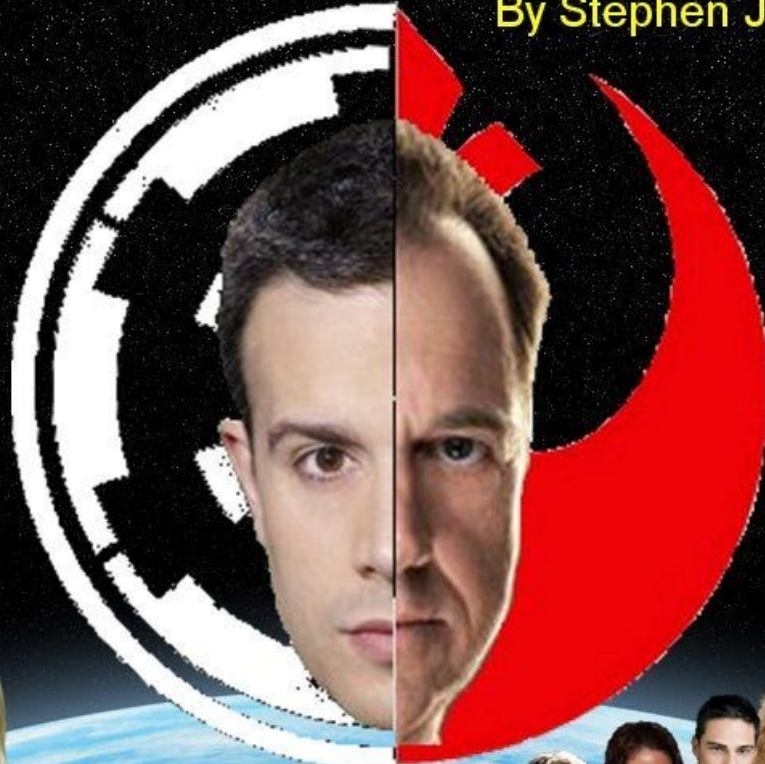


STAR WARS

9-07: The Bigger They Are

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 MAGE GRAYLE, CAPTAIN OF THE FREIGHTER THE *SILVER HAWK* TAKE THE FIGHT TO THE EMPIRE.

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

TITLE

THE EMPIRE IS IN RETREAT BUT AN ALLEGIANCE-CLASS BATTLECRUISER LIKE THE *PRIDE OF THE EMPIRE* CAN STILL LAY WASTE TO ENTIRE SQUADRONS OF ALLIANCE CAPITAL SHIPS. KNOWING THAT DESTROYING THIS VESSEL IS ESSENTIAL TO DRIVING THE EMPIRE FROM THE SECTOR A SMALL TEAM LED BY VORN LARCUS IS SENT TO SABOTAGE IT...

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

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1.

The four Imperial cruisers were heavily out gunned by the Alliance battlegroup that was built around a pair of MC-80 cruisers supported by a number of frigates and corvettes as well as numerous starfighter squadrons. Two of the Imperial capital ships were already burning and few of their own TIE fighters remained. However, before the Alliance vessels could destroy the entire Imperial line there was the flash of light produced by a vessel exiting hyperspace and a massive triangular vessel almost twice the length of the mon calamari carriers appeared. This was followed by three more such flashes as a trio of much smaller boxlike escort carriers also dropped out of hyperspace and began to disgorge their fighters.

"All craft prepare to retreat!" Rear Admiral Aphanar exclaimed as the newly arrived allegiance-class battlecruiser opened fire, its turbolasers slamming into the admiral's own flagship and making it shudder, "Our cruisers can't repel firepower of that magnitude."

"Yes admiral, preparing to jump to hyperspace." one of the other mon calamari on the bridge responded. Returning fire on the battlecruiser to no effect, the admiral's flagship began to turn towards open space so that it could jump into hyperspace more easily. As the admiral watched through the bridge viewport she saw one rebel ship after another vanish into hyperspace ahead of her own until all of a sudden the stars outside blurred and her flagship entered hyperspace as well, leaving the Imperial warships far behind.

"Contact headquarters as soon as we exit hyperspace." Admiral Aphanar ordered, "Tell them that we were engaged by the *Pride of the Empire* and were forced to withdraw. Again."

A hologram of the allegiance-class *Pride of the Empire* floated in mid air as Admiral Aphanar joined General Syres Kain, the commander of Alliance forces in the sector, Colonel Max Collis of Alliance Special Forces and Lieutenant Geran Pay of Alliance Intelligence in studying it.

"The Imperial fleet is too well equipped." Admiral Aphanar said, "Even after the destruction of Admiral Trell's heavy squadron, Fleet Admiral Vretan still has considerable forces at his disposal and the strategic thinking to be able to use them to the maximum level of effectiveness."

"Since the destruction of the star forge Admiral Sayer has been able to concentrate his efforts on hunting down our ships." Geran said. Admiral Lorn Sayer was the commanding officer of the *Pride of the Empire*, a decorated fleet officer who had been given command of the most powerful warship in the sector as well as considerable leeway in pursuing Alliance ships and bringing them to battle. With the Empire coming under ever increasing pressure following the destruction of the second Death Star and the deaths of Emperor Palpatine and Darth Vader the Alliance was making considerable gains almost everywhere. However, ships like the *Pride of the Empire* still posed serious obstacles, "He's moving his ship behind lines of smaller vessels and when they come under attack he's jumping in and engaging our ships once they are already committed to the attack."

"We've not taken any losses though, right?" General Kain asked.

"We have lost no capital ships of our own general." Admiral Aphanar answered, "But there have been casualties among the crews and even with our increased manpower trained starship crew take time to replace. Plus there is the effect that this is having on morale. Across the galaxy the Empire is on the retreat but we are still suffering defeat after defeat against the sector group. The destruction of Admiral Trell's squadron was the exception, not the rule."

"Well I'm sorry to say that Spec Force can't help you with this one." Colonel Collis said, "I just don't have enough men to be able to overcome the marine complement aboard a battlecruiser like that."

"My forces could destroy the ship if we could isolate it. Like all allegiance-class ships the *Pride of the Empire* lacks hangars and thus relies on other ships to provide fighter cover" Admiral Aphanar added, "But the problem is that Admiral Sayer makes sure that he travels with a line of escort carriers. That gives him more than two hundred TIE fighters to provide him with cover."

"But without them his ship would be vulnerable?" General Kain asked.

"Yes." Admiral Aphanar replied, "With our B and Y-wing squadrons we could weaken his ship sufficiently that our on cruisers could destroy it. But as I said, Admiral Sayer goes nowhere without escort."

"Also we'd have to find out where he was going to be and keep him there." Geran added, "Something we haven't been able to predict so far."

"Perhaps because we've not been going about this the right way." General Kain said, "What we need to do is control where the *Pride of the Empire* goes ourselves."

"How you propose we do that general?" Colonel Collis asked.

"I'm suggesting that we get agents aboard the *Pride of the Empire* to access its computer system." General Kain said, "Viewing the ship's orders will tell us where it is going to be and even a slight alteration to the navigational computer would separate it from its escorts."

"We can force it from hyperspace." Geran said, smiling, "Now that the *Refractor* is fully operational we've got our very own interdictor."

"The *Refractor's* gravity well projector has not been tested operationally yet." Admiral Aphanar pointed out.

"So why not test it on the *Pride of the Empire*?" Colonel Collis asked.

"The artificial gravity well would also prevent the ship from jumping back into hyperspace while our fighters engage it." General Kain asked.

"You are correct of course general." Admiral Aphanar replied, "But how do we get our agents aboard? And who do we send?"

"Don't worry admiral." Geran said, "I think I've got that covered."

"What's with the blast vest?" Cass Grayle asked when she saw Tharun Verser walk into the lounge of the Silver Hawk wearing an armour vest over his casual clothes and carrying a helmet tucked under his arm.

"Dinner with my in laws." the former mercenary told the adopted daughter of the *Silver Hawk's* owner and Cass looked at him with a confused expression.

