I know, but I don't know what we'll be facing and I want him there with us."

Tharun got up from the table and then bent down to pick up his rifle and armour from beside the chair. He walked to the door and kissed Lyssa on the cheek as he passed her.

"Sorry honey but I've got to go." He said.

"Well it's not fair." Lyssa commented, folding her arms and glaring at Vorn.

"I'll have him back soon I promise." He said.

"So how did the major's little princess take it?" Kara asked Tharun as she stood at the door of his cabin and watched him stow his weapons and armour.

"Badly." He replied, "She'd gone to a lot of effort for dinner."

"Wow, I never pictured her doing anything for anyone but herself."

"Yeah well you don't know her then do you?" Tharun replied, pushing past Kara and returning to the *Silver Hawk's* lounge where the rest of the team were waiting.

"Ahh good Kara," Vorn said, "I want you in the turret. This is only a short hop and we may encounter enemy ships as soon as we exit hyperspace."

"One little cannon's hardly going to scare anyone." Kara commented.

"No but its all we've got." Mace said, "If we do run into trouble we'll be relying on the shield while the major plots a jump out of there."

"You're just itching to try out that new shield aren't you?" Kara replied.

"Well you and Jaysica suffered so much to install it." Tharun said with a smirk.

"Only because the klutz left the refresher tank full." Kara said, "It took me three showers to get the stench off." The she looked at Vorn, "That's your fault boss."

"Why me?" Vorn asked.

"Because you refuse to help me scrub myself down when I asked you to. Jaysica had Tobis to help her despite being so small. All of her parts are easier to reach."

"Well that just goes to show Tobis likes me more than the major likes you." Jaysica commented, "Besides it was you that unhooked the line."

"Just get in the turret." Vorn said to Kara and she saluted him.

"Sure boss, I love it when you're strict." She said, heading towards the turret access ladder.

Vorn then looked at Jaysica and Tobis.

"And we need you two to monitor the shield, just in case anything goes wrong. This could be its first field test after all."

"Come on Tobis." Jaysica said with a smile and she took Tobis by the hand as she led him towards the cockpit.

"I guess that just leaves me then." Tharun said.

"Just make sure all of the small arms are prepped." Vorn said, "If we get boarded I want us ready."

"Because the six of us can easily fight off the stormtrooper regiment a star destroyer carries." Mace added sarcastically.

Just as Vorn had said the trip through hyperspace was a short one, the path was clear of major obstacles creating gravity wells that Mace had to avoid and it was mere minutes before the *Silver Hawk* was ready to drop back out of hyperspace.

"Be ready with that shield as soon as we're back in realspace." Mace said to Tobis without looking round to where the engineer sat.

"Yes captain." He replied simply and he extended an arm to the controls set into the wall beside him.

The bright tunnel of hyperspace suddenly gave way to realspace and both Mace and Vorn gasped.

"Oh kriff!" Mace exclaimed, "Get that shield up!" and he threw the *Silver Hawk* into a sudden dive to avoid the massive craft right in front of them.

Possessing the triangular shape common to larger Imperial ships of the line the vessel that appeared to be racing past the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit canopy as the relatively miniscule transport flew beneath it was almost half as long again as an Imperial-class star destroyer and was about as wide at its widest point as it was long. Passing underneath the warship allowed the rebels in the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit and turret to see the multiple hangars located ventrally and when Mace reached the far side of the vessel he pulled up, giving them a view of the twin command towers located central on its dorsal surface and surrounded by weapons batteries.

"It's a secutor!" Kara exclaimed over the intercom from the turret, "What's a secutor-class doing out here?"

"Acting as a flagship it would seem." Vorn responded, "Look right ahead." And sure enough just coming into view were the wedge shapes of gladiator-class ships and the ovals of strike-class ships, all medium cruisers much larger than the *Silver Hawk* but still dwarfed by the massive star destroyer.

"Unidentified transport, heave to and prepare to be boarded!" the signal came from one of the Imperial ship's but it was not clear which one.

"Not likely." Mace said then he looked at the control console and added, "Tobis we're that damn shield?"

"Oh, err, right." Tobis replied and he activated the shield. Immediately the lights across the ship dimmed slightly and Vorn glared at Mace.

"Its just teething trouble." He said and he banked sharply.

"Hey what's going on in here?" Tharun called out as he appeared in the cockpit doorway, "First your throwing the ship about like mad and then the lights go - Oh stang." And he stared open mouthed at the star destroyer.

"Boss we've got incoming." Kara reported and Vorn looked at the sensor panel.

"I see them, looks like a flight of interceptors. Kara deal with them while I plot us a jump out of here."

"Oh sure, I'll just ask them to go away." Kara replied briefly and then there was the sound of the turret opening fire.

"Where are we going to go?" Jaysica asked nervously.

"We can't go straight back to headquarters." Mace said.

"I know." Vorn replied as there was a flash of weapons fire against the shield outside the cockpit, "I'm setting a course for Tarlen."

"Tarlen? Why Tarlen?" Jaysica asked.

"Because its close by." Vorn replied, "But I'll have us drop out of hyperspace about a parsec short. Then we can warn headquarters, they need to know about this."

"Anytime now would be good." Tharun commented from the doorway.

"Almost there." Vorn said, "Mace, keep us away from that star destroyer. If they grab us in a tractor beam we're done for."

"Do we have a lock yet?" the *Frightener's* most senior officer asked his bridge crew.

"Not yet admiral." Came the reply from one of the crew pits.

"Our fighters report being fired upon sir." Another crewman reported.

"A rebel scoutship perhaps?" the admiral's deputy, technically the ship's captain responded.

"Possibly." The admiral replied, "But it could be a smuggling vessel. Either way I want that ship stopped. The mere fact that it's firing on our fighters tells us its up to no good."

Then as the admiral and captain looked out of the bridge's forward viewports there was a sudden and brief flash of light from the direction of the *Silver Hawk*. The ship itself had not been visible to the officers at this distance but they knew that the helmsman had been steering towards it.

"Admiral the ship no longer appears on our scopes."

"Track their exit vector!" the admiral barked, "I want to know where they went."

"It looks like Tarlen sir."

"Tarlen?" the admiral repeated and then he strode towards the rear of the bridge, "Someone get me a line to Fleet Admiral Vretan." He ordered.

"Its possible the rebels are alerted to our presence." The holographic image of the admiral reported to Fleet Admiral Vretan, "A light freighter dropped out of hyperspace close to us and then withdrew before we could intercept it."

"Did you calculate its heading Admiral Black?" Admiral Vretan asked.

"The Tarlen system sir. I'd like permission to bring up the time of the attack."

"Hmm." Admiral Vretan replied, "I was hoping to transfer some more ships to you first. If you run into the rebel's entire fleet out there you could take heavy losses."

"I am aware of that sir."

"Well hold on for now. Wait until you get the next surveillance package and if the odds look good you may attack at your discretion admiral. In the mean time I'll have Admiral Trell's heavy squadron move to Tarlen, that should put them close to you if you do need reinforcements without alerting the rebels and I'll have Admiral Hall and the *Horrific* on standby to reinforce you if the scout reports a heavy rebel presence beforehand."

"Thank you sir. Admiral Black out." And the hologram faded away as Admiral Black stepped out of shot. Aboard the *Frightener* the admiral looked at his deputy.

"Put the fleet on alert." He said, "And let me know as soon as that scout reports in."

Shyla was waiting when the *Silver Hawk* returned the headquarters' hangar.

"Vorn!" she called out as his team disembarked from the ship.

"Ah, she's stayed up to wait for him." Tharun commented, glancing at Mace, "Must be love eh captain?"

"How can I help you Shyla?" Vorn asked.

"That transmission you sent has ruffled a lot of feathers Vorn. There's a meeting on now to formulate plan. You're to join it, you and Mace."

"Who else is there?" Mace asked.

"Everyone with a command." Shyla replied.

5.

As far as Mace and Vorn could tell Shyla had been telling the truth when she had said that everyone with a command was at the meeting. There were a few officers missing owing to there being on assignment away from headquarters, but most of the field team commanders and warship captains were present. Vorn even noticed a handful of privateers had been included. Mace on the other hand spotted that Mallia had been allowed out of the infirmary and he headed towards her, followed by Vorn while Shyla instead headed towards the front row.

"Thanks or getting me out of sick bay." Mallia whispered as the pair sat down next to her.

"We didn't actually arrange for an Imperial fleet to be on hand you know." Vorn replied, also keeping his voice low.

"Shush major." Mace whispered, "This could count as something nice I've done for her." And he looked at Mallia and grinned, "So what have we missed?" he added.

"The general has just filled us in on how you discovered the Imperial squadron in deep space." Malia replied.

"I'll now turn over to Admiral Aphanar." The tall dark skinned human who had been addressing the meeting said and he stepped back as a female mon calamari in a fleet uniform stepped forwards to take his place.

"Thank you General Kain." She said and then she addressed the gathered officers, "As you can see from the data obtained by Major Larcus' unit the Empire has been able to divert a substantial number of ships without our noticing. Additionally not long before the start of this meeting I received word that the tector-class star destroyer *Horrific* will be joining it within the next twenty-four hours. This will represent a level of firepower that we cannot repel. It is my opinion that we must evacuate this base."

"That's almost a hundred thousand people." Captain Tarl said.

"The *Trading Dream* can take on far more than that number." A neimoidian fleet officer replied. The *Trading Dream* was an old Lucrehulk-class battleship that had fought as part of the Trade Federation fleet before the Clone Wars. While it was a capable warship it also provided the local Alliance forces with the bulk of their transport capability.

"We'll need time to arrange an evacuation captain." Shyla said, "We're talking about a lot of personnel and equipment too valuable to abandon."

"I'm afraid that full evacuation is out of the question." This came from a kaminoan, his long neck making him stand out amongst the crowd.

"Doctor Na, could you explain?" General Kain asked.

"I currently have fourteen patients undergoing treatment that cannot be interrupted without putting their lives at risk. I estimate it will be two to three weeks before I can clear the last of them to be moved."

"I don't see the Empire waiting that long doctor." The general said.

"Even so, I will not risk the life of a single patient." Doctor Na replied.

"How is having them blown up going to help them?" Colonel Collis asked from the front of the crowd.

"An evacuation is our only hope." Admiral Aphanar said, "I will keep my entire battlegroup here to provide protection against any advanced force the Empire launches against us, but they cannot remain to fight their entire fleet."

"I must protest-" Doctor Na began, but he was interrupted by the general.

"It has been decided." He said, "An evacuation is to begin immediately. Captain Kaaro will dock the *Trading Dream* with the station and other ships will take on passengers and cargo via shuttle. Now I'll let Colonel Ergard explain our destination." And the general gave way to a bald headed man who's uniform looked to have seen better days. As he stepped forwards the room's holoprojector displayed an image of a planet.

"This world is habitable," the colonel explained, "though it is somewhat cold. We'll be establishing a base in the equatorial region where the temperature remains above freezing for most of the year. Though I still advise everyone to pack warm."

Mallia leant over to Mace and whispered in his ear.

"I guess this means I won't be wearing that swimsuit for a while then." And Mace's face fell.

"We're just running away?" Kara said, staring at Vorn in disbelief as he and Mace explained to the rest of their unit that the station was being evacuated.

"Err, why not just-" Tobis began.

"We can't stand and fight." Vorn said, focusing his attention on Kara.

"Yeah, you saw the size of that fleet." Mace added, "And intel suggests that more Imperial ships could be on the way."

"Ahh, well we could-" Tobis said.

"Intel suggests?" Tharun interrupted, "Couldn't they be more certain?"

"The intelligence is good enough to convince the admiral." Vorn said.

"But if we were to—" Tobis said.

"Face it," Mace said, "we're leaving this place behind."

"Why not just move the station?" Tobis yelled and everyone stared at him, "Sorry." He muttered.

"How would we move the station?" Kara asked.

"Stations do tend to be stationary lad." Tharun added, "I think that's where the name comes from."

"If Tobis says it can be done then it can be." Jaysica said.

"Go on." Vorn said looking at Tobis.

"Well the Trading Dream has large scale tractor beams mounted on the tips of its cargo arms," Tobis began, "and the gap between the arms is just about big enough to fit the central core of the station in. If we braced it with beams welded into place and then used the tractor beams to anchor it firmly then the *Trading Dream* should be able to carry the station through hyperspace. For a while at least."

"That may not get us far." Kara commented.

"It wouldn't have to." Mace told her, "Even a few parsecs would get us clear."

"We need to see the general." Vorn said, "He has to hear this."

"Let's make this quick." General Kain said as Vorn entered his office accompanied by Tobis and the neimoidian Captain Kaaro.

"Indeed." Captain Kaaro said, "I am needed aboard my ship."

"Well if Tobis' idea works your ship will save us all." Vorn said, "Including those that Doctor Na doesn't want moved." Then he looked at Tobis, "Go on." He said.

"Ahh, err, well its just that we can use the engines of the *Trading Dream* to move the station through hyperspace."

"Explain corporal." The general said, staring at Tobis.

Tobis held out his datapad so that both the general and Captain Kaaro could see the display that showed a rough sketch showing the station placed between the cargo arms of the *Trading Dream*.

"Err, well, like this." Tobis said nervously, "By linking the station to the *Trading Dream* like so and using the ship's tractor beams to strengthen the link we can move the station somewhere safe."

"What would that do to the Trading Dream itself?" General Kain asked.

"Err, well it may burn out the hyperdrive after a while. But we'd be able to get back to realspace before that happened."

"This is intolerable!" Captain Kaaro snapped, "To have my ship—"

"You'd still have the backup hyperdrive." Vorn interrupted, "Until we can repair the primary one, its not like your ship would be immobilised."

"Even so general, I must—"

"How long would this take?" General Kain asked Tobis, ignoring the captain's protests for now.

"Ahh, err, umm, about six to eight hours."

"General that is too long." Captain Kaaro said, "If the Empire arrived at any time during that my ship would be helpless and the admiral has already said that our ships are to withdraw as soon as any major force arrives."

"We'll just have to delay them then." Vorn said.

"And how do you intend to do that major?" General Kain asked.

"We'll blow up that secutor-class ship." Vorn said, "Its obviously their command ship, so without it their force will be disorganised."

"Do you have a plan to do this?" the general asked.

"My team is working on it right now general."

"Good, then I'll hear it twenty minutes. Now get back to your ships and Captain Kaaro begin preparations to establish a stable connection between your ship and this station."

"Okay this is the situation," Vorn said to the rest of the team back on the *Silver Hawk*, "we have fifteen minutes to come up with a way of blowing up a star destroyer. Any ideas?"

"Ooh, ooh, me sir." Kara said, her arm in the air and with a large smile on her face she exclaimed, "We assign Jaysica to it."

"That could work." Tharun said.

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

"We'll need a scoutship." Vorn said as he stood in front of General Kain with both Kara and Tobis, "I'd rather have a pacifier like the one Colonel Collis' men seized, but from what I heard that's somewhat shot up."

"Correct." General Kain replied, "The crew had chance to pretty much scuttle it before the colonel's SpaceOps troopers boarded it."

"Well one of the lone scouts will have to do." Vorn said.

"But how do you intend to use it to destroy a star destroyer?" the general asked.

"Firstly as an Imperial vessel it will hopefully be able to get us aboard that star destroyer," Vorn explained, "and after that we'll blow it up inside the hangar bay. After getting off the ship ourselves of course."
"So that's it? But what will you use to destroy the scoutship that will be powerful enough to take out the star destroyer? We don't have enough baradium to fill the hold of a lone scout and conventional explosives won't cut it."

"No way I'm flying a ship filled with baradium anyway." Kara muttered.

"We'll be using the ship's hyperdrive sir." Vorn told the general and he looked at Tobis, "Go on, it was your idea."

"Oh, err, well." Tobis stammered as the general looked in his direction, "You see we can't use the ship's sublight drives because that would require a prolonged build up of energy and the Imperials would easily notice that they were running. But the hyperdrive is designed to channel large amounts of energy rapidly. If we trigger the hyperdrive inside the hangar then its emergency systems will cut in and block the formation of the hyperspace portal. Normally the energy released would be dumped into hyperspace, but by sabotaging the safety systems we can stop that and the energy will be released into the hangar."

"Enough energy to rip the guts out a star destroyer." Vorn said.

"Especially when all that fuel and munitions stored there get caught up in the blast." Kara added with a grin.

"So the three of you will be going?" General Kain asked.

"There'll be four of us." Vorn answered, "Tharun, err, Sergeant Verser will accompany us as well as protection just in case we get rumbled by the Empire. Kara will fly us there and back, I'll navigate and Tobis will modify the hyperdrive once we're inside the star destroyer's hangar. We'll need some uniforms."

The general smiled.

"Draw whatever you need from stores." He said.

"Take care of yourself." Lyssa said, embracing Tharun and then she looked into the scoutship where Kara was sat in the pilot's seat, "Why is she flying daddy?" she asked, "Isn't Captain Grayle your pilot? I thought she was grounded."

"Kara is an excellent pilot dear," Vorn said to his daughter, "and if we fail then the *Silver Hawk* will be needed to help with the evacuation so he's staying here."

"But we aren't." Kara called out, "Now can we get moving boss?"

"Of course." Vorn said, "Tharun, get in and we can be leaving."

Tharun kissed Lyssa and then boarded the scoutship.

"I still don't get why you stay with her." Kara said to him as the hatch closed.

"At least I've got someone waiting for me." Tharun replied.

There was the sound of repulsorlift engines activating and the scoutship rose off the deck. Kara turned it towards the hangar bay door and accelerated into space. Moments later there was a flash as the ship entered hyperspace.

6.

Once again the trip through hyperspace was brief and before long the scoutship returned to realspace to find the ominous form of the star destroyer floated in space ahead of it.

"Scout ship trill herf xesh," a communication from the star destroyer stated, "follow beacon to bay one one three eight."

"Copy that control." Vorn replied, "We're on our way in."

"Admiral the scoutship has arrived." The captain announced.

"Excellent." Admiral Black replied, "Have the crew report to me immediately, I want a personal briefing on the status of the rebel base."

"Of course sir." The captain replied before striding away.

There was a dull 'thump' as the scout ship touched down.

"We're down boss." Kara said.

"Yeah, I think they'll have heard that one up on the bridge." Tharun said as he inserted a rifle into a bag. This was not his heavy Blastech A-280 but the more compact Imperial issue E-11 that he had leant to Vorn for the raid on the scout base. With its stock folded the weapon fit neatly inside the bag without giving its presence away.

"Any landing you can walk away from is a good one." Kara said.

"Never mind that now." Vorn said and he looked at Tobis, "Okay Tobis get started on the hyperdrive." And he opened the hatch. As it dropped open Vorn froze when he saw an Imperial officer with a captain's rank badge on his chest standing on the deck and staring at him.

"I'm Captain Rick." The officer announced, "Admiral Black wants an immediate report from you."

"Of course." Vorn replied, "Can I have a few minutes to get the data from our flight transferred to a mem-stik?"

"Now major." Captain Rick said, "You and your crew."

"Of course, if it's urgent." Vorn said and he looked around at the other rebels, all in Imperial uniform, "Come along, the admiral wants to see us."

Captain Rick led the rebels from the hangar deck and towards a turbolift cluster.

"The admiral is eager to get information regarding the rebels' fleet disposition." He said as he pressed the button to summon a turbolift. With his back to the rebels he did not notice as Tharun looked about to check that they were not being observed and then slipped the blaster rifle from his bag. Just as the turbolift door opened he brought the butt of the weapon down on the base of Captain Rick's skull.

The captain let out a grunt as he collapsed and Kara delivered a kick to his unconscious form to get him inside the turbolift before the doors shut.

"Okay let's move." Vorn said, turning back towards the hangar, "Tharun protect Tobis while he modifies the hyperdrive on the scout. Kara come with me to find a suitable getaway ship."

"Admiral!" the cry came from a stormtrooper positioned outside the bridge by the turbolifts. Admiral Black turned to see what the fuss was about to see a pair of crewmen helping Captain Rick out of the turbolift, the officer rubbing the back of his skull.

"The scout crew sir." Captain Rick said when he saw the admiral approaching, "They jumped me."

"Sound the alarm." Admiral Black ordered, "I want them found before they do whatever they came here to do."

"You think they have a specific target sir?" Captain Rick asked.

"I do." The admiral replied, "Don't you?"

"Well I suppose you don't sneak aboard a star destroyer without some sort of cunning plan."

Kara and Vorn walked calmly through the *Frightener's* vast hangar. Row after row of TIE fighters hung from the ceiling but these were unsuitable, not only did they carry only a single crewman each but they lacked the hyperdrives needed to let the rebels return to their headquarters. However, a ship the size of a secutor-class star destroyer carried more than just fighters.

"Boss, skiprays." Kara said and she nodded towards a row of craft with fish-shaped hulls that were somewhat larger than the TIE fighters hanging from the ceiling.

"Excellent." Vorn said, smiling, "Four man crew and hyperdrive capable with excellent sublight speed. Exactly what we need."

"Not to mention kick ass firepower." Kara added and she headed for the nearest skipray blastboat. Meanwhile Vorn took out his comlink.

"Tharun," he said softly as he followed Kara, "can you read me?"

"Right here major." Tharun's voice replied.

"There are skipray blastboats towards the front of the hangar. As soon as Tobis is done get up here."

"Got it major." Tharun said and then there was the blaring of an alarm.

"Think that's for us boss?" Kara asked.

"Unless it's the dinner bell." Vorn replied.

Tobis had removed a single panel from the interior of the lone scout and was examining the machinery behind it carefully when the alarm sounded.

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Tharun said and he glanced down at his rifle, "How long until you're done there lad?"

"Err," Tobis replied and he reached into the machinery and disconnected a single component, "Done it." He said

"What? That's it?"

"Err, well yeah. The flight controls were rigged before we left headquarters and all I had to do to stop the safety systems dumping the energy from the hyperdrive into hyperspace was break the circuit."

"Well okay then lad. Follow me." Tharun told Tobis and he darted out of the scoutship, holding the rifle beneath the bag still slung over his shoulder.

Kara took a few moments to familiarise herself with the controls of the skipray. Though larger than the starfighters she had trained to fly and far more spacious inside it operated in a similar way and before long she began to bring the skipray's systems on line.

"Won't they notice what you're doing?" Vorn asked.

"Over that racket from the alarms? I doubt it boss. But they will sooner or later so you may want to sit down beside me."

"What for?"

"It's the navigator's seat." Kara told him and Vorn sat down and began programming the hyperspace jump back to the rebel headquarters into the nav computer.

Tharun and Tobis did their best to keep to the edge of the hangar where the servicing equipment for the vessels in the hangar offered them cover. The deck crews continued to work even as the alarm sounded, ignoring the rebels. However, a group of black uniformed fleet troopers emerged from a nearby doorway.

"You there." The officer called out when he saw the two rebels, "What's your operating number?"

Tharun reacted immediately, letting the empty bag drop to the deck and raising his rifle. Before the startled officer could do anything Tharun opened fire, sending a stream of energy bolts into the group of soldiers.

"Run!" he yelled at Tobis as the surviving fleet troopers ducked back through the doorway, drawing their blasters.

Tobis drew his own blaster and with Tharun he fired at the troopers as they both ran towards the row of skipray blastboats.

At the sound of gunfire from outside the ship both Kara and Vorn stopped what they were doing and looked at one another.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Kara said and she began to speed up the activation of the skipray while Vorn got up and rushed to the hatch.

The sound of the skipray's engines coming to life finally revealed what the rebels were doing and a senior crewman strode towards the ship to challenge them.

"What the hell are you doing?" he yelled at Vorn.

"Stealing this ship." He replied and he pulled his holdout blaster from his pocket. Unarmed, the crewman dived aside and rolled behind a bulky loading droid. Vorn then looked towards Tharun and Tobis as they ran towards him, "Hurry!" he yelled.

As the other two rebels reached the skipray Vorn helped pull them aboard.

"Take the rear seats." Vorn said, sliding the hatch shut and sealing it, "I've got the front one."

"Boss we've got company." Kara called out from the front of the skipray and she pointed through the viewport to a large group of fleet troopers and stormtroopers charging towards them. There were flashes of red as they began to open fire. Kara flicked a switch and there was a brief flash of white as the skipray's shields came up.

"Okay let's get out of here." Vorn said as he sat down and fastened his harness.

"Sure thing boss." Kara said and she pulled back on the control column.

Naval personnel and stormtroopers dived to the deck as the skipray began to move, the wings at the rear of the ship rotating from the horizontal landing position to the vertical flight position and making the ship appear even more fishlike.

"Hang on!" Kara exclaimed and the skipray shot forwards and then dived down to pass through the shield holding the atmosphere in the hangar.

Already warned by the star destroyer, the nearby fighter patrols closed fast on the skipray and began to fire. "Tobis, trigger the hyperdrive." Vorn ordered and Tobis took out his comlink. The device was set to a different channel than the one the unit typically used and Tobis did hold it to his mouth when he activated it, instead transmitting a simple 'ping' directly to the lone scout they had arrived in.

Inside the hangar the lone scout's engines came to life when the signal from Tobis was received. The hyperdrive powered up and attempted to open a portal into hyperspace. However, surrounded by the mass of the star destroyer the attempt failed and the ship's computer aborted the process. But the engines had already generated immense amounts of energy that had to be channelled somewhere. Unable to use the unstable portal to dispose of it the unwanted energy remain trapped within the hyperdrive, causing it to massively overheat and melt several components before it exploded.

The blast vaporised not only the lone scout but also everything within a thirty-metre radius, while the immense heat travelled much further, burning crewmen and triggering munitions.

From their position on the primary bridge Admiral Black and Captain Rick felt the deck beneath them shudder.

"What was that?" the admiral said, but before Captain Rick could answer him through the viewport he saw the front of his ship explode, the hull peeling back as the destruction spread. He barely had time to take into account what was happened before it reached the bridge and the admiral's world ended in a brilliant flash of white.

Crewmen applauded as Kara, Tharun, Tobis and Vorn disembarked from the skipray on the hangar deck of the rebel headquarters.

"Excellent work major. We'll be ready to move the station in under three hours and thanks to you we can assume that the Empire won't be bothering us before then." General Kain said, shaking Vorn's hand as he did so and then he looked at Tobis, "And excellent work corporal." He added, "Or should I say sergeant? Your excellent thinking has not only saved our headquarters but also helped destroy an enemy capital ship. I think a promotion is in order don't you?"

"Ah, well, err." Tobis replied.

"He does general." Mace said, stepping out of the crowd.

Jaysica also pushed her way forwards, darted past the general to embrace Tobis.

"Oh Tobis that's wonderful!" she exclaimed.

Further away, not part of the crowd Major Jym Shrell and his unit watched the celebrating.

"That was our mission and they get all the glory." Tayal said.

"I can't watch any more of this poodoo." Anzar added and he turned to leave.

"Wait for me." Tayal said, following him.

"You're quiet major." Lannaye commented.

"Very quiet." Travis added.

For a few moments more Jym just stared at Vorn without him noticing then without a word he turned and followed Anzar and Tayal from the hangar.

"So what happened?" Moff Horatian asked as Fleet Admiral Vretan and Gayal Tharr stood in front of his desk.

"The intelligence was good." Gayal said first.

"Yes it was." Admiral Vretan added, "But it seems that the rebels were able to sabotage a ship inside the *Frightener's* hangar bay, causing the destruction of that vessel. The other ships' commanders believed that it may be a prelude to an assault and so took up defensive formations and held their positions. By the time the *Horrific* arrived and Admiral Hall ordered the attack on the rebel headquarters it was gone."

"Gone? Gone how?" the moff asked and Admiral Vretan and Gayal glanced at one another.

"It would seem that the rebel headquarters possesses hyperspace capability sir." The admiral said, "Intelligence's agent missed that."

Gayal frowned.

"Now if I have your permission to leave there's something I need to attend to." Admiral Vretan added and Moff Horatian nodded.

"Yes I'm done with you both for now." He said.

Standing in front of a viewport on the orbiting fleet headquarters Fleet Admiral Vretan looked out at the allegiance-class battlecruiser *Pride Of The Empire*.

"Admiral Sayer reporting as ordered sir." An officer said from beside him, saluting. Admiral Vretan smiled as he returned the salute.

"Congratulations on your promotion admiral." He replied.

"Thank you sir, I must admit I was somewhat surprised. I had expected you to pick someone better, err, well-"
"Connected? Why? Your line performed well at Tarlen and I want good people where they can do the most good. In this case there." And he pointed to the battlecruiser. The ship was the same length as the destroyed secutor-class *Frightener*, but unlike that ship the *Pride Of The Empire* was purpose built for ship to ship engagements, lacking hangar space entirely and mounting half as many guns again as an Imperial-class star destroyer, "The *Pride Of The Empire* is yours to command admiral. You've got Admiral Black's battle squadron now and I want you to use it to hunt down every last rebel in the sector."