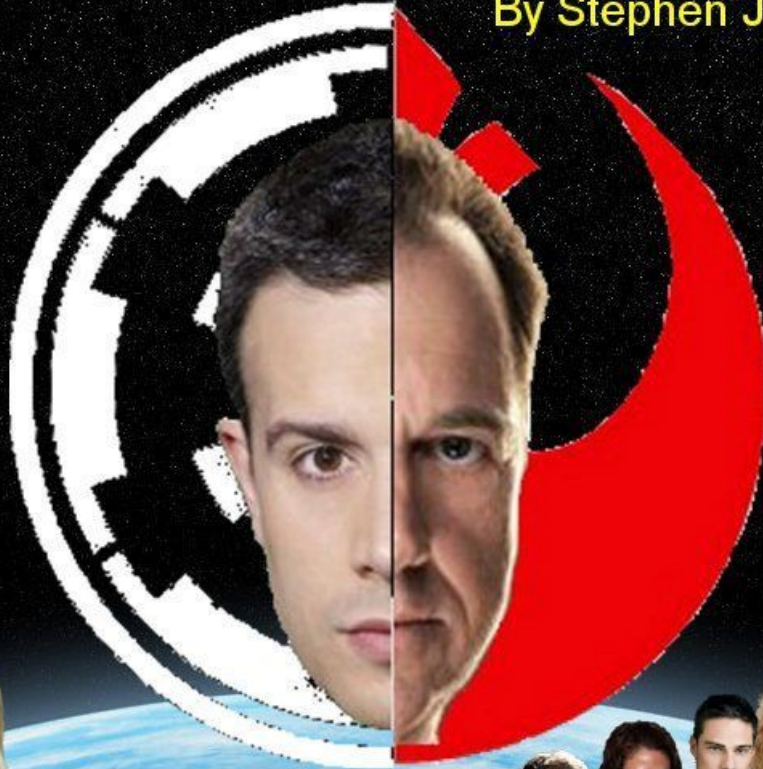


# STAR WARS

## 10-00: The Fall of Estran

By Stephen J Dutton



*Key/Key*



Civil war turns father against son

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

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

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

## THE FALL OF ESTRAN

THE REBEL ALLIANCE STANDS POISED TO INVAD E STRAN, THE CAPITAL PLANET AND KEY TO THE SECTOR. ON THE SURFACE OF THE PLANET THE GOVERNMENT UNDER MOFF HORATIAN KNOWS THAT THIS INVASION MUST BE IMMINENT AND PREPARATIONS ARE BEING MADE TO DEFEND THE PLANET. REBEL INFILTRATORS, INCLUDING VORN LARCUS ARE SENT TO ESTRAN TO PAVE THE WAY FOR THE INVASION IN A DARING MISSION THAT MAY BRING ABOUT A FINAL CONFRONTATION BY A FATHER AND A SON WHO HAVE CHOSEN DIFFERENT SIDES IN THIS CIVIL WAR...

Original characters created and story written by Stephen J. Dutton.  
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# 1.

The status of Estran as the cultural, political and economic heart of the sector guaranteed that it would be afforded the best protection possible. Until just a few weeks earlier this had included at least half a dozen Imperial-class star destroyers on station at almost all times. However, the staggering losses inflicted on the Imperial sector group when it had attempted to launch an attack on the space station serving as the headquarters of the Rebel Alliance in the sector now made this impossible. Having gathered together all of the sector's Imperial and tector-class vessels for the assault along with a large number of interdicator-class heavy cruisers to prevent any rebel vessels present from escaping into hyperspace, Fleet Admiral Vretan had walked right into a trap that had cost the sector group all but a single tector-class star destroyer and the lives of hundreds of thousands of crewmen including the fleet admiral himself. Even the sole surviving tector-class star destroyer, the *Horrific* commanded by Admiral Kenit Hall had been heavily damaged and was confined to the space dock orbiting Estran while the system's security now relied on a trio of much older and lighter venator-class star destroyers and other vessels that were even lighter still.

A skirmish line of four such vessels, sixty-four metre long gozanti-class patrol cruisers had been deployed on the outer edge of the system to watch for rebel ships attempting to sneak in by dropping out of hyperspace out here and then running silent as they made their way deeper into the system. To increase their effectiveness these vessels each carried four standard TIE fighters on ventral racks and two of these maintained a patrol around the line of warships when all of a sudden a dozen Alliance X-wing fighters dropped out of hyperspace close by them.

"Captain we have hostile ships emerging from hyperspace." one of the flight crew aboard the lead patrol ship exclaimed, "Rebel fighters, twelve of them."

"Send to all ships, come about to engage and launch fighters." the captain ordered and a klaxon began to sound as the ship came to battle stations.

At the same time as the line captain was giving out his orders the leader of the Alliance fighter squadron, Captain Jarad Tarl, was giving orders to his pilots as well.

"Okay Blue Squadron it looks like we're crashing a party here. Lock S-foils in attack position and accelerate to attack speed. Take out those two fighters before the rest can launch and we'll leave the cruisers to the *Renegade*. She should be right behind us." he broadcast and as soon as he finished speaking there was another flash of light as the CR90 Corellian corvette *Renegade* dropped out of hyperspace as well.

"Stang!" the Corvette's captain, Malia Grayle exclaimed when she saw the Imperial patrol ahead of them, "Sound battle stations. Power all weapons and raise shields." then she looked at the comscan officer sat at the side of the bridge, "Krissa how long?" she asked.

"Running the sweep now captain. But from this range it'll take a while to gather the data we need." Krissa replied.

"Okay, just get it done. Helm take us in closer to those patrol ships." Malia ordered.

"How close captain?" the helmsman asked.

"Right down their throats. Fire all turbolasers as soon as targets come to bear." she told him and the two forces, Imperial and rebel both turned towards one another.

The first casualties were the two TIE fighters already deployed for immediate action. Although fast and agile they were swiftly overwhelmed by the superior rebel X-wing fighters and the fragile Imperial craft were blasted apart in a barrage of bright red laser fire before the rest of the line's fighter support could be launched.

"Great work Blue Five." Jarad signalled as the second TIE fighter was destroyed, Jarad having destroyed the first one himself, "Now we've got another fourteen eyeballs heading for us so break and engage. Good hunting." and the twelve strong squadron of X-wings split up into six pairs as they raced towards the oncoming screen of TIE fighters.

Despite the greater speed of both the X-wings and the TIE fighters it was the *Renegade* that took the next kill. The corvette's powerful turbolasers not only had greater destructive power than the laser cannons aboard the Imperial patrol cruisers, they also had a significantly greater range and the *Renegade's* six turrets were able to begin firing almost immediately. One of these blasts struck one of the gozanti-class ships before its crew could raise its shields fully and a massive hole was blown in it amidships. The damage from this disabled the cruiser's shield generator entirely and another hit from a turbolaser in the same place was enough to break the ship in half before its reactor went critical and the explosion consumed both halves of it.

"Good shooting." Malia said, smiling when she saw this.

"Captain the enemy ships are splitting up." the helmsman announced as he saw one of the gozanti-class cruisers continue directly towards the *Renegade* while the other two peeled off in different directions.

"Trying to surround us hey?" Malia said, "Well we'll show them. Steer thirty degrees to port but angle our turrets to starboard. Hit that centre cruiser while getting us closer to the one to the left."

"Yes captain, steering thirty degrees to port." the helmsman announced.

Outside the corvette the two groups of starfighters began to fire on one another as soon as they came within range. Both sets of craft had weapons of roughly equal range and at their limits the damage they could inflict was much reduced. This gave the X-wings a significant advantage, one that the rebel pilots were quick to exploit. Not only were their fighters more durable but they were also shielded and with their shields focused forwards to block the TIE fighters' fire they were almost impervious to being damaged by them. On the other hand the TIE fighters had next to no armour plating and no deflector shields of any kind. This was meant to create a fighter that was much lighter and easier to handle but the result was one that could be destroyed by even the slightest amount of damage and another three of them were shot down before the two opposing forces got close enough to be able to make full use of their weapons. At this shorter range the TIE fighters were able to make full use of their handling and before the rebel pilots could stabilise their deflector shields to cover the rear of their ships an Imperial pilot was able to race between one of the pairs, spin around without adjusting his heading and fire a sustained volley into the back of one of them. The X-wing's astromech droid let out a shrill squeal as it watched the back of the ship torn apart before the destruction reached it as well and the droid exploded moments before the cockpit was filled with flames that engulfed the helpless pilot.

"Blue Four is down. I need help!" the wingman of the destroyed X-wing signalled to the rest of the squadron as he began to take evasive action while a pair of TIE fighters dropped in behind him.

"Keep going Blue Three." Jarad told him, "I'm on my way. Blue Two stay on my wing." and he turned his own X-wing towards the pilot being chased. Jarad could see the two TIE fighters clearly on his targeting display and he flipped his fire selector from their salvo mode to alternating fire so that all four of his laser cannons would fire in turn rather than together. This would reduce the power of each shot but massively increase his rate of fire and as Jarad continued to turn towards the leading TIE fighter he held down his trigger to unleash a sustained burst of laser cannon shots. One of these clipped one of the TIE fighter's hexagonal wings and the fragile craft suddenly began to spin wildly, pale blue lightning arcing across it as its flight control systems were ionised. As this ship spun out of control Jarad's wingman opened fire on the second TIE fighter, sending a laser blast right through its cockpit.

"Blue Three you're in the clear. Hook up with Blue Nine and get back in the fight." Jarad transmitted to the other pilot.

Inside the *Renegade* the crew could feel the slight shudder as the laser cannons mounted on the three patrol cruisers hammered at the corvette's shields. These weapons lacked the power to penetrate the shields quickly but they would eventually wear them down if left unchecked. On the other hand the *Renegade's* turbolasers needed only a few hits against one of the gozantis' shields to pierce them and strike the vessel beneath them and the centre patrol cruiser burst into flames as it was hit repeatedly, its engines shutting down and its turrets ceasing fire.

Seeing this Malia checked how close the Imperial ship the *Renegade* had been making for now was and saw that the ship filled half of the bridge's forward facing viewport.

"Weapons front. Now!" she snapped and the *Renegade's* turrets quickly spun to face the central cruiser and fired almost in unison. From such short range the firepower of the six dual turrets was devastating against the Imperial vessel, its shields collapsing almost instantly before the front section of the cruiser including its bridge exploded.

"Got it!" Krissa exclaimed suddenly as she continued to monitor her comscan panel.

"Navigation are we set?" Malia asked.

"Course set for Tarlen captain." the corvette's navigator replied and Malia nodded.

"Krissa tell Blue Squadron that we're out of here. Helm execute the jump for Tarlen before any more Imperial ships can show up." she commanded. Then just as the *Renegade* began to swing around to face back out of the system there were two further flashes of light as an Imperial recon line consisting of two arquiten's-class light cruisers dropped out of hyperspace.

"Any time you're ready." Malia said when she saw the two warships, each of them twice the size of the *Renegade*, "Captain Tarl we've got what we came for and are preparing to leave." she signalled to the fighter squadron accompanying her corvette.

"Copy that *Renegade*. I've lost Blue Four and Blue Seven. Keen to get out of here myself before I lose any more." Jarad responded.

"Engaging hyperdrive now captain." the helmsman announced and the Imperial light cruisers outside the corvette vanished as the *Renegade* entered hyperspace. At the same time Malia let out a gasp and reached forwards to steady herself on the console in front of her.

"Captain are you okay?" Krissa asked when she saw this and Malia smiled back at her.

"I'm fine." she said, stroking her swollen stomach with one hand, "The baby kicked, that's all."

Moff Gregor Horatian, Imperial governor of the sector had gathered together all of his most senior officials in the capitol building on Estran to discuss the current situation. As the highest ranking officer from the sector

group still alive Admiral Hall was here to represent the navy while General Julius Dern represented the army. In addition to the purely military personnel there were also two members of the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order, often just referred to as COMPNOR, at the table. Rodge Larrs was the head of COMPNOR in the sector and functioned as both a minister of propaganda and also a deputy to the moff while Director Helios headed up the Imperial Security Bureau in the sector. In addition to the Imperial personnel Moff Horatian had decided to invite two civilians to the meeting as well, despite the objections of both Admiral Hall and Rodge Larrs who felt that the security briefing should remain closed to outsiders until the matters discussed could be presented in the best light. However, Moff Horatian had decided that Lord Maxamillion Torr and Edvars Kurrad, a senior member of the Estranian Parliament and the sector's leading industrialist respectively could have useful input to the meeting and so he had overruled his staff on this occasion.

"You see here the extent of the damage to the *Horrific*." Admiral Hall began when he was called upon to speak first and a false colour holographic image of his star destroyer appeared above the centre of the circular table that the men were all sat around, "The colours represent the extent of the damage inflicted when my ship was rammed by the rebels' droid battleship."

"Yes, how did that happen exactly admiral?" Edvars Kurrad interrupted, "It's all over the planet that the sector group's major warships were destroyed by ramming but I thought that was supposed to be next to impossible."

"True." Admiral Hall said, "Under normal circumstances you'd have to catch your opponent asleep to ram one capital ship into another but the circumstances at the rebel space station were anything but normal. With both sides operating gravity well projectors neither was able to manoeuvre properly and as soon as the rebel ships engaged their hyperdrives they were pulled right back out of hyperspace again, crashing straight into our ships before anyone could react. My crew and I were lucky that we got away with only the damage you can see here. The red areas are entirely out of commission while the yellow are functioning at a reduced capacity. The green are fully functional."

"I don't see a lot of green there admiral." Rodge Larrs commented.

"No. The damage to the power plant has affected most of the key systems and until it can be repaired the *Horrific* will be a sitting duck in combat." the admiral responded.

"And how long until the most powerful ship we have remaining to us can be used to defend Estran effectively?" Moff Horatian asked.

"If we can get the parts then the dock master has assured me that she can be ready in under two weeks from now." Admiral Hall answered, "Given the destruction of so many of our ships at once, there is a great deal of manpower available that can be concentrated on the *Horrific*. The problem is the supply of parts."

"You supply those, don't you Edvars?" Lord Torr said, looking at Edvars.

"Yes and my factories are running at full output. The problem is that since the near destruction of the sector group the rebels are hitting my convoys. I need warships to escort them here." he replied.

"We also need those warships to protect the worlds still loyal to us." Director Helios pointed out.

"Are there worlds that could be surrendered to-" Edvars began before he was interrupted.

"Outrageous!" Admiral Hall snapped, "The Empire will not surrender to terrorists."

"If you want a reliable supply of parts then you need to be able to protect my convoys." Edvars told him.

"Aren't there any reserve ships that could be brought into service? Or perhaps a neighbouring sector could send reinforcements." Lord Torr suggested.

"There was a fleet of older vessels, yes." Admiral Hall said.

"The rebels stole them." Director Helios added, "Those were the ships used to destroy ours."

"Then what about other sectors?" Lord Torr asked.

"The Empire is not what it was even a year ago Lord Torr." Rodge responded, "Individual sectors are looking out for their own interests now. We came close to going to war with our own neighbours when they attacked us if you recall."

"Gentlemen," Moff Horatian said, "I called you here to try and find solutions to our problems. Doesn't anyone have any ideas?"

"Raise Estran's shield." Director Helios said, "Our estimates of the rebels' fleet strength in the sector indicates that they could bombard us for a week and still not put a dent in it. That would allow us to send Admiral Hall's ships to escort Mister Kurrad's freighters. With the shield down and no ships to conduct scans in space the rebels could bring in civilian transports filled with troops and starfighters and the first we'd know about it was when they were deploying right outside."

"Director a large part of the economy of Estran is based on the import and export of goods." Lord Torr said, "If you raise the shield then all of us will suffer."

"You mean your credit account will suffer." the director replied, glaring at the local politician.

"What about shield gates?" Rodge Larrs suggested, "If we constructed some of those then we could activate the planetary shield and still permit the passage of commercial traffic until we come under attack. It could also scan the contents of approaching vessels."

"Yes Mister Larrs," General Dern said, "but the problem there is that if we do not have the spare parts needed to repair a single star destroyer then we certainly don't have the parts to be building a network of shield gates."

"And even a day's disruption of trade could trigger mass panic." Lord Torr added.

"Maintaining order on the ground would be the army's job." Director Helios said, "How ready for that are you general?"

"The army and stormtrooper corps are ready director. All leave has been cancelled and every fighting man we have is under orders to be available within one hour of receiving their call to duty. The problem is one of numbers again. We don't know where the rebels will land and so we have to be prepared to focus our surface defences on the most valuable locations, the capital, shield generator stations and various industrial and transport hubs." General Dern said.

"Leaving the rest of the planet open for a rebel invasion to be able to secure a beachhead where they can land reinforcements of their own." Rodge Larrs said.

"I'm afraid so, yes. I can scatter small units of troops in more remote areas to act as rapid reaction forces to tie down the rebels but they won't be able to hold off a full scale invasion that's supported from space." the general said.

"The shield must be raised." Rodge Larrs said, "We have no choice."

"Of course we have a choice." the moff said and then he looked around the table, "Obviously we cannot destroy the economy of Estran if we are going to hold this sector but we cannot leave it defenceless either. I want a full breakdown of what we have left on every planet in the sector. If there are any worlds that are no longer of strategic benefit to us then we will withdraw whatever fleet and army units are defending them. The army units will be used to bolster our defences here and the fleet vessels used to create a patrol and escort force that will keep open our supply lines for Mister Kurrad's freighters. If anyone does come up with an idea for how we can further bolster our defences then I'll hear them out. However, Estran's planetary shield will remain down unless the rebels actually launch an attack. Is that clear?" and he waited for a response, "I asked if that was clear." he added when no-one spoke up.

"Of course your excellency." Rodge said.

"Good. You are all dismissed." the moff ordered.

"You heard the moff's opinion on the shield. What do you think of it?" Rodge Larrs asked Director Helios when they entered the turbolift together, alone apart from Rodge's black protocol droid, PTR-3PO.

"I think he's taking a massive risk." the director replied, "Of course there'd be outcry over the cutting off of off world trade and travel but that would short lived. The rebels on the surface might try to whip up public sentiment against the moff but there aren't enough of them to pose a significant threat or they'd have already made their move. Ironically they'd only make themselves easier to track. Right now I've got agents scouring over all the reports of pro-rebel comments on line and we're identifying more of the culprits spreading it every hour. Raise the shield and cut off their outside support and the ISB can secure Estran in a week. Any disruption to our economy while we construct a shield gate will be temporary at worst."

"It's a shame the moff doesn't see it that way." Rodge said, "Of course if he decided to step down-

"It would take time to find a replacement." Director Helios interrupted, "In the meantime we'd need an interim governor. Someone with the will to take hard decisions and carry them out. Perhaps having a select council drawn from the upper levels of COMPNOR would do. As the head of COMPNOR in the sector it would mean you'd have to run that council of course."

"A task I would carry out to the best of my abilities." Rodge added as the turbolift came to a stop and the doors slid open, "This is my floor." he added.

"Yes Mister Larrs. I think we both know exactly where we are." Director Helios replied, smiling.

## 2.

After abandoning the ancient space station that had served as the sector headquarters for the Alliance to Restore the Republic since its inception just a few years earlier the rebellion had relocated its command structure to the largely agricultural world of Tarlen, one of the first planets in the sector to be taken. The space around this planet was now filled with warships being brought together not only to protect the Alliance's most senior personnel in the sector but also in anticipation of the upcoming attack on Estran that would cement the Alliance's hold over the entire sector. Meanwhile on the ground a network of bases had been set up to house the troops for the invasion as well as the local Alliance leadership. It was at the the headquarters of the local Alliance high command that General Syres Kain and the mon calamari Rear Admiral Aphanar were bringing together many of their command staff just as Moff Horatian had done in his headquarters. However, the mood at this meeting was far more jovial than it was on the capitol world of the sector.

Lieutenant Colonel Vorn Larcus III led a small rebel field team and when he entered the briefing chamber arm in arm with his much younger wife Kara, a former fighter pilot turned field medic they saw that a large number of officers from the fleet, army, support services and covert units such as their team had been brought together for this meeting.

"Wow, is there anyone over the rank of major not here today boss?" Kara said, looking around as they made their way to a vacant pair of seats nearby.

"Probably not." Vorn replied, "You didn't have to come you know. I know you don't like listening to all this strategic planning."

"Yeah well what were my options boss? Tharun's off on the *Golden Empress* with your little princess and their kid and Tobis and Cass are helping Mace overhaul the *Silver Hawk*."

"You could have gone with Jaysica to check out how your homeworld has changed since you were both here last." Vorn suggested and Kara winced.

"Yes or I could strip myself naked, coat myself in glue, roll in sugar and then run screaming into a swarm of fire wasps. It would probably be less humiliating and painful to have to walk twenty kilometres home after that than whatever indignity the klutz would inflict on me." she said, "Hopefully this war will be over soon and the pair of us can just retire to that mansion of yours on Estran and never let anyone disturb our constant love making."

"What about Vorn junior?" Vorn asked, referring to their young son Vorn Larcus IV.

"Jeeves can look after him boss. That droid acts like a nanny so he may as well be one." Kara answered.

"Then that leaves the paramedics you'll have to call after wearing me out." Vorn commented as they sat down and Kara smiled.

"I can take care of that as well boss. I'll give you the kiss of life as often as you need it. In fact here's one now." she said before kissing him on the cheek and leaning her head on his shoulder, "Besides you need me here to make all these stuffy old farts jealous."

"For which I will be eternally grateful. Now pay attention, it looks like its beginning." Vorn told her as General Kain got up out of the innermost row of seats in the large briefing room and walked up to the central holographic display.

"As I'm sure everyone is already aware our next target is Estran itself." he announced, activating the display to show a three dimensional image of Estran, "Moff Horatian himself is based here and if we can capture him and his senior staff then we will have decapitated the Empire's forces in the sector. In effect if we take Estran then we will hold the sector. The remaining Imperial forces will be scattered and isolated, perfect for us to pick off in small groups. I'm now going to turn this briefing over to Rear Admiral Aphanar. Her ships have been carrying out scouting flights to the Estran system and she can explain what the current situation is. Admiral."

"Thank you General Kain." Admiral Aphanar said as she got up, trading places with him so that she could adjust the hologram, zooming in on where the large orbiting fleet station was located. This was locked into a fixed position above Estran's equator by an orbital turbolift tether that could be seen stretching down towards the planet's surface in the hologram, "You see here the Imperial navy headquarters orbiting the capital world of Estran. This image was recorded less than twelve hours ago by the corvette *Renegade*."

"Malia's ship." Kara muttered as the admiral continued with her address.

"As you can see, despite the destruction of most of the sector group's star destroyers the Empire can still call upon a large number of smaller vessels to protect their primary world in the sector. In addition to these ships they still have other vessels ranging from corvettes to cruisers in the other systems remaining under their control. According to our intelligence we can defeat the remaining naval forces in any system, however a direct assault will doubtless result in the Imperial forces raising the planetary shield. The shield is strong enough to resist any bombardment and would delay an assault on the planet long enough for the Empire to

bring in reinforcements from other systems. Therefore, our attack must be carried out more covertly and I shall leave it to Colonel Sallir to explain." she said and the admiral then stepped back in favour of a male member of her species instead.

"Looks like this is going to be about us boss." Kara whispered as the colonel walked up to the holo projector. Like Vorn Lieutenant Colonel Sallir commanded a rebel field team but he combined this command with overall control of all of the other field teams in the sector as well, deciding which team was best suited to any particular mission.

"As Rear Admiral Aphanar has already explained our forces cannot launch a direct assault on Estran." he said, "However, we have a plan that will take the planetary shield and turn it from an asset to the Empire to their final undoing. It is our intention to land troops on the surface prior to the arrival of our fleet. These will remain hidden until the Empire activates the planetary shield and cuts the surface off from orbital support at which point we will attack key targets such as the ground station for the orbital turbolifts to the sector group headquarters, the capitol building and army and stormtrooper command centres."

"That sounds complicated boss." Kara commented and Vorn nodded.

"Yes and I've got a very bad feeling about who they'll ask to pull it off." Vorn replied.

"To prepare the way for these forces I will be deploying four field teams to Estran, including my own. I will also be taking the following other units with me. Lieutenant Colonel Vorn Larcus' unit aboard the *Silver Hawk*. Commander Dayle Kord's aboard the *Beauty Queen*. Captain Grayce Myrell's aboard the *Artist's Impression* and Captain Jenessa Drame's aboard the *Academic Freedom*. Each team will liaise independently with resistance units on Estran and report back to me when they have secured suitable locations for us to land our troops and keep them and their equipment hidden until the time comes to strike."

"Did you hear that boss? We're going home ahead of schedule." Kara said, nudging Vorn and he frowned.

"But Tarlen is your home." he said.

"Are you kidding me? Here we've got a couple of rooms. On Estran you've got a mansion. I know which I prefer." Kara said and Vorn sighed.

"Sometimes it sounds like you married me for my money. You do remember that the Empire froze my accounts don't you?" he said and Kara nodded.

"Sure boss. It doesn't matter anyway. I married you for your body. The money is just a bonus." she said. Then she paused before adding, "I wonder how happy people will be to see us come home?"

Garm Larcus ranked high enough in the ISB, reporting directly to Director Helios himself that he had a private office that was more than large enough both for him and Vay Udra. Originally assigned to determine whether Garm was still loyal to the Empire following his father's defection to the rebellion she had since become his partner in both his professional and personal life. While Garm was meeting with the director Vay was taking the opportunity to meditate, focusing her mind on the Force to draw strength from it. She had removed her ISB uniform to avoid creasing it while she sat on the floor to meditate in the skin tight black bodyglove she always wore underneath it. Vay would have happily removed this as well and sat on the floor naked, knowing that when Garm returned he would be spend at least as much time concentrating on her as his work but there was no guarantee that he would be the next person to enter the office and while Vay was content to be naked in front of Garm while he worked she drew the line at strangers and so the bodyglove remained on.

*Something's coming Vay.*

Vay gasped when she heard the voice from within the Force itself. Initially just an anonymous voice inside her mind, Vay had later discovered that this was in fact the spirit of a distant ancestor of hers called Lara Udra. Lara had been a member of the Jedi Order around four thousand years earlier and according to her the spirits of all her family members who had served as jedi were concentrating their power so that she could guide Vay away from the Dark Side and to the light. For her part Vay was not thrilled by the idea of making such a change in her lifestyle although as her relationship with Garm had developed she had found herself drawing on emotions more closely associated with the Light Side of the Force more and more often.

"What now Lara?" she said, opening her eyes and relaxing, "What's coming?"

*Something that will change everything Vay.*

"Stang, can't you just tell me straight? What's coming?" Vay said angrily.

*Vay you have to make a choice. Open the doors Vay. Open the doors.*

Vay frowned again when she heard this. Then she sighed, got up from her meditation and went to the office door so that she could open it and peer out into the corridor. Looking in both directions she saw several Imperial officers from various branches of service walking along it. In particular one young male who stared at Vay in the bodyglove that clung to every curve of her body.

*Lust.*

Vay smiled when she sensed his obvious reaction but seeing nothing in the corridor worth her attention she went back into the office and closed the door behind her. She was just settling down to meditate again when the door slid open once more and Garm entered with a datapad in his hand that he read as he walked.



"How was the meeting Garm?" Vay asked and he sighed as he made his way to his desk and sat down. "To summarise it our situation is desperate. Not that the director would use those words." Garm replied, "What about you? How was your meditation?"

Vay shrugged.

"Okay I guess." she said, "Though I think I just fell victim to the Force equivalent of a knock and run."

"Well I hope it left you ready to go because from what I've just spent an hour listening to we're going to be busy. The rebels are expected to launch a major offensive against Estran soon. They know that the capital is key to the sector so they'll want to take it as quickly as possible." Garm said.

"You think they'll do it, don't you?" Vay asked, getting back to her feet and wrapping her arms around Garm's waist, "You think the rebels will take Estran."

Garm sighed.

Ever since the creation of the Empire Estran has been loyal." he said, "Of course there have been a few rebels, my father for one, but the worst of them existed even under the Republic. Now though things are different. Imperial Intelligence may a shadow of its former self since Ibram Kellesen and Gayal Tharr tried to depose Moff Horatian but the analysis section is still operational and sending reports to Director Helios now. They say the amount of pro-rebel chatter they're picking up from all over the planet is through the roof. People are questioning the Empire openly in places now. They want the war to end and they see surrender as the best way of achieving that."

"I take it that arrests are being made." Vay said.