"But you get on fine with Colonel Larcus and Kara." she said.

"Yeah, but you know how Lyssa and Kara can be." Tharun replied.

"You mean they act more childish than Vorn junior and Hallanah?" she said and Tharun smiled.

"Pretty much. Lyssa is bound to refer to Kara as 'mother' and she knows how much that annoys her. Her being younger than Lyssa and all." he said.

"But you call her 'mom' all the time just to wind her up." Cass pointed out.

"That I do. But it's funnier when I do it. I love Lyssa but she has a viscous streak longer than a star destroyer." Tharun said, "Take it from me kid, if you marry some guy that's thirty years older than you like Kara did then check on his kids first and make sure that none of them would give the late Emperor Palpatine a run for his credits in deviousness."

"Married? Are you kidding me? A guy only has to look at me and dad freaks out. You all do. What about that guy from that new team the other day? You all basically threatened to kill him if he looked at me again."

"He deserved it." Tharun said.

"Well at this rate I'll probably have to spend all the money I've got saved on cats for company when the war's over." Cass said.

"How do you have money saved?" a woman asked as she entered the lounge as well. She was tall for a female human and this only served to exaggerate how short the dress she wore was, ending part way down her thighs, "Oh and why did I hear my name being mentioned?"

"Because we were just talking about you behind your back mom." Tharun said and Kara scowled.

"Stop calling me that." she said.

"And I've been saving the money you and the colonel and Tharun and Lyssa pay me for babysitting." Cass added, "I've got almost two thousand credits saved now."

"Two thousand!" Kara exclaimed, "Right, I'm telling the boss that we're paying you too much."

"Hey, isn't that dress Jaysica's?" Cass asked, looking more closely at what Kara was wearing.

"We borrow each other's things all the time." Kara replied.

"No you don't." Tharun said, "You're about fifteen centimetres taller than her. That dress is far too short for you." then he scowled, "You're wearing it to annoy Lyssa aren't you?"

"Think it'll work?" Kara asked.

"Hello? Anyone in there?" a voice called out from outside the ship before Tharun or Cass could answer.

"In here Geran." Kara responded when she recognised the voice and when the intelligence agent appeared at the top of the access ramp she faced him, "Geran does this dress make me look cheap and trashy?"

"She means more than normal." Cass commented and Kara frowned.

"Err." Geran said.

"Now you sound like Tobis." Kara said, "So what brings you here anyway?"

"An assignment." Geran replied.

"Stang that means we'll have to cancel dinner." Tharun said, his tone suggesting that he was not at all bothered about this, "Oh well, duty calls."

"Actually it's just her I need." Geran said and he looked at Cass.

"Me? What can I do?" Cass asked.

"Pick pockets." Geran said, "You supplied my department with a lot of useful information when you were stealing datapads. I'll need your parents as well though, I've got a mission for the three of you."

"What sort of mission needs a pickpocket, a smuggler and a fleet captain?" Tharun asked and Geran smiled.

"I want them to help destroy the largest warship in the sector." he said.

2.

"Watch yourselves. This place can get a little rough." Mace Grayle, owner of the *Silver Hawk* said as he led his wife Malia and Cass towards the cantina owned by Odras Balve, the crime lord that Mace owed a great deal of money to.

"I know dad." Cass replied, "I've been here before."

"Mace honey," Malia added, "we really must discuss the sorts of places you bring our daughter to. In fact perhaps she'd be better off transferring to the *Renegade* with me. She can still learn about piloting and engineering aboard a corvette."

"No, being aboard the *Silver Hawk* is too much fun." Cass said, "But why don't you transfer and join us? Tobis could move in with Tharun and the colonel and then you two could have a room alone together and make me a baby brother or sister."

"Just get inside." Mace said as he held the cantina door open for Cass. Then he looked at Malia and they smiled at one another.

"Perhaps we should tell her." Malia said, "She needs to know. The others as well."

Mace shrugged.

"I think they'll notice when you get fat and give birth." he commented. Then he kissed Malia and wrapped an arm around her before the pair of them followed Cass into the cantina.

Inside the three of them made their way towards the bar where the muscular devaronian barman stared at Mace.

"Captain Grayle, here to make your payment?" he asked.

"I've got Balve's money." Mace answered and he patted his pocket, "But I need to see the sleemo himself."

"He's busy. If you give me the money I'll pass it along to him." the barman replied.

"It's about a job." Mace said.

"We'll pay." Malia added.

"Show Captain Grayle and his charming family right in." a voice suddenly said from an intercom panel behind the bar and the devaronian smiled.

"Mister Balve will see you now." he said.

"Thanks." Mace said and he walked towards a door at the end of the bar that led into the private office of Odras Balve.

As soon as the trio entered the office, the hulking wookiee bodyguard who accompanied the crime lord everywhere growled at them.

"No, my orders still stand." Odras said, "Mace and his family don't need to be disarmed. Though if Mace does try anything untoward then you may feel free to rip the arms off his wife and daughter."

"You're such a gentle soul, you know that Balve?" Mace asked as he sat down opposite Odras and the older man smiled back at him.

"Thank you." he said, "Now what brings you and your family to me today? I'm guessing that it is related to your involvement with the rebellion somehow."

"He's intuitive Mace, I'll give you that." Malia commented.

"Balve has proven useful in getting us places." Mace replied.

"Even if he did keep trying to buy me." Cass muttered.

"Take it as a complement young lady. I don't invest in anything I can't turn a profit on." Odras said. Then he looked at Mace, "So where do you want to get to now Mace? A ship? Or maybe an Imperial base?"

"A ship. The *Pride of the Empire*." Mace replied and Odras grinned.

"The largest, most powerful and heavily guarded ship in the sector?"

"The very same. Is that going to be a problem?" Mace replied.

"Of course not. In fact I can get you aboard any ship you name."

"Someone owe you money?" Cass said, knowing that a lot of the business Odras conducted involved getting people into debt. Mace was a prime example of this.

"As a matter of fact no. But just recently I've been expanding my customer base off world and the Imperial Navy has been most helpful in this matter." Odras said.

"You mean you're using navy crewmen as couriers for your smuggling business." Mace said.

"Well good smugglers such as yourself are hard to find. Though I suppose I should thank you for sending the good Captain Deller and his charming co-pilot Miss Curve my way." Odras said.

"Deller? As in Anzar Deller from the *Scarlett Knife*? Wasn't he one of Major Shrell's unit?" Malia asked.

"The team that went rogue and tried to kill us." Cass added.

"Captain Deller works for me now." Odras said, "He came with a recommendation from Mace. However, he is just one man with a small ship. The Imperial Navy has thousands of ship that can carry large amounts of

cargo right through customs. Paying off government officials is nothing new, the customs agents at the starport you make use of whenever you visit me are all on my payroll and now I've added a number of navy cargo hands. They can get my goods onto military ships as I need them to."

"Do you have someone aboard the *Pride of the Empire* then?" Malia asked.

"I do. Though the price of getting you aboard is likely to be high. Especially if you are planning to destroy the ship. After all that would mean I couldn't use it again." Odras answered.

"Yes we're planning on taking out the ship *Balve*. Now how much?" Mace asked.

"Fifty thousand. All in advance." Odras told him.

"Fifty thousand?" Cass exclaimed.

"And I'm taking a loss." Odras added, "The *Pride of the Empire* stands to make me twice that in a year."

"Assuming the Empire hasn't surrendered by then." Malia commented.

"Oh I'm betting on this war lasting a while longer yet." Odras said, "Now are you going to pay or are you just taking advantage of my hospitality?"

"We'll pay." Mace replied, "We have cash on the *Silver Hawk*."

"Yes, I expected as much. So you go and fetch it and then we'll wait here for my contact to arrive. I'm expecting him in about three hours. I take it you'll be able to dress more appropriately?"

"If you mean do we have Imperial uniforms, then yes we do." Mace said.

"Good. Then everything's settled. As a show of good faith your first drink while you wait will be on me." Odras replied.

Returning with money and uniforms, the three rebels waited in the main cantina for Odras' contact in the Imperial Navy to arrive. Given that the crime lord's customer base included a wide variety of beings, including numerous members of the Imperial military they did not need to hide while wearing their disguises and could sit out in the open while they waited.

"Is this him?" Cass said when another man in an Imperial uniform entered the cantina and made his way straight to the bar.

"Possibly." Mace said, watching the man carefully, "But he could just be another customer."

"We'll just have to wait and see." Malia added. The three rebels then watched as the Imperial officer was shown into Odras' office and then soon after reappeared in the company of Odras himself as well as his wookiee bodyguard.

"Lieutenant Ossen, meet my associates. I need you to get them aboard the *Pride of the Empire* in place of the usual package." Odras said.

"People? What is this? You pay me to move cargo, not passengers." Ossen said and Odras scowled.

"I don't pay you ask questions." he said, "My associates need to be on that ship."

"That was never a condition of our arrangement." Ossen protested.

"I am altering the deal. Pray I don't alter it further." Odras hissed.

"Fine." Ossen said after a moments hesitation while the wookiee snarled at him, "I'll get them aboard. Do they have much luggage?"

"Just these cases and a droid." Mace replied as he laid his hand on one of the three equipment cases on the table. Each rebel had such a case that contained a comlink operating on a non-Imperial frequency, a datapad and for Mace and Cass a blaster. Malia on the other hand was armed with a standard military issue DH-17 pistol and as such she could wear her weapon openly in a holster on her hip.

"And the droid?" Ossen asked and Cass lifted a holdall onto the table and opened it up to reveal a mouse droid in a powered down state.

"Her name's Penny." she said.

"I don't care what you call that thing." Ossen said, "Let's just get out of here. I've got a bad feeling about this."

Ossen had a speeder located close to the cantina and he drove the three rebels directly to a Imperial Navy base where dozens of shuttles were lined up ready to transport Imperial personnel into space. Producing his own identification, Ossen was waved through the front gate by the guards and he drove towards one of the landing areas. The shuttle that Ossen took the rebels to did not take them directly to the *Pride of the Empire* however, instead it flew them to an orbiting dockyard. The *Pride of the Empire* lacked any internal hangars and this meant that its crew had to make use of docking ports along the side of the massive vessel's hull to get aboard and cargo had to be loaded in the same way.

"Wait here." Ossen said as he led the rebels towards one of the docking ports and its guards came within sight.

"Where are you going?" Malia asked.

"Aboard the ship." Ossen said and Mace frowned.

"If you're trying to double cross us-" he began.

"I'm not trying to double cross you." Ossen hissed, "I know what Odras *Balve* will do to me if I do. But I need to add you to the ship's roster if I'm going to get you aboard. Now you wait here while I go aboard and

manufacture passes for you all. It's take about ten minutes and I'll send them to this." and then he handed his datapad to Mace.

"Ten minutes then." Mace said, "Then we find our own way aboard and come looking for you. Understand?"

"Yes. I understand." Ossen replied before he turned around and strode away, anxious to put as much distance between himself and the trio of rebels as he could as he joined the short queue of people waiting to get aboard the *Pride of the Empire*.

"Mace, do you think we can trust him?" Malia asked as she watched the Imperial officer leave.

"Not for a second." Mace replied, "But he's scared of Odras and for good reason too. That low down son of a hutt would have him killed faster than you can say 'No please don't yank out my fingernails' if he double crossed us."

"Nice to know he's well motivated." Cass commented.

The last of the queue of people wanting to board the *Pride of the Empire* passed through the checkpoint soon after Ossen made it aboard and with nothing else to occupy them, the guards looked along the corridor and noticed the three rebels standing there. All of the rebels wore officers' uniforms, with both Mace and Malia appearing to be naval commanders while Cass wore an ensign's rank badge while the fleet troopers on guard were all enlisted men. However, this did not stop one of the troopers from deciding to challenge the strangers loitering nearby.

"Who are you?" he asked, "What are you doing here?"

Malia froze, as an Alliance fleet captain she was unused to having to bluff her way past an opponent. She was more used to firing on them directly. On the other hand both Mace and Cass were able to remain relaxed at being challenged in such a direct manner.

"We've been assigned to the *Pride of the Empire* corporal." he said calmly.

"So why not board her?" the guard asked.

"We're supposed to meet someone here first." Cass answered before Mace could say anything.

"Show me your boarding authorisation." the guard said and he held out his hand.

"Ah." Cass said, "I must have it here somewhere and she began to act as if she was searching her uniform for the authorisation. Meanwhile Mace glanced down at the datapad Ossen had given him and breathed a sigh of relief as a set of three boarding authorisation scandocs were downloaded wirelessly from the *Pride of the Empire's* computer system. Each of these bore an image of one of the rebels to identify which of them each of the scandocs belonged to.

"I think you'll find our authorisation is in order private." Mace said as he held out the datapad.

"It's corporal." the guard said and Mace snorted.

"Not if you carry on this way it isn't." he said and the guard hurriedly returned the datapad after having looked at just one of the authorisation documents.

"You are free to board sir." he said.

"In that case that's exactly what we'll do." Mace said, "Maybe our friend didn't come through this way."

"It's possible he came in through the south entrance." Malia added, nodding as if in agreement with her husband.

The three rebels then calmly walked past the guards and boarded the battlecruiser before looking round.

"Okay, so now what?" Cass asked.

"Ossen attached a message with the boarding authorisations." Mace commented, "He said to wait by the emergency shaft about fifty metres towards the prow from here."

"An emergency shaft?" Malia commented as they turned to walk towards the battlecruiser's prow, "What's so significant about that?"

"Possibly just a convenient spot for him to be able to describe." Mace replied. Then as the access hatch to the shaft came into view he pointed towards it, "See, here it is." he added.

When the rebels reached the shaft they looked around for any signs of Ossen but as far as they could tell they were alone in the corridor and Cass took the holdall from her shoulder.

"I may as well unpack Penny." she said, opening up the holdall and taking the tiny droid from it. As soon as she put Penny on the floor Cass activated the droid and it moved back and forwards briefly as it calibrated its systems before letting out a stream of chirps, "Hang on Penny, I can't understand you." she said as she then took her datapad from the equipment case she carried and activated it, calling up the translation program, "Okay say it again." and Penny chirped once more, "No, Jaysica's not here with us. But don't worry, you'll be just fine."

All of a sudden the hatch to the emergency shaft slid open to reveal Lieutenant Ossen.

"Good, you made it." he said.

"Only just." Mace replied, "The guards had just started to take a close interest in us. Your authorisation made it to us just in time."

"Well you'll need these now." Ossen said and he held out three pass keys that Mace took from him.

"What are those for?" Cass asked.

"I've assigned you a cabin." Ossen replied, "These will get you into it. It's located on deck eleven, section

thirty-eight.”

“Assume for a moment we don't have the layout of this ship committed to memory.” Mace said and Ossen frowned.

“You have that datapad I gave you?” he asked.

“Right here.” Mace replied.

“Good. There's a schematic on that. You'll be able to find your way around using it. Now I've got you aboard and I've got you somewhere to stay. Now how about you go there and stay put until we get to wherever it is that you're planning on jumping ship? I've done everything Mister Balve asked for.” and at that point Ossen returned to the shaft and closed the hatch behind him.

“How rude.” Malia commented.

“Yeah, well at least we've got somewhere to stay so I suggest we go and take a look at them while we wait for the ship to get underway” Mace said as he gave a key to each of Malia and Cass.

3.

The quarters that Ossen had assigned the rebels to had obviously not been used for some time and all of the furniture was covered to protect it from dust. There was no bedding on the bunks and more significantly there were only two bunks between the three of them.

"Looks like we're sharing then honey." Malia said, kissing Mace on the cheek and Cass frowned.

"I hereby absolve you of any obligation to provide me with a younger sibling while we are on this mission." she said.

"Speaking of our mission we need to go over our roles here." Mace said. Then he removed the plastic cover from a nearby chair and sat down, "Cass I want you to locate Admiral Sayer. Track his movements and find a way to get close to him. Then steal his datapad. Hopefully we'll be able to pull his orders from it."

"What if it's encrypted?" Cass asked, "Most of the ones I stole at the cantina were."

"That's why I need you to stay close to him." Mace answered, "See if you can find out what his access code is."

"Okay, so what about me?" Malia said.

"You know capital ships." Mace replied, "I need you to take a look at how the crew are operating and figure out how best to manipulate the navigation system without it being noticed."

"I don't get it." Cass said suddenly.

"Don't get what?" Mace asked.

"Well I'm needed to steal the information we need and mom's here to figure out how we'll use it. So what do you bring to this mission dad?" Cass said.

"My boyish good looks and wit." Mace responded.

The *Pride of the Empire's* departure from port was heralded by an announcement over the shipwide communication system ten minutes before departure and then a klaxon thirty seconds before so that the crew could make sure to be ready just in case there was a fault with the artificial gravity system. However, all that was felt was a slight tremor as the ship's ion drives fired and it began to accelerate. Then after a few more minutes there was another shudder, this one greater than the first as the battlecruiser entered hyperspace. It was then that the rebels emerged from their cabin and split up to study their respective targets.

Cass made her way to the senior officers' quarters, keeping her datapad tucked under her arm as if she was delivering a message to someone. She passed by several higher ranking officers in the corridors as she headed for the quarters belonging to Admiral Sayer. Most of these avoided making eye contact with her, continuing on their way without even acknowledging her presence and twice Cass had to quickly dodge out of their way as they barged past her. Those that did actually look at her did so only briefly and their expressions became sneers as soon as they saw the ensign's rank badge on her chest.

Rounding one corner Cass unexpectedly came almost face to face with Admiral Sayer himself. She had seen an image of the admiral but it was a different matter altogether to see him in real life. Tall, his dark hair was starting to go grey with age but he was still in the peak of physical fitness and he moved quickly along the corridor. Cass instinctively side stepped to give him room to pass her by.

"Good morning admiral." she said and then she winced as he came to a sudden halt.

"Are you new here ensign?" he asked.

"Yes sir." Cass said, now wishing that she had remained silent.

"Well, keep being polite and respectful and I'm sure you'll do just fine." the admiral said before he carried on his way and Cass breathed a sigh of relief before she too continued the way she had been going.

Turning another corner Cass found what she had been looking for, Admiral Sayer's quarters themselves. The door to these looked the same as any of the other cabins in this part of the ship and there was no sign to identify who they belonged to. However, what did make the door stand out against all of the others were the two stormtroopers from the *Pride of the Empire's* marine contingent standing guard outside. Calmly, clutching her datapad to her chest Cass walked up to the nearest stormtrooper and looked directly at his faceplate.

"Is the admiral in his quarters?" she asked, already knowing the answer.

"No. You just missed him." the armoured trooper replied while still looking straight ahead, "he went the way you just came from. I'm surprised you didn't see him."

"Poor timing I guess. I'll try the bridge instead." Cass said and she turned as if she was about to leave.

However, instead she turned back towards the guards and spoke to them again, "Look, I'm new here." she said, "Can you give me any pointers as to what the admiral is like? I really want to make a good impression."

"Do your job right." the stormtrooper said.

"Yeah, I get that. But is there anything extra I can do that will get him to notice me? What does he like?"

The two stormtroopers unexpectedly looked at one another.

"He has a cup of caf sent from the galley every morning at seven." the one right in front of Cass said and she smiled, "He drinks it while he reads the daily report."

"Daily report. Caf. Thanks." Cass said. Then she tilted her head as she looked at the stormtroopers standing guard, "Doesn't it get hot in those suits?" she asked, "I ask because I thought about applying for the stormtrooper course and I've always wondered what it would have been like."

Both stormtroopers then looked at Cass and then at one another again.

"You're too short for a stormtrooper." the one on the far side of the door from Cass said.

"Fair enough." Cass responded and she turned around and began to walk away, smiling, "Thankfully you two are just dumb enough to be stormtroopers." she muttered under her breath.

While Cass was investigating the admiral's quarters Mace and Malia chose to study the *Pride of the Empire's* command and control operations and this required the pair of them to make their way to the battlecruiser's bridge. Like most larger Imperial vessels the battlecruiser's bridge was split into two levels. The upper level was a wide open space around the edge of the room with large viewports towards the front and instrument consoles towards the rear. Meanwhile most of the centre of the bridge was open to the crew pits below where lower ranking personnel carried out most of the actual activities needed to keep the ship running while their superiors were able to literally look down upon them. The two rebels remained near the back of the bridge where several consoles and large free standing displays gave them an overview of the entire ship as well as a tactical readout updated via the holonet that showed the disposition of all Imperial Navy vessels in the sector as well as suspected rebel ships.

"Geran would give his right eye for a look at this." Mace whispered as he studied the tactical display.

"Fortunately they don't seem to have the locations of our forces right." Malia whispered back. Then she started to look at the crewmen around them. As was to be expected most of the bridge crew were enlisted personnel but there was also a significant number of officers present and given the importance of the *Pride of the Empire* they were of relatively high rank. Most were lieutenant commanders or above who on a smaller vessel could have been expected to be either in command or its first officer. However, given its status as a squadron flagship commanded by an admiral, the *Pride of the Empire* had a officer with the rank of captain to serve just as first officer.

"What's our status?" a voice called out from the rear of the bridge and the crew not sat at consoles suddenly snapped to attention, a movement that Mace and Malia were quick to copy as Admiral Sayer strode past them towards the front of the bridge, "At ease." he said before the crew went back to their work.

"Our jump into hyperspace went normally admiral." Admiral Sayer's first officer said, "Navigation reports no unusual conditions along our flight path so we should reach the Shadow Region in about fifteen minutes."

"Excellent." Admiral Sayer responded, "I want the crew to be ready for combat when we proceed into the Spire Worlds. There are reports of increasing rebel activity over the last week. I'd like a set of drills scheduled to test readiness. Notify all the department heads to be ready for them Captain Dallen."

"Yes admiral." Captain Dallen replied.

"Drills to test reaction time." Malia commented, "Those go better when they aren't announced ahead of time."

"This is the Imperial Navy we're talking about." Mace commented, "I doubt anyone on this ship uses the refresher without booking an appointment forty-eight hours ahead. But what do you think of the crew?"

"Capable." Malia replied, "Though absolutely everything they're doing is following standard practice to the letter. There's no indication that anyone has found any workarounds to make their jobs quicker. That makes them easy to predict. Of course it also means that Admiral Sayer knows exactly how his crew will react to any given situation and speeds up his decision making."

"Is that a navigation station?" Mace said, looking at one of the duty stations towards the rear of the bridge and Malia nodded.

"Looks like one. Do you want to take a closer look?" she said.

"Ladies first." Mace commented and he let Malia lead the way towards the console.

With the *Pride of the Empire* already in hyperspace there was no need to keep the navigation station manned and instead there was an R3 astromech droid positioned there, plugged directly into a computer access port.

"Display our current position." Mace ordered and the R3 unit bleeped as it overlaid the course of the *Pride of the Empire's* current jump through hyperspace onto a map of the sector and then added a representation of the battlecruiser itself.

"Right on course for the Shadow Region." Malia commented and Mace nodded.

"Has any further jump information been uploaded to the nav computer yet?" Mace asked and the astromech droid let out a lower pitched tone. At the same time its response was translated on the navigation display.

"No further jumps programmed at this time."

"I don't think there's anything else we can learn here right now." Mace said.

"No, I agree. But I would like to get a look at some of the other duty stations, reactor control and engineering

so I can get a better picture of how this ship is run." Malia replied.

"Okay, let's go. We can stop at them on the way back to our quarters." Mace said and then the two rebels strolled off the bridge.

"Where have you been?" Cass exclaimed when Mace and Malia returned to their quarters, "Penny and I were getting worried that you'd been caught."

"Oh honey, we were just checking out the key areas of the ship, that's all." Malia said as she embraced Cass.

"Careful not to crumple those uniforms." Mace said, "We don't have any spares."

"In fact we've no spare clothing at all." Malia said in agreement, "Perhaps we ought to do something about that."

"The ship's stores?" Cass suggested.

"We could do with grabbing as much extra gear as we can." Mace said, "Not just spares for our uniforms. I'm talking about extra disguises as well."

"Stormtrooper armour." Malia said and Cass's face fell.

"I'm too short for a stormtrooper." she said, "One of them told me that today."

"Well your mother should just about make the grade and I'm definitely tall enough." Mace said, "So we'll just see about grabbing two sets and as many other uniforms as we can manage."

"What about weapons?" Cass said, "Stormtroopers only carry certain types of blaster and we don't have any of them."

"Weapons will be accounted for regularly." Malia pointed out.

"I know, that means that we'll need to be clever about it." Mace said and he looked down at Penny, "Penny can you gain access to the armoury and machine shops on the lower levels?" he asked and the little droid chirped.

"She says that's easy." Cass said, reading Penny's response off her datapad.

"Good in that case here's what I need you to do." Mace began.

4.

The machine shops in the lower levels of the *Pride of the Empire* were intended to be able to produce spare parts from stocks of raw materials carried in place of vast quantities of spares for every system on the ship. The equipment in this section could work almost all types of metals and plastics with ease and their accuracy was good enough to meet the most exacting standards required aboard a starship. This meant that what Penny was about to request was a trivial thing. Having first been to the armoury, the mouse droid had identified several weapons that could be of use to the rebels and using the concealed holorecorder that had been added inside Penny's body by rebel technicians, it had produced three dimensional models of them that were accurate down to the serial numbers etched into them. Loading these into the computers that controlled the automated production machinery, they promptly set to work manufacturing inert replicas of the weapons that on the outside were exact reproductions of the originals and when these came off the production line the three rebels were there waiting.

"Okay Cass it's up to you now." Mace said as they loaded the fake weapons into the holdall. Only one of them would not fit inside the holdall, a replica of a Blastech DLT-19 heavy blaster rifle and instead Cass strained to lift the heavy object over her shoulder as she nodded.

"I crawl through the vent to the armoury where Penny has already released the cover from the inside. Then I swap these fakes for the real weapons and climb back into the vent." she said.

"Are you sure you'll be okay?" Malia asked.

"I'll be fine mom. Don't worry, I mean what could go wrong?" Cass said.

Mace and Malia helped Cass lift the fake weapons into the *Pride of the Empire's* ventilation system and then lifted the cover back into place.

"Now remember," Mace told his daughter before sealing her in the vent, "you take the genuine weapons straight back to our quarters. Don't leave the vent early and try carrying them through the corridors out in the open."

"I get it." Cass said, "Besides if the real things are as heavy as these fakes then I won't be able to carry them. Dragging them is about the best I can manage." and then she began to crawl away.

Malia watched as Mace finished replacing the vent cover and fixing it back in place and then sighed.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"I don't know. I've just got a bad feeling about this Mace." she replied.

Slowly, dragging the weight of the fake weapons behind her, Cass was able to crawl through the ventilation shaft more than five hundred metres to the nearest of the battlecruiser's armouries when she found the vent cover was loose and she was able to remove it from inside the vent itself. Penny had provided her with the locations of each of the weapons she needed to replace and one by one Cass removed the genuine weapons from their racks and put the inert replicas in their place. In total she had to replace six blasters, the DLT-19 heavy blaster rifle, a pair of E-11 blaster rifles that were standard issue to all branches of the Imperial military and finally three SE-14 pistols that were also near universal in service.

She had just lifted the last of these into the vent and returned for a case of power cells when the door to the armoury opened with a 'hiss' and Cass hid behind the stacks of power cell cases.

"So you want an SE-14? They're right over here." she heard a crewman say and Cass almost gasped out loud, knowing that if he picked up one of the fakes to issue it then the first thing he would do would be to check the operating mechanism and he would instantly discover that it was fake. Peering out from behind the stack of cases she watched closely as the armoury crewman and a fleet trooper walked over to the rack of pistols.

"Here you go." the armoury crewman said as he took a genuine blaster pistol from the rack and handed it to the trooper, "Now try not to damage this one." and the two men then left the room.

"That was too close." Cass said to herself as soon as the door slid shut and then she quickly finished lifting the case of power cells into the vent and then climbed in after it.

Returning to the cabin she was sharing with her parents was tougher going than crawling to the armoury had been. The armoury had been chosen because it was on the same deck as the machine shop. But getting back to the rebels' quarters meant carrying the heavy blasters up more than twenty vertical shafts between decks as well and Cass soon found herself out of breath. Stopping for a while to recover her strength, Cass wished that she had brought some water with her and considered the possibility of leaving the weapons where they were while she exited the vent for just long enough to get something to drink.

It was then that Cass heard the sound of metal feet on the inside of the vent as something came scurrying towards her and her eyes widened as she realised that it was one of the cleaning droids used to make sure that the ventilation system remained unblocked and that the emergency hatches that could be used to isolate

individual areas of the ship were functional. If the droid discovered Cass in the vent then it would undoubtedly report this and the battlecruiser's crew would be placed on alert for an intruder. Then Cass remembered her blaster. Not one of the weapons that she had just stolen from the armoury, but the sporting pistol she had in her own equipment case and she removed this as quickly as she could. The weapon was not particularly powerful as blasters went but it was light and easy to move about inside the confines of the vent and she pointed towards the source of the scuttling sound. Moments later a compact spiderlike droid appeared in front of Cass in the vent and when it saw her it came to a halt, analysing her to determine what she was and why she was blocking the vent shaft. As the light of the scanning beam shone at her, Cass fired her blaster. The ventilation maintenance droid had little in the way of self preservation programming and it did not even attempt to move out of the way when the weapon was aimed at it. This made Cass's shot easy and the bright red energy blast hit the centre of the droid's body, blowing it apart in a small explosion. Cass flinched at this, the sound of the blast echoing down the vent and she suddenly wondered whether anyone would have heard the sound and recognised it for what it was. Then she came to her senses and realised that regardless of whether or not the sound had been heard she needed to carry on going and she put the blaster back into her case and continued on through the vent.

The rebels' quarters were littered with uniforms of various types. There were spares of the typical officers' uniforms that they already wore as well as overalls for enlisted technicians, gunners and troopers. Mace and Malia had also obtained helmets to go with these, both the open fronted fleet trooper helmets and the enclosed type worn by Imperial gunners.

"We still need to find a way of getting hold of stormtrooper armour." Malia commented as she and Mace checked what they had been able to remove from the battlecruiser's stores.

"That stuff's kept under lock and key in their barracks." Mace replied, "There wasn't a single piece in the general stores."

"Maybe we could-" Malia began before there was a scraping sound from the vent, "Did you hear that?" she said suddenly.

"Cass." Mace said and they both rushed to where Mace had already removed the vent cover and peered inside, "Cass are you there?" Mace called out.

"Right here dad." Cass replied as she crawled into view, "Now how about you give me a hand with all of this stuff? Then I really need something to drink."

"Did you have any trouble getting these?" Mace asked as he lined up the weapons on one of the bunks, checking each on in turn.

"Some." Cass replied, shaking her head as she lowered a mug of water from her mouth, "I was just finishing off when the armourer came in with one of the ship's troopers and for a moment I thought he was going to pick up one of the fakes I'd just put on the racks. Then of course there was the droid."

"What droid?" Mace asked.

"There was a maintenance droid in the vent." Cass said and Mace and Malia exchanged glances.

"Did it see you?" Malia asked.

"Don't worry, I blasted it while it was still scanning me." Cass replied.

"Where is it now?" Mace said.

"Right where I left it. Is that a problem?"

"It might be if another droid comes along and finds it." Malia said, "Then the crew will know there was someone in the vents."

"Then I should go back and get it." Cass said.

"No." Mace told her, "I don't want you crawling around in there any more than necessary. Hopefully this ship will be even more scrap than that droid before it's found."

"What about you?" Cass said, looking around at the uniforms, "Did you get everything?"

"No stormtrooper armour unfortunately." Mace replied.

"But we managed to get the rest right out from under the nose of the quartermaster." Malia added.

"This is a lot of stuff. How did you manage that?" Cass said.

"Well I thought about making him think I was interested in him while your father loaded up the cart." Malia said, "But I wasn't his type."

"Perhaps we should all have gone." Cass suggested, "Dad may not like it but perhaps I could have helped out."

"No Cass, neither of us is the quartermaster's type." Malia said and Cass frowned.

"So what is his type?" she said.

"Me apparently." Mace replied and a smile spread across Cass's face.

"Don't laugh honey." Malia said, "You're father is supposed to be meeting him for dinner when the ship gets back to Estran."

The *Pride of the Empire's* jump through hyperspace to the Shadow Region was followed by a second jump that took it into the Spire Worlds where the battlecruiser met with a line of escort carriers and the combined force began to conduct its patrol in search of Alliance vessels. Having gained knowledge of some of the admiral's schedule from the guards outside his quarters Cass made her way to the galley that would serve his quarters in time for it to be preparing his regular morning caf.

"Is that for the admiral?" she asked when a crewman emerged from the galley with a mug on a tray.

"Yes ensign." the crewman responded.

"Good. Then give it to me."

"Ensign?"

"I said hand over the tray crewman. I'll take it to the admiral, I'm on my way there now." Cass said.

"I'm sorry ensign but my orders are-" the crewman began before Mace suddenly appeared behind Cass.

"The ensign just ordered you to hand over the tray crewman." he said, "So hand it over."

"Yes commander." the crewman said and as Cass took the tray from him Mace looked at her.

"Now make sure you get that to the admiral before it gets cold." he said.

"Yes commander." Cass said, turning around and smiling at him as she walked past.

Cass then took the tray from the galley to the admiral's quarters where a pair of stormtroopers were again standing guard outside. For a moment Cass wondered whether either of them would be the same two stormtroopers that she had spoken to the day before but then put this possibility out of her mind as she walked up to the door of the admiral's quarters and pressed the intercom.

"Yes?" the admiral's voice asked.

"Your caf admiral." Cass said.

"Enter." Admiral Sayer said and the door slid open to reveal the inside of his quarters to Cass.

As she stepped through the doorway, Cass took a look around Admiral Sayer's quarters. Despite his rank, the admiral had quarters that were decorated in the standard Imperial manner. However, she did notice that here and there the admiral had added a few personal touches including an image of himself alongside a woman that Cass took to be his wife and three children of varying ages. Meanwhile the admiral himself was stood on the far side of the room putting his tunic on and looking in a mirror to make sure that it was straight. "What happened to the crewman from the galley?" Admiral Sayer asked when he looked around and saw Cass.

"I relieved him sir." she replied.

"We met yesterday didn't we?" Admiral Sayer said, "Out in the corridor."

"Yes admiral."

"Well let me tell you now ensign, it'll take more than delivering my caf to get you promoted. Talking of which, could you set it down on my desk?"

"Yes admiral." Cass said again and she carried the tray over to the large desk that dominated one side of the room. As she took the mug off the tray and set it down on the desk Cass noticed the single datapad on the desk and she moved to stand right beside it as Admiral Sayer made his way over to the desk as well and sat down. As luck would have it the datapad was active, indicating that providing Cass could escape with it before the admiral had the chance to shut it down no access code would be required to unlock it before use. "Will there be anything else admiral?" Cass asked as he picked up the drink and at the same time she casually moved the empty tray over the datapad.

Admiral Sayer took a sip of the caf before he answered.

"No that will be all ensign. You are dismissed." he said and he turned towards the computer terminal on his desk.

"Yes admiral." Cass replied, lifting the tray away from the desk and at the same time using it to shield the fact that she now had his datapad in her hand as well. Taking care not to touch the screen of the datapad with her fingers or the tray Cass moved casually to the door and opened it, half expecting the admiral to call her back at any moment. However, he remained too focused on the reports displayed on his terminal to notice that his datapad was now missing.

If it had not been for the two stormtroopers standing outside the door to the admiral's quarters Cass would have broken into a run as soon as it slid shut behind her. Instead she kept the datapad hidden under the tray and walked calmly back down the corridor, waiting until the stormtroopers were out of sight before she finally began to run back towards the rebels' quarters. When she got there she found Penny waiting for her but neither Mace or Malia had returned yet since Cass parted ways with Mace outside the galley.

"Penny I got it." Cass said as she sat down on her bunk and looked at the datapad, "Now let's see just what it is that I got."

As Cass had expected the datapad held a mix of private and official information and Admiral Sayer had done a good job of separating the two, permitting Cass to pick out the files relating to the *Pride of the Empire's* operations over those that did not. Most of the official files concerned the day to day running of the massive starship but there was also a section that listed the orders given to Admiral Sayer that governed his objectives for the patrol. This section included details of the ships that were to join the battlecruiser to provide

it with support as well containing a list of all the systems he was supposed to search and the route he was expected to take through the *Spire Worlds*. Cass smiled when she saw this but was interrupted by a 'hiss' as the door to the cabin slid open and Cass gasped when she saw a stormtrooper enter the room.

"Cass wait!" Mace's voice called out from beneath the stormtrooper's helmet as Cass was reaching for her blaster.

"Dad? Mom?" Cass asked as a second, obviously shorter stormtrooper entered the cabin while Mace removed his helmet, "Why are you dressed like that?"

"Well two stormtroopers with a bag containing uniforms looks a lot less conspicuous than a pair of officers carrying sets of stormtrooper armour." Malia answered as she too removed her helmet.

"We found a barracks that didn't have anyone in it and took the opportunity to take what we wanted from their stores." Mace said.

"Well next time let me know ahead of time. You scared me half to death." Cass said.

"So how did your job go?" Malia asked and Cass held up the datapad.

"First attempt." she replied, "It was active as well so no pass codes needed. Look, we've got a full flight plan for the patrol."

"Cass this is excellent." Malia said, wrapping an arm around her daughter and squeezing her.

"Then perhaps we should take a look at this flight plan and figure out the best way to deliver this ship into Admiral Aphanar's waiting hands." Mace added.

5.

Admiral Sayer was searching through his belongings when the intercom at his door sounded.

"Yes," he called out.

"Admiral it's Captain Dallen. I need to speak with you."

"Come on in then." Admiral Sayer replied and the door slid open to permit the captain to enter. Then before the captain could speak Admiral Sayer added, "I don't suppose you can see my datapad can you? I can't find the damned thing. I could have sworn it was on my desk."

"No sir." the captain replied, looking around the room.

"Well I suppose it must be here somewhere." Admiral Sayer said as she sat down at his desk again, "Now what's so important that it brings you to my quarters instead of waiting for me to get to the bridge Captain Dallen?"

"One of the maintenance droids was performing a standard sweep through the ventilation system when it came across another droid that had been logged as missing last night sir." the captain said.

"And I take it that you don't think it was just a random equipment malfunction."

"No sir. The remains were cleared from the system and sent for analysis by engineering. Our chief engineer said that the droid had undoubtedly been hit by blaster fire, though the extent of the damage suggested that the yield of the weapon was below that of a military specification blaster. He said it was most likely a sporting pistol. I ordered a review of our armouries just in case though, just in case we were missing any but they all came back fully stocked."

"What sort of time scale are we looking at for this to have occurred?" Admiral Sayer asked.

"Any time after we left port up to about twenty-one hundred hours last night when the droid was supposed to return for servicing."

"Get the armouries to check again. This time have them inspect the weapons to see if there are any signs that they have been fired recently. Oh and have engineering check our escape pods as well. The survival rifles in them put out about as much power as a sporting blaster pistol."

"Of course Admiral." Captain Dallen said. Then he noticed Admiral Sayer frown as he looked at the end of his desk, "Is something wrong admiral?" he asked.

"We took on new crew before this patrol started, yes?" Admiral Sayer responded.

"Yes admiral."

"I need to check something." Admiral Sayer said, sitting back in his seat and calling up the ship's personnel records. There were almost fifty thousand crew members aboard the *Pride of the Empire*, including its stormtrooper contingent and so Admiral Sayer began by narrowing down the list to those who had come aboard the battlecruiser at the beginning of the current patrol and then he reduced the number of his list even further by limiting the parameters to those with the rank of ensign only. This left him with only three individuals on his list and all three were male, "The girl," he hissed, "She stole my datapad." then he looked at Captain Dallen as he got out of his seat, "Captain we have an intruder."

"Here." Malia said, pointing to a point on the star chart that had the *Pride of the Empire's* route marked on it, "Admiral Aphanar could deploy her ships here and when Admiral Sayer jumps his force between these two systems we can divert it by adjusting the jump co-ordinates just slightly."

"But how do we let Admiral Aphanar know?" Cass asked.

"The ship is scheduled to drop out of hyperspace twice before then." Malia answered, "We can arrange to send a message then."

"We can get a subspace transmitter, record a message and toss it out with the garbage." Mace suggested, "The ship will jettison it before jumping back into hyperspace and the transmitter will send the message after we're gone."

"Sounds good to me. Admiral Aphanar should have no problem getting her ships into position in that time."

Malia said and then she checked the time shown on the datapad they were studying, "But we need to get a move on. The ship is scheduled to jump again in fifteen minutes."

The *Pride of the Empire* had just jumped back into hyperspace and Admiral Sayer was on the bridge by one of the consoles towards its rear when the officer in command of the ship's stormtrooper contingent marched into the room accompanied by an entire squad of his men.

"Report commander." the admiral said as he and Captain Dallen turned towards the new arrivals.

"Admiral a detailed review of our armouries has revealed that several weapons have been removed from one of them and replaced with fakes. We're working on the assumption that these were manufactured in our own machine shops." the black uniformed stormtrooper officer said.

"What sort of weapons were taken?" Captain Dallen asked.

"A mixture of small arms. Three SE-fourteen blaster pistols, two E-elevens and a DLT-nineteen heavy blaster rifle." the commander told him.

"Enough for three people. Interesting." Admiral Sayer commented. Then he pointed to a display where the faces of Mace, Malia and Cass were shown, "Commander our records show that these three individuals presented scandocs permitting them to board the ship just before we left Estran. All three were authorised just before they boarded by Lieutenant Ossen. I want him arrested and interrogated. If he knowingly forged permission for terrorists to board my ship then he may also know what they are planning. Three people can't seize a ship the size of the *Pride of the Empire* after all so they must have some other objective in mind."

"Admiral my guess is that you are their target." the stormtrooper commander replied.

"Me? But that girl could have attacked me in my quarters. Or poisoned my drink if that was her intention." Admiral Sayer pointed out.

"There were guards outside your door at the time sir. It would have taken only a moment for you to raise the alarm and I doubt she could have fought off two of my men. Admiral I think it prudent that you go nowhere without a full escort."

"So that's the reason for the squad then is it commander?" Captain Dallen said and the other officer nodded.

"Yes sir." he replied.

"Very well." Admiral Sayer said, "But I want those intruders found commander. Reinforce the guards on key areas of the ship as well. They may be planning some act of sabotage. Take charge of the operation personally and when you have them I want them brought to me alive. Do you understand?"

"Yes admiral." the commander responded.

"Admiral we are receiving a transmission from Captain Grayle of the *Renegade*." one of Admiral Aphanar's bridge officers announced, "It is repeating on a loop."

"Put it through to me." Admiral Aphanar replied and the comscan operator played back Malia's message so that the entire bridge could hear it.

"This is Captain Malia Grayle, we have successfully infiltrated the *Pride of the Empire* and obtained a copy of her patrol route. The ship and three escort carriers will jump from the Jenteel system in the Spire Worlds to Toriana at around sixteen fourteen today. We intend to divert the *Pride of the Empire* by five degrees coreward. If you can deploy the *Refractor* and an attack force along that vector then you will be able to catch the ship on its own. End of message, Captain Grayle out."

"Navigation, plot a course to a point three light years outside the Jenteel system along the defined vector. Then pass it to the rest of the attack group. We jump immediately." Admiral Aphanar announced.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Mace said as the rebels made their way back towards their cabin as they narrowly missed a unit of fleet troopers marching down the corridor.

"I know." Malia agreed, "That's the third patrol we've seen since the ship jumped to hyperspace."

"Do you think they know we're on board?" Cass asked but before either of her parents could answer her comlink chirped, "It's Penny." she said and she quickly connected the device to her datapad.

"What is that?" Malia asked when the datapad screen started to show the feed being forwarded by the mouse droid's concealed camera. The feed showed an open doorway in one of the *Pride of the Empire*'s corridors and fleet troopers entering the room on the other side while others stood back with their blasters held ready.

"Those are our quarters." Mace said.

"So they do know we're aboard." Malia said.

"Do you think Lieutenant Ossen sold us out?" Cass suggested.

"Possibly. Or perhaps the admiral figured out how we got on board and pressured Ossen into telling him where to find us."

"So what do we do now?" Cass said and at that moment the ship shuddered as it dropped out of hyperspace again.

"We carry on with the plan." Mace replied, "We need to rig the navigation computer before the ship jumps again. Cass, get Penny to meet us at the computer core. I get the feeling we'll need her to carry out the modifications we need."

"Penny did you hear that?" Cass said into her comlink, "Meet us outside the nav computer room." and when Penny chirped in acknowledgement Cass disconnected the comlink from the datapad again and the three rebels hurried towards the battlecruiser's navigation computer.

Given that the officers' uniforms they wore did not permit them to easily hide their features, the rebels did their best to avoid any other members of the battlecruiser's crew and on occasions this proved impossible they averted their gaze to avoid making eye contact. Fortunately the relatively high rank that Mace and Malia had marked on their uniforms made this easier and crewmen did not become suspicious when officers avoided looking at them.

The rebels came to a halt at the end of the corridor that led to the compartment that contained the *Pride of the Empire's* navigation computer and Mace peered around the corner at the stormtroopers standing guard outside.

"This is as far as we go." he said softly before he felt something slam into his foot and he gasped. Looking down he saw a mouse droid and frowned, "Penny I assume." he said and the droid chirped. Then he looked at Malia, "Obviously we can't go inside. Can you tell Penny what to do?" he asked her.

"Of course. It's easy, just a slight adjustment." Malia replied and Mace nodded.

"Okay Penny, off you go." he told the droid and it chirped again before rolling around the corridor.

Cass connected her comlink to her datapad again and while Mace kept watch for patrols Malia and Cass watched the feed coming from Penny's camera. As expected the stormtroopers guarding the nav computer totally ignored the mouse droid that rolled past them and into the room they were guarding. Inside the room was empty although there were several computer terminals where navigators could directly access the core of the navigation computer and Penny sped towards one of these and plugged into an access port located beneath it.

"Good." Malia said, "Now access the calibration data and adjust the coreward axis offset by five degrees."

Penny chirped and the feed from the droid's camera was joined by the stream of data from the navigation computer. This showed each of the offset values currently applied to the *Pride of the Empire's* hyperdrive system to compensate for any errors in its astronomical sensors. As the rebels watched the number representing the coreward offset began to rise from a tiny fraction below zero to almost five degrees instead and Malia smiled.

"And that's it." she said, "Done."

"Really?" Cass asked and Malia nodded.

"That's it."

"And here was me thinking it took Tobis an hour." Mace said and then he frowned, "I wonder what he's doing with the rest of the time."

"Does Jaysica help him?" Malia asked.

"She does now, yes." Mace answered.

"In that case he's either fixing whatever she breaks before you find out or they're having-" Malia began but then she stopped suddenly and looked at Cass, "Never mind." she said.

"Yes because my innocent ears must never hear the word 'sex'." Cass said.

"Hey you!" a voice suddenly called out and when the rebels looked around they found themselves confronted by a stormtrooper officer and a pair of armoured marines, "You're under arrest."

"Oh stang." Mace said as he realised that they had been caught he went for his blaster. However, he did not reach for the SE-14 he carried openly in a holster on his belt and so neither the officer nor his stormtroopers realised what he was doing. Instead Mace opened up the equipment case he still carried and produced his more powerful DL-44 heavy blaster pistol. Pointing this at the nearest stormtrooper he fired, shooting the man in the chest and at the same time he hurled the case itself at the unarmoured officer.

The other stormtrooper raised his rifle to fire back at Mace but Cass dived at him, grabbing his weapon and trying to pull it from his grip. The stormtrooper was too strong for Cass to be able to overcome but she was able to prevent him from shooting at Mace long enough for Malia to draw her sidearm and press it up under his helmet before shooting him as well. Mace fired another shot from his blaster, this one aimed at the startled officer who had yet to draw his weapon but before he could say anything he felt the heat of a blaster shot passing close by his head and he flinched.

"The rebels are outside the nav computer chamber." one of the stormtroopers on guard reported as the entire squad came rushing towards them and Malia turned and fired several rapid shots that struck one of them.

"Go!" she yelled and at the same time there was a high pitched screeching sound as Penny came zooming out of the navigation computer chamber and raced towards the rebels, all of whom began to fall back away from the pursuing stormtroopers.

There was another shudder at that point and Mace looked around.

"We need to get to the hull." he said, "The ship just jumped back into hyperspace. If Admiral Aphanar is on schedule then we'll be dragged back out again soon. We need to find an escape pod."

"Security reports they are giving chase to the intruders admiral." one of the crewmen in the pit below Admiral Sayer announced.

"Is there any indication that they were able to damage our nav computer?" the admiral asked.

"Negative admiral. They never made it inside."

All of a sudden the *Pride of the Empire* lurched violently and the officers standing on the upper level of the bridge, including Admiral Sayer himself, were thrown forwards as alarms began to sound and the coloured lights of sub atomic particles interacting filled the entire ship as the battlecruiser was unexpectedly forced out of hyperspace.

"What's going on?" Admiral Sayer demanded as he picked himself up.

"We've been pulled out of hyperspace admiral. I'm detecting a massive gravity well dead ahead. Hyperdrive is offline." one of the bridge crew replied.

"Admiral!" another crewman called out, "I have enemy ships in sector three-seven."

"It's a trap." Admiral Sayer said.

6.

"All fighter squadrons begin your run now." Admiral Aphanar broadcast to her force, "Capital ships stay out of range and shield the *Refractor*. We can't let that battlecruiser escape back into hyperspace."

Outside Admiral Aphanar's flagship a total of six squadrons of fighters rushed towards the *Pride of the Empire*. Most of these were old but rugged Y-wings but accompanying them was a single squadron of more heavily armed B-wings and as soon as the Imperial gunners came to their senses following their unexpected departure from hyperspace they opened fire. Fortunately for the rebel pilots the weapons aboard the battlecruiser were intended for engaging other capital ships and could not easily track the small fast moving starfighters. Inevitably a handful of the fighters were hit and in such cases the sheer power of the turbolaser blasts was enough to utterly destroy them with a single hit. However, the vast majority of the fighters still made it to within firing range of the *Pride of the Empire* and as soon as they could they opened fire as well.

"What was that?" Cass called out when the Imperial battlecruiser shuddered again, "Have we jumped back into hyperspace?"

"No." Malia replied, "Those were torpedo hits. The ship is under attack."

"Then we need to get a move on." Mace said and he reached down to scoop Penny up from the floor, "Come on, there are escape pods dead ahead."

"There they are!" a voice yelled out from behind them and Malia turned to see a group of fleet troopers had just appeared at a junction.

"Go!" she shouted, "I'll cover you!" and she opened fire with her blaster, backing away from the Imperial troops as she fired.

Mace also fired as he retreated while Cass broke into a run and sprinted down the corridor but as she came to a junction she suddenly felt a strong blow just beneath her ribs as a fleet trooper who had been waiting around the corner knocked the breath out of her. Cass collapsed, tears filling her eyes but unable to cry out as she gasped for breath.

"Cuff her." the trooper said and Cass felt another trooper pull her arms behind her back and snap binders into place. Then as the first trooper reached down she suddenly leant forwards and bit into his gauntlet. The bite was unable to pierce the tough gauntlet but it still made the trooper cry out.

"Stang! The bitch has teeth. Muzzle her." he said and then Cass heard the tearing of tape before it was pressed over her mouth.

Then there was a flash of light and heat as Mace shot the first trooper and his body fell on top of Cass as Mace fired again and the second trooper was also shot dead.

"Come on, we're almost there." Mace said as he tucked his blaster into his belt and dragged Cass to her feet. Rather than waste time hunting for the key to the binders or ripping the tape from her mouth, Mace instead just pulled Cass along with him as Malia followed and continued to lay down covering fire.

Just as Mace had said there was a row of escape pods just a few metres further on and he pushed Cass into the closest before turning around and calling out to his wife.

"Malia! Come on, I'll cover you." he shouted as he drew his blaster again. However, there was another sudden shudder as the *Pride of the Empire* was hit by another volley of torpedoes and inside the escape pod Cass was thrown against the wall, unable to stop herself with her arms bound behind her back and she struck the escape pods emergency release trigger. In an instant the hatch dropped shut and the escape pod was sent hurtling into space.

"Cass!" Mace exclaimed as he realised what had happened to his daughter.

"Never mind." Malia called out, "She's safe. Now let's get after her." and she and Mace then dived into the next escape pod before hitting the release trigger deliberately.

"Turbolaser batteries four through seven are off line admiral. We have fires on decks four through seven and our sublight engines are down to twenty percent power." a panicked sounding crewman called out as Admiral Sayer demanded an update. Through the bridge viewports he could see the rebel starfighters making one rapid pass after another and unleashing their deadly payload.

"Are we far enough away from that interdicator to be able to jump yet?" the admiral asked.

"No sir and the damage to our sublight engines means we can't outrun it any more." the crewman replied.

"Admiral we have to evacuate." Captain Dallen said, "The rebels are too well equipped. They brought exactly the ships they needed to destroy us. If we take the command lifeboat then we can get beyond the range of that interdicator and be away before the rebels know what's happened."

Admiral Sayer nodded.

"So be it." he said, "Sound the evacuation."

Admiral Aphanar could see the flames from the *Pride of the Empire* through the viewport on her own flagship. As she watched she saw flashes of light suddenly erupt from the surface of the cripple battlecruiser and she recognised these instantly as the telltale launch flares of escape pods. The sheer number of these led her to one conclusion.

"Our fighters have done it." she said, "Admiral Sayer has ordered his crew to abandon ship. Signal all fighters to pull back. He likely ordered his vessel scuttled to stop it falling into our hands. We'll recover what survivors we can and take them back to headquarters."

Lieutenant Colonel Vorn Larcus III looked at the rows of Imperial prisoners lined up in the hangar of Alliance headquarters before an Alliance fleet trooper approached him.

"Colonel Larcus." she said, "Thank you for coming."

"Glad to." Vorn replied, "You say they asked for me by name?"

"Yes sir. Two commanders and an ensign. We found the ensign bound and gagged but when we removed her gag she said she knew you. The other two said the same thing."

"Show me." Vorn said and the fleet trooper led him along the lines of kneeling prisoners of all ranks from enlisted crewman to commander until they reach the spot where Mace, Malia and Cass were all gathered together.

"Do you know them sir?" the fleet trooper asked and Vorn smiled.

"No." he replied, "I've never seen any of them before in my life."