"The director has issued guidelines on how to deal with sedition. The operators of data exchange services are being made aware of their own liability if their platforms are used to spread dissent. We're not going as far as mass arrests yet but a list of names is being compiled for further investigation. It's likely that there are actual rebels whipping up this disorder and we need to route them out." Garm told her.

"Or we could just leave." Vay suggested and Garm stared at her.

*Confusion.*

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean we go home and pack our things then we take Cayla and we run away somewhere where there is no war." Vay said.

*No Vay. You are needed here for what's coming. Open the doors.*

Vay frowned as Lara repeated the odd instruction.

"What's wrong?" Garm asked when he saw her expression.

"Nothing. So about it?" Vay said.

"That's desertion Vay. Under the emergency powers being discussed its a capital offence." Garm replied.

"Let them try Garm. You know that I can protect us both."

"No Vay. We have a job to do and I intend to carry it out to the bitter end." Garm said sternly.

"Fair enough. But if you change your mind then just tell me. I know all the access codes for Moff Horatian's personal escape shuttle." Vay said and then she kissed Garm.

"I bet you do." he said, "No get your uniform back on. We need to start reviewing our list of names to be investigated."

"Daddy are you there?" Vorn's daughter Lyssa called out as she walked up the access ramp of the YT-1300 class freighter *Silver Hawk*, holding the hand of the former mercenary Tharun Verser who as well as being part of Vorn's field team was also her husband.

"Hi Tharun, hi Lyssa." a girl in her late teens wearing grease covered overalls said when the pair entered the ship's lounge.

"Hi kid." Tharun said, "Is the colonel around?"

"I think he just headed off to find my dad, Tobis and Jaysica. They were taking the old parts they replaced in the service to be disposed of properly. Kara's around though. She's in our cabin."

"Cass did you call?" Kara asked as she leant through the doorway that led to the ship's crew cabins and then she frowned when she saw Lyssa, "Oh, it's you." she said.

"Hello mother." Lyssa replied and she smiled at Kara, knowing full well that she hated being reminded that despite being a number of years younger than her she was in fact Lyssa's stepmother. The pair had never seen eye-to-eye and Kara's marriage to Vorn had done nothing to heal their differences.

"Oh shut up." she hissed, "One more word from you and I may just give you that spanking the boss should have done years ago."

Lyssa scowled and drew in breath to respond but Tharun was quicker.

"Let it go Lyssa." he said before looking at Kara, "The colonel ordered me here lieutenant." he added.

"On what is supposed to be his day off I might add." Lyssa said.

"Well I'm sorry if ending the war is more important than your love life." Kara replied.

"So it's happening." Tharun said, "We're invading Estran."

"Hold your horses there Tharun. We're just taking a trip there to lay the ground work. It'll be up to the fleet

and the army to do all the actual invading. The boss will explain when he gets back." Kara said.

"Speaking of which this sounds like him now." Tharun commented when he heard voices from the landing field outside the ship and he looked down the ramp to see Vorn and the rest of the rebels from the *Silver Hawk* approaching. Vorn and the ship's engineer Tobis Dorfus were supporting Mace Grayle, its owner between them as he hobbled along, clearly in pain while behind them they were being followed by Jaysica Horbid who was the team's demolitions and security expert.

"I'm really sorry captain." she said as Mace frowned, "I didn't know it was that flimsy."

"The strap is more than strong enough to hold it if its fastened properly." he replied as he was helped up the access ramp.

"Gods dad, what happened?" Cass exclaimed when she saw him.

"Oh, err, there was an accident." Tobis replied.

"Accident my ass." Kara said, "It was the klutz wasn't it?" and she stared at Jaysica.

"It's not my fault. The fastening on the strap used to secure the old repulsor unit wasn't done up properly." Jaysica protested.

"I fastened that myself. It was spot on." Cass said, anxious not to be blamed for whatever had happened to Mace's foot.

"Kara could you take a look at him?" Vorn asked.

"Sure boss. Sit him down." Kara replied and as Mace was helped to sit down in the only free standing seat in the lounge Kara went over and crouched down in front of him, "So how exactly did the klutz inflict this injury on an officer?" Kara asked while she removed Mace's boot, "An offence that carries a penalty of up to ten years in prison I might add."

"You'd know all about that." Jaysica snapped back at her, "You hit Captain Tarl enough times."

"Jaysica go and get cleaned up." Vorn said, not wanting to have Kara distracted by an argument, "Cass you as well. I'll be briefing you all on our mission as soon as possible."

"There was a worn out repulsor unit on a cart." Mace said and Kara smiled and nodded.

"And the klutz offered to unload it." she said.

"Err, ah, she just undid the straps." Tobis commented.

"The little lady's not here now lad." Tharun said, "You don't have to back her up for her to sleep with you tonight."

"Speaking of not being here I must be going as well Tharun. I have a meeting with Rear Admiral Aphanar. It's probably going to be about the invasion of Estran as well." Lyssa said.

"Or maybe she just wants someone to tell her she smells of fish." Kara muttered as Lyssa and Tharun kissed while Vorn glared at her.

"Daddy." Lyssa added as she looked at Vorn and then she glanced down at Kara, "Mother."

"Ouch! Be careful!" Mace called out as Kara suddenly looked up and twisted his injured foot as she scowled at Lyssa.

"Oh grow up you big baby." Kara replied, getting back to her feet.

"I outrank you." Mace said.

"Oh grow up you big baby Captain Grayle sir." Kara said, snapping to attention and saluting, holding the salute until Mace returned it as regulations required, "I saw worse injuries among my brothers when we were growing up on the farm."

"How many of those did you inflict lieutenant?" Tharun asked.

"More than my fair share I can tell you." Kara answered, "This might swell up a bit but it's not broken. I'll get you something to rub on it and you should be just fine tomorrow, maybe the day after."

"Excellent." Vorn said, "And goodbye Lyssa," he added hugging his daughter briefly.

"Just think daddy, the next time we see one another we could be back home on Estran." she replied before they let go of one another and she left the ship.

"No way is she coming to live with us in our mansion boss." Kara said when she was certain that Lyssa was gone.

"I wouldn't want to be the one to tell her that." Tharun commented, "Now if you don't mind I need a beer before this briefing. Who else?"

"Me. Unless whatever Kara gives me will kill me if it reacts with alcohol." Mace said, raising his hand.

"You'll be fine." Kara told him before both Jaysica and Cass returned to the lounge.

"Okay now that everyone's here I can explain what it is we've been ordered to do." Vorn said as the rebels all sat down.

"Do I get a beer as well?" Cass asked.

"Go on. Just one." Mace told her and Cass grinned as she darted to the fridge for a beer while Vorn began his briefing.

"Basically Estran is too well protected for the Alliance to invade. There are too many Imperial warships left in the system for us to just jump right in close and make a dash for the surface before they can raise the planetary shield without our transports getting shredded and if we send in our fleet first to clear them out then

the shield will be raised before we can even get our transports out of hyperspace." Vorn explained.

"So we're going to take out the shield?" Tharun asked.

"We'll need a lot of explosives to destroy enough shield generators to disable enough of the shield to let our ships through." Jaysica pointed out.

"Fortunately for the galaxy Jaysica, Alliance sector command realises that any plan that hinges on you to carry out is a bad one. Turns out it's the boss and Mace that will save the day. Not you." Kara said.

"The Alliance intends to smuggle troops to the surface before launching the attack." Vorn said.

"Seriously?" Mace said, lowering his beer, "Because if we're talking about enough troops to be able to take Estran then they aren't going to be easy to get past customs, let alone find enough places to hide them all."

"They won't be taking the entire planet, just a few key locations." Vorn reassured him, "Though we are still talking about more than ten thousand soldiers drawn from across the sector as well as units the Alliance itself has sent to bolster our numbers for the operation."

"Good, because I'd hate to be relying on all those Allastran troops we recruited. They'd sell their blasters to the Empire before using them to shoot stormtroopers." Tharun said, remembering the corruption that had been endemic on Allastra before its own planetary defence force had been disbanded by the Empire.

"There are five teams being deployed with Colonel Sallir co-ordinating them." Vorn continued.

"Colonel Sallir? But won't a mon calamari stand out on Estran?" Cass asked.

"The *Harpoon* will be hidden underwater. The colonel's team won't make their presence known on the planet unless they can't help it." Vorn said, "Then in addition to our team we'll also be joined by Captain Myrell's, Captain Drame's and Commander Kord's."

"Oh great." Mace said, wincing at the mention of Commander Kord's field team, "Inra." Mace did not have an issue with any of Kord's field team itself but the captain of the ship that they flew in, the Hapan woman Captain Inra Vayne, had a habit of annoying all of the other ship operators among the rebel field teams. The basis for this was her belief in the superiority of her vessel, the *Beauty Queen*. Unlike many of the other ships such as the old but dependable YT-1300 class *Silver Hawk*, the *Beauty Queen* was a state of the art YT-2400 class freighter that Inra was incredibly proud of and she never passed up an opportunity to boast of its capabilities.

"Don't worry about Inra, Mace. All four teams will deploy separately and pursue different avenues of action. That's why Colonel Sallir will be present on the planet to co-ordinate. Commander Kord's team as well as ours will be hunting for suitable ways of getting our troops onto the surface and keeping them out of sight until the attack starts while Jenessa and Grayce will instead be liaising with local resistance groups to try and raise a force on Estran itself that can be supplied with weapons and stage a more general uprising that will keep as many of the Imperial forces on the planet tied down as possible while Alliance troops attack priority targets." Vorn said.

"I don't know. I've got a very bad feeling about this colonel." Mace said, "There's just too much that can go wrong. Especially if we're involving the locals."

"The locals won't be given the time of the attack much ahead of schedule. In fact the plan is to tell them that we intend Estran to be taken almost entirely by indigenous forces. If they do betray us to the Empire then we'll only lose a few inexperienced troops."

"Acceptable losses." Mace commented.

"Yes, I'm afraid so." Vorn replied.

"Even if they aren't arrested some are bound to be killed when the shooting starts." Tharun added.

"That's horrible." Jaysica said.

"Haven't you noticed that we're at war?" Kara said.

"So we'll be working with Commander Kord then?" Cass asked.

"No. The separation of the teams isn't just between the team with different tasks, the two teams in each pair will also work separately. That way if one gets uncovered we still have the other to work with. I don't know what Commander Kord is planning but I intend to make use of mine and Mace's contacts on Estran." Vorn said and Mace pulled another displeased face.

"I only have one contact on Estran." he said, "Balve."

Odras Balve was the crime lord that Mace had borrowed the money to buy the *Silver Hawk* from at such a high rate of interest he doubted that he would ever clear the debt. Odras had his hands in numerous criminal enterprises and this had proven useful to the rebellion on more than one occasion. His planetwide criminal network gave him access to almost every walk of life on Estran but his lack of morals and criminal activity were a major handicap.

"I know but he's got the contacts to be able to tell us where the gaps are in Imperial security to get our people onto the planet and safe houses where they and their equipment can stay hidden until the time comes to strike. That second part is also where Lord Desh comes in." Vorn said and the other rebels smiled when they heard the name of his old mentor from his days in Parliament mentioned.

"Excellent boss. It's about time we caught up with him again." Kara said.

### 3.

Lord Couran Desh had feigned interest in the conversation over dinner at the home of Lord Torr. His host had also invited several other current members of Estran's Parliament to dinner and to hear him speak, the most notable of these to Couran being Lady Lynn Sharva who had taken over from Vorn Larcus when he had been expelled from Parliament for his anti-Imperial views. Prior to that she had spent a short time in the Imperial Senate itself as the sector's representative. Couran had retired from Parliament several years before Vorn had been expelled but unlike Vorn his departure had not had any hint of disgrace to it and he remained a popular figure among the current generation of politicians on the planet, none of them suspecting the anti-Imperial views he had kept hidden even after his retirement. Also added into the mix were a pair of Imperial Army officers that Couran did not recognise. Having paid no attention to them over dinner he still did not know their names and the only details he knew about either were that they were a colonel and a major attached to a logistics unit here on Estran. Now that the meal was over though Lord Torr had the group relocate into a lounge where a small podium had been set up for him to speak from. The design of this podium was an obvious copy of the Speaker's Podium in Estran's Parliament chamber where members would be called to deliver their speeches from and Couran smiled when he saw this.

"I see you're prepared to deliver your sermon Max old boy." he said.

"What this?" Lord Torr responded as he took his place at the podium, "I find it helps me focus on my delivery."

"And practice just in case you get to be named Speaker, yes?" Couran added as he sat down, "Now do go on Max. At my age I can last only so long after a fine meal before needing the bathroom and I would hate to interrupt your speech."

Lord Torr frowned for a moment at Couran's blunt statement, then he looked at the datapad already positioned on the podium for him to refer to as he began to speak as if he was addressing Parliament. "My Lords and Ladies of Parliament," he said in the traditional manner that addresses to Parliament began, "the people of Estran have long been a peaceful society. When the Clone Wars were brought to an end in this sector they saw the increased level of security that the rise of the New Order brought to the galaxy and were overwhelming in their support for the drastic reduction in the size of our own armed forces in favour of the shared forces of the Empire. This arrangement has served our planet well since then but now a dark cloud is falling across the sector once more and I fear it is time for the people of Estran to stand up and be counted on to hold back this darkness with their very lives if need be. The Empire has always protected Estran against the aggression of the rebels who would take us back to the corruption of the Galactic Republic that led directly to the horrors of the Clone Wars and now the time has come for us to repay the debt we owe to the Empire by playing an active part in the defence of our planet and make no mistake it is Estran that is now at risk. Already rebel spacecraft striking from a hidden base have penetrated our system and although they were repulsed by the Imperial Navy we must not take it for granted that this will always be the case. My Lords and Ladies of Parliament it is my proposal that all able bodied adults on Estran should be called forth to create a people's militia, trained and equipped to assist both our regular army and also the Loyal Imperial forces on the planet. In preparation for this I have consulted with senior officers of the Estranian Defence Force who have informed me that a functional soldier can be trained in as little as six weeks providing suitable leadership can be provided from our existing military strength."

At this point Couran glanced over at the two Imperial officers and saw both of them smiling. Obviously these two men were the ones Lord Torr had spoken to about raising his militia. Couran suspected that the claims of how long it would take to train soldiers had come from them and the fact that this would require people to give up their current occupations to undergo full time training had not been discussed, nor had where the Imperial Army would suddenly get enough instructors to carry it out from. Couran then turned his head back towards the podium where Lord Torr continued to speak.

"Not only will the existence of this militia give us the capability to help defend our homes but it will also send a signal to the rebels that the people of Estran reject their demands and are willing to fight for their freedom. My Lords and Ladies of Parliament I thank you for listening and I submit this proposal to the House for urgent consideration." Lord Torr finished and then as he bowed his head his guests began to applaud politely.

"Oh bravo Max my boy!" Couran called out as he clapped as quickly and loudly as he could manage, "Bravo. Bravo. I really do mean it. Why it reminds me of the speech given by Lord Orran when the Clone Wars began and he assured the Republic that our armed forces would fight side by side with the Grand Army of the Republic. Did you hear that? It was a wonderful speech."

"You are too kind." Lord Torr said.

"It's just what we need." Lady Sharva added, "I'm sure that the people will agree that the time has come for them to take up arms as well."

"Yes they will." Couran said and then he hesitated.

"Is something wrong Lord Desh?" one of the other Parliamentarians asked.

"Oh no. Maybe. No, it's nothing I'm sure." Couran replied.

"I'm sure that Lord Torr would welcome any input you might have Lord Desh." the army colonel commented and Couran smiled at him, knowing that Lord Torr only wanted to hear glowing praise for his idea.

"Well it's just that I've been hearing from people close to Moff Horatian that a lot of people here on Estran are actually starting to voice dissent against the Empire. In fact some of them are openly voicing their support for the rebels themselves. Now wouldn't it be unfortunate if we spent the time and effort to train people in military tactics and gave them weapons only for that training and those weapons to be turned against the Empire?" Couran said, "I mean even a small fraction of the adult population would be enough for-

"Of course we'd conduct thorough background checks." the army major interrupted, not noticing that several of the Parliamentarians were glaring at him for daring to speak over such a respected person as Lord Desh.

"Oh well that's alright then. Though I do hope the rebels are kind enough to wait for those millions of background checks to be carried out before they invade." Couran said before he glanced at the ornate chronometer he wore on his wrist, "Now I am terribly sorry Max my boy but I do need to be going, dinner went on somewhat longer than I had anticipated. I look forwards to seeing how your idea develops before you deliver it to Parliament though. Do please keep me up to date."

"Of course." Lord Torr responded, inwardly furious at having the flaw in his plan exposed in front of the group of Parliamentarians he had been hoping would form the core of his support in Parliament instead of being the ones who already had objections to it.

The five small rebel ships arrived in the Estran system at different times, avoiding having the appearance of a united group and helping the five small ships blend into the crowds of commercial vessels around the planet. The sheer number of these made it impossible for every vessel to be searched and the rebellion had experience in knowing how to sneak ships through the orbital patrols.

"How does it look?" Vorn asked as he stood in the doorway of the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit when it came out of hyperspace with Mace and Cass at the controls.

"There are more ships on patrol than usual but their patterns are the same." Mace replied, "Look, there's your old friend Captain Naje." and he pointed to the sensor display where it showed a line of three venator-class star destroyers, now the largest vessels available to the Imperial sector group patrolling beyond the orbit of Estran's two small moons. Vorn had served as a navigator on a vessel commanded by Captain Sayla Naje and had remained in intermittent contact with her until he defected to the rebellion.

"Can we get around them?" Vorn asked, "Sayla and her captains may not have been given the most modern ships but you know how good they are and those ships carry more than a thousand fighters between them." "Sucks to be a woman in the Imperial Navy huh?" Mace commented, aware that the captains of the other two star destroyers that made up Sayla's attack line were also women, all of whom had been relegated to the command of the older class of ship despite their ability due to the sexism that was rampant in the upper echelons of the Empire, "In answer to your question though yes, I can get us around them easily. They aren't positioned for customs duty, those ships are there in case of invasion, look at their position in relation to everything in a fixed orbit. They're beyond it. That means that they can make a quick jump through hyperspace to any part of the system without worrying about gravity wells and they have a clear line of fire if any warships jump in within weapons range. All we need to do is head towards the starport here on the southern continent and we won't come close to them. The ships covering that sector are here." Mace continued and he pointed to another group of contacts, "Four arquitens-class light cruisers. As long as we don't look like we're trying to avoid them we should be okay. There's a lot of traffic heading that way and they can't stop and search all of them."

"So we'll head for the southern starport and then fly in atmosphere to our destination?" Vorn said and Mace nodded.

"It'll add a few hours to our travel time but at least we won't get shot down or boarded." he said.

"Okay do it." Vorn ordered before he left the cockpit, leaving Mace and Cass to continue flying the ship towards Estran, taking them towards the attack line of light cruisers instead of the much larger star destroyers.

The light cruisers were in a low orbit over Estran in a diamond formation and Mace saw that each of them was focusing its sensor on a particular facing so that between them they could get the best possible coverage.

"This looks good." Mace told Cass as he adjusted the *Silver Hawk's* heading so that it would pass through the sensor arc of one of the cruisers on the flank of the formation, "We'll fly through and see if they challenge us."

"And if they do?" Cass asked and Mace shrugged.

"Then I'll wing it." he said and Cass groaned.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." she said as the cruisers came close enough to be seen through the cockpit canopy.

"Hey, how many times have we done this before?" Mace said.

"Yeah dad, with customs patrols. Not entire lines of capital ships." Cass pointed out.

"Attention YT-1300 class vessel this is the Imperial cruiser *Spear Point*. Identify yourself and your purpose for being here." a bored sounding voice announced over the communication system and Mace grinned.

"He's been saying that so often I doubt he even recognises the individual words any more." he said before he sent his reply, "This is the independent transport ship *Grey Ghost*. We are transporting passengers from The Heart following beacon trill herf xesh one-one-three-eight." he said, knowing that the upheaval in the central region of the sector known as The Heart as the Alliance took control of more more worlds there was driving out many beings who feared reprisals for having collaborated with the Empire for so long.

"Will they believe that dad?" Cass asked.

"If they don't then this party's going to be over before it even begins." Mace said and then the sound of the Imperial communications officer's voice was heard again.

"Understood *Grey Ghost*. Report to customs on your arrival."

"Confirmed *Spear Point* we are-" Mace began before he saw that the Imperial vessel had already broken contact, no doubt moving on to interrogate the next vessel to approach, "How rude." Mace commented and then he smiled and looked at Cass, "See? I told you it would work." he told her.

"One day you're going to mess up." she replied.

"Maybe, but not today. Now we're heading into the atmosphere. Be ready to switch from ion drive to repulsorlifts." Mace said.

He kept the *Silver Hawk* on its heading towards the starport located on Estran's southern continent until it was well into the planet's atmosphere. Then before getting close enough that it would enter the starport's own traffic control zone he turned away and flew out over the ocean, using this area to descend further so that by the time they were approaching the starport that the rebels really wanted to land at the ship had the appearance of having flown along the commercial atmospheric flight paths normally reserved for air speeders that were unable to leave the atmosphere and take advantage of the fuel economy offered by making sub orbital hops instead.

The starport that Mace came into land at had been chosen carefully. He used this particular starport often, knowing that although it was of limited size and offered relatively few services it was one where the customs agents could be counted on to look the other way thanks to them having been bribed by Odras Balve. However, as he brought the ship into land in the docking bay he saw that the customs agents waiting to inspect the ship were also accompanied by a pair of stormtroopers.

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

"Me too. Should we try somewhere else?" Cass asked.

"No we're already committed. If we break off now that'll just attract attention. But you better go and tell everyone to hide." Mace answered and Cass nodded as she got out of her seat and hurried from the cockpit into the lounge. Here she found the other rebels gathered together with weapons holstered.

"Hey kid what's wrong?" Tharun said as she came rushing into the room.

"Stormtroopers." she said, "There are stormtroopers in the docking bay."

"Oh my!" the golden coloured protocol droid standing in the corner of the room exclaimed, "The Empire knows we are here."

"Calm down Jeeves." Vorn told his droid, "It's more likely that the Empire is just boosting security at all the starports on the planet. How many stormtroopers are we talking about Cass?"

"Just two I think. If there were more then I didn't see them." she told him.

"We can deal with two stormtroopers can't we?" Jaysica said.

"It only takes one to raise the alarm little lady." Tharun said.

"Plus someone's bound to notice when they don't check in." Kara added.

"Okay go and tell you father to invite the stormtroopers aboard." Vorn told Cass, "We'll hide in the cargo lift and when they come aboard we can sneak out that way. Tobis can you have Harvey operate the lift hatch?"

"Oh, err, yes of course." Tobis said as they both looked at his red and white R5 astromech droid that let out an abrupt whistle.

"Grab what you can and put everything else away." Vorn told the gathered rebels, "It needs to look like its only Mace and Cass aboard."

"Excuse me Colonel Larcus sir," the gold coloured protocol droid stood in the corner of the room said, "but what role am I required to play in this deception?"

"None Jeeves." Vorn replied, "Just keep quiet when those agents come aboard and if they ask you belong to Mace. You're Cass' tutor or something."

The two customs agents and the accompanying stormtroopers looked up into the air as the *Silver Hawk* hovered above the docking bay for more than a minute before the freighter's landing gear deployed and the ship descended, setting down in front of them. There then came another pause before the ship's access ramp lowered and Mace came walking down with a datapad in his hand.

"Something wrong?" he asked one of the customs agents as they and the stormtroopers walked up to him.

Mace recognised both the customs agents, he had landed at this starport so often that he knew all of them by sight now but he knew well enough not to bring attention to this fact. Telling a corrupt agent to his face that you knew who he was was a good way for him to decide to make an example of you so that you could not spread the word widely enough that his superiors would find out.

"Nothing really." the agent replied, "It's just increased security in light of the rebel threat. Do you have your registration?"

"Right here." Mace said and he held out the datapad that contained the details of the *Silver Hawk* and himself that were held with the Bureau of Ships and Services.

"BoSS seal checks out. Are you alone on this ship?" the customs agent asked and Mace shook his head.

"No, my daughter's aboard as well. Plus a couple of droids we use to monitor the systems."

"We need to see this girl." one of the stormtroopers said.

"Is that really necessary? Cass is busy right now." Mace replied.

"She can come out or we can go in." the stormtrooper said, just as Mace had expected him to.

"You better come aboard then." Mace said and he beckoned for the customs agents and stormtroopers to follow him as he walked back up the access ramp into the ship. Then when he came to the lounge he gave a shout, "Cass! Come out here."

"I'm in the shower!" Cass shouted back just as the customs agents and stormtroopers arrived in the lounge as well and one of the agents smiled while the other looked around, spotting Jeeves standing in the corner beside Harvey.

Are those your droids?" he asked.

"What Jeeves and Harvey over there?" Mace responded, "The astromech helps with maintenance and navigation and the protocol droid tutors my daughter. I can't afford a boarding school and I want her to have a proper-"

"I don't care. I want to see this daughter of yours though. Either she comes out or we blast the door open." the first agent said, his attention focused on the doorway that led to the crew cabins and bathroom while paying no attention to the astromech droid that rolled out of the lounge via the exit on the other side of the central turret access shaft.

Making its way past the ship's workshop the droid entered the cargo hold where there were a few crates stacked up along the back wall. Ignoring these the droid made its way towards the hatch set into the floor in the centre of the room instead. This was part of the cargo lift system with the hatch cover itself forming the lift platform while the four columns at its corners held the pistons that enabled it to move up and down.

Alternatively the hatch could slide back so that cargo could be winched aboard or deposited by a loader located beneath the ship. With a second outer hatch located flush against the *Silver Hawk's* ventral hull this created a space between them that was just about large enough for the other five rebels aboard the ship to cram themselves and a limited amount of equipment into while they waited for the docking bay to be cleared. Harvey simply rolled up to the controls for the lift and hatch system, extending a computer access probe so that it could connect with the system before opening the outer hatch without warning, dropping the rebels onto the floor of the docking bay.

"Stang!" Kara hissed as she picked herself up, "That little bucket of bolts could at least have warned us."

"Never mind that now." Vorn replied, "We need to move. That way." and he pointed to the exit from the docking bay that stood unguarded now that the security personnel for the bay were all inside the *Silver Hawk*.

While the other rebels were quickly exiting the docking bay one of the customs agents decided that he had waited long enough for Cass to appear and he drew his blaster as he strode towards the door to the bathroom.

"Okay we're going in." he said, snarling.

"Cass!" Mace called out and he stepped forwards only for one of the stormtroopers to hold him back."

"Stay where you are." he ordered. However, before the customs agent could reach the bathroom door it suddenly opened and Cass emerged barefoot, wearing a robe and with her wet hair hanging down over her shoulders.

"What the kriff?" she exclaimed when she saw the customs agent's blaster pointing at her and she held her robe tightly shut.

"Starport customs wanted to see you." Mace told her.

"Well if they'd burst in on me in the shower they'd have seen everything." she replied.

"There you go officers." Mace said, "This is Cass, my daughter."

"Do you always shower while the ship is landing?" the customs agent still stood close to Mace asked.

"Only after our astromech droid has sprayed me with lubricant." Cass answered, "That stuff stinks like poodoo."

The customs agent standing close to Cass returned his blaster to its holster.

"Okay I think we've seen enough." he said, sighing.

"Let's go. There's nothing more to be done here." the second agent added.

"So I can go about my business?" Mace asked the stormtrooper still, holding his arm.

"You can go about your business." the stormtrooper replied. letting go of Mace before he turned to leave the ship, the second stormtrooper and the two customs agents following close behind him.

"That went about as well as can be expected," Mace said, looking towards the access ramp, "and from the lack of blaster fire outside I'd say that the colonel and the others managed to get away in time. Mind you I was worried when that agent decided he was going to force open the bathroom door. What was taking so long anyway? Were you actually taking a shower in there?"

"Of course not. But I needed to wet my hair and rub shampoo in or I wouldn't have looked or smelt right for someone who had just stepped out of the shower." Cass said.

"Frankly I'm not sure that pervert would have noticed. I think he just wanted to drag you from the shower." Mace said and Cass smiled.

"Good job he didn't order me to flash him then isn't it dad?" she said as she opened her robe to reveal the clothing she was still wearing beneath it, her trouser legs rolled up to hide them beneath the knee length robe and Mace smiled back at her.

"Sort out your clothes and grab your blaster. We're going to see Balve." he told her.



#### 4.

Odras Balve ran his criminal empire from a cantina located close enough to the starport that it was within easy walking distance. This was deliberate on his part since smuggling goods and people made up such a high percentage of his income he needed reliable access to a mass transport hub. None of the cantina patrons looked up as Vorn and his team of rebels entered the cantina, this was not the sort of place where strangers looked too closely at one another. On the other hand the rebels did look around to evaluate any potential threat and Tharun nudged Vorn.

"Colonel check out the table at ten o'clock by the door." he said."

"What?" Vorn said as he turned his head to see a familiar face, "Stang. That's Anzar Deller." he added when he saw the dark skinned human sitting across the cantina.

"Major Shrell's pilot? But I thought he was dead." Jaysica said as the other rebels looked towards the table.

"So did I. I thought Mace killed him when Shrell's people tried to kill us." Vorn replied, thinking back to the last time his team had encountered the renegade rebel field team. Major Jym Shrell and his unit aboard the old barloz-class medium freighter *Scarlet Knife* had deserted from the rebellion to become outlaws. They had signed up with another former rebel, an ex-privateer using a stolen Alliance encrypted communication system to plot attacks when he attempted to form a fleet of pirate ships under his command. Vorn's team had been sent to disrupt this operation and been recognised by Major Shrell, resulting in a pitched battle between the two teams in which Anzar had supposedly been killed after Mace chased him down.

"Mace lied about killing him?" Kara said, "That snake. How about we finish the job here and now boss?" she suggested.

"No. Not here. Let's hear what Mace has to say for himself first." Vorn replied and he headed for the bar. The muscular man behind the bar recognised Vorn and his team when they reached him and he looked towards the door.

"Where's Mace?" he asked.

"He'll be along shortly. For now we'll take a round of beers." Vorn replied.

"Not the watered down ones." Tharun added and the barman scowled at him as he poured the drinks.

"Six." Vorn commented, "We'll need one for Mace."

"What about Cass boss?" Kara asked as the rebels picked up their drinks from the counter.

"I'll leave it to Mace to decide if she's allowed another." he answered.

"So where do we wait?" Jaysica asked, turning around and as she did so she knocked her drink against another young woman who happened to be passing in the crowded cantina, "Hey watch where you're going!" she exclaimed.

"Me watch where I'm going? It was you that-" the woman responded and as she turned to face Jaysica the pair recognised one another, "You." the woman said, looking at the rebels.

"Well hello there Lieutenant Curve. You're looking well." Vorn said as he too recognised the face of Anzar Deller's first mate Lannaye Curve. The last time any of them had seen her she had been critically wounded and being carried away by Anzar himself.

Across the room Anzar heard Lannaye call out when Jaysica knocked into her and he looked around to see Vorn and his team at the bar with her. Getting up from his chair he rushed to join her, positioning himself between the small woman and Vorn's rebels.

"Hey we don't want any trouble." he said, "We've kept out of the way just like I promised."

"Yeah after leaving Cass cuffed to the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp." Kara pointed out.

"Oh, err, here's Mace." Tobis said when the cantina door opened again and Mace entered with Cass. Looking towards the bar he saw Vorn and Anzar confronting one another and he froze.

"What's wrong?" Cass asked and then she gasped when she saw the *Scarlet Knife's* crew, "Stang. I thought they were dead."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Mace said and then pulling Cass along with him he hurried to join the other rebels, "Anzar." he said, "I see you found Balve then."

"Mace can you explain what's going on here?" Vorn asked and Mace sighed.

"Anzar stopped Travis from killing Cass. I couldn't kill him when he was just trying to get away and save Lannaye." Mace replied.

"He told me about this place and I've been working for Odras Balve ever since." Anzar added.

"Doing what exactly?" Kara said.

"Whatever Odras will pay us to do." Lannaye replied.

"They're wanted by the Alliance colonel." Tharun pointed out and Vorn nodded.

"Yes and if they ever set foot on an Alliance facility I'm sure that there will be consequences but take a look around us. Do you really think us trying to detain anyone is a good idea?" he said.

"Probably not." Tharun said.

"Then let's just do what we came here to do and we can leave Captain Deller in peace." Vorn said.

"Thanks. We'll be getting out of your way." Anzar replied and he and Lannaye turned around to make their way to the exit.

"Colonel I-" Mace began.

"Mace you should have told me." Vorn interrupted, "Don't worry though. I understand that you couldn't kill a man who was running away. In fact I think I'm happier about it than if you had shot him."

"I'm not sure I am boss." Kara commented.

"Or me." Cass added.

"Mace." the barman said suddenly, "Mister Balve is ready to see you." and Mace looked behind the bar to where he knew there was a hidden surveillance camera that allowed Odras to monitor the happenings in the public area of his headquarters, "You can take your drinks but your weapons stay out here."

Odras Balve said behind his desk in his office as the rebels were shown in, the old human smiling across it at them. Behind him stood his hulking wookiee bodyguard, the alien cradling a bow-caster in his arms.

"Ah Mace, so good to see you again." he said, "Though since you've brought all of your rebel friends with you I'm guessing that it is Lord Vorn Larcus the third that will be putting whatever proposition you have brought to me."

"Correct." Vorn said as he and Mace sat down while the other rebels stood behind them, Tharun watching the wookiee while the others looked at Odras.

"Then make your case." Odras told him.

"The Alliance is coming to Estran." Vorn stated but if Odras was at all startled by this then his facial expression did not reveal it.

"You don't seem surprised by that." Mace said and Odras smiled at him.

"Mace everyone in the sector knows that the rebellion-" Odras began.

"The Alliance." Cass interrupted.

"Ah the waitress speaks. Very well, the Alliance has to take Estran to achieve victory in the sector. They could go from planet to planet and take every lump of rock except this planet but without it they can't claim to be in command. We're right on the Trade Corridor here and all shipping through the sector comes past us. A line of interditors could set up a blockade that would make the sector impassable to the commercial traffic the Alliance," and he glanced at Cass as he used the word 'Alliance', "needs to have flowing if it's going to claim to be a galactic government. In fact I'm counting on it."

"What do you mean? How will an Alliance attack benefit you?" Jaysica said.

"He's stockpiling for a siege." Mace said, "He's counting on the shield going up and the Imperial government imposing strict rationing on the population."

"At which point I will be sitting on thousands of tonnes of goods I will have bought for a few credits per tonne but will now be worth anything up to a thousand credits per kilo. Stang, I've even imported a hundred tonnes of candy bars so if the little girl wants one-" Odras said, glancing at Cass again.

"No thank you. I don't take candy from strangers." she told him.

"But I'm not a stranger. I'm your friendly Uncle Odras who's pulled you, your adoptive father and all of your rebel friends out of more than one jam over the last few years.

"You can't be declaring any of this to the Empire." Vorn said, "If they knew you had even basic supplies then they'd nationalise it all as soon as the shield went up."

"Ha!" Kara exclaimed, "The great Odras Balve. Loan shark, slaver and murderer. Now he hides sweets under his bed." and Odras glared at her.

"If you're bringing supplies in without the Empire knowing then you've still got routes through customs even with stormtroopers at the starports and if you're storing them then you've got warehouse space." Mace said, "We want both." and Odras' eyes widened for a moment at the audacity of the demand.

"Oh really Mace? And why should I give you either?" Odras asked.

"Because it will help the Alliance win the war in this sector." Vorn said and Odras shrugged.

"Empire. Alliance. What's the difference to a man like me?" he replied.

"The difference is that when the Alliance wins you can either be seen as a hero who helped in the liberation of this planet or a war profiteer." Vorn said.

"Are you threatening me?" Odras asked, leaning towards Vorn and behind him his bodyguard growled.

"I'm suggesting that you may want to look beyond the end of the war Odras. Give us what we want and there could be a place for you running Estran." Vorn responded.

"Boss are you sure you know what you're saying?" Kara commented.

"I know Kara." Vorn said, glancing at her before he looked back at Odras, "Think about it. You sit here in this office making your deals and knowing that the authorities could be gathering evidence against you as we speak. I'm offering you a way out Odras. The Alliance will offer you a pardon for crimes committed under the Empire, even the more distasteful ones like slavery and murder. All they ask in return is that you help us smuggle troops and equipment onto the surface and then keep them hidden until the time is right."

"Somehow I doubt that your Alliance's goodwill will last after the war's end." Odras said, "I won't be able to

carry out my business any more openly than I can now."

"Of course not, but you could consider a different approach." Vorn said.

"You expect me to go straight?" Odras replied, grinning in amusement at the thought of becoming an honest citizen.

"As straight as any other politician." Vorn said, "I did say that you could have a hand in running Estran. Help us and it will be known that Odras Balve is a hero of the Alliance to Restore the Republic. Not something that most Members of Parliament will be able to say if you challenge them for office."

"Lord Balve." Mace commented.

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

"Lord Balve. I like the sound of that." Odras replied, nodding, "But supposing I don't get elected to office. What then?"

"Then you have to get by for the rest of your life with however many millions of credits you've made from spreading misery." Mace said.

"Whereas you would be free of your debt to me I take it." Odras said, looking back at Mace, "Am I correct?"

"You couldn't keep up with any of your criminal activity." Vorn told him.

"The risk is too great." Odras said suddenly, "If anything goes wrong then I wouldn't even get a trial before the Empire stood me in front of a firing squad. I'd need much more than a few vague suggestions of what might be."

"Ten million credits." Vorn said and everyone in the room stared at him.

"Ten million?" Odras asked and Vorn nodded.

"Delivered in the form of precious gemstones and gold." he said.

"You have this aboard your ship?" Odras asked.

"We're not stupid Odras. If we pay you up front then we've no guarantee that you won't keep it and go back on your part of the deal." Vorn said.

"I could say the same. If I agree to be paid after helping you then I've no guarantee of being paid." Odras pointed out.

"That's been considered." Vorn told him, "Each unit of troops will bring part of your payment with them. You'll be paid when they touch down. If we cheat you then you'd stop helping us."

"Whereas if I try to cheat you I lose the rest of my pay and I have to deal with all your soldiers on my doorstep." Odras said, smiling as he nodded his head, "I need time to think about this."

"Of course, but remember that time is of the essence." Vorn replied before he downed what was left of his drink.

Most of the field teams operating in the sector had six members in all, divided up between two to crew the starship they were based aboard and four in the team itself. Vorn's team had acquired a seventh member when Mace had adopted Cass and in the case of Jenessa's team there were only her and the other three people who had fled Estran with her. However, the means by which they had escaped, by stealing an Imperial lambda-class shuttle, gave them an easy way of infiltrating the planet's security. All it took was a slight modification to the transponder and her pilot Thracken Grammel was able to fly them right through the orbiting patrols.

Just in case any of the patrol ships decided to challenge the shuttle on its way down Jenessa sat in the cockpit with Thracken wearing an Imperial officer's uniform. She would rather not have been the one to have to try and bluff their past an Imperial warship if it came down to it but Thracken himself had become somewhat eccentric after spending so many years in space alone surveying the nebula that neighboured the sector and there was no way that he would be able to pass himself off as an Imperial pilot and therefore, it fell to Jenessa to be ready.

"Looks like we're through." she said when she saw the glow of the air against the shuttle's hull as the craft entered Estran's atmosphere and Thracken laughed.

"Yes. I knew it would work." he said cheerfully.

"Well you just get us down. I'm going to go and change." Jenessa told him before she got up and left the cockpit, returning to the rear section of the shuttle where the two young women who made up the rest of her team, Kay Laran, the former handmaiden to Lady Sharva and underworld slicer Emissi Caysa. Emissi had not come along by choice when the others fled Estran but with nowhere else to go afterwards she and her slicer droid Sneaky reluctantly joined the Alliance with them.

"I take it we got past the blockade then?" Kay asked and Jenessa nodded as she walked past the two young women to the stacks of equipment cases towards the rear of the compartment.

"They didn't even ask who we were." she replied and Emissi snorted.

"Typical. They're overworked and getting sloppy." she commented.

"I just wish we'd known for sure that I wouldn't have to talk to them before I put this ridiculous costume on." Jenessa said as she hurriedly removed the belt from her uniform and began to undo the tunic, "This thing is so tight I can hardly breathe." and then she opened up one of the equipment containers to take out her own

clothes that she had placed in there ready to be changed into.

"So are we still on schedule?" Emissi said as Jenessa changed.

"I think so. Assuming Thracken gets us down in the right place." she answered.

"Yeah, he is a bit of a laser brain isn't he?" Emissi commented.

"Oh leave him alone. He's nice." Kay responded.

"In a crazy hobo sort of way." Emissi said.

"Just grab your gear." Jenessa said, "We'll be landing just outside the capital and after I've let Colonel Sallir know that we're down safe we're going to set up the meeting.

Before her involvement with the rebel alliance had become known to the Empire, Jenessa Drame had been a professor of xenoarchaeology at the University of Estran and when she returned to Estran with her team of rebels she returned to the place she knew best - the university campus. The wide area which this was spread out over meant that Jenessa and her team could simply wander onto it without being challenged and after that she used her knowledge of the layout to get them to the main library. However, this was as far as Jenessa could get them now that she no longer had a valid staff ID to get her inside and she instead led her team to a side entrance that was usually kept locked.

"Okay Emissi, you're up." she said as she and Thracken positioned themselves to keep watch for a security patrol. Thracken reached under his long coat and started to take out the blaster carbine he kept beneath it,

"No, not here Thracken." Jenessa told him, "Blasters are forbidden on campus. If anyone sees that we'll never explain it away." and he nodded as he returned the weapon to its hiding place under his coat.

Meanwhile Emissi walked up to the door and examined the locking panel beside it. As was common with electronic security systems there was a computer access port located close by for diagnostics and reprogramming but this also meant that a dedicated slicing droid like Sneaky had a way of breaking into it.

"Come on Sneaky. This should be youngling's play. All that's in there is a bunch of data cards and old fashioned books." Emissi said and her droid chirped as it rolled forwards.

"Actually the library holds a number of very rare and expensive volumes." Jenessa pointed out, "Security is taken seriously."

"Oh yeah? Well just watch Sneaky go." Emissi replied, grinning.

Based on an ordinary R2 unit, Sneaky was equipped with a standard computer access probe in addition to numerous more specialised equipment and programming designed specifically to defeat both hardware and software security intended to stop slicers from gaining access to the systems they protected. The droid chirped and whistled as it studied the security system in place to protect the lock and then all of a sudden it let out a loud screech and Kay jumped back.

"What's wrong?" she exclaimed before the door to the library building slid open and Emissi smiled.

"Nothing. Sneaky just gets a bit excited every now and again." she said.

"As long as he can keep quiet inside. This is a library after all." Jenessa said as she led the team inside the building.

The door gave the rebels access to a service area of the library that thankfully was deserted and so no-one could raise the alarm about the break in. However, the rebels had not come here to skulk around in an empty area of the library and followed by the rest of her team Jenessa made her way to the public area of the library, emerging between two rows of shelves of old fashioned printed books.

"So where to now captain?" Kay whispered as she peered through the shelves at the students she could see in other rows.

"I don't know." Jenessa replied, "I guess we just keep looking until we find someone I think we can count on."

"You guess?" Emissi said, "That's your great plan? You guess? I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Shush." a voice said from between the shelves as someone in an adjacent row ordered her to be quiet.

"Oh kriff off." Emissi said.

"Sorry." Jenessa added, glaring at Emissi, "Come on, all of you." she added, pulling Emissi along with her.

Making her way through the library Jenessa took note of every student she saw until she found one that she recognised from one of her classes, "There." she said softly to her team, "That's Jayk Tosk, one of the university's grad students. He took my undergraduate class and was on the field expedition I first met Vorn on. I'm sure we can trust him. You wait here and try not to get shushed."

Leaving her team where they were Jenessa then calmly walked over to where the student Jayk was examining a library data card on his datapad. This was the riskiest part of Jenessa's plan that she could think of, making initial contact. If Jayk refused to hear her out and raised the alarm then the plan would fail right here and now.

"Jayk." she said quietly from close behind him and he turned around, gasping when he saw her.

"Professor Drame." he said, keeping his voice low and looking around suspiciously. This was a relief to Jenessa. He could have simply called out for security but had not, "What are you doing here? Word around campus is that you joined the rebellion. Some people said you'd been executed."

"I probably came close." Jenessa told him, "Look Jayk, what's the feeling around here about the war?"

"People are sick of it professor." Jayk answered, "The Empire's trying to hush up what's going on, both here

and beyond the sector but they can't. We've seen the reports of the atrocities Imperial troops are committing when the rebellion takes a world from them and people are angry. Angry and scared that it could happen here if the rebellion decides to attack."

Jenessa nodded.

"Okay Jayk. Look the rumours about me joining the rebellion were true and now I've been sent to try and drum up support here on Estran. The hope is that we can weaken the Imperial forces enough to make an invasion relatively quick and easy." she said and Jayk looked around again.

"Where do I sign up?" he asked, prompting a smile from Jenessa.

"I think you just did." she said, "But we need far more people and that's where I need your help. I want to organise a meeting so I can address as many people as possible. Can you find some of your friends who think like you and get them to come along? Tell them to bring friends as well."

"Sure, that should be easy. The university message boards are full of posts saying that the Empire needs to go." Jayk said, nodding.

"Good. Just remember don't ask anyone you're not sure of. The Empire probably has spies here on campus as well." Jenessa warned him.

"I'll be careful." Jayk said.

"You'll be dead if you get arrested for treason." Jenessa added.

Jaynie Drud was studying the student events noticeboard. Until recently this had been filled with news of activities, trips and celebrations to which all students were invited. However, now that the rebellion was rampaging through the sector and overthrowing the Imperial government of one world after another the number of upcoming events had dropped to just three as travel off world became too risky and resources became harder to find. None of the upcoming events appealed to Jaynie though, all of them were visits to exhibitions based on classes she did not take. Then she noticed a huddle of students further down the corridor when she overheard one of them speaking.

"It starts at six this evening." he said, "Feel free to bring anyone else who will be genuinely interested." and then the group broke up, the student who Jaynie had just heard speak heading in her direction.

"Hey." Jaynie said, reaching out to stop him, "What's all the excitement?"

The other student looked at her for a moment, wondering how much Jaynie could be trusted.

"You took xenoarchaeology didn't you?" he asked.

"Yeah, before the teacher got arrested." Jaynie answered, omitting her role in Jenessa's arrest.

"Well she's back on Estran. She must have escaped from the Empire." the student told her and Jaynie's eyes widened.

"She's back? Where is she?" Jaynie said excitedly.

"Right now? I don't know. But I do know that she'll be addressing a gathering where the service tunnels all meet up below the utility building this evening." the student said, "Are you interested?"

"Of course." Jaynie said, her answer technically honest even if she was not interested for the reasons she knew the other student hoped she would be.

"Then come along."

"Thanks, I will. This is open to everyone, right?" Jaynie asked.

"Everyone who wants us to be free, yes." the other student said, "Invite anyone you can trust."

"I will. In fact I know someone who'll be eager to be there." Jaynie replied.

## 5.

*These people are harmless Vay. Leave them alone. You need to open the doors.*

Vay frowned, still not understanding Lara's cryptic phrase and she tossed the datapad on which she was studying the individual case reports of beings found to be making anti-Imperial comments onto the desk. "Something wrong Vay?" Garm asked from across it.

"These people aren't exactly worth our time." she replied, "This is work for junior agents."

"Technically you are a junior agent." Garm pointed out, referring to Vay's official rank in the ISB despite the experience she had had as one of Palpatine's Force sensitive agents before that.

"Oh ha-ha." Vay said and she stuck her tongue out at him.

"Very mature." Garm said and then the communicator on his desk sounded, alerting him to a call coming to him directly rather than via the main switchboard, "Larcus." he said as he activated the communicator.

"Garm it's Jaynie." Jaynie Horbid said.

"Jaynie is this important I'm-" Garm began, expecting her to be calling with the usual list of names of students she had overheard making comments along the lines of what the beings in the lists he and Vay were studying had made.

"Professor Drame's back on campus." Jaynie interrupted and Garm and Vay looked at one another.

"Are you sure? You've seen her?" Garm said.

"No but someone I trust said that she's going to be addressing a meeting this evening." Jaynie said.

"How big?" Vay asked.

"I don't know. There's a general invitation being issued to anyone that wants to attend. It's taking place where the tunnels meet under the campus utility building at six." Jaynie said and Garm checked the time on his computer.

"Stang. That gives us less than three hours. Look Jaynie I'm going to send Vay to you now. You and she will attend the meeting while I arrange for enough troops to raid it." Garm said.

"Vay?" Jaynie replied.

"Yes Vay. Now be ready to meet her outside the front entrance of the main campus building. She'll be on her way as soon as she's ready." Garm said and then he shut off the communicator.

"Me?" Vay said.

"Yes you Vay. You can pass for a student far easier than I can and I don't need to worry about you going in there unarmed. Most people can't recognise a lightsaber even if they spot it." Garm said.

"Maybe not but I bet Jenessa Drame will recognise one. She'll recognise me too if she spots me." Vay pointed out.

"So don't get spotted by her. Now get out of that uniform and go and meet Jaynie." Garm told her and Vay sighed as she got to her feet.

"You just want to watch me stripping don't you?" she asked as she started to remove her uniform and Garm smiled.

Vay arrived at the campus by taxi, snatching her credit stick back from the driver after he had processed the payment and then looking around for Jaynie as the vehicle drove away.

"Vay over here." she heard a voice say and she turned to see Jaynie emerge from behind some bushes.

"Hiding just makes you stand out you know?" Vay told her, "You're allowed to be here."

"You're one to talk about standing out." Jaynie replied, looking at the bodyglove Vay wore.

"Not as much as my uniform would." Vay said as she took a pair of glasses from a pouch on her belt and put them on.

"That's not much of a disguise." Jaynie said.

"Just show me where this meeting's being held." Vay told her.

"Okay this way. Is Garm coming?"

"As soon as he can put together a response team, yes." Vay answered as they began to walk across the campus.

Most of the buildings at the university were constructed with large windows dominating most of the walls. One of the buildings that stood out from this pattern was the one that Jaynie led Vay towards, however. This was located at the edge of the campus grounds and its purpose was to handle all of the power, water and physical communication lines that the university needed to operate. These were then distributed around the campus using cable clusters and pipes running through a network of tunnels that ran beneath it. Officially these were out of bounds to students but it was widely known to both staff and students that there were ways for them to sneak inside and as long as no damage was caused the university did not consider it an issue worth pushing very hard.

"Over there." Jaynie said when she spotted a trio of students head down a set of stairs that led underground

and she and Vay followed them down into the tunnel below it.

"Stang it's warm in here." Vay said and she halted for a moment, "Hold on while I adjust my bodyglove." and she reached for the temperature regulating panel on its left arm. With the cooling system activated she smiled at Jaynie, "Okay, carry on." she told her.

Jaynie then led Vay a short distance along the tunnel and from ahead of them they heard voices, none of which sounded familiar to Vay. The tunnel terminated in a circular chamber that had several other tunnels leading away from it and there were several dozen young people present, the vast majority of them human but Vay saw a handful of aliens among them as well.

"Jaynie you came." the student who had told Jaynie about the meeting said as he walked over towards her and Vay, "Who's this?"

"This is Vay." Jaynie told him.

"Hi." Vay added, looking around as she tried to commit as many of the faces she saw to memory as possible, "When will Professor Drame be here?"

"Oh I doubt she'll be here for another half an hour yet." the student said, "Jayk knows more than me. You can ask him if you want."

"No, I'll wait. I'm just impatient to hear her speak." Vay replied.

"Have you ever met her before?" the student asked.

"Once or twice yes." Vay answered with a smile, "Though I'm sure she'll be surprised to see me here tonight."

Although his rank and access to Moff Horatian meant that Garm could have easily secured the use of a company of stormtroopers or the Imperial Army he instead chose to keep the operation within COMPNOR and for this reason he headed for the office of Major Dayle Kramm, the commanding officer of the company of COMPForce assault troops stationed in the capitol building itself.

"Agent Larcus." Kramm said when he saw Garm standing in his doorway, "Where's your girlfriend?"

"On her way to the university." Garm replied and Kramm grunted.

"Bad idea. Can't trust educated women. They think their fancy degrees make them better than the rest of us." he said.

"You don't say." Garm said, "Remember Professor Jenessa Drame?"

"That woman you went chasing after with Captain Layne?" Kramm said and Garm nodded.

"The very same." he responded and Kramm grunted again, triggering a smile from Garm as he pictured the thuggish ISB officer as a primitive primate.

"Another educated woman. See what I mean?"

"Well it looks like she's come back to Estran to give a speech to a bunch of students at the university tonight. Vay's gone on ahead to check out the place but she won't be able to detain everyone there one her own."

"Ah so you need my help to break up this act of group sedition then? I can get behind that." Kramm said,

"How many do you think we're talking about at this meeting?"

"I don't know. It could just be a dozen or so but then again it could be hundreds." Garm said and Kramm snarled.

"Yeah, these universities tend to attract people who think they know better than anyone else what's best for everyone. I'll assemble the full company. Almost everyone's already here so it shouldn't take more than about half an hour."

"Good. Oh and major?"

"Yes Agent Larcus?"

"I want prisoners to be questioned, not just bodies to be cremated." Garm said.

"Of course agent." Kramm replied, smiling.

Jenessa walked along one of the underground utility tunnels towards the chamber where they met and found Emissi waiting for her near to it.

"How many?" Jenessa asked.

"Looks like a full house." Emissi told her.

"Oh gods." Jenessa said.

"What's wrong? That's good isn't it?" Kay commented.

"Yeah, aren't you used to lecturing crowds of students?" Emissi added.

"I suppose so." Jenessa said, "It's just that I'm not just trying to teach this people about the past, I'm trying to get them to risk their lives for the future."

All of a sudden Kay let out a gasp and she instinctively reached out and grabbed hold of Thracken for support.

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No, no I'm fine. I think." she answered.

"Then what's wrong?" Emissi said.

"I just felt something. Something cold." Kay responded.  
"Cold? Really? It's pretty warm down here." Thracken said.  
"No, not like that." Kay said.  
"Something in the Force?" Jenessa said and Kay nodded.  
"I've got a very bad feeling about this." she said.  
"What about asking that cube?" Emissi suggested, referring to the ancient holocron that Kay possessed and often consulted for advice and instruction.  
"No, I'll be fine. I've been told that fear and anger come from the Dark Side so maybe I'm just picking up on what the crowd is feeling right now." Kay replied.  
"In that case let's get a move on and see if I can calm them all down." Jenessa said and the group of rebels starting moving again.  
When they reached the chamber up ahead Jenessa saw that Emissi had been correct about the size of the crowd and although there was still room for people to move Jenessa could not see all the way through the crowd at any point.  
"It's professor Drame!" someone called out and Jenessa was startled when those gathered broke into spontaneous applause.  
"Thank you all." she called out over the noise, smiling at those gathered, "Now if you don't mind I'd like to get started." she added as she made her way to a crate that had been placed on the floor so that when she stood on it she would be able to see and be seen by everyone in the chamber.  
Vay watched as she climbed up onto this, she and Jaynie having moved close to the wall so that they could stay out of sight of the rest of the crowd.  
"And there she is. Just as I thought." Vay whispered.  
"What? Professor Drame?" Jaynie asked.  
"No. Kay Laren. Lady Sharva's serving girl." Vay answered and Jaynie frowned.  
"What's so special about her?" she said.  
"Kay Laren is sensitive to the Force. Capturing her is as important as Jenessa Drame herself." Vay told her and then she looked around to double check that no-one was watching as she took her comlink from a pouch on her belt and after connecting an earpiece to the device that she could slip into her ear she subtly raised it to her mouth, "Garm are you there?" she signalled.  
"Reading you loud and clear Vay." Garm responded over the sound of powerful repulsorlifts.  
"From the noise I take it that you're on your way then." Vay said.  
"Confirmed. I'm with Major Kramm and his company. ETA seven minutes." Garm told her and even though he could not see her Vay nodded.  
"Good. Professor Drame and her team just arrived. I've seen Thracken Grammel, Emissi Caysa and also Kay Laren." Vay said.  
"Interesting. I take it that you want Kay Laren treated as a priority as well?" Garm asked.  
"Yes. We may not have the same resources for dealing with someone like her as we used to but she's too dangerous to leave on the loose and I'd like to find out if there are any others like her out there." Vay replied.  
"Understood. I'll pass the word to Major Kramm and his men. Keep your comlink open, we're using it to home in on your position. Are there any sentries we need to look out for?"  
"None that I saw." Vay said and then as she noticed some of the crowd moving closer towards her she added, "I've got to go." and slid the still active comlink back into her pouch.  
"Are they coming?" Jaynie asked and Vay nodded.  
"They should be here at any moment but don't forget Garm's mine. He's not interested in you." she said and then she started to applaud with the crowd as Jenessa called for the end of Imperial rule in the sector.  
*You know they're right Vay. Your Emperor is gone and his Empire should die with him. Open the doors Vay.*  
"Shut up!" Vay hissed.  
"I didn't say anything." Jaynie said defensively.  
"What? Oh never mind, not you." Vay said.

"So what's the score Agent Larcus?" Captain Kyle Layne, Major Kramm's second in command asked while Garm sat in the gunship transporting the COMPForce company's command section on its way to the university campus. In addition to his usual ISB uniform Garm also wore an armoured vest over the top of it just in case the rebels decided to put up a fight.  
"The meeting's started and Professor Drame is in attendance. Also there is this individual." Garm replied and he used his datapad to call up an image of Kay Laren from his file on her to show the COMPForce officers.  
"Nice." Layne said, smiling.  
"She's a suspected Force user." Garm told him and Kramm laughed.  
"Careful Kyle. Try it on with her and you never know what she'll do to you." he said and Layne frowned.  
"Guess we'll just have to burn the witch then." he said, "A pity I left my flame thrower in my other armour."  
"Actually Vay thinks it would be better to take her alive. If there are any more Force users at large in the



sector then she might know about them. They do tend to find one another." Garm said.

"Letting that little girl tell you what to do now Deputy Director Larcus?" Kramm asked, using Garm's full rank to highlight his seniority over Vay.

"I trust Vay's judgement in matters like this." Garm answered.

"Well we'll take her suggestion under advisement but I'm not having my men's lives put at risk to protect one witch just because another says it's a good idea. Now what about security?" Kramm responded.

"Vay didn't see any guards but it's only prudent to assume that the unit Professor Drame is with will be armed. From our experience of rebel field teams that means six beings with a mix of light arms. That number may or may not include Professor Drame herself." Garm told him.

"So up to seven to be picked out from a crowd." Captain Layne said and he looked at Major Kramm and added, "We're going to have to search every last person at that meeting to be sure we're got them." and Kramm nodded.

"One more thing." Garm said, "We also have an informant in the crowd. She's the one that told us about this meeting in the first place. This is her, Jaynie Drud." and he used his datapad again to show the COMPForce officers Jaynie's image and Layne smiled.

"So just to be clear Agent Larcus," he said, "I am allowed to try and get off with her, right?" and Kramm smiled again.

"Three minutes to target." the pilot of the gunship announced suddenly and Kramm activated the company wide communication system built into his armour.

"Three minutes. Secure armour and standby. Data will be distributed by our ISB advisor of two subjects to watch out for. Subject one, Kay Laren, suspected force user. Use extreme caution when dealing with her. We have a request to take her alive. Subject two is Jaynie Drud. She's our informer so make sure there are no accidental discharges or unexpected crossfire around her." he said before he put on his helmet while Garm uploaded the images of both Kay and Jaynie to the company's data network so that individual squad leaders could pass them on to their men.

With no look outs set to keep watch for approaching Imperial forces the gunships transporting the COMPForce assault troopers were able to fly right above the campus before descending to ground level so that their troops could disembark. The combination of Vay's comlink homing signal and a schematic of the tunnel network provided the assault force with not only the precise location of their targets but also the locations of access points into the tunnels that could be used. Even those judged not to be useful needed to have troops deployed to them to make sure that they would not be used by any of the rebels or their sympathisers to escape.

Garm joined Major Kramm's unit in entering the tunnels. Unlike many officers in the Imperial Army or stormtrooper corps, Kramm led from the front and Garm drew his sidearm in readiness to have to use it. At the same time other units of COMPForce assault troopers were entering the tunnels from other directions to try and cut off as many avenues of escape as possible and it was one of these units that was advancing along a tunnel when all of a sudden someone shone the beam of light from a glow rod towards them.

"Hello? Who's there?" Thracken called out before he saw the white armoured uniforms the troopers were wearing. Dropping the glow rod, Thracken pulled his carbine from under his jacket and fired it down the tunnel, spraying blaster bolts from side to side, "It's a trap!" he yelled at the top of his voice.

Back inside the chamber where the meeting was being held Jenessa suddenly turned around when she heard the blaster fire and also Thracken's warning.

"Everyone get out of here." she called out, producing her own blaster from under her jacket. Jenessa was used to using a slug thrower rather than a blaster but she had made the switch to a modern weapon to give her a better chance in a firefight. Around her the crowd began to panic as its members ran for any of the numerous tunnels leading away from the chamber and there were shouts from within some as the students attempting to escape down them found themselves running right into the COMPForce units advancing along them as well.

"Stay here." Vay told Jaynie as she pulled her lightsaber from its pouch on her belt and started to push her way through the panicking crowd, heading towards Jenessa.

Moments later the student who had invited Jaynie to the meeting came rushing up to her with several friends.

"Come on Jaynie, we're getting out of here." he said.

"But-" Jaynie began before she was grabbed by two of the other students and they dragged her towards one of the tunnel entrances.

Looking around again Jenessa picked Vay out of the crowd, she being the only one among it running towards her. Vay's crude disguise of putting on a pair of spectacles did nothing to conceal her identity when she was still wearing the form fitting bodyglove that she had when Jenessa had first encountered her. Jenessa raised her blaster, a slender sporting weapon and tightened her finger around its trigger.

*Danger.*

Vay sensed the blaster shot a split second before Jenessa actually fired it and there was a 'snap-hiss' as she activated her lightsaber and its bright red blade extended from out of the grip. Swinging this in front of her

Vay was able to deflect the blaster bolt Jenessa fired and there was a scream as it struck a fleeing student in the back and he collapsed, knocking over one of his friends.

"We need to go." Jenessa told Emissi and Kay and the three women rushed back towards the tunnel they had used to get here. However, despite the number of shots Thracken had fired the tunnel still had a number of COMPForce troops in it and these were now firing back at him.

"No, not this way." Thracken said right before a blaster bolt hit him in the shoulder and sent his carbine flying from his hand. Clutching at the wound Thracken staggered back a single step before he was hit again and he fell to the floor.

"Thracken!" Kay cried out and she was about to run to try and help him when Emissi grabbed hold of her.

"He's gone. There's nothing you can do." she said.

"Emissi's right. We need to find another way out of here and quickly." Jenessa said and the three women turned around to see Vay now standing beside the crate Jenessa had stood on to speak with her lightsaber held up in front of her.

"You may as well give up Professor Drame. You and your friends." Vay said.

"Like hell we will." Emissi replied as she pulled a compact hold out blaster from her pocket and broke into a sprint towards Vay, pointing the pistol towards her.

"Emissi no!" Jenessa called out but her warning came too late and Emissi opened fire. The hold out blaster was designed for combat only at close range and so at the same time as she used her lightsaber to swat the bolt aside Vay leapt forwards, angling her weapon straight ahead of her and she thrust the blade right through Emissi's chest.

*Anger.*

*Hatred.*

"No!" Kay screamed and she instinctively lashed out through the Force with a blast of telekinetic energy.

Vay was taken totally by surprise by this attack that was clearly based in the Dark Side of the Force and she was unprepared as the wave of telekinetic energy hurled her backwards into the crate Jenessa had spoken from. This shattered under the impact of Vay's body and her lightsaber rolled out of her hand as she lay there dazed.

"Come on!" Jenessa said, shocked by what she had just witnessed and knowing that nothing good could come of allowing Kay to unleash her powers in that manner again. Taking Kay by the hand she then began to pull her towards another tunnel entrance. However, she was not the only one to have witnessed this, Major Kramm and his command unit having just reached the chamber through the tunnel Jenessa had been heading towards.

"Vay!" Garm called out and he ran towards her to see if she was badly injured as a result of the attack.

"Sod this." Major Kramm said, "I'm not letting that witch do that to my men." and he aimed his blaster rifle towards Kay and fired a rapid burst at her. Several of the shots hit Kay and Jenessa felt her fall, her grip on Jenessa's hand relaxing as she died. Looking down at Kay's lifeless body staring blankly back up at her, Jenessa gasped and let go of the young woman's hand. Meanwhile Garm reached Vay and found that she for one was still breathing.

"Vay are you okay?" he asked.

"I'll be fine." she replied, groaning, "It was Kay. She-"

"I know, we saw. She won't do it again though, Kramm just shot her." Garm interrupted.

"Stang. She could have been a useful weapon." Vay said as she was getting back to her feet and then Garm heard Jenessa fire her weapon back at the COMPForce troops. The shot clipped one of them in his shoulder but his armour deflected most of the energy and he only twisted momentarily before he took aim back at her.

"Drame!" Garm yelled, "Stand down!" and he also pointed his weapon at Jenessa.

"Your father's twice the man you are Garm." Jenessa replied and she turned her weapon towards him.

However, Garm reacted faster and he fired first, unleashed a bright blue pulse of energy from his blaster pistol on its stun setting. This hit Jenessa in the centre of her chest right where Garm had aimed and she collapsed on the spot, her weapon clattering to the floor and skidding away from her.

## 6.

While Garm, Vay and the command elements of the COMPForce company were securing the chamber where the meeting had taken place most of those who had been attending it were still trying to escape, running down the various tunnels in search of a way out. However, Major Kramm had been efficient in his deployment of his men and when the first of the meetings attendees opened a hatch leading to the outside world they were roughly grabbed by their collar and dragged out of the tunnel.

"COMPForce!" an armoured soldier snapped at the startled and terrified student, "You are under arrest on suspicion of sedition and treason."

Behind the student just taken into custody the others fleeing with him retreated, panicking as they searched for another way out of the tunnels that was not already guarded by Imperial troops. It was not necessary for them to have to get to the outside world, however to be arrested, the units sent into the tunnels hunting them down below ground as well and the group that Jaynie was being swept along with ran right into one of these patrols. A male student that was part of the group attempted to resist being arrested, trying to wrestle the weapon from the grip of an armoured trooper but his effort was futile. The well trained and experienced soldier used his rifle like a club to strike the student on the side of his head, drawing blood before he was able to trip the student over and send him tumbling to the tunnel floor.

"On your knees! All of you!" another of the troopers bellowed and in response to this one of the others students towards the back of the group turned and tried to escape back down the tunnel. He made it only a few metres though before without any extra warning another trooper fired his blaster rifle and shot him in the back. Seeing their friend killed was all the convincing that the rest of the group needed and they began to drop to their knees, their hands held above their heads.

"Don't shoot." one said.

"And you. On your knees!" a trooper shouted, waving his weapon towards Jaynie who just stood in the tunnel confused as to what she should do.

"Do what he says Jaynie. They'll kill you too." one of the other students said before flinching as a set of plastic handcuffs were tightened around her wrists.

"You heard your friend. On your knees or-" the trooper said.

"Wait!" Jaynie exclaimed suddenly, "I'm on your side. Just ask Agent Larcus. I told you about this meeting."

"You little bitch! You sold us out!" one of the arrested students snapped while the others just glared at Jaynie.

"I had no choice." Jaynie protested.

"You had no choice. We understand, don't we?" the student said and he looked at the others for support.

"With me." the leader of this group of COMPForce troopers told Jaynie, leading her back down the tunnel,

"Get the rest to the surface." he told his men while he and Jaynie began to head back towards the chamber where the meeting had been held.

"Garm!" Jaynie called out when they got there and found the company's command section as well as Garm and Vay inspecting the bodies of those who had not made it out of the chamber, "Can you tell this-"

"It's all right sergeant." Garm called out before Jaynie could finish, "She's with us."

"Yes sir I recognised her when we took her group into custody." the squad leader replied, "It's just that she identified herself to us in front of the others we arrested."

"Oh great." Garm said, wincing.

"You nerf herder." Vay added, staring at Jaynie.

"What's wrong? I don't want to be arrested." Jaynie protested.

"Yes but now we need to consider who knows that you've been working for us." Garm said and he sighed.

"We're going to have to bring her in." Vay commented.

"What do you mean bring me in?" Jaynie asked.

"It means you can't stay here at the university, not now that you may have been exposed. No-one will give you any information now." Garm said.

"But my degree." Jaynie replied, her presence at the university having been partly so that she could earn the qualification she wanted.

Kramm grunted.

"You don't need a posh degree to get on in life." he said and Layne nodded in agreement.

"I guess we could sign her up with the ISB." Vay suggested, "She can run errands for us." then she crouched down beside Kay's body and reached inside her coat to see what it contained, "Whoa!" she exclaimed.

"Something wrong Agent Udra?" Layne asked.

*That's not yours Vay. Leave it alone. You just need to open the doors.*

"Mine now." Vay said, smiling when she removed the crystalline cube from inside Kay's coat.

"What? A novelty paperweight?" Kramm asked.

"This is what not having a degree or the equivalent leads to." Vay told Jaynie. Then she looked at Garm, "Do

you know what this is?"

"It's a holocron isn't it?" he replied and Vay smiled and nodded.

"Exactly. A very special holocron." she said.

"What's a holocron?" Jaynie asked.

"It's a type of data storage device. The technology is ancient and may even predate the Old Republic but it remains highly complex and can store vast amounts of information." Garm told her.

"And this one was created by a jedi." Vay said.

"How can you tell?" Jaynie said.

"Because the jedi that created it put some of himself into it. I can sense it." Vay replied.

"What, he like cut off a finger or something?" Layne said.

"That's horrible." Jaynie added.

"That's poodoo." Vay responded, "I mean that when this holocron was made a piece of Force reactive kyber crystal was placed at its core. That enabled the jedi to encode not only hard data but also a representation of his personality into it. Think of this as a jedi AI system. Annoyingly this has been right in front of me before now and I never noticed it."

"When?" Garm said.

"When I saw it on Professor Drame's desk. It was inactive then so it must have been waiting for someone suitable to come along and activate it. That someone turned out to be Kay Laren." Vay answered.

"So how come you couldn't do it?" Kramm asked, "What made her better than you?" and Vay scowled.

"That amateur wasn't better than me at all." she said, "But that telekinetic attack she launched against me here today was probably the first time she's called on the Dark Side. That's what counted."

All of a sudden the comlink in Kramm's armour activated when one of his men contacted him.

"Major we may have a problem here." he told his superior.

"What is it trooper?" Kramm asked.

"The press are here."

"Stang. Looks like this is going to turn into a media circus now." Kramm said, looking at Garm, "We've got reporters."

"Okay have your men finish up down here and call in transport for all of the prisoners. I'm going to go and deal with this." Garm replied.

Still wearing his armoured vest, Garm exited the tunnel system to see a group of reporters being told to keep back while the COMPForce troops were bringing prisoners out of the tunnels and lying them down on the ground before searching them. Thankfully there was proving to be no resistance at this stage that would have provoked a violent response from the COMPForce troops. Right now the last thing Garm wanted was to be part of an operation that would be used to portray the Empire as an oppressive force.

"Agent Larcus!" a female voice called out and Garm recognised the reporter as one that he had met on several occasions during the last few years. Neema Gorord was a video broadcast reporter and as she pointed a microphone towards him her camera operator stood behind her to get them both in his shot, "Can you explain what's happening here?"

"What's happening Miss Gorord is that we have just apprehended a number of rebel sympathisers." Garm answered as he strode right up to her.

"Rebels? Really? Because these look like students to me." Neema said.

"Perhaps so, but they were gathered at a meeting organised by a former employee of this very university. Professor Jenessa Drame, formerly of the University of Estran's xenoarchaeology department. As you can see a large number of them have been taken into custody and a number of known terrorist killed when they opened fire on our forces while in a space filled with the students foolish enough to be drawn into their campaign of political insurgency. I think it is telling that the so-called rebel alliance would seek to turn a place of learning such as this university where I myself once studied into a centre for terrorist activity. Fortunately among those taken into custody is Jenessa Drame herself and the public can rest assured that she will be held responsible for her crimes against the Empire."

"Look! Is that her?" another of the gathered reporters shouted, pointing to where Major Kramm and his command section were escorting Vay out of the tunnel complex and back to the transports. Jenessa had regained consciousness and a pair of COMPForce troopers were dragging her along between them. More annoyingly Jaynie was also with them at the back of the group and Garm knew that this meant her image would now be broadcast around the entire planet, making her useless for any future work as an informant. "Down with the Empire!" Jenessa shouted when she saw the gathered journalists, "The New Republic will bring freedom to Estran. Down with-" and then she was silenced as one of the troopers holding her clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Agent Larcus what was happening here?" Neema asked, turning back towards Garm.

"The extent of the criminal activity here is still being investigated. All I can tell you is that we have made numerous arrests and evidence including military specification weapons has been recovered. Now if you don't mind I need to return to my headquarters so that we can evaluate what we have found here today."

Garm answered, hoping that although his reference to the seizure of weapons related only to those carried by the members of Jenessa's rebel cell the media would interpret it as being a stockpile of weapons that had been stored on the university campus. Neema and the other reporters tried asking more questions, calling them out at the same time as one another while Garm was turning around but he ignored them all and headed back to his transport where he found Major Kramm in the process of securing Jenessa's binders to the ceiling while she attempted to hurl insults at him that were muffled by the tape that had been stuck over her mouth.

"So what did you tell them?" Vay asked as Garm sat down between her and Jaynie.

"Oh the usual. The evil rebellion using students as stooges for their campaign of terror. Oh and I may have let it slip that we found weapons." Garm answered.

"Nice." Layne said from across the interior of the gunship, "I can see the headline now 'Massive arms find at university.'"

Before defecting to the rebellion Vorn had lived with his daughter Lyssa in a large mansion in one of the most exclusive areas of Estran City. Upon his defection the planetary government had frozen all of the assets he had left behind him. Ordinarily the government would have then taken control of all of these and sold them off, however thanks to the intervention of Couran Desh the assets had instead remained frozen indefinitely and the result of this was that the mansion had stood empty for several years and provided Vorn and his team with a place to stay when on Estran that was more comfortable than most of the usual safe houses. There were drawbacks of course, the rebels had to be certain not to alert any of the neighbours to their presence in the residence but the extensive grounds in which the mansion sat provided them with a great deal of cover.

The back up generator installed in case of a power failure many years earlier provided a power source that would not alert the utility company to the rebels' presence and with this Cass was able to power the large video screen in the lounge while the other rebels were bringing other appliances on line that they considered useful. Although Cass had intended to find an entertainment channel to watch the screen came on set to a news feed and Cass gasped when she saw Garm's face looking at her and the caption 'Counter Terrorism Operation at University of Estran. Some suspects killed others arrested.'

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." she said to herself before she called out, "Dad!"

"Cass keep the noise down." Vorn said as he came rushing into the lounge with Kara and Jeeves and then he froze when he saw his son on the screen.

"I say," Jeeves said, "isn't that-"

"Oh great. Junior." Kara interrupted, frowning, "Stang boss you should have given him the spanking from hell when he was young. You might have beaten some sense into him."

"What's going on?" Mace asked when he appeared in the doorway next.

"It looks like Garm's made the news." Kara said, "Probably for being his fascist G-man self."

"Young master Garm appears to have been involved in breaking up an Alliance meeting." Jeeves added.

"Play back the whole story from the start." Vorn said, "I need to see this." and while he rushed to sit down Cass used the control to the screen to reset the feed to the start of the story and set the volume so that everyone in the room could hear it.

"Is everything okay in here? I thought I heard screaming." Tharun said, walking through the door with his heavy rifle in his hands.

"It was just Cass." Kara said, sitting down in Vorn's lap and then kissing his cheek, "Come on Cass, play the thing and let's find out what shame junior's bringing on the family now."

Cass pressed 'play' and the news story began with the anchors sat in the studio.

"Reports have come of a military operation at the university of Estran. We go now to our reporter Neema Gorord who was at the scene to interview a spokesman from the Imperial Security Bureau." one of the anchors said before the image changed from the studio to an outside broadcast when Neema was speaking to camera while behind her prisoners were being loaded onto transports by COMPForce troopers.

"It was at shortly after six this evening that reports first came in of a large scale military deployment in the area of the University of Estran campus and when we arrived on the scene we found a number of gunships had been used to deploy a full company of soldiers from COMPForce, the military branch of COMPNOR. According to Imperial officers on the scene they were deployed to deal with a meeting attended by numerous students from the university that was addressed by the noted professor Jenessa Drame who abandoned her position at the university about a year ago when her involvement with the rebellion became known to the authorities. I was able to speak with Deputy Director Garm Larcus of the Imperial Security Bureau at the scene about the purpose of the operation and he had this to say." Neema said and then the report cut to Garm.

"I think it is telling that the so-called rebel alliance would seek to turn a place of learning such as this university where I myself once studied into a centre for terrorist activity. Fortunately among those taken into custody is Jenessa Drame herself and the public can rest assured that she will be held responsible for her

crimes against the Empire." Garm said before Neema's face reappeared.

"Shortly after this we caught sight of Jenessa Drame herself as she was being taken from the scene." she said, the screen splitting into two to show the footage of Jenessa being dragged to the gunship beside Neema.

"Kriff, they've arrested Jenessa." Mace said and Kara's eyes widened.

"Cass pause it there." she exclaimed.

"What for?" Tharun asked as Cass paused the playback.

"Look there with Jenessa." Kara said, pointing and the other rebels looked at the group of people around her.

"Vay." Vorn said, frowning.

"No, not her boss. Look again." Kara said.

"It's Jaynie." Mace said, "Jaysica's sister."

"Poodoo." Tharun said, "Now she's working for the Empire. I thought she was rotting in prison."

"She doesn't look like a prisoner to me." Mace said.

"No she doesn't. More like a collaborator." Vorn said sternly.

"So they let her out of prison to inform for them. I think we just found out how the Empire knew about the meeting." Tharun said.

Kara leapt out of Vorn's lap and stormed over to the door, looking into the hallway and up the stairs.

"Jaysica! Get down here." she shouted and Vorn flinched.

"How about I just go round to the neighbours and ask to borrow a cup of sugar?" he said.

"Jaysica if you don't come down here then I'm coming up to drag you down." Kara shouted, ignoring Vorn's comment.

"Wait. Wait we're coming." Jaysica responded as she and Tobis both came hurrying down the stair, still fastening their clothing, "What's so important."

"Your sister is still working for the Empire. That's what. Trying to set us up on Tarlen wasn't enough for her it seems." Kara said and she pointed to the video screen.

"She can't be. The Empire put her in prison." Jaysica said.

"Oh. Err. It does look like her." Tobis added.

"It is her Jaysica." Cass said.

"More importantly they have Jenessa. Let's not forget that." Vorn said.

"Think she'll talk?" Mace asked.

"She's new at this boss." Kara pointed out.

"I'm sure she wouldn't intentionally turn on us but there's no tell what she'll reveal under interrogation colonel." Tharun said, "She could name names."

"Fortunately that's about all she does know." Vorn said, "She knows that we're here but I didn't discuss our plan with her. The same goes for the other groups. Only Colonel Sallir knows what each of us is planning and at the first sign of trouble he and his team will go deep. Literally."

"What about Lord Desh and Odras Balve?" Mace said, "Jenessa has met them both and knows they've worked with us in the past."

"Stang you're right." Vorn said and he lifted Kara from his lap.

"Where are you going?" Cass asked as he hurried from the room.

"To warn Couran." Vorn replied.

"What about Balve?" Tharun said, looking at Mace.

"Despite my better judgement I suppose I better warn him too." he replied.

Even before Vorn had defected to the rebellion he and Couran had maintained a secret line of communication that enabled the two men to talk to one another without anyone knowing just how far Couran's support for Vorn went. Had that been public at the time then he too would have been forced into exile to avoid arrest, no matter how highly respected he had been up until that point. Therefore, when he saw that a call was coming in on that channel he knew exactly who it was that was calling him and knew that it was important enough to interrupt his meeting with a pair of junior members of Estran's Parliament hoping to secure his backing for a project they were working on.

"Excuse me gentlemen," he told the two men sat on the other side of his desk in his private office, "I'm afraid that I'm going to have to end our meeting at this point." and he pressed the intercom button that would summon a droid to show them out.

"Of course Lord Desh." one of the men replied, "Can we take that you'll give our proposal consideration?"

"My boy it will get all the attention it deserves, don't you worry about that." Couran said as the door to his office slid open and the protocol droid entered the room.

"You rang my lord?" it asked.

"Yes please show my guests out and have their speeder brought around to the front door. Then do not disturb me until I say otherwise." Couran ordered.

"Yes my lord." the droid said, "Please follow me sirs." it then told the two other noblemen as they were

getting to their feet.

Couran then watched as they left the room and waited for the door to slid shut again before he activated the communication system.

"Vorn my boy, it's so good to see you again." Couran said when a hologram of Vorn appeared on his desk.

"Couran we've got trouble." Vorn said.

"But of course we do. Trouble does tend to follow you around somewhat." Couran replied.

"It's serious this time. Have you seen the news about the raid at the university?" Vorn asked.

"Briefly. I may have been distracted by two of the most stupid people to be voted into office. Not Lord Torr or Lady Sharva either. Despite their dreadful personalities those two can be depressingly bright at times."

Couran answered and Vorn sighed.

"Garm and Vay raided a meeting that Jenessa was speaking at." Vorn told him and Couran's eyes widened.

"I take it that you wouldn't be calling me if she had been killed." he said.

"No. They took her Couran. That means they'll be interrogating her." Vorn told him

"And she knows about me." Couran added, "She's been to my home with your friends."

"Couran you need to get out. You know where I am." Vorn said and Couran nodded.

"I'm on my way now." he replied before he shut off the communicator and Vorn's hologram vanished.

## 7.

A pair of COMPForce troopers pulled Jenessa along between them as Garm and Vay led the way to the ISB holding cells in the capitol building. Also accompanying them was Jaynie, who in the aftermath of the raid was uncertain of what she was supposed to do next.

"Is cell four available?" Garm asked the custody officer.

"Yes sir. It's clear." the stern looking woman responded.

"Good. Then I want to place this prisoner in it. Here are the details of her identity and the charges against her." Garm said and he handed over his datapad to the custody officer who nodded and used her console to open the cell door remotely.

"You may take her through sir. What about that one?" she said and she looked at Jaynie.

"What about me?" Jaynie replied.

"She's asking if we're going to lock you up as well." Vay said.

"You aren't, are you? You can't. I've done everything you ever asked me to." Jaynie protested, the thought of returning to an Imperial cell terrifying her after spending months in solitary confinement the first time.

"Don't worry. You're free to go." Garm said, "Let's just get the professor secured. Vay you know what else I need."

"Of course. I'll go and get it from the dispensary." Vay said and as she walked away Garm led the COMPForce troopers to the open cell.

Inside the cell was almost completely barren, the only furnishings being a raised platform along one end that could function as a bed as well as having a refresher built into it that could be exposed by lifting a panel on the bed and also a single complicated looking chair in the centre of the room. It was to this chair that Jenessa was led and after her binders were removed she was forced to sit down in it. With Garm and Jaynie watching from the doorway of the cell the two COMPForce troopers then began to secure Jenessa to the chair using its built in metal restraints. These held her arms behind her in a position designed not only to deny her the use of her limbs but also to be incredibly uncomfortable. Likewise restraints fitted to the back of the chair acted to put pressure on her spine and by removing her boots Jenessa's feet could be secured so that there were metal blocks pressing up into her soles. Left long enough this would inevitably cause injury to Jenessa's joints and spine but in the short term it would instead cause a rising level of discomfort that she would not be able to do anything about.

"You're dismissed." Garm told the soldiers and they left the cell without a word, leaving Jenessa glaring at Garm unable to say anything while her mouth remained taped shut.

"So now what?" Jaynie asked, "Are you going to use a mind probe?"

"No. No not the mind probe." Garm replied, smiling, "If we have to then that's always an option but for now I'm going to try something a little less drastic and less likely to lead to permanent brain damage. Ah here's Vay now with what we need." he added as Vay arrived with a small box that she handed to him.

"It's charged with the right dose." she said.

"Excellent. Thank you." Garm said, opening the box to reveal an injector gun.

"Truth serum?" Jaynie said and Vay smiled.

"No, truth serums are too unreliable. Garm said as he walked over to Jenessa and injected the contents of the gun into her neck, "The chemical I have just injected her with will cause sustained vomiting and loss of bowel and bladder control. In addition there is a stimulant included that while doing nothing to alleviate fatigue ought to prevent her from falling asleep for the next forty-eight hours or so. Combined with the chair that is designed to place as much stress on her body as possible by the time tomorrow morning comes the professor here will have spent an entire night awake unable to rest comfortably and covered in her own waste. Added to the dehydration and hunger she'll be suffering from I think that she'll be quite ready to talk to us. Of course I better get rid of this before she chokes on her own vomit." Garm explained and then he ripped the tape from Jenessa's mouth.

"I'm telling you nothing." she hissed, glaring at him, "Your father would be ashamed of you if he knew what you were doing to me here Garm."

"I'm not so sure about that." he replied, "In fact he left Vay and I in a situation not so dissimilar once." and Vay winced as she remembered spending the night bound and gagged with Garm in his office.

*That was when I first made contact. When your mind was first opened to me. Now you just need to remember to open the doors Vay. Open the doors.*

"Don't remind me." Vay said, frowning as she tried to figure out what the phrase Lara kept using meant.

"He's more a man than you are. He took a stand for what he knew to be-" Jenessa began before suddenly retching as the drug Garm had injected her with and at the same time a wet stain began to appear between her legs.

"Oh dear professor." Vay said, "It appears you've had an accident. Perhaps we should leave her alone now



Garm." and Garm nodded.

"I would say pleasant dreams but I settle for see you in the morning instead." he said before they left the cell, closing the door behind them and locking Jenessa in.

"Thanks for letting me stay." Jaynie said again as Garm opened the front door to his home.

"Just as long as it is just one night." Vay commented.

"I'm sure we'll be able to get something figured out after your ISB induction tomorrow." Garm said. Then he heard the sound of the video screen in the lounge and called out, "Cayla I hope your homework is done."

"Finished it ages ago dad." Garm's daughter replied as Garm, Vay and Jaynie entered to lounge to see the girl who was just into her teens sat watching an animation on the screen, "Oh, my teacher wants to speak to you. She left a message."

Garm sighed.

"What now?" he said, walking over to the communicator and activating the message playback.

"Mister Larcus this is Miss Nallas, Cayla's teacher. I'm afraid that Cayla and her friends have been overheard discussing the rebellion at recess and I need to speak with you. I'm a SAGroup administrator with COMPNOR and I have some suggestions for you about the proper way to inform your daughter about the truth about the rebellion outside of school. Please contact me as soon as you can." the recording said and Cayla smiled at Garm.

"What's so funny?" Garm asked.

"Will you wear your uniform to meet her dad? It'll scare the poodoo out of her. She's always going on about how awesome the Empire is." Cayla answered.

"Firstly mind your language. We have a guest. Secondly have I met Miss Nallas?" Garm said and Cayla shrugged.

"Grandma and grandpa have. She started not long after mom was murdered. Everyone hates her." she said.

"I'll call her tomorrow." Garm said, "In the mean time have you had dinner?"

"No, not yet."

"In that case I'll see what we've got." Garm said.

"Garm if its alright with you I want to take a look at something." Vay said and Garm nodded.

"Sure, I'll give you a shout when its ready." he replied.

Leaving Garm to prepare a meal Vay headed upstairs to the bedroom they shared and after locking the door she removed her uniform, set down the holocron she had taken from Kay's body on the floor and then sat in in front of it.

"Okay, let's see who you are." she said, focusing her mind on the crystalline cube.

*That's not yours Vay. Open the doors.*

"Make sense or kriff off Lara." Vay said, frowning before she took a deep breath and turned her attention back to the holocron, "I command you to obey me." she said, using the Force to try and compel the device to respond to her in the same way she would do with a living person.

"You are wasting your time." a man's voice said and then the holocron began to glow as a three dimensional image of a tall human male materialised in front of Vay.

"I got you to appear didn't I?" she said, smiling as she got back to her feet to try and remove the feeling of the figure looming over her. However, even though Vay was reasonably tall for a human female the hologram still still around twenty centimetres taller than her.

"Is that the extent of your desire? Then I must say that the lust for power by users of the Dark Side has abated considerably in the last four thousand years or so. In my day they wanted to rule the galaxy."

"Who are you?" Vay asked.

"Criston Harsis." the hologram answered, "And you?"

"Vay Udra."

"Udra? Interesting." Criston commented.

"Why?"

"Oh nothing. But the real me knew of several jedi called Udra. If you are descended from them then their bloodline has obviously thinned. They faced the Dark Side head on and did not falter. They would be sorely disappointed to see that you have fallen." Criston said.

*Told you. Open the doors.*

"Oh shut up with that open the doors poodoo Lara!" Vay snapped.

"Lara? Lara Udra perhaps." Criston said, his hologram giving the appearance of looking around the room,

"Why do I get the feeling that we aren't entirely alone here?"

"You know Lara Udra?" Vay responded but Criston's hologram shook his head.

"No. I never met her. Though I did meet her brother and he told me what happened to her."

"What?"

"She was murdered. Murdered by someone like you."

"Someone like me?"

"Yes. An agent of the Dark Side. I may not be able to manipulate the Force like my creator could but he did give me the ability to tell the Light from the Dark so that I would not be tricked into revealing any of the knowledge of the Jedi to our enemies." Criston explained.

"Well you're right. Lara Udra has been bugging me for about three years now. Apparently the spirits of the Udra family think I need redeeming and they nominated her to do it." Vay said.

"A noble aim. Have you tried listening to what she has to say?"

"If it was up to her I wouldn't be in this house right now. She didn't think my getting together with Garm was a good idea."

"Garm?" Criston asked and Vay nodded.

"Garm Larcus. He's an ISB agent I-" she began.

"That doesn't matter." Criston interrupted, "I think Lara made a mistake. Whoever Garm is, when you mention him I sense a glimmer of light in you. He will be your redemption if you let him. I've heard all about the Empire you serve Vay. As long as you continue with that then I won't help you. Turn away from the Dark Side and maybe we can talk further."

"Do you hear that Lara?" Vay said, looking upwards as humans tended to do when addressing anything without a physical presence to relate to. "Snaring Garm was the best thing I ever did."

*Snaring? Yes that sounds very romantic. You used your power to force yourself on him when he was vulnerable Vay. All you need to do is-*

"Yes, yes, open the doors. Why not just tell me what that means?" Vay said impatiently.

*You will know when the time comes. Open the doors.*

"Right. Hey Criston, do you know what 'open the doors' means?" Vay said but as she looked back towards the holocron his projected image had vanished.

"He's here!" Jaysica called out when she saw the speeder pulling up outside the house and she rushed to open the front door just as Couran was getting out of the droid piloted vehicle.

"Couran, come inside quickly." Vorn said as he appeared behind Jaysica.

"Well I didn't come here to stand outside all night my boy." Couran replied and as soon as he entered the house he made his way to the lounge and sat down, "Now how about you fill me in on what's going on around here?"

"I made you a drink." Kara said as she appeared with a mug of caf in her hands and she kissed Couran on the cheek as she gave it to him.

"Thank you my dear." he said, "Will you be attacking anyone tonight by any chance? It's always so entertaining to watch."

Kara smiled.

"Well if Jaysica breaks anything in my house-" she said and Jaysica gasped.

"Whose house?" Vorn interrupted.

"Our house boss." Kara replied.

"That's better." Vorn said as they both sat down close to Couran, "Couran we came here to lay the groundwork for the Alliance's invasion."

"So it's true. There is going to be an invasion."

"Of a sort, yes." Mace said as he entered the lounge with the other rebels.

"Is the Empire expecting us?" Jaysica asked.

"Of course they're expecting us." Kara said, "They know we have to take Estran to control the sector."

"Err, I, err, I think Jaysica meant-" Tobis began before Couran interrupted him.

"Gregor's people are rushing about trying to put together any sort of strategy that will defend the planet long enough for them to rebuild their fleet." he said, "They're even reaching out to the planetary government to determine what resources they can call upon. Max is ecstatic about it all. He wants to create a planetwide militia."

"That could be trouble colonel." Tharun said, "Billions of people with blasters."

"Oh I wouldn't worry too much about that young man. Support for the Empire on Estran is not what it once was." Couran said,

"Perhaps not. But if even one in ten of the population were to-" Vorn began and Couran grinned, "What did you do Couran?" Vorn asked.

"Well I may have put the thought into the heads of a few key Parliamentarians, including your old acquaintance Lady Sharva by the way, that forming a militia would instead be creating an insurgent force that would sweep the Alliance to power." Couran answered, "I take it that Jenessa was here to do the same thing as you?"

"Not quite." Vorn said, "Her team was here to try and drum up support among the population for the invasion, getting us supporters who could disrupt the Imperial administration of the planet while we invade. My team is one of the ones sent to organise a way to get our troops down here without an orbital siege lasting months or even years."

"We had planned to ask you for your help." Mace added.

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

"Our plan is to smuggle a large force of troops onto the surface without the Empire even knowing that the invasion is taking place. But once we've done that we need to be able to hide them somewhere long enough to get up to full strength. I was hoping that you'd be able to use your contacts to find us some hiding places." Vorn said.

"We've already done a deal to get troops down and we'll have safe houses for a few hundred but we need far more." Mace added.

"I see. Well I suppose I could convince a few like minded individuals to open their properties to you but that would rely on my being able to approach them without being arrested. Do you have a plan to rescue Jenessa before she can be made to talk?" Couran said.

"She's probably being held at the capitol building. ISB headquarters." Kara said.

"Ah. That is bad news." Couran said.

"Why? Haven't you broken in there before?" Cass pointed out.

"Yes, right under the noses of the Empire as well." Mace said.

"But security has been tightened considerably given the current situation." Couran said, "Duty stations there are being manned around the clock right now. There are no night shifts with lesser manpower that you can exploit."

"Then we need to find a way to get Jenessa moved to somewhere where we can reach her." Vorn said.

"Fake transfer orders?" Tharun said and Vorn nodded.

"Something that looks urgent enough that it won't be double checked in time." he said.

"Tobis can you handle that?" Kara asked.

"Me? Oh, err. Maybe. But, err, I'd have to be inside the building. I'd, err, I'd need Harvey's help to plug in." Tobis answered.

"Colonel we need a proper slicer." Mace said.

"Geran." Kara said, referring to a lieutenant in Alliance Intelligence who was an expert slicer.

"I'll contact Colonel Sallir. Maybe he can arrange for Geran to be infiltrated onto Estran." Vorn said, "The rest of you make sure your gear is ready. We may have to move at short notice."

"Let me get this straight colonel, you want Lieutenant Pay sent to Estran?" General Kain said, an image of Colonel Sallir on the screen in front of him. The image was distorted, a consequence of the low energy transmission coming from far enough underwater in Estran's oceans that the *Harpoon* would not be detected by the Empire.

"That's right general. Captain Drame has been taken by the Empire and Lieutenant Pay's skills are needed to free her before she can be made to reveal our operation." the mon calamari officer said and General Kain leant back in his chair.

"You understand that Lieutenant Pay is privy to more information about our plans than any other officer besides myself and Rear Admiral Aphanar?" he said.

"Yes general. However, if our operation here fails then all of our plans will become useless." Colonel Sallir said and General Kain paused to think.

"Very well." he said, "I'll arrange for a ship to bring the lieutenant to you within the next few hours." and he closed the channel linking him to Estran before switching to the intercom, "I need to see Lieutenant Pay and Colonel Ergard in my office. They're going on a little trip." he said into it.

## 8.

### *Fear.*

"What's wrong?" Vay asked Jaynie as she looked at herself in the mirror of the women's bathroom in the capitol building, having changed into the ISB uniform she had just been issued with.

"I don't know. I just have a bad feeling about this." Jaynie replied, "I didn't expect to suddenly become a full agent like you overnight. In fact I didn't think I'd ever be wearing this uniform. I thought I'd carry out our agreement at college and then get a regular job."

"Well these days we need all the help we can get so we aren't going to let you slip through our fingers. Remember though, technically we have the same rank but I'm still senior to you. Got it?" Vay said and Jaynie nodded, "Good. Now let's get out there and do our job." she added and the two young women exited the bathroom and made their way to Garm's office.

"Ah Agent Horbid, ready for your first day?" Garm asked when he saw Jaynie.

"Yes sir." Jaynie replied, "But do I get a blaster as well?" and she looked at the military issue weapon holstered on Garm's hip.

"We'll need to get you trained up first but yes. In the mean time leave your civilian clothes on the couch and take one of these." Garm said and he hand both Vay and Jaynie what looked like surgical masks."

"What are these?" Jaynie asked, looking at her mask.

"Sniff it." Vay told her and Jaynie lifted it to her face, flinching at the powerful chemical smell on the inside.

"It's to protect you from the odour in the cell. After spending all night unable to control any of her bodily functions Professor Drame's cell is going to smell like a hutt's tail on a hot day." Garm said.

"Thanks for the mental image." Jaynie replied.

The three agents then made their way to the detention block where they had left Jenessa secured the previous evening. In addition to his chemically treated mask Garm also carried with him an injection gun loaded with a counter agent to the drug given to Jenessa the previous day so that she could be questioned without the distraction of its effects and also a bottle of water. By this point Jenessa would be badly dehydrated and the water would act as an incentive for her to so-operate. However, when the door to Jenessa's cell opened what the trio of agents saw inside was not what they had expected.

Had everything gone to Garm's plan of the previous evening then they would have found Jenessa exactly where they had left her in clothing now soaked in her own waste, desperate for food, water and sleep. The idea being the combination would leave her susceptible to suggestion. Jenessa was still in the cell and the bodily waste was present on the floor but that was where what was expected and what existed in reality diverged.

Someone had obviously released her from her restraints and she now lay curled up on the floor, naked and whimpering. The fragments of her clothing elsewhere on the floor indicated that they had been torn from her body rather than carefully removed. The marks covering her body showed where she had been beaten and electrocuted and a significant amount of blood was smeared across the floor along with the other waste.

Most disturbing though was what lay neatly lined up on the raised platform at the end of the cell that was intended as a bed. The row of blood stained objects began with human teeth and finger and toenails at one end while at the other were a pair of brown eyes and a lump of flesh that could only be a humanoid tongue.

"Gods." Jaynie exclaimed as she doubled over, steadying herself on the frame of the cell door.

"She's going to blow." Vay said right before Jaynie ripped the mask from over her nose and mouth and threw up onto the floor.

### *Rage.*

"I'm going to get some answers. Someone is going to pay for this I swear." Garm said sternly and he turned around and stormed out of the cell.

Vay followed Garm while Jaynie remained just outside the cell doorway.

*This is partly your fault Vay. You put that woman in that cell. Open-*

"Open the doors, yes." Vay muttered, "If I'd left that door open she still couldn't have got out though, could she?"

The custody officer, a different agent to the one on duty when Jenessa had been placed in the cell, looked up as Garm approached and before he could say anything Garm began to speak.

"What the kriff happened to my prisoner?" he demanded.

"I don't know what you mean sir. She is still in her cell." the custody officer replied.

"Yes she is. Every piece of her. It's just a pity that they aren't all stuck together right now." Vay said.

"Who did that and on whose authorisation?" Garm said angrily.

"I don't-" the custody officer began.

"Don't tell me that you don't know." Garm interrupted, "The records must say who did that." and the custody officer checked his control station's log.

"A specialist agent from the interrogation branch presented a valid order to be allowed into the cell at twenty-two thirty-four last night." he said.

"Interrogation was working late last night." Vay commented.

"The name." Garm said, "Give me the name."

"Interrogator Mortan Kriss." the custody officer said.

"Check the duty roster. Is he in the building still?" Garm asked.

"Err, his shift is just ending now sir." the custody officer told Garm and he looked at Vay.

"Go." he said and Vay nodded before she turned round and started to run, "This isn't over." Garm told the custody officer, "Tell your supervisor that I'll want to know why my orders were countermanded."

Interrogator Mortan Kriss walked through the underground parking garage to where his speeder was parked. Removing his belt and tunic Kriss placed them both in the back seat of the vehicle and got in. As soon as he started the engine the speeder rose up off the ground and Kriss began to drive away slowly, limiting his speed while still in the parking garage as he drove towards the exit ramp. All of a sudden he saw Vay appear ahead of him, running directly towards his speeder. Thinking that the young woman was just hurrying to reach a vehicle of her own he ignored her beyond making sure that he was not going to run her over. However, just before Vay reached him she drew her lightsaber and Kriss saw the flash of red as she activated the blade and then slashed at the side of the speeder. The speeder's own forward momentum added to the energy of the blade and Vay cut deep into the forward repulsorlift engine, making it fail suddenly in an uncontrolled manner. This shutdown caused the front of the speeder to drop to the ground with a 'crash' and there were sparks as the speeder continued moving forwards, grinding against the ground until Kriss brought it to a halt.

Vay watched as Kriss leapt out of the speeder, glaring at her.

"What the kriff is going on?" he yelled at her, startled by her use of a lightsaber.

"He wants a word with you interrogator." Vay replied and she pointed past the man towards the turbolifts where Garm had just emerged and was walking towards them, his hand resting on his blaster.

"Agent Larcus?" Kriss said, "What's going on?"

*Anger.*

"What's going on interrogator is that you tortured and mutilated my prisoner before I could question her."

Garm said calmly, "Professor Drame."

"The woman from the university?" Kriss said, "I was just following orders."

"Whose orders?" Garm asked.

"You're not cleared to know that." Kriss answered and Garm looked at Vay.

"Vay." he said simply and she smiled, thrusting her hand towards the interrogator's throat.

Kriss instantly began to choke and he instinctively reached for his throat, attempting to remove what his senses were telling him had to be there.

"You're wasting your time." Vay said, "I don't need to lay a finger on you to kill you."

"Now tell me whose orders override mine." Garm added.

"The director." Kriss gasped.

"Director Helios?" Garm said, frowning and Kriss nodded.

"He's telling the truth." Vay said.

"Vay release him." Garm told her and when Vay lowered her arm Kriss collapsed, no longer supported by her via telekinesis.

"I guess he was authorised to torture her then." Vay said but Garm's anger did not subside. Instead he turned around and started to stride back towards the turbolift, "Garm where are you going?" Vay called out after him.

"To get answers from the director." he called out back at her.

Director Helios had just arrived in his office when Garm stormed in, Vay following behind him.

"Ah Garm I-" the director began when he saw Garm.

"What gives you the right to do that? To have a woman mutilated for no good reason?" Garm snapped at him and Director Helios smiled as he sat down.

"If you recall you yourself arrested her in the act of planning terrorism. She was hardly innocent." he said.

"Yes and she was my prisoner. I had everything arranged to question her this morning, only now I can't can I?"

"I saved you the trouble. I thought you'd be more grateful." Helios replied.

"I'd have got answers out of her. There was no need for that butcher to be turned loose on her."

"By 'that butcher' I take it you mean Interrogator Kriss. You and Vay questioned him? He was told not to tell you anything and I had hoped he would have been strong minded enough to resist her skills." Helios said and he looked at Vay.

"I'm good at what I do." she said.

"Yes you are. Agent Larcus remember your place. As my deputy you report to me, not the other way around. We needed answers quickly and your methods take time so I decided to bring in a specialist from the interrogation division. Thanks to Interrogator Kriss we now have those." Helios said and he picked up his datapad to read from the report Kriss had submitted, "There are five rebel teams here on Estran right now, four of them acting as advanced scouts for their invasion and one commanding them. Your father's team is among the others. Unfortunately Kriss was unable to get any information out of Professor Drame about what each unit is doing but that's only to be expected. We know that the rebellion uses a system of independent cells so it's likely that none of the teams know what the others are doing except for one."

"The command group." Vay said and Helios nodded once.

"Exactly. The command group is a mon calamari team and they're exploiting their species' abilities to remain hidden underwater. Perhaps you should get to work in tracking them down." he said.

"Just answer me one question director." Garm said, "What about her tongue? Your interrogator pulled out her teeth and nails and gouged out her eyes, all straight out of the barbarians' play book for getting information under torture, but what if we need more information? She can't tell us a damned thing now that her tongue has been ripped out of her mouth. Even if it can be replaced it'll take weeks to transplant. Months before she can talk again properly. That was pure sadism."

"Not at all Garm. In fact I ordered it to be done personally when Interrogator Kriss gave me his report. We'll leave her and all those parts removed from her in that cell and put the next rebels we capture in there with her. A few hours looking at what happened to Professor Drame should loosen a few tongues without them having to be taken out. You see in the long run her suffering may just mean that we don't need to take such drastic measures again." Helios said, "So are you going to go and track down this command group the professor told us about or do I need to find a new deputy?"

"No. I'm going." Garm replied and he turned to leave.

"Oh and Garm, there is one other thing." Helios added, "You are clearly upset and I'm going to let this little incident pass this time, but speak to me again like that and I'll see to it that it'll be your tongue that's being ripped out. You and Vay both, I don't care how favoured you are by the moff."

"Garm, what's going on?" Jaynie asked when he and Vay returned to the detention section.

"It was Director Helios that authorised Professor Drame's torture." Vay replied as Garm walked up to the still open cell door and began to unfold a foil blanket taken from a survival kit. Entering the cell he stretched this out and draped it over Jenessa.

"She told them about the other rebel units here on Estran." he told Jaynie as she watched him from the cell doorway, "The team led by my father and including your sister is one of them. The director has ordered us to find the team that is directing all of the others. That should lead us to them as well."

"How do we do that?" Jaynie said and Garm stood up and turned around.

"First we take a trip to fleet headquarters. They'll have what we need there." he said.

"Twenty seconds to realspace." Colonel Harris Ergard said from the pilot's seat of his Incom A-24 Sleuth scout ship when his astromech droid, Sparky, chirped and behind him his passenger climbed out of the compact bunk and sat down in the seat beside him.

"Okay," Lieutenant Geran Pay of Alliance Intelligence said, "is everything set?"

"The transponder is rigged the way you said and we're on the heading you wanted." Harris replied right as the scout ship dropped out of hyperspace and ahead of them the two rebels saw the warships patrol around Estran.

"Good." Geran said, "We should look as if we've come from the Core and our transponder will tell them we're a courier belonging to Incom. By the time they can run our ID we'll already be on the surface."

The A-24 was a very fast design in both hyperspace and realspace and the speed at which it flew towards Estran brought it to the Imperial patrols quickly. The communication system beeped when one of the three venator-class star destroyers protecting the planet made contact.

"Attention A-twenty-four. This is the Imperial vessel *Ferocious*, identify yourself and state the reason for your presence."

"The *Ferocious*. Captain Celtis' ship." Geran commented.

"Will knowing her name help get us past them?" Harris asked.

"No."

"Then say something that will lieutenant. That's an order."

"Yes colonel. of course." Geran replied and he activated the communication system, "*Ferocious* this is *Corellian Sunset* out of Corellia. We are here on behalf of Incom Industries and request permission to land at the capital starport. Our purpose here is to commence commercial negotiations with local licensees."

"Local licensees?" Harris said when Geran stopped transmitting and the intelligence officer nodded.

"We know they're short on parts. They'll be looking to arrange for replacements whether imported or made locally." he said.

"So how come they're taking so long to reply? We'll hit atmosphere in under a minute at this rate." Harris said before the communication system came back on line, this with a woman's voice at the other end.

"*Corellian Sunset* this is Captain Celtis. You aren't on our list of priority clearances."

"Err, no captain." Geran responded, "We were on a mission to the Lotana Sector when we were ordered to divert to here. This is an unsolicited visit. Is Fleet Admiral Vretan still the ranking officer of the sector group?" and Harris smiled when Geran used the name of the flag officer known to have been killed leading the assault on the Alliance's previous headquarters in the sector.

"No. Admiral Hall is in command of the sector group now. He can be contacted at fleet headquarters. You are cleared to land *Corellian Sunset*." Captain Celtis told him and then she closed the channel and her ship turned its attention to the next approaching ship.

"See? I told you it would work." Geran said.

"Okay, okay. You got us through the blockade. Now how about getting hold of Vorn's team and letting them know that we're on our way down?" Harris asked.

"On it." Geran said as he turned his attention back to the communication system. However, rather than operating it on an open frequency he set it to send out a low energy identification signal on a frequency used by the Alliance. Knowing that Vorn's team was the only Alliance unit active in the region of the planet's capital city he centred the signal there and kept it as a narrow beam transmission that would not be detected much beyond its limits. Almost immediately there was a reply on the same frequency, a burst of data that contained the co-ordinates for a rendezvous.

"Is that Vorn?" Harris asked when he saw Geran smiled while reading the information shown on the screen in front of him.

"No. It looks like they left their astromech plugged into their communication system on the *Silver Hawk*. He's given us the rendezvous co-ordinates and also asked us to remind Tobis that he's been waiting there for several hours without any indication of when he'll be able to take a break." Geran said and Harris nodded.

"That sounds like an R-five alright. Obnoxious little critters." he said and his own astromech squealed, "No Sparky, R-two units are much easier to get along with." he added.

Following the co-ordinates given to them by Harvey, Harris flew the scout ship over the capital city. Merging with other air traffic to disguise its heading he veered away from the main starport and instead headed out over the countryside to an empty stretch of land where there were just a few empty buildings clustered together. One of these was large enough to fit a light freighter inside, making it more than large enough to hold the fourteen metre long A-24. Harris decelerated to fly his ship through the large open doorway and inside he and Geran saw a landspeeder parked to one side with Mace and Cass sat waiting in it.

"There they are." Harris said, lowering the scout ship's landing gear and setting it down.

"Good. Given how urgent they said this was we probably can't afford to wait." Geran replied and as soon as the ship had landed he got out of his seat and went to open the hatch, "Mace." he called out, "I hear you have trouble."

"Sure do." Mace replied, "Hop into the speeder. I'll explain on the way."

"On the way where exactly?" Harris asked as he followed Geran out of the scout ship.

"To Vorn's place." Mace answered.

"You should see it. It's like a palace." Cass added, smiling.

"So you're not around here then?" Harris said, "I figured you brought us down to your hideout."

"No, Vorn wanted to make sure that you weren't being tracked before leading you to it." Mace said, "This place belongs to a friend of his. Hopefully it'll be filled with our troops in a few days."

"And what if we were tracked?" Geran asked.

"Didn't happen." Harris added.

"Indulge me. Won't we have just given away one of the staging areas we need for the invasion?" Geran said.

"If the Empire does find the ship here then they'll either already know the owner of these buildings is helping us or he can just claim we broke in." Mace said.

"Which is exactly what we did." Cass added, pointing to where the controls to the main doors had been destroyed by a blaster bolt.

Just then Sparky chirped from just inside the ship, peering out at the rebels.

"Sparky you stay put and watch the ship." Harris told the droid, "Contact me only if someone finds you here." and the droid chirped again before it retreated back inside the scout ship, sealing the hatch behind it.

With the *Horrific* in dry dock, Admiral Kenit Hall was a commanding officer without a ship to command. More concerning to him though as he stood in the main command centre of the sector group headquarters was that he was also a fleet commanding officer without much of a fleet. He still had almost two thousand starships at his disposal but the vast majority of these were small to medium sized warships that were no match one on one against the larger vessels fielded by the Alliance fleet, despite most of the Alliance ships being either obsolete models or converted civilian vessels. Most annoying of all was the fact that the Alliance had among their fleet in the sector a stolen Imperial-class star destroyer, meaning that they were the only

people to have such a vessel in working order in this area of space.

"Admiral Deputy Director Larcus is here to see you." one of the command centre staff said while the admiral was focused on the tactical display on the wall in front of him.

"What? Oh very well. I'll see him in my office." Hall replied, however before he could make his way from the command centre to the office meant for the station commander but that he was using for himself Garm, Vay and Jaynie were shown into the command centre by a junior officer.

"Deputy Director." Admiral Hall said, "This is an unexpected visit. I hope you aren't here hunting rebels."

"The ISB has no authority over the military. You know that fleet admiral." Vay replied, aware that Hall's membership of COMPNOR meant that he had a history of allowing its branches, including the ISB, access to parts of the fleet that they technically had no right to demand.

"We're hunting rebels but not within the fleet, admiral." Garm said, "In fact we need your assistance. We have reliable information that the rebels have infiltrated several units to the surface of Estran that are being directed by a mon calamari command element using a submersible vessel to remain hidden. I need access to your tracking data to try and determine where it is."

"I don't know how much you know about our sensors deputy director, but they aren't designed for tracking submersibles from space." Admiral Hall replied.

"I understand that admiral but you may still have tracked the vessel to the point where it entered the ocean. With that information we would have a starting point for our search." Garm said.

"Almost sixty percent of Estran is covered by ocean admiral. That's a lot of area to cover if we have to search it all." Vay commented.

"Yes, I am familiar with geography young lady." Admiral Hall replied with barely disguised contempt, "Tell me Deputy Director Larcus, even if you are able to pinpoint where the rebels entered the ocean how will you find out where they are now?"

"For that we'll need a different type of help. I believe that you currently have authority over the Space Rescue Corps as well as the regular navy." Garm said and Admiral Hall nodded.

"Yes, the corps was militarised and now falls under my authority." he said.

"Then I'd like the use of one of their rescue craft. The sensors aboard that type of vessel are perfectly suited for searching for submerged objects for crash recovery." Garm explained and the admiral smiled.

"I think that can be arranged." he said, happy that Garm was asking for a type of vessel he cared nothing about and a crew he regarded as being inferior to regular naval personnel.

"Excellent. There's a lieutenant in the corps that we've worked with before, a Mirri Cordall, if she's available then-" Garm began.

"Yes, you can have whoever you want as long as you aren't diverting any of my capital ships from their stations." Admiral Hall interrupted. Then he turned to one of his staff officers and added, "Please give the deputy director and his, ah, assistants all the help they need." he said and Vay scowled as she sensed that the admiral's opinion of her and Jaynie was as a pair of young women Garm kept around for purely sexual reasons even though he was well aware of Vay's abilities.

"Yes admiral." the commander said, snapping to attention before he looked at Garm, "If you'd like to come with me sir then I'll show you to somewhere you can work."



## 9.

With their equipment loaded into the landspeeder, Mace drove the two newly arrived rebel agents back to Vorn's home while Cass focused on making sure that they were not being observed, particularly when approaching their destination. Fortunately the residences in the area had only limited views of the streets outside to protect the occupants' privacy and with no other vehicles or pedestrians in view they were able to swiftly open the gates remotely before Mace drove into the driveway and the gates swung shut behind them again to hide them from view. Then as Mace pulled up outside the front doors they opened and Vorn emerged with Couran.

"Stang. Is that-" Harris began and Cass smiled.

"Lord Desh?" she interrupted, "Yeah. I threatened to shoot him once."

"Vorn really does have contacts in high places doesn't he?" Harris commented.

"Enemies too unfortunately." Mace said, turning off the speeder's engine and stepping out.

"Colonel Ergard," Vorn said as Harris got out as well, "may I introduce Lord Couran Desh?"

"An honour to meet you sir." Harris said as he and Couran shook hands.

"I'm just glad to be able to help the Alliance." Couran replied. Then he looked at Geran and added, "And I expect that you have a plan to rescue Professor Drame?"

"Yes, I've worked out how we can do it. At least in theory." Geran answered.

"Good. Then come inside and tell us. The others are waiting." Vorn said, waving Harris and Geran inside.

The other rebels from Vorn's team were waiting in the main lounge when Harris and Geran were shown in and Geran placed his portable computer down on the table.

"It's probably best if I link this to your screen over there." he told Vorn who nodded in reply.

"Go ahead." he said and Geran quickly established a wireless link with the large wall mounted screen, duplicating what was shown on his computer's monitor.

"The problem as I see it," Geran said, "is that the current state of security at the capitol building is too great for us to stand a reasonable chance of penetrating it and then getting out with a prisoner. The general level of activity is massive at the moment and there are no undermanned night shifts that we can take advantage of. Therefore. what we need to do is make the Empire bring Jenessa Drame out of the building themselves. That's where this base comes in." and he called up an aerial image of a small Imperial facility, "This is a tracking station about six hundred kilometres outside the capital. It has a small garrison consisting of a company of troops with an average amount of firepower and fixed defences that would make attacking the station itself without anything other than heavy artillery or armour a stupidly dangerous prospect. However, its isolated location, size and strength make it perfect for what I have in mind. Because of its location there are no fixed communication lines between the station and the outside world. All communications run through the array to the south west of the compound."

"So we're going to blow it up?" Jaysica said.

"Didn't you just hear what he said about attacking the place?" Kara responded, "Wait on second thoughts yes, you can attack it alone."

"Kara." Vorn said, glaring at her.

"I'm proposing that I slice into the system." Geran said, "I'm pretty sure that I can seize control of their entire communication system and not only send messages that will make it look as if they come from this tracking station but also feed them whatever information I want them to get."

"So you'll be sending one lot of fake messages to the capital and another lot to this tracking station, right?"

Tharun asked and Geran nodded.

"Precisely. I intend to tell the Imperial high command that patrols from the base had detected significant rebel activity in the area and that they are in the process of organising an assault on the suspected location of the rebel camp. Then I'll follow this up with a report of how many prisoners they expect to take and what sort. Since the Empire already knows that there are Alliance teams active on the planet I'll say that it looks like one is arming a local resistance force to attack the tracking station and that they expect to take a number of high value prisoners. More than the limited detention facilities in the capitol building can handle. Hopefully that will trigger the Empire to move its current prisoners to other locations."

"So we can attack the transfer convoy en route." Kara said, "Nice. As long as they don't fly them."

"The plan isn't without risk." Geran said, "Also I'll make the tracking station personnel think that their commanders are warning them that their intelligence suggests an imminent attack on the tracking station and that they need to prepare to repulse it. The result should be that the Empire will interpret the extra resources requested by the tracking station as supplies needed for the assault while at the same time they'll be clearing cell space for new prisoners."

"And what if Jenessa isn't on the transfer list?" Mace asked, "As a unit leader she'll be pretty high priority as well."

"Of course she is and I've thought of that as well." Geran replied, "I'll also use the tracking station as an entry point to the Empire's planetary network so that I can slice the capitol's system just long enough to check that she's been included on the transfer list and add her name to it if I need to."

"Will we be enough to carry out this plan?" Vorn asked.

"I doubt it. I'll need to get within a couple of thousand metres of the array to slice in without the Empire picking up my signals and I'm going to need Colonel Ergard's help in setting up a hiding place so that their patrols don't find any rebels for real. That leaves you with just one ship to attack the prisoner transfer convoy with. Given the likely strength of that convoy I'd recommend having a second one. Plus that would give you more room for any other prisoners you manage to rescue, after all there's no sense in leaving anyone else in Imperial custody either."

"So are we going to bring in another of the Alliance teams here on Estran colonel?" Tharun asked and Mace smiled.

"I sure as hell would like to see Inra's face when her ship is filled with unwashed escaped prisoners." he added.

"Actually I'd like to keep the others out of this if we can." Vorn said, "If it all goes wrong then Commander Kord and Captain Myrell will be our only hope. Do you think that Odras Balve would be willing to help?"

"Err, he is at risk if the Empire get the professor to talk." Tobis pointed out.

"I'll ask him, but I've got a bad feeling that he won't be in a generous mood just because his neck is on the line. After all it's because of one of our people that it is." Mace said.

The door to the cramped office where Garm, Vay and Jaynie had been given access to the navy's computer system slid open and a woman in the black uniform of an SRC officer entered.

"Deputy Director Larcus, I'm told that you asked for me." Mirri Cordall said. Despite being a member of the supposedly civilian Space Rescue Corps she still wore a blaster on her hip now that it had been brought under full military command as the power of the Empire waned.

"Mirri, come in and take a seat." Garm replied, both he and Vay smiling at her, "This is Junior Agent Jaynie Horbid by the way. She's just joined our regular division and will be helping us with this mission."

"Have you been told what we're looking for?" Vay added.

"No." Mirri answered, shaking her head, "The fleet commander that's been put in charge of my unit doesn't seem to care what we're ordered to do as long as we do it."

"Yes, I can believe that." Vay said.

"Lieutenant we're hunting for a rebel command unit that's using Estran's oceans as a hiding place." Garm told her.

"I see and since the sensors on a sprint-class rescue ship are designed to search for downed vessels no matter where they may have ended up it makes perfect sense to use my ship to do it." Mirri said, "But what about when we find the rebel ship? My ship's not equipped even for underwater recovery, let alone underwater combat."

"No but you've got plenty of passenger space." Vay pointed out, "In addition to us there'll be a squad of sea troopers accompanying us. Once we find the rebel ship we'll deploy them to take control of it."

"Okay, that sounds fair enough. I take it you have a rough idea of where this rebel unit is hiding." Mirri said and Garm looked at Jaynie.

"Agent Horbid." he said.

"Oh right, me." Jaynie said and she slid her chair back from her terminal so that Mirri could see the screen she had been looking at more clearly, "You see here the Sea of Trall. Naval tracking picked up a deepwater-class freighter entering this directly from space less than twenty-four ago. Ground stations were notified to keep an eye out for a suspected smuggling vessel in the area but it hasn't been seen since."

"The Sea of Trall? That's a pretty good hiding place." Mirri said.

"You've searched for a downed ship there before?" Vay asked.

"No, not personally but during my training my instructor used it as an example of a hostile environment for both sonar and magnetic anomaly detection. The water is relatively shallow so a ship like a deepwater will be able to get right to the bottom at any point. Plus there area was used for ocean mining about a thousand years ago or so and the miners left their scrap gear down there. It just wasn't worth the cost of recovering it to them. If the rebels are operating under power we should be able to pick up their repulsor field but if they've bottomed the ship then this is going to get tricky." Mirri said.

"If they want to keep in touch with the other rebel units on the planet then they'll have no choice but to leave some systems active." Garm said.

"A pity the director's pet torturer didn't think to find out the location of Professor Drame's ship before he ripped out her tongue." Vay commented and Mirri frowned.

"Jenessa Drame?" she said, remembering working with Jenessa on one of Garm and Vay's earlier assignments that involved the presence of an aggressive alien species attempting to bring more of their kind to Estran, "What happened to her?"

"They ripped out her eyes and tongue." Jaynie said nervously.

"Director Helios decided that her case warranted extreme interrogation methods." Garm explained, "With a human interrogator rather than a droid. He wanted to send a message to any other rebels we capture."

"And you're all okay with that?" Mirri said, looking around at the three ISB agents.

*Can you accept what you're a part of Vay? You know that any other rebels you capture could be treated just like that. You need to open the doors.*

"Garm had a different plan." Vay told Mirri, "One that would have yielded results without maiming her like that. The director acted without our knowledge."

"What's done is done." Garm said, "Lieutenant Cordall, how soon can you be ready to leave?"

"I may be under military authority now but I command a rescue ship deputy director. It's ready to go now." Mirri replied.

With stormtroopers monitoring the docking bay where the *Silver Hawk* had landed it was necessary for Mace to move the ship to the same building on Lord Desh's land where Harris had landed his scout ship. The colonel's ship was gone now, along with Harris and Geran so that they could carry out their part of the plan to rescue Jenessa. Having the *Silver Hawk* hidden on Lord Desh's land enabled Vorn's team to prepare to their own part of the plan with a much lower risk of discovery by the Empire but while they were in the midst of this there was the sound of repulsorlifts from overhead. Cass was outside when she heard this and she looked up to see a freighter descending towards the ground.

"Oh no." she said to herself, "I've got a very bad feeling about this." and then she looked inside the building where the *Silver Hawk* stood and shouted, "Dad! Come quick." Mace came rushing down the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp, accompanied by Vorn and Tharun. All three rebels had their weapons already drawn, expecting an Imperial attack but Cass pointed at the approaching freighter, "Isn't that the *Scarlet Knife*?" she asked.

"Oh stang." Mace said, watching as the barloz-class medium freighter touched down just outside the building.

"What the hell is Anzar doing here?" Tharun asked and Mace raised a hand to his forehead.

"Odras said he'd supply another ship for the op." he said, "I just didn't think that he'd send that one."

"I think that I should go and find out what's going on here." Vorn said as he returned his compact hold out blaster to the holster under his jacket before he began to walk towards the *Scarlet Knife*.

"Cover us." Mace told Tharun, holstering his own blaster and hurrying after Vorn.

"Dad wait for me." Cass called out.

"Stay back Cass. Just in case." Mace told her.

"You heard him kid. We'll watch from here." Tharun added.

Anzar and Lannaye exited the *Scarlet Knife* together and like Vorn and Mace they were armed but their blasters were holstered.

"Captain Deller. Lieutenant Curve." Vorn said, "I take it that you are not here to turn yourselves in to Alliance custody."

"Balve sent you didn't he?" Mace asked.

"Apparently he owns us now." Lannaye answered.

"Didn't I warn you not borrow money from him?" Mace said.

"And I didn't. The problem is that when he offers us the choice of helping you or ending up on our own again." Anzar said.

"Without our ship." Lannaye added, "If we'd said 'no' then he promised that

"Sounds like Balve." Mace muttered.

"How much did he tell you?" Vorn said.

"That the Empire managed to grab one of your friends and that if you can't free her then all of us could end up in front of a firing squad." Anzar said.

"Exactly the sort of thing we're trying to avoid." Lannaye added, folding her arms.

"Come with us." Vorn told Anzar and Lannaye, "We'll explain everything."

Located high up in the mountains so that its sensor array would be able to operate without interference from civilian traffic or communications the only way to approach the Imperial tracking station was for Harris to land his scout ship beyond the mountain on which it was built and for the two rebels then to make their way around it on foot. As befitting its role, the tracking station was well equipped with sensor devices and these included an omniprobe sensor array that was capable of scanning the ground over the intervening terrain in a five kilometre radius. This forced Harris to land further away than this, presenting him and Geran with a significant walk ahead of them. Having spent much of his time with the Alliance exploring remote regions in search of suitable locations for bases, Harris was used to the snowy terrain that they had to navigate but Geran struggled to keep up and stumbled frequently.

"Come on lieutenant." Harris said as he helped Geran back to his feet for the third time, "If you fall all the way

down this mountain then it'll be all the harder for you to slice into that communication antenna." and Geran frowned.

"If I wanted to walk through the snow then I wouldn't have joined intelligence." Geran replied, "Where are we?" and Harris checked his datapad.

"About two and half thousand metres from the target." he said, "If we can make it to that ledge over there then we should be close enough to - down!" and he pushed Geran back to the ground before diving flat himself right before a atmospheric TIE striker passed overhead.

Geran lifted his head, wiping snow from his face and spitting more from his mouth.

"Do you think the pilot saw us?" he asked.

"If he did then they'd already be circling round to attack." Harris pointed out, "We might want to get a move on though. We might not be as lucky a second time."

"Lucky. Sure." Geran replied as he dragged himself back to his feet before the pair began to hurry towards the ledge Harris had pointed out. Once there they took cover behind the rocks on the ledge and while Geran was unpacking his equipment to slice into the communication array Harris took out a set of macrobinoculars and began to study the Imperial tracking station. He could see the power fence that surrounded the facility and several security droids patrolling inside while the organic guards remained inside where it was warmer. There were three landing pads, one of which was vacant, one occupied by an ordinary lambda-class shuttle and a third occupied by a troop carrying TIE reaper.

"Looks like the Imperials are staying indoors." Harris said.

"I don't blame them. It's freezing out here." Geran said as he placed a compact transceiver unit on the rock he was using for cover and aimed it directly at the communication antenna, "Now let's see how secure their system is." he said and he began to tap at the keyboard of his portable computer.

Connecting to the tracking station's communication antenna was simple but Geran still had to penetrate the software defences in place to stop anyone from doing what he was now attempting, gaining access to the system that controlled the communication system. Fortunately for the rebels not only was Geran well experienced at this but also the security software here had not been updated as often as it should and it took him just a few minutes to penetrate it.

"Got it!" he snapped.

"You're in already?" Harris asked, "I thought it would take longer."

"Yeah, well I guess that when they don't have high ranking officers peering over your shoulder all the time Imperial techs can get a bit lax in their work." Geran said, "I've got full access to their communication system. I'm uploading the spike that will let me edit their messages now."

"In that case I'll get the shelter set up. No sense in us continuing to sit out here in the snow." Harris said and Geran just nodded as he continued to work.

"Director Helios I think you should see this." an ISB agent told the director over the intercom from the capitol building's main communications suite, "A message was just received by army command from a tracking station in the Sarranian Mountains. Their patrols have located what looks to be a major rebel hideout."

"Define major." Director Helios replied.

"They say upwards of fifty to one hundred rebels sir."

"And how strong is their garrison?"

"They have a full line company sir. Their commanding officer is preparing his men to launch an attack and has requested additional resources from his superiors."

"Seems like they have everything in hand then. Nothing for us to worry about." the director said.

"Sir the tracking station patrols report that the hideout appears to include a significant communication system. It looks like it could be where the rebellion intends to direct any invasion of Estran from. The garrison commanding officer has indicated that he hopes to take a large number of rebels alive for interrogation. That's why he's been requesting additional resources to enable his men to capture them instead of killing them."

"Interesting. An army captain able to see the bigger picture." Director Helios said to himself, "Very well. Inform the army that we will be ready to take custody of any prisoners taken in the operation. In the meantime I'll arrange to clear some cell space for them."

"Are we really trusting them boss?" Kara asked, sitting down beside Vorn in the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit while the other rebels were in the lounge with Anzar and Lannaye and Vorn looked over his shoulder.

"Not entirely, no." he told her, "Lannaye was never happy about the risks they had to take as part of the Alliance and Anzar just wanted a quiet life. I think if they see an opportunity to escape they'll take it."

"So we just send them on their way then?" Kara suggested.

"No. We need their ship. We'll have to block the path of whatever transports are being used by the Empire to move the prisoners in both directions. Plus having the *Scarlet Knife* along doubles our firepower. That could come in useful if there are armoured escorts." Vorn said.

"So how will you make certain that they don't just do a runner at the first sign of combat?" Kara said.

"I doubt that will be an issue since they could have just run rather than come here. Anzar may be tired of war but he's no coward." Vorn said and Kara snorted.

"He ran at the shadow port." she pointed out.

"That was different. He did that to save Lannaye." Vorn said, "But they won't be alone. Tharun and I will fly with them while the rest of you stay aboard the *Silver Hawk*."

"I don't know. I've got a bad feeling about this boss." Kara said, "I don't want to lose you, not now that we're so close to winning this war. Especially not to a knife in your back from someone who's already betrayed us once."

"I'll be careful." Vorn reassured her, smiling.

"You'll be dead." Kara said before the *Silver Hawk's* communications activated.

"*Silver Hawk* this is Geran. Do you read me?"

"Yes Geran we read you." Vorn responded, "Have you managed to get into their system?"

"Get into? Colonel I could have your name added to COMPNOR's order of merit if you wanted." Geran said, "I've sent the phony message about finding an alliance base and there's already been a reply promising all the support they need. I've intercepted that and replaced it with a warning about a predicted attack and a notice that extra equipment will be shipped to them to help out if the tracking station is the target."

"That's excellent news Geran. What news is there about the prisoners?" Vorn asked.

"As expected the ISB are looking to offload some of their existing prisoners to other facilities. They aren't naming any names yet though so I'll have to keep an eye on that. I'll let you know as soon as I have a departure time and route."

"Okay Geran. Thanks for that. *Silver Hawk* out." Vorn said before shutting off the communication system, "Come on Kara, we better go and let the others know." he added as he got out of his seat.

## 10.

"Altitude twenty metres. Beginning sensor sweep." one of Mirri's flight crew said and she nodded, activating the intercom so that she could talk to her passengers.

"Deputy Director Larcus we're starting our first run now." she said and in the rear of the vessel, surrounded by aquatic assault stormtroopers Garm responded.

"Good. We'll be with you in a moment." he said and he looked at Vay who nodded back at him.

"What about me?" Jaynie asked.

"Stay put. We don't need you right now." Vay told her.

"No. Come with us. you can at least watch how this is done." he said and Vay frowned for a moment.

*Jealous Vay? Worried that Garm will leave you for her if he gets the chance? You need to put all that out of your mind Vay. Something big is coming and you need to open the doors.*

Vay grunted, still unable to comprehend the message Lara now repeated with every interruption as she and Jaynie both followed Garm to the rescue ship's cockpit. With all of the control stations occupied there was nowhere in the compartment for the ISB agents to sit down and not much room for them to stand either and so all three ended up squeezed in right behind Mirri.

"How long will this take?" Jaynie asked.

"We can search two hundred square kilometres of ocean every ten minutes." Mirri told her, "So with forty thousand square kilometres to cover we could be here a long time unless the rebels use their communication system. We can pick up even a weak signal from more than three hundred kilometres at this altitude."

"I think I've got something." one of the flight crew suddenly announced, "Energy signal bearing three one four degrees. Range seventy kilometres."

"We've found them already?" Jaynie said, surprised, "Should we let the stormtroopers know?"

"Not just yet." Garm replied, "We don't know what the source is."

"Source identified. Single aquatic repulsorlift platform. Looks like a harvester." the crewman said as he locked onto the source of the signal.

"Still want to send in the troops?" Vay said, leaning towards Jaynie, "I'm sure those sea troopers would just love to storm a fishing boat."

"No." Jaynie answered, shaking her head.

The rescue ship flew over the harvester at an altitude low enough that it caused the men working on its deck to duck instinctively as they felt the displacement of air.

*Anger.*

"I don't think those fishermen liked that." Vay commented, looking at Garm and smiling.

"That's their problem." Garm said.

"I've got a large magnetic anomaly ahead." one of the flight crew said, "About two hundred metres across."

"Any energy readings?" Mirri asked.

"Negative."

"Ignore it then. It's just wreckage on the sea bed."

"I've got a signal. Low energy wireless transmission coming from the surface." another crewman announced,

"Bearing forty-two degrees, range sixty kilometres."

*Vay you shouldn't be bothering with this. Open the-*

"That's it. The rebels are there." Vay exclaimed before Lara could finish.

"How do know?" Jaynie said, "Wouldn't the rebels be transmitting from beneath the surface anyway?"

"No, they'd send up an antenna so that their signal doesn't need to be strong enough to penetrate the water.

Vay's right, we've found them." Garm said.

"Steering forty-one degrees and accelerating to maximum speed. Our ETA is about three minutes." Mirri announced.

"Jaynie, go and tell the sea troopers to get ready." Garm ordered and Jaynie nodded before she left the cockpit.

Lieutenant Colonel Shintal Sallir was sat in the cockpit of the deepwater-class freighter *Harpoon* with its captain Nassar Ghal. Nassar kept the vessel just below the ocean surface so that the antenna they had raised could penetrate the surface while the colonel spoke with Grace Myrell.

"Colonel we've made contact with a number of the broadcast engineers Druvvon and I used to work with."

she said. Before defecting to the Alliance Grace had been a popular holovid actress while the snivvian Druvvon had been a writer she had worked with. The pair of them had been among those who spoke out against the censorship of the art world under the Empire and been blacklisted as a result. However, despite having to end their work in the entertainment industry they still knew many of the beings who had chosen to try and carry on working under the Empire and they had chosen to approach some of these for help in

spreading information to the general population without the Empire being able to block it, "They're willing to help us bypass the Empire's broadcast regulations. When the invasion starts they'll-"

"Colonel!" Nassar exclaimed suddenly, "The Empire has found us. Look." and he pointed through the cockpit canopy to where a pair of sea troopers had just dropped into the ocean from the rescue ship above.

"Captain Mycrell, we're under attack." Shintal said before suddenly shutting off the communication system, "Take us deep." he ordered and Nassar pushed forwards on the flight controls, tilting the *Harpoon's* nose downwards as it began to head for deeper water in the hope that the sea troopers would be unable to follow. However, the two sea troopers who had been dropped in front of the vessel were not the first of the squad to enter the water and two other troopers were able to clamp themselves to the *Harpoon's* hull before taking concussion grenades from their belts. Fixing these to the hull of the descending vessel the two sea troopers armed them before releasing themselves from the *Harpoon* and using their own propulsion units to get far enough away that they would not be injured when the grenades detonated. The water around the *Harpoon* served to focus the energy of the concussion grenades against the ship's hull and the vessel rocked before bubbles of gas began streaming from a ruptured pressure line.

"I can't keep us under the surface." Nassar said, "The repulsorlift system is losing power and our air reprocessing system is offline. We need to get to the surface now."

"Do it. I'll warn the others that we're going to have uninvited passengers." Shintal responded, leaping out of his chair and rushing from the cockpit.

The first other member of the ship's crew that he encountered was Shar Attan, the ship's engineer.

"Colonel the power core is damaged." he said.

"We're under attack. Do whatever it takes." Shintal ordered, rushing past Shar to the crew quarters where he found the rest of the *Harpoon's* crew already readying their weapons in preparation to defend the ship.

"Colonel, what's happening?" Sergeant Rhac Gysal, the team's combat specialist asked while he hurried to put on his armour.

"The Empire found us. Sea troopers have damaged the power and life support systems. They'll probably be aboard in in a few minutes unless Shar can get the power core fixed in time." Shintal told him.

"There she is." Mirri said when the *Harpoon* broke the surface.

"Pull up." Garm told her, "That ship's laser cannon could bring us down if the rebels get the chance to use it. Keep us out of the way and let the troopers do their job.

"Okay, I'm taking us up to three thousand metres." Mirri replied.

A muffled explosion let the crew of the *Harpoon* know that the aquatic assault stormtroopers outside were forcing their way in through the cargo hold.

"Rhac, Lon, try and slow them down. I'm going to check on the repairs." Shintal said and the two other mon calamari rushed towards the hold. They arrived just in time to see the cargo loading door explode inwards and the first of the aquatic assault stormtroopers appeared in the hatchway.

"They're in!" Rhac snapped as he fired an energy bolt from his blaster spear gun into the trooper's chest.

The dead trooper's body slid back through the hatch before a second emerged just long enough to hurl a grenade into the hold and Rhac and Lon took cover before it went off. The blast ripped apart all of the nearby cargo containers and shrapnel from one of these hit Lon in his leg. Rhac reached out to grab his comrade so that he could pull him from the cargo hold but while he was distracted another of the aquatic assault stormtroopers beneath the *Harpoon* surfaced in the hatchway and fired his weapon. Still configured for underwater use, the rifle shot a physical harpoon rather than an energy bolt and this hit Rhac in his stomach and caused him to cry out in pain as he fell.

"Rhac what's happening?" a female voice called out and Rhac looked around to see Ajay Addos, the team's medic rushing towards him.

"Get back." Rhac shouted as he tried to level his weapon towards the hatchway but before he could fire it there was a flash of red as the sea trooper switched his weapon to its conventional operating mode and fired again, the energy blast striking Rhac in his chest and punching right through his lightweight armour to kill him instantly.

Lon was able to return fire with his own blaster, the shot sending the aquatic assault stormtrooper back down into the water but there was yet another member of the squad already climbing aboard the *Harpoon*. Initially this sea trooper pulled himself through the hatch and rolled aside rather than firing at the mon calamari. Only after he considered himself in the relative safety of cover behind a large crate did he set his weapon to fire automatically and fire a burst of energy blasts towards Lon.

"Get back!" Ajay called out and she finished the job of dragging the injured Lon from the cargo hold before slamming her hand down on the controls to the door and sealing it behind him.

"I'll try and hold them here." Lon told her, "You go and warn the colonel that they're aboard. He'll know what to do."

"Take care Lon." Ajay replied and then she turn on the spot and ran to the power core where Shar was busy

trying to restore enough power that the *Harpoon* could at least get airborne while Shintal handed him the tools he asked for.

"Colonel there are sea troopers aboard. Lon is injured and Rhac's dead." she announced.

"Yes, we heard the shooting." Shintal replied, "Shar, how much longer?"

"At least half an hour colonel. The problem is that the core is fully operational but the distribution matrix is almost completely burned out. If we try to take power for more than a second or two it will fail totally and we'll never be able to fix it. I need to rig a bypass for the damaged components.

Shintal sighed.

"We can't let them take this ship." he said and Shar nodded slowly.

"A core overload would vaporise everything of intelligence value colonel but it would have to be triggered manually." he said.

"I'll stay and do it." Shintal said, "Ajay, you and Shar should get the others and get out while you still can. Don't use the escape pod, the Empire will be able to track that. Just swim for it and try to get far enough away before I have to-"

"No colonel there isn't going to be time for that." Shar interrupted, "The core needs to be rigged first and that's going to take me five to ten minutes. I have to stay."

"In that case I will buy you your time." Shintal told him, "Ajay come with me to get Lon." then he activated a nearby intercom panel, "Nassar you need to abandon ship." he said into it, "Meet me and Ajay by the hold."

"Yes colonel. I'll be right there." Nassar responded and Shintal immediately began to head for the hold himself, followed by Ajay.

Lon was still waiting by the hold, having dragged himself to where he could cover the doorway while being in cover himself but just as Shintal and Ajay approached him there was a sudden flash as the Imperial troops inside the hold used a thermal breaching charge to melt through the door, causing it to drop out of the frame.

"Lon lookout!" Ajay shouted as the first sea trooper leant through the hole and opened fire towards him. Lon raised his blaster to return fire but before he could take aim he was hit in the chest and collapsed, "Lon, no!" Ajay screamed at the same time as Shintal fired his blaster towards the doorway.

"Colonel what's happening?" Nassar said as he came running up behind Shintal and Ajay.

"Nassar, take Ajay and get out of here. I'll hold them back and give Shar time to rig the ship to self destruct." Shintal ordered.

"Got it colonel. Come on Ajay, we'll have to use the upper hatch." Nassar responded and he pulled Ajay away from Shintal, heading for the *Harpoon's* dorsal hatch while Shintal continued to fire his blaster.

The two mon calamari reached the ladder leading up to the dorsal hatch and Nassar was the first to climb out onto the upper hull.

"It's clear." he said as he looked around to make sure that there were no more Imperial troops waiting for them outside. Outside the ship, clear of its internal artificial gravity field the *Harpoon* could be felt to be rocking back and forth as it floated on the surface of the ocean. Members of many species would be concerned about being washed overboard in such a situation but this possibility did not bother the two mon calamari at all since they were planning to throw themselves into the ocean anyway. Instead all they were concerned about was making it to the edge of the hull without falling and injuring themselves against it. Making it to the edge of the hull they stood side by side and looked at one another.

"Ready?" Nassar asked.

"Ready." Ajay replied and then both mon calamari leapt into the ocean together.

Back inside the *Harpoon*, Shintal had noticed that the bursts of bright red energy blasts had ceased and now the aquatic assault stormtroopers firing from inside the cargo hold had been replaced by individual blasts that were blue in colour, indicating that the troopers had now set their weapons to 'stun' and were intending to take prisoners. Knowing that if he was captured then he could easily be taken from the ship before it could be destroyed Shintal began to fall back, hoping to put as much distance between him and the sea troopers as he could.

"Shar how much longer?" he asked as he rushed into the *Harpoon's* engineering compartment.

"Almost there colonel. I just need to make this connection." Shar replied and there was a sharp 'crack' of electrical discharge as Shar caused a short circuit that destroyed the safety system intended to prevent the explosion that the engineer was wanting to trigger, "That's it. We can blow the ship whenever you want colonel." he added.

"You in there. Surrender." a voice called out from the corridor outside and there was the sound of footsteps as the Imperial boarding party closed in.

"Do it." Shintal ordered and just as the first sea trooper appeared in the doorway behind him Shar touched together the two wires that caused the power core to try and output enough energy to open up an entry point into hyperspace while there was nowhere for it to go and the entire core exploded, producing a blast so powerful that the whole of the *Harpoon*, including all of the aquatic assault stormtroopers aboard it were consumed and the water around it for almost a hundred metres boiled away.

Meanwhile deep beneath the *Harpoon*, Nassar and Ajay swam downwards. There had been no more aquatic



assault stormtroopers in the water when they had jumped overboard and they had immediately started to head downwards, taking full advantage of their aquatic physiology that meant they could survive at any depth while the depth that the sea troopers could dive to was limited by their equipment.

The forward viewport of the rescue ship darkened automatically to compensate for the flash when the *Harpoon* exploded and Garm flinched.

"What happened?" Mirri said, looking at her crew.

"It looks like their power core melted down." one of them replied, "There's nothing left. I'm not picking up any wreckage more than about two centimetres across."

"So much for General Dern's men." Vay commented, "We lost the ship and the crew."

"Wait." Garm said, "We may not have lost the crew, some might have been able to escape overboard. If our information was correct then that team was largely or possibly even entirely made up of mon calamari. Lieutenant Cordall can your instruments search for a mon calamari in the water?"

"On the surface? Sure, it's just as easy as picking up any other survivor of a crash in the water. Beneath it is another matter though. With mon cal's being naturally aquatic they'll look like any other ocean life form."

"Stang." Garm hissed, "In that case we're done here. Take us back to the capital. I need to tell Director Helios that he had Professor Drame mutilated for nothing."

Harris peered out of the shelter, keeping watch for any patrols from the tracking station while Geran continued to monitor the Imperial computer network.

"Got it." Geran exclaimed suddenly, "The program I uploaded just gave me the transfer details."

"Is Captain Drame on the list?" Harris asked but Geran shook his head.

"No, she's not." he said before he began to type furiously, "But she is now." he added, "She'll be loaded onto a transport along with sixteen other prisoners and move via convoy to the holding centre outside the city of Trassan. That's just under a hundred kilometres from Estran City itself. I've got everything here. Number of transports, approved route and escort."

"Great. Then let's get that to Vorn and his team." Harris said.

"Wait one moment. I think I might be able to give him an extra edge." Geran replied as he started to type once more, "There." he said suddenly, "I've altered the route that will be uploaded to the convoy's navigation system. It'll take them off the main highways between the two cities and leave them more exposed. Also three minutes after the convoy sets out the route in the main system will revert to what it was originally. That way the Empire won't know where its own convoy is. Now we can let Colonel Larcus know."

"Well done Geran." Vorn said as the members of his team, along with Couran, Anzar and Lannaye studied the data provided to them by the intelligence agent, using the large wall mounted video screen in the main lounge to view it on.

"That new route takes them through some pretty rough country my boy." Couran commented, "Nothing up there but hills and vermin."

"Jaysica should blend right in then." Kara said, smirking as Jaysica scowled back at her.

"Hey that's not-" she began.

"Looks like Geran's provided us with a full list of the vehicles to be used as well." Mace said, ignoring Jaysica, "Six troop transports, four for the prisoners and two as escorts plus a pair of assault tanks for extra hitting power."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Lannaye said, "It reminds of when Devid was killed."

Devid Nerreck had been the doctor assigned to the team operating aboard the *Scarlet Knife* when it had participated in a mission to rescue Tharun and Tobis from Imperial custody and he had been killed during it. That has set the pattern for the bad feelings between the occupants of the *Scarlet Knife* and *Silver Hawk* and prompted the former's eventual desertion from the rebellion.

"Devid was careless." Vorn replied, "I'm sorry to say it but it's true. He rushed to open that transport when he should have waited for support."

"he helped save you as well you know." Lannaye said angrily.

"The colonel's right Lannaye." Anzar said, "Devid was my friend as well but he made a mistake. Major Shrell should have known that but he led us down the wrong path and got himself and Travis killed for it. You too very nearly. If it wasn't for Mace the pair of us could have ended up dead."

"Tobis what do you think of the terrain?" Vorn asked.

"What?" Tobis replied, surprised, "Oh, err. Well it's bad for direct communications." and Vorn smiled.

"That's what I was hoping you'd say." he said, "That means we can jam their comms and no-one in the convoy will notice."

"What about satellites?" Cass said.

"Thanks to our having changed the course of the convoy the Empire won't be expecting to need satellite communications." Mace said.

"Even if they do notice something's up they'll be searching along the original route kid." Tharun added before Jeeves came rushing into the room.

"Colonel Larcus sir there is a call for you that I think you should take immediately." the droid announced.

"On the house comm line?" Vorn asked.

"Who even knows we're here?" Mace added.

"It appears to be Captain Ghal." Jeeves answered and Vorn and Mace looked at one another before they both ran from the lounge.

"I know I'm not an expert on rebel matters so could someone please tell me who this Captain Ghal is?" Couran said.

"The captain of the *Harpoon*. Colonel Sallir's ship." Anzar told him.

"So he shouldn't be using the house's communication line." Tharun added.

Hurrying into what had been Vorn's home office where before his defection he had dealt with Parliamentary business out of hours Vorn sat down behind the desk while Mace leant on the side of it.

"Captain Ghal." Vorn said into the desk mounted communicator, "Why aren't you using the secure communication channel?"

"I'm sorry, I'll keep this quick." Nassar replied, "The *Harpoon's* gone. Shar had to rig it to self destruct when it was boarded. Ajay and I got out but everyone else is dead."

"The Empire?" Mace said.

"Yes. They dropped a squad of sea troopers while we were communicating with Captain Myrell. I don't think they know where she is though. She was reporting everything going according to plan. Colonel Sallir didn't want the ship falling into the Empire's hands so he ordered it destroyed." Nassar explained.

"They must have tracked them after questioning Jenessa." Mace said.

"Okay captain. Where are you?" Vorn asked.

"Some small fishing settlement on the coast of the Sea of Trall called Costan's Point." Nassar replied.

"I know that place." Mace said, "I can be there and back in the *Silver Hawk* in about four hours."

"That gives you enough time to get back for the rescue operation." Vorn said, nodding before he turned back to the communicator, "Nassar I need you and Ajay to stay out of sight. Mace is on his way to pick you up. You'll join him for the rescue mission."

"Understood." Nassar said and then the communication channel was cut off from his end.

"I hope the Empire wasn't monitoring that line." Mace said.

"Why would they be?" Vorn said, "Just in case though we should all get out of here before any stormtroopers can arrive. Now that you'll have Nassar and Ajay with you aboard the *Silver Hawk* I'll take Kara as well as Tharun with me on the *Scarlet Knife*. Let's go and tell the others."

The rest of the rebels were still waiting in the lounge when Vorn and Mace returned.

"Colonel Sallir's dead." Vorn announced, "The Empire found the *Harpoon* and its crew set it to self destruct to prevent the Empire from getting hold of it."

"So who's in charge now?" Jaysica asked.

"Colonel Ergard is the ranking Alliance officer on Estran now." Kara said.

"But he's not a field agent lieutenant." Tharun pointed out.

"No he's not." Vorn said, "Technically my position gives me tactical seniority over him. I'm in charge now."

"Congratulations my boy. You've always had leadership potential." Couran said.

"So what are we doing now?" Anzar asked, "Is the rescue mission still on?"

"Yes it's still on." Vorn answered, "Though there will be something of a change to it. Mace needs to take the *Silver Hawk* to collect Captain Ghal and Lieutenant Addos. Cass, Tobis and Jaysica will go with him. Tharun and Kara will come with me aboard the *Scarlet Knife* while we scout out the convoy's route for the best place to ambush it. Jaysica I want you to have prepared charges to take out armoured vehicles by the time you get back. Remember those tanks are tracked. I think that Penny might be of use in taking them out."

"I hesitate to ask Vorn my boy but what should I be doing while you're all off rushing around fighting the Empire?" Couran asked.

"Until we know if this place is compromised you can't stay here." Vorn said, "I suggest you go to our usual meeting place and wait there until you hear from us."

"Of course. I'll have drinks waiting for you." Couran said and Mace frowned, remembering the quality of the drinks served at the cantina where he and Vorn usually met with Couran.

"Please don't." he said.

"On your feet traitor!" Captain Layne yelled as a pair of COMPForce troopers lifted Jenessa from the floor. Blind and unable to make anything more than a grunt, Jenessa tried to place her arms in front of her to cover herself up but they were promptly pulled apart by the soldiers holding her. However, the assault she now expected did not come to pass and instead she felt her limbs being pulled so that a simple jumpsuit could be placed on her. Then despite her being unable to see a hood was pulled over her head and tightened around her neck, "Cone on," Layne went on, "now you're decent we can get you moved to your new home. I'm sure you'll love it. I hear there are some excellent views. Oops, silly me. You'd still need eyes for those. In fact I tell you what if at any point you decide you've had enough then just tell the guards and they'll let you go. Won't you men?"

"Yes captain." one of the other COMPForce troopers in the room replied and then they all laughed at Jenessa's helplessness. Despite being blind a set of binders was still placed around Jenessa's wrists before she was finally dragged from the cell and led to one of the transport vehicles preparing to move the ISB's prisoners to a different facility in the expectation of new captives being brought in to fill their cells.

Captain Layne watched as each of the prisoners was loaded into a transport, four of them per vehicle along with four of his men to guard them in addition to the three crew members of the armoured transports. Their orders were to remain in their transports with the prisoners no matter what. If the convoy did come under attack it would be up to the two squads of troops in the other transports along with the pair of TX-225 GAVw occupier assault tanks to defend the convoy.

"Captain the prisoners are secured and the escorts prepared." another of the COMPForce troopers announced when he marched up to Captain Layne and snapped to attention.

"Good. Send them out." Layne ordered and the trooper waved to the commander of the tank that would be leading the convoy. The officer waved back and then the engines of the armoured vehicles started up.

The *Silver Hawk* and *Scarlet Knife* both circled above the area chosen for the ambush of the Imperial convoy while Jaysica and Tobis made their way along the bank of a deep and fast flowing river that the road the convoy would be coming along crossed over with an unremarkable ferrocrete bridge. By destroying this at just the right moment the convoy could be stopped in its tracks. The terrain either side of the road was not only steep but also covered in dense woodland, making traversing it even in replusorlift vehicles difficult and so all that would be left for the rebels to do to trap the convoy would be to take out the vehicle bringing up the rear.

"Tobis I need to get up there." Jaysica said, pointing at the underside of the bridge and setting her backpack down on the ground.

"Oh. Err, perhaps you should give me the, err, the charges and I could take them up there." Tobis suggested.

"I'll be fine. Just help me up there." Jaysica said, reaching up to grab hold of the metalwork that supported the bridge and Tobis sighed as she started to climb.

Stepping closer to try and help Jaysica in her climb Tobis recoiled suddenly as she inadvertently kicked him in the chest and he let out a gasp.

"What happened?" Jaysica asked, looking down at Tobis.

"Err. Nothing. I, err, I just coughed." Tobis lied, not wanting to hurt Jaysica's feelings.

"Okay then." Jaysica said, continuing to climb until she reached the point where the metalwork column spread out to support the bridge itself. Only then did she realise that she had left the explosive charges she had prepared in her backpack on the ground, "Oh Tobis could you throw a charge up to me?" she asked and Tobis looked down at the pack.

For some strange reason Jaysica's notorious clumsiness had never extended to her handling of explosives and since the charges being used were not so unstable that they would explode if dropped anyway Tobis decided to do as she had asked him. Rummaging through the backpack Tobis found the charges along with Jaysica's compact hold out blaster and he peeled the weapon away from the block of detonite that it had become stuck to before throwing the charge one handed up to Jaysica who caught it also using one hand. She then pressed the explosive against the bridge support, using her fingers to shape the compound to better fit against it.

"Okay that's one." she called out as she began to move slowly sideways along the metal beam she was standing on towards the far end of the support at the other side of the bridge.

"Oh, err, be careful Jaysica." Tobis said as he watched this but to his relief Jaysica made it to the other side of the bridge safely and she looked down at him again.

"Okay throw me another charge." she said and Tobis threw the second explosive charge he had taken from her backpack up to her. Once again Jaysica pressed this against the supporting metalwork beneath the bridge and made sure that it was properly stuck before she looked back down towards Tobis, "Okay I'm

done." she called out, "I'm on my way down." and she started to lower herself back down the metalwork. However, the pattern of the metal work was not identical on each side of the bridge, having been altered during repairs over the centuries the bridge had stood here and Jaysica suddenly found herself putting a foot where she expected there to be another metal beam but finding only an empty space, "Hey where did the-" she began, looking down as she continued to lower herself as well and all of a sudden she lost her grip on the metal work, "Tobis help me!" she cried out right before losing her grip entirely and she screamed as she fell.

For a moment Jaysica stopped moving as her trousers caught on a protruding part of the metalwork and she hung upside down, caught in place. This lasted only for a few moments though before there was a tearing sound as she continued to fall, leaving behind most of her trousers.

"Jaysica!" Tobis exclaimed, dropping her backpack and rushing to try and catch her. Sure enough Tobis was right underneath Jaysica as she fell but rather than him being able to catch her and bring her to a harmless halt her momentum sent him toppling backwards and the pair of them fell over the side of the ferrocrete base of the bridge that Tobis had been stood on and plunged into the fast flowing water.

"Tobis!" Jaysica cried out as they were carried along with the water.

Tobis was able to reach out and grab hold of a rung of a ladder built into the ferrocrete base before being swept too far away and then he felt a sudden tug as in turn Jaysica grabbed hold of him, gripping tightly to the leg of his overalls.

"Hold on." Tobis shouted, "I, err, I'll try and get us up the ladder."

"Tobis I can't. The current is too strong." and then Jaysica squealed as the fabric of Tobis' overalls began to tear where she was holding it, unable to take her weight as the river tried to drag her away.

"Climb up me." Tobis said, knowing that he would not be able to keep hold of the ladder for much longer while Jaysica was also weighing him down and she began to pull herself up his body, using his overalls to hang onto. This just put more pressure on the fabric though and it continued to tear until all of a sudden the overalls split completely and Jaysica screamed as she was swept away.

"Jaysica!" Tobis called out and he let go of the ladder, allowing the river to sweep him along as well.

In the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk*, Nassar sat in the co-pilot's seat beside Mace while Cass sat behind them and watched her father fly the ship.

"How much longer do you think they'll take?" she asked.

"Not much I hope." Mace replied as he checked the time display, "If they're on schedule then the convoy will be here in under an hour."

"Should we try the comlink?" Nassar suggested and Mace nodded.

"It's worth a shot. Cass can you take care of that?" he said.

"Sure dad." Cass replied and she turned to the communication panel beside her, "Tobis? Jaysica? It's Cass. Can you read me? How are things going down there?" but there was no reply.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Mace said and activated the ship to ship communications, "*Scarlet Knife* do you read me?" he transmitted.

"Loud and clear Mace." Anzar's voice responded.

"You've heard from Tobis or Jaysica have you?" Mace asked, "We just tried getting them on their comlink but they didn't respond."

"Negative. We've just been checking out the road. We haven't tried communicating with them." Anzar said before Vorn's voice was heard.

"Mace take the *Silver Hawk* down. Make sure that they're both alright. Maybe the geography combined with the structure of that bridge is interfering with your signal." he said.

"Okay colonel, we're going in." Mace said and he angled the nose of the *Silver Hawk* downwards. Knowing that Tobis and Jaysica had been going to lay explosives on the bridge that the convoy would have to cross, Mace descended over the river and started to follow its path.

"There's the bridge. Up ahead." Nassar said and Mace nodded.

"Cass I can't land here but I'll hover beside the bridge. Can you open the access ramp and take a look outside? Let me now if there's any sign of either Tobis or Jaysica."

"Sure thing." Cass said, getting out of her seat and hurrying from the cockpit to the access ramp. When she opened this Cass saw the river bank at the bottom, with a gap of about a metre between it and the end of the ramp and she carefully made her way down the ramp, "Tobis! Jaysica!" she called out as she looked around and then she spotted Jaysica's backpack where it had been put down on the bridge support, "Dad," Cass said, taking out her comlink and activating it, "I can see Jaysica's bag under the bridge. I'm going to go and take a closer look."

"Be careful Cass." Mace told her.

"Hey, it's me." Cass responded before she jumped from the end of the ramp down to the riverbank and rolled as she landed.

Picking herself up and dusting her self off, Cass took another look around before she dashed to the bridge

and looked around. Then as she looked up she winced.

"Oh no. I've got a very feeling about this." she said to herself and she flicked the control to her comlink, "Dad Tobis and Jaysica aren't here. Though it looks like Jaysica did leave her pants behind." she signalled.

"Did you just say pants?" Anzar's voice responded and it was only then that Cass realised she was broadcasting on a general Alliance channel rather than transmitting specifically to the *Silver Hawk*.

"Err yeah. It looks like they got torn off when Jaysica fell from the bridge. I'm guessing she ended up in the river and Tobis threw himself in to save her."

"Cass can you see whether the charges are in place?" Vorn's voice then asked and Cass looked up into the metalwork, searching for the telltale pale grey colour of the explosive charges she had seen Jaysica preparing earlier.

"Yes I can see them both." she said.

"Good. Then get back aboard the *Silver Hawk*. We'll find Tobis and Jaysica. Mace let us know if the convoy shows up." Vorn ordered.

Aboard the *Scarlett Knife* Vorn walked out of the cockpit and made his way into the lounge where he found Kara, Tharun and Lannaye all sat playing cards.

"There's been a hitch." he said and the other three rebels present all looked at him.

"What's the klutz done now?" Kara asked.

"Now we don't know the exact circumstances of what happened." Vorn said.

"Yep, it was the little lady." Tharun commented.

"This happens a lot." Kara told Lannaye, "The klutz doesn't need explosives to destroy a bridge. Trust me."

"Colonel Larcus." Anzar's voice announced over the intercom, "I've found them. I think they're both okay but they are definitely in need of our help. I'll take us down so that they'll be on our port side."

"I guess we use the port ramp then." Tharun said.

The three members of the *Silver Hawk's* crew stood at the top of the ramp as Lannaye opened it and Kara and Tharun both smiled when they saw what was below the ship.

"What's so-" Lannaye began when she saw their expressions and then looked outside for herself, "Oh. I see." she added when she then saw both Tobis and Jaysica sat huddled on a rock in the middle of the river, Tobis in just his underwear while Jaysica also had on a shirt that was thoroughly soaked and stuck to her skin.

"Hey down there!" Kara shouted, "Sorry to interrupt your skinny dipping but we do have a job to do."

"We didn't plan on this." Jaysica replied.

"It was an accident." Kara and Tharun both said in unison before Jaysica could utter the words and Jaysica frowned.

"Oh just help them aboard," Vorn said, "and find something for them to wear before they both freeze to death."

## 12.

By the time the convoy came into view Tobis and Jaysica had been transferred back aboard the *Silver Hawk* and Jaysica sat in the cockpit along with Mace, Cass and Nassar.

"Here they come." Mace said, "Looks like they've got the tanks at front and rear."

"Just like we expected." Nassar added.

"Priming charges." Jaysica said from behind them, "Make sure we keep a direct line of sight to the bridge. It'll make this easier."

"Okay. Hopefully that won't make those Imperials down there suspicious." Mace said and then the communication system activated as Vorn signalled from the *Scarlet Knife*.

"Mace its Vorn. We're starting our jamming now. The convoy won't be able to send for help. Are you ready to go?" he said.

"All set colonel." Mace replied, "Stand by for the bang."

"Convoy nearing bridge." Cass announced, "Thirty metres."

"Arming explosives." Jaysica said as she sent the arm command to the remote detonators she had fitted to the explosives under the bridge.

"Twenty metres to bridge." Cass said, "Ten metres. Okay that's it. The lead tank is on the bridge."

"Blow it." Mace ordered and Jaysica triggered the explosives she had planted.

The bridge shook from the double detonation and inside the leading vehicle of the convoy the crew rocked back and forth.

"What the-" the commander began before all of a sudden there was a loud rumbling and the entire vehicle tipped over as the bridge beneath it gave way, unable to support even its own weight let alone that of an armoured vehicle as well.

The driver of the transport following behind the tank at the front of the convoy saw what happened and cursed as he slammed on his vehicle's brakes before it could plunge over the steep embankment into the river below. However, the driver of the second transport was not as quick to react, hearing the explosion from up ahead but not seeing it like the first driver did and he failed to brake in time to avoid his vehicle crashing into the one in front.

"What the hell's happening?" the commander of the second transport exclaimed and he activated the vehicle's comlink to try and communicate with the commander of either of the vehicles that were supposed to be in front of his own. As soon as he activated the comlink though he winced and ripped the headset from his head as it produced a loud and continuous sharp tone, "We're being jammed. It's a trap!" he snapped.

"You did it." Cass said excitedly, "The lead tank is wrecked and the convoy's stopped."

"Great work Jaysica. Now get Penny to finish the job." Mace ordered and Jaysica nodded.

"Okay Penny, off you go girl." she transmitted.

This was the signal for the mouse droid that Jaysica owned to emerge from where it had been hidden beside the road and race along it, heading for the vehicle at the back of the convoy. With the spacing between the vehicles in the convoy impossible to predict a charge in a fixed location could not be used to destroy the one at the back and so it had been decided to use Penny as a delivery system instead. Too small to be noticed from inside any of the armoured vehicles the little droid had another explosive charge mounted on its back and when it found the tank bringing up the rear of the convoy it swerved to pass underneath the tracked vehicle. As soon as Penny passed beneath the tank the magnetic plate attached to the explosive charge latched onto the vehicle's underside, where its armour was weakest and Penny whistled as soon as this happened, using a built in comlink to let Jaysica know that the charge was in place.

"Good girl Penny." Jaysica responded, "Now get as far away as you can."

"Give her ten seconds. Then take out that tank." Mace said and Jaysica looked at the time readout, counting down the seconds before she triggered the explosive charge that her droid had just planted beneath the Imperial tank.

The explosion produced a sheet of flame that shot out from beneath the tank in front, behind and from between the wheels inside its tracks. At the same time the blast wave itself split the underside of the vehicle wide open and the sudden overpressure that it created inside it not only killed the crew instantly but also caused all of the hatches to explode outwards as the tank started to burn. With the wreckage of this vehicle now blocking the road behind the convoy, the bridge ahead destroyed and the ground either side being unsuitable for the six armoured transports the remaining vehicles of the convoy were now effectively trapped and when he saw this from the *Scarlet Knife*, Vorn smiled.

"We've got them pinned in place." he told the other rebels aboard both ships, "Initiate phase two of the plan."

At Vorn's command both the *Silver Hawk* and the *Scarlet Knife* raised their shields and descended towards

what was left of the Imperial prisoner transfer convoy. Seeing the craft heading towards them and quickly realising that their communications were being jammed the commanders of the transports ordered their gunners to engage, the vehicles' turrets turned to face the two rebel craft and opening fire.

"Shields are holding." Lannaye said from the pilot's seat of the *Scarlet Knife* and behind her Vorn nodded as he placed a hand on Kara's shoulder, Kara being sat beside Lannaye with the targeting system for the freighter's forward mounted laser cannon active in front of her.

"As soon as you identify the escort vehicles take them out. I'm going to join Tharun and Anzar." he told her.

"Great. May the Force be with you boss." Kara replied as Vorn was heading out of the cockpit.

Meanwhile aboard the *Silver Hawk* the situation was similar. Mace was acting as gunner in the ship's turret while Cass handled the flight controls. This left Tobis, Jaysica, Nassar and Ajay to form a strike team standing by at the top of the access ramp while Cass flew towards the convoy.

"Almost there." Cass announced over the intercom while the sound of laser blasts hitting the ship's shields could be heard, "I'm putting us down on the road behind the convoy. You'll be able to use the ship for cover while you disembark."

"Understood." Nassar responded and Tobis lowered the ramp to reveal the ground below as the *Silver Hawk* flew over the trees.

Cass slowed the *Silver Hawk* down as she neared the road and then set it down facing towards the convoy with a jolt, her ability to pilot a starship still not up to the standards of Mace despite his best efforts to teach her.

"Steady there Cass." Mace said from the turret, "It would be nice to be able to take off again."

"Sorry dad." Cass replied, "Everyone's clear to disembark now though."

"Hold on." Mace said before anyone from the assembled strike team could exit the ship. Although all that Cass could see of the convoy from the cockpit was the burning tank at the rear Mace had a higher vantage point from the turret and he could see past this wreck to the transport immediately in front of it where a squad of COMPForce assault troopers were disembarking from it, "Wait for my word. Now!" Mace added as he lined the *Silver Hawk's* single laser cannon up on the rear of the transport and opened fire. The energy blasts flew over the heads of the armoured Imperial soldiers and into the rear of the vehicle where they struck its main power core. The resulting explosion blew the vehicle apart, killing everyone still inside instantly and sending the troops who had already got out flying through the air.

This gave the strike team the perfect cover to rush down the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp and run from the road into the woods beside it where they could take cover as the ship lifted off once more just as the *Scarlett Knife* was approaching from the direction of the ruined bridge.

"I need a clear shot at that cannon." Kara said as the first transport in the convoy fired at the freighter, its shots being deflected by the forward shield. Without knowing what the purpose of the transport was she could not risk simply destroying it just in case there were prisoners being held inside.

"Hold on." Lannaye replied as she turned the *Scarlet Knife* to face directly at the transport as she also brought the ship to a halt in mid air.

"Got it." Kara said when she saw the transport's turret appear dead centre of her targeting display and she fired a single blast from the *Scarlet Knife's* laser cannon that sheared the turret right off without destroying the transport.

"Moving in. Stand by to deploy." Lannaye told the *Scarlet Knife's* strike team as she moved the freight forwards far enough that it was hovering right above the damaged transport so that when Vorn opened the access ramp Tharun and Anzar were able to charge right down onto the roof of the vehicle, firing their rifles on automatic towards the second transport that was still jammed up against the first.

"The roof! There are rebels on the roof!" someone shouted from within the transport just as Vorn was leaping from the access ramp and he looked down through the hole created by the destruction of the turret to see several COMPForce troopers attempting to open the rear hatch that unknown to them was blocked by the transport that had crashed into the back of their vehicle.

"Tharun. Frag grenade." Vorn ordered and Tharun nodded as he plucked a fragmentation grenade from his webbing and then armed it.

"Fire in the hole!" he yelled as he tossed the explosive down into the transport.

The three rebels then jumped down from the roof of the transport before the grenade went off, sending a brief blast of flame up through the hole in the roof at the same time as the interior was filled with shrapnel and Vorn took out his comlink.

"Second escort destroyed. Just the prisoner transports left now but watch out for those cannons on the roofs. Stay in cover or close to them. They only have a limited depression." he broadcast as he, Tharun and Anzar moved towards the next transport along.

When this vehicle had crashed into the one in front none of the crew had been wearing their safety harnesses and all three had been knocked unconscious when they were thrown forwards and when he peered in through a viewport at the side of the forward compartment Anzar saw them slumped forwards over their controls.

"They're out." he said.

"Cover me. Vorn said, slinging his rifle over his shoulder and while Tharun and Anzar kept their weapons trained on the transport's forward access hatch he opened the yellow and black striped cover that was labelled 'RESCUE' in red. Behind this there was a lever that Vorn took hold of, "Here goes." he said before he pulled the lever and there was a sudden 'hiss' as the pressure in the system keeping the door shut was released, allowing Vorn to push it aside to reveal the interior of the transport.

Tharun was the first into the vehicle and he heard groaning sounds from through the open interior doorway leading to the rear compartment of the transport. Looking through this he saw both the prisoners carried by the vehicle and their guards sprawled around the compartment where they had ended up after the crash. One of the guards was just about conscious and when he saw Tharun appear he reached for his sidearm. Tharun was faster though and a single shot from his rifle at close range punched a charred hole right through his armoured chest plate and the blaster pistol fell from his dead hand.

While Vorn, Tharun and Anzar were dealing with the transports towards the front of the convoy Tobis, Jaysica, Nassar and Ajay were making their way through the trees beside its rear, keeping out of the line of sight of the turret of the first transport they had targeted.

"We'll have to make a dash for it." Nassar said, "The turret's not facing directly towards-" and then he stopped speaking when there was the sound of blaster fire from inside the vehicle.

"What was that?" Jaysica asked.

"Err, I've got a bad feeling about this." Tobis replied before the hatch at the rear of the vehicle burst open and four COMPForce troopers came bursting out of it, deploying in a semi-circle around the hatch as they searched for targets.

"Take them down." Nassar ordered and the four rebels opened fire together, cutting down the troopers before they were able to determine exactly where they were being attacked from. The rebels then ran from their hiding place the short distance to the open back of the transport and Nassar peered inside, ducking back as one of the vehicle's crew fired at him from the forward compartment. However, he was able to get a good enough look inside to see what the earlier shooting had been all about, "They killed the prisoners." he said.

"We need to tell the colonel." Jaysica said, taking out her comlink and activating it, "Colonel Larcus, the guards in the transport at the back just murdered their prisoners."

"Was Jenessa one of them?" Vorn responded and Jaysica looked at Nassar.

"No, I don't think so." the mon calamari replied.

"Did you hear that colonel?" Jaysica asked.

"Yes, I heard. As soon as you've dealt with the crew move onto the next vehicle. We need to secure them all before any more prisoners can be killed." Vorn told her and hearing this Tobis leant inside the transport and pointed his carbine towards the doorway leading to the forward compartment and fired a brief burst from it. Then as soon as he saw one of the crew begin to lean around the edge of the door he fired again.

"Let's move." Nassar said, waving Jaysica and Ajay towards the forward hatch where he prepared to trigger the emergency door release. However, before he could do this one of the crew opened the door from the inside, intending to use it to escape and instead finding himself face to face with the mon calamari. Too close to one another to even raise their blasters the pair lunged at one another, attempting to disarm their opponent while keeping hold of their own. The Imperial crewman knocked Nassar to the ground and landed on top of him but before he could take full advantage of this Ajay pressed the muzzle of her hold out blaster to the base of his neck and fired it, causing him to collapse on top of Nassar.

"It's clear." Jaysica said, looking inside the transport's forward compartment and seeing the other two crewmen dead inside. However, as she turned to move on to the next transport she tripped over Nassar's leg and fell, striking her head against the side of the armoured vehicle beside her.

"Jaysica." Tobis exclaimed when he saw her fall to the ground and he ran towards her.

"She's knocked herself out cold." Ajay said as she examined Jaysica.

"Is, err, is she going to be okay?" Tobis asked, concerned for her.

"I think so. I'll take a better look at her when we get her back aboard the ship." Ajay told him.

"In mean time let's get moving. We've still got another transport to deal with." Nassar added.

Between them Vorn, Tharun and Anzar had removed the binders from the four unconscious prisoners, checking to make sure that Jenessa was not among them and instead used them to restrain the COMPForce guards just in case they came to before the rebels could leave. Then they left the transport through the same forward hatch they had used to get inside and used the crashed vehicle for cover as much as they could as they moved back along the convoy with Tharun in the lead.

"Back!" he snapped when he reached the very back of the vehicle and he pressed himself against its hull as a blaster bolt flew past him, "Looks like this lot have already bailed out." he added. Then he fired a rapid burst around the transport in the hope of hitting the soldier who had just narrowly missed hitting him.

"We're going to need more cover." Vorn said.

"Smoke?" Anzar suggested, tapping the smoke grenade clipped to his webbing.

"I've got another." Tharun added and Vorn nodded.



"Anzar come with me. We'll circle round to the other side and you can use your smoke grenade. Then Tharun uses his and while he gives covering fire through it we'll make a break for the next transport." he said.

"Got it." Anzar replied and when Tharun fired another rapid burst around the transport Vorn and Anzar ran back the way they had come. With the front of the crashed transport still being jammed up against the rear of the one ahead of it the two rebels had to run around this one also to reach the far side, making sure to keep out of sight at they got to the opposite side of the vehicle Tharun was firing from behind.

"Okay use your grenade." Vorn whispered and Anzar nodded as he took the smoke grenade from his webbing and then rolled it along the ground. When it was part way between the two rebels and the next transport along it suddenly burst open and cloud of grey smoke began to form, obscuring the transport from the rebels. Using this as his signal, Tharun ejected the partially spent power pack from his rifle at the same time as he plucked his own smoke grenade from his webbing and the threw it towards the transport ahead of him. Then as this also began to spew out blinding smoke Tharun slammed another power cell into his rifle and then fired a sustained burst towards the transport.

"That's our cue. Go." Vorn said and he and Anzar ran through the smoke until they reached the side of the next transport along, moving alongside it cautiously until they got to the rear where they found the main hatch already open and a pair of COMPForce troopers crouched down taking cover from Tharun's continued covering fire. One of them suddenly looked around and saw the two rebels who had managed to circle around behind them but before he could call out a warning Vorn shot him dead and he fell against his comrade, knocking him over before Vorn shot him from behind as well.

"Stang!" a voice exclaimed from inside the transport and when Anzar spun around to look inside he saw the other two COMPForce guards standing there. Instinctively he fired his rifle at one, the shot sending the man toppling backwards before the other reached down and grabbed hold of one of the prisoners. Lifting the man in front of him as a shield the guard rested his blaster on the prisoner's shoulder before returning fire.

"Back!" Anzar snapped and both he and Vorn leapt back behind the transport.

"Surrender." Vorn called out, "Your transmissions have been jammed and no-one even knows you are here. We've got air support and you've got nothing."

"Kriff off rebels scum. This is what I think of you." the guard inside the transport yelled before he fired another burst out through the hatch.

"Okay I'll deal with this." Vorn said as he flicked his rifle to its stun setting and then he leant around the transport, pointing the weapon inside and fired several rapid shots towards the guard and his human shield. The first shot struck the prisoner and he instantly went limp as he was rendered unconscious. Unable to support the weight of his hostage one handed, the guard was pulled forwards as the man started to collapse. This exposed enough of him that the next stun blast struck him in the shoulder. However, thanks to the energy dissipating armour he was wearing he avoided being incapacitated. Instead he found his arm suddenly go numb and he dropped his blaster to the floor. In order to try and pick it up he had to let go of the man he was trying to hide behind, leaving him exposed as Anzar stepped out from behind Vorn and fired a lethal blast into him.

"We surrender!" a voice called out from the compartment at the front of the transport, "Don't shoot!"

"Okay toss out your weapons." Vorn ordered and then one after another three blaster pistols were thrown into the transport's rear compartment.

"Tharun the crew are giving up. Hold your fire and move in. I want you and Anzar to secure them while I check the prisoners" Vorn signalled using his comlink.

"Copy that colonel. I'm on my way." Tharun responded.

While Anzar and Tharun began to secure the three surrendered crewmen Vorn removed the hoods from the prisoners in the transport one after another so that he could see their faces. There was only one woman among them and she was furthest away from the main hatch so Vorn got to her last. Removing the hood from her head he saw immediately that it was Jenessa but he was not prepared for what he saw had been done to her.

"Gods no, Jenessa." he said out loud.

"What's wrong colonel?" Tharun asked, leaning through the doorway to the forward compartment and he too saw her mutilated face, "Holy kriff." he said.

"Ajay are you there?" Vorn said into his comlink as Jenessa just whimpered.

"Yes colonel." Ajay responded.

"What's your status?" Vorn asked.

"We've secured our second transport. Captain Drame is not here though." Ajay told him.

"No she's here. I need you here now to take a look at her." Vorn said.

"On my way colonel." Ajay replied and as Vorn put his comlink away again he looked at Jenessa.

"Jenessa listen to me, it's Vorn. Do you recognise my voice?" he said and she nodded.

"Good. I'm going to get you help. You're safe now." he added but Jenessa just screamed and then began to weep.

"Colonel Ergard, Lieutenant Pay, do you read me?" Mace's voice asked and Harris smiled as he lifted his comlink to his mouth.

"Loud and clear captain." he said.

"Ask him if we can get of this freezing mountain yet." Geran commented.

"Lieutenant Pay is hoping that we can relocate to a warmer position." Harris said into his comlink.

"Tell him yes." Vorn said, "We hit the convoy exactly as planned. Some of the prisoners were killed but we managed to free the rest, including Jenessa Drame. We're in the process of loading them and the prisoners we took onto the ships now."

"So the mission was a success then. That excellent news." Harris said, smiling at Geran.

"Sort of." Vorn said and Harris' expression changed to a frown.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"It's complicated. I need you and Geran to meet us back at the hangar. We'll discuss it then. In the mean time I need to speak with Jenessa about her time in custody." Vorn told him.

### 13.

When both the freed prisoners and captured Imperial troops were loaded onto the two rebel freighters Vorn brought Jenessa aboard the *Scarlet Knife* along with Ajay so that both she and Kara could examine Jenessa, making use of the medical equipment aboard Anzar's ship that had once belonged to their old teammate Devid.

"Okay we've arranged for Odras Balve to take in the other prisoners and the Imperial troops we captured." Vorn said as he entered the cabin where the two medics were examining Jenessa, "How is this going?" he added, looking at Jenessa. Kara and Ajay had bandaged her hands to protect her finger tips from infection and now had moved on to examining her empty eye sockets and mouth.

"There's a lot of damage colonel." Ajay replied, "I wish I'd been able to get my droid Boxer off the *Harpoon*. He could have done more than we can but he'd never have survived being submerged in the ocean."

"It's bad boss." Kara added, "It's hard to tell but I think there's damage to the optic nerve. That's going to make fitting prosthetics more difficult. Regenerating a replacement for her tongue ought to be more straight forwards though. There's still some of hers left in there for it to be grafted onto. It'll take time for her to recover regardless though."

"Okay thanks." Vorn said as he walked up to Jenessa and then crouched in front of her, taking hold of her hands, "Jenessa I'm sorry but I need to ask you some questions." he said.

"Boss this probably isn't the best time." Kara said.

"We need to know how much the Empire knows." Vorn said, "Jenessa listen to me. Does the Empire know about our connection with Lord Desh?" and Jenessa shook her head rapidly, "Okay, what about Odras Balve?" and again she shook her head.

"Well that's something at least." Vorn said to Kara and Ajay, "I'll ask Couran about having Jenessa stay at his home until we can move her to a proper medical facility. She'll be more comfortable there than aboard our ships and I'd rather not trust her care to any underworld surgeon that Odras would provide."

"Sounds like a good idea boss, but where do you plan on going from here?" Kara asked, "You're in command of this operation now after all."

"I know that," Vorn said, "and frankly I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"Worried about facing junior?" Kara said and she looked at Jenessa, "He did a right number on her didn't he? Unless it was that little witch he-" and at that point Jenessa shook her head again, letting out a grunt as she tried to speak.

"Jenessa what is it?" Vorn said, crouching in front of Jenessa and taking her hands in his, "Are you trying to say that Garm didn't do this?" and she nodded.

"So it wasn't him. What about Vay? Was it her?" Kara added and Jenessa shook her head, "Someone else ripped her apart then."

"I should get back to the cockpit and bring Anzar up to speed. We need to tell Couran and Odras that they are both in the clear for now at least." Vorn said and he got up and left the room.

"Can you manage without me for a while Ajay?" Kara asked and before the mon calamari doctor could respond she too hurried out of the cabin, "Boss are you okay?" she called out after Vorn and he turned around to face her.

"You know until you mentioned it it never even occurred to me that Garm could have been responsible for torturing Jenessa like that?" Vorn replied, "Even that Vay Udra. I just assumed that Garm would have stopped her first."

"Well it looks like you were right boss." Kara said, "Junior and the witch had nothing to do with it."

"Maybe not but the fact is that my son is the deputy director of the Imperial Security Bureau in this sector and that means he's our enemy. For this war to end I have to stop him. Maybe I'll have to have my own son killed. How can I-" Vorn said but he was stopped from continuing when Kara leapt forwards and kissed him passionately.

"Boss we'll deal with that when the time comes." she said when she pulled back again, "Know that whatever happens I'll be there to support you like you've always been there for me. You'll always have me and young Vorn. In fact-"

"In fact what?" Vorn asked when Kara suddenly trailed off mid sentence.

"Boss I want another baby." Kara said.

"Oh." Vorn said, surprised.

"Oh? Is that all you have to say?"

"You just caught me by surprise that's all." Vorn said, "You're not already-"

"No I'm not already pregnant. I've made sure my implant is working regularly. But I want to get it taken out and I want to have another baby. Our baby. One that we decided to have together beforehand rather than one I was too scared to tell you I was going to have because he wasn't planned." Kara answered, "So what

do you say boss?"

"I think this time I'd like to there when he or she is born and it should be in a proper hospital rather than a ruined basement." Vorn replied.

"Thanks boss." Kara said and she leant forwards to kiss him again.

"You asked to see me director?" Garm said as he entered the ISB operations room upon his return to the capitol building.

"Garm, yes, we have a problem." Director Helios replied, turning from the large holographic map he was studying, "Take a look at this." and he beckoned Garm towards him. Moving closer Garm saw that the map showed a rural area of Estran that he was not familiar with. This had been overlaid on top of satellite imagery that showed an actual image of the area in question. Worryingly it showed that the bridge shown on the map was no longer intact and also that there were numerous armoured vehicles in the road approaching it, all them apparently burned out.

"A rebel attack? Where did this happen?" Garm asked.

"Less than a hundred kilometres from here but it's not the location that matters, its what that convoy held." the director said.

"What did it hold director?"

"Prisoners. Prisoners from our own detention section that included Professor Drame."

"Why was she being moved? I thought the idea was to use her to try and coerce other prisoners into providing information." Garm said, frowning.

"It was. In fact a good question would be why any of the prisoners were being moved at all."

"You didn't issue the authorisation?" Garm said.

"Of course I did, but it didn't include Professor Drame. There was supposed to have been a fraudster who was caught trying embezzle Imperial funds sent in her place but someone swapped the order. Presumably the same person who was able to falsify the communications between tracking station trill herf xesh one-one-three-eight and here. We were receiving messages supposedly from them that indicated they had located a major rebel encampment while they were receiving that were supposedly coming from us warning them of an imminent attack and ordering them to stand to. This convoy wasn't even following the correct route when it was ambushed. It seems that the rebels were also able to alter that. Changing it back again so we didn't know where to look when it was finally reported overdue. It wasn't until a motorist happened upon all this and reported it to the police that we were able to get someone there."

"Someone sliced the communications system." Garm said.

"Exactly. I've got our own cyber security people going over our network to make sure that the rebels didn't manage to get any more surprises into it. Oh and I've also asked General Dern to make sure that the communication staff at the tracking station are punished for their dereliction of duty. If they'd made sure that their security software was kept up to date this might not have happened." Director Helios said, nodding in agreement.

"It was my father, wasn't it?" Garm said.

"We don't know. We think that some of the guards survived but they weren't at the scene when this was discovered. A total of eight are missing. All low ranking army and COMPForce." Director Helios said.

"That's significant." Garm said, "If the rebels are taking prisoners of that level then they must be confident that they can hold them securely until they can either be moved off world or-

"Or until the rebellion carries out its invasion." Director Helios interrupted, "This could signify that that invasion is imminent. I'm going to meet with Rodge Larrs to discuss this with him."

"Rodge Larrs? But he's just PR. I don't see any propaganda value in this." Garm said, confused.

"If the rebels are about to invade then we need to prepare the population and that is where he comes in."

"Of course director. Do you want me in the meeting as well? My mission to capture the rebel command unit failed but they were wiped out." Garm said.

"I want you to go back over what we found during Professor Drame's interrogation. Losing her without capturing any more rebels puts us at a dead end for now but if you can find something that we've missed up to now then maybe you can get us some new leads. Debrief those two women you've got working for you now as well. They were both at the rally Professor Drame addressed so maybe they heard something that will connect with what we learned from the professor herself. This is important Garm, we can't afford to sit around waiting for the rebels to make their next move and you're my best agent."

"Of course director. I'll get right on it." Garm replied.

"The rebels managed to break into our system and they attacked an armoured convoy. Releasing a high value prisoner that we'd used as an example of our success to the media." Director Helios said to Rodge Larrs in his office. In addition to the two men who were present in person a hologram of Admiral Hall sat in an otherwise vacant chair.

"The rebels were able to slice into our computer network?" Rodge Larrs asked, reading what details of the

incident were known.

"I'm afraid so." Director Helios said and Rodge smiled.

"Something amusing you?" Admiral Hall said when he saw this via the transmission feed linking to the orbiting fleet headquarters.

"If the rebels can slice our system then they can disrupt communications from here to any of our outlying facilities on the planet. Even the line from the capitol to fleet headquarters might not be fully secure. This is all the excuse we need to get the moff to raise the planetary shield. The longer it is left down the longer the rebels will have to disable " Rodge told him.

"Those were my thoughts exactly," Director Helios said, "and if he refuses then we'll have all the evidence we need to have him declared incompetent and justify his removal from office."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Admiral Hall said, "There are those who would defend him."

"You mean my deputy?" Director Helios said.

"I was more concerned about the woman. The Force user." Admiral Hall said.

"That's why I made sure to give Deputy Director Larcus an assignment that will keep him and Agent Udra out of the way long enough for us to take our demands to the moff." Director Helios told him, "We needn't worry about either of them getting in our way providing we act quickly."

"I'll summon a committee immediately." Rodge Larrs said, "We can take our demands to the moff within the hour."

"This is pointless." Jaynie said, tossing her datapad onto Garm's desk and then grabbing hold of her mug to finish what was left of the caf it contained, "We've been over all this already and Professor Drame didn't say anything at that meeting that told us who or where the other rebels were on Estran."

"I hate to admit it but she's right Garm." Vay agreed, "This is a waste of our time. Perhaps if we could figure out what ship the professor used to get here we might be able to trace it. There's bound to be some evidence aboard that would reveal more of their plan, or at least some intelligence about the rebel fleet."

"I know." Garm replied, "Something about this doesn't add up but the director was quite clear about how he wanted me to proceed. I'm not exactly in his good books right now after the way I objected to having Jenessa Drame handed over to the interrogation section."

"I thought we were supposed to be better than that." Jaynie commented, "Rebel terrorists torture people. Not us."

"How sweet of you think that." Vay commented and then she turned to Garm, "You're right that there's something going on. I've got a very bad feeling about all this. Like there's some sort of conspiracy afoot. Like Director Helios wants us out of the way for the time being."

"He said he was going to meet with Rodge Larrs." Garm said, using his computer terminal to access the capitol building's security system, "So let's see who Larrs has met with. Ah yes, here we go. The director met with him right when he said he would but they weren't alone."

"Who else was in the meeting?" Vay asked.

"Admiral Hall via live holographic feed from fleet headquarters. This is odd." Garm answered.

"What's odd? That they'd meet with an admiral?" Jaynie said.

"No. Admiral Hall is a COMPNOR member as well. He often meets with Rodge Larrs and the director." Garm told her, "What's odd is that according the communication logs from Rodge Larrs' office as soon as the feed to fleet headquarters was broken he set up a conference call and contacted six other high ranking members of COMPNOR on Estran. That lasted less than two minutes and now I can see that all six have been issued with visitor's passes for the capitol."

"He's assembling a committee." Vay said, "There's only one reason to do that."

"They're going after Moff Horatian." Garm said.

"Going after? You mean they're going to remove him from office? Can they do that?" Jaynie asked.

"They can if COMPNOR passes a vote of no confidence in his leadership." Garm said as he got to his feet, "We need to warn him. If we can get to him before the committee assembles then maybe he can take action to stop them."

Rushing from Garm's office the three agents made their way as quickly as they could to the moff's office on the top floor of the building.

"We need to see the moff." Vay told the receptionist, waving her hand as she used the Force to compel the woman to agree to the instruction, "We'll go right in."

"You need to see the moff. You can go right in." the receptionist replied, opening the ornate office doors from the controls on her desk and the trio of ISB agents rushed through into Moff Horatian's office.

Only to discover that the meeting was already taking place.

"Garm, finished your task already?" Director Helios asked as Garm looked around at the committee of high ranking COMPNOR members, most of whom were in the office in person except for Admiral Hall and one other man who were both present only as holograms.

"We came to update the moff on the security situation." Vay responded.

"Something that this committee was already doing." Rodge Larrs said, "Your input is not needed here Agent Udra."

"They can stay." Moff Horatian said from behind his desk, "They are all trusted COMPNOR members anyway, aren't they?"

"Of course your excellency. Now about the report-" Rodge said.

"Yes, the report. Rebels running amok and preparing for the invasion."

"The planetary shield must be raised." one of the committee members said.

"Without a shield gate in place?" Moff Horatian said, "The effect on trade would be disastrous."

"The rebels are strangling our trade with other worlds as it is. We must secure Estran." Admiral Hall said,

"Raise the shield and I can spare more ships to get the shipping lanes open again so that we can bring in the components we need to build a shield gate quickly."

"The committee feels strongly about this your excellency." the other COMPNOR official present only as a hologram said.

"Yes I'm sure it does." Moff Horatian said, looking around, "Strongly enough to gather together and present the demand to me in person. I assume that if I decline then you will hold another meeting to discuss whether or not you still have confidence in my leadership?"

"We would rather not have to do that your excellency but if that is what is required then we will do what we must." Rodge said.

"And how exactly would you go about replacing me?" the moff asked, "The usual procedure after a vote of no confidence would be to inform Coruscant so that the Emperor could appoint a replacement."

"The committee itself is prepared to chose a temporary replacement until a more permanent solution can be found." Rodge said.

"You no doubt." Vay muttered.

"The point is irrelevant." Moff Horatian announced, "I have reviewed the information presented to me and I am satisfied that the security situation requires that the planetary shield be raised. Director Helios, Deputy Director Larcus, I expect you to make use of the time this buys us in delaying a rebel invasion to hunt down and eliminate every rebel cell operating here on Estran by any means necessary. Am I clear?"

"Of course your excellency." Director Helios said.

"Yes Moff Horatian." Garm added.

"Good. In that case you are dismissed. Though I would just like brief word with Deputy Director Larcus and his subordinates." Moff Horatian said and then he waited while the COMPNOR committee exited his office, those present only in holographic form fading away to nothing in moments. When the committee was gone the doors to the moff's office closed behind them automatically, "Take a seat." Moff Horatian said before glancing at Jaynie and adding, "I don't believe we've met before have we young lady?"

"No your excellency." Jaynie answered.

"Junior Agent Horbid is the informant that led us to Professor Drame." Garm said, "Unfortunately her cover was blown during the raid so she can't be returned to her previous position and I've brought her on as full time agent instead."

"Excellent. We need all the help we can get right now." Moff Horatian said, smiling at Jaynie.

"Gregor are you insane?" Vay snapped.

"Remember who you are talking to Junior Agent Udra." Moff Horatian said.

"I'm talking to the guy who just ordered his own planet blockaded because of a few rebels." Vay responded.

"No. I ordered the shield raised because to do otherwise would have triggered a vote of no confidence in me that I knew I couldn't win. Rodge Larrs, Director Helios and Admiral Hall have seen to that."

"So you did it just to stay in office?" Vay asked.

"Now Vay I would have thought you'd know me better than that by now. After how close we've been."

"I never slept with you Gregor. Our affair was a ruse to throw people off the scent of who I really am and why I was sent here." Vay replied.

"I agreed to their demands to buy time." Moff Horatian said, "I'm sure that the reason you came bursting in here was to warn me what they were planning but you really needn't have bothered. I've been expecting something like this since Professor Drame was first arrested. They want to adopt a fortress mentality that will do nothing but tell the population that the rebellion is a genuine threat as well as causing hardship for millions. That will increase the level of dissent."

"You want more dissent?" Jaynie asked, confused.

"No, but I can make use of it. When the local government complains about the economic effects of the shield being raised constantly I should be able to use that to convince members of the COMPNOR Sector Committee that it needs to be lowered again without being removed from office and causing chaos when we can least afford it. I'm sure that Rodge Larrs could take my place if he had to but he doesn't have to and having him step in now will just cause yet more disruption."

"I hope you're right." Garm said, "Because if you aren't then this could easily blow up in al our faces."

## 14.

Previously the *Just Cause* had been an Imperial customs frigate before its crew had mutinied and become pirates, preying on the ships they had previously inspected and defended. Under her current captain, Lorn Kruger, the ship had been issued a letter of marque and reprisal by the Alliance to Restore the Republic and authorised to strike at Imperial targets. Now though, with what commercial traffic remained in the sector becoming more security conscious and travelling in convoys as well as the actual rebel fleet being used to interdict shipping there were far fewer targets available than one small ship, even a well armed one like the *Just Cause* could take on alone with a reasonable chance of success.

On the other hand, being an Imperial vessel meant that the frigate could go places that more obvious rebel craft could not and Captain Kruger had agreed to take his ship to the Estran system, dropping out of hyperspace on the outskirts of the system unnoticed and carefully making its way deeper into the system to monitor Imperial activity quietly.

"Captain we may have a problem here." one of Lorn's crew suddenly called out.

"Have we been spotted?" Lorn replied, "I knew I shouldn't have agreed to this mission, no matter how much we're being paid."

"No captain, there's no activity from any Imperial vessels to suggest that they know who we really are. It's the planet." the crewman said.

"Estran? What about it?" Lorn said.

"The planetary shield just activated and traffic control is ordering all ships to divert to alternate ports."

"Stang, why would they do that?" Lorn said before he activated the intercom, "Carli I need you on the bridge." he said simply before shutting off the intercom again. Then a few seconds later the door to the bridge opened to reveal the Alliance's liaison officer, Lieutenant Carli Sentis whose job it was to not only relay information between the Alliance and the privateer crew but also to make sure that the privateers acted only within their approved rules of engagement.

"What's wrong?" Carli asked.

"Estran's planetary shield just went up, that's what." Lorn told her, "Your invasion is going to have a tough time getting down there now."

"Get us back to Tarlen. We have to warn the Alliance not to launch their troop ships." Carli replied and Lorn turned to his navigator.

"You heard her. Get us out of here." he ordered.

"Do you want us to make the jump from here or make for the edge of the system first captain?" the helmsman responded.

"It's more important that we warn the Alliance than maintain our cover here." Carli said and Lorn nodded.

"Jump from here. Make it fast." he said.

"Plotting jump for Tarlen system. ETA twenty minutes." the navigator announced as he used the ship's navigational computer to obtain the jump co-ordinates for the rebellion's headquarters in the sector. With the co-ordinates programmed in, the helmsman turned the *Just Cause* away from Estran and before any of the Imperial patrol ships could query the frigate's abrupt change in course he activated the hyperdrive, rapidly sending the ship out of the system.

Tobis and Jaysica sat together on a bench located in the rear grounds of Vorn's home looking up at the night sky. On an advance world like Estran this meant seeing not only the stars but also the numerous points of light created by satellites and the multitude of spacecraft in near orbit. However, on this night the two rebels also saw something else as a wave of energy appeared to cross the sky.

"Tobis was that what I think it was?" Jaysica exclaimed.

"I, err, it looked like the planetary shield going up." Tobis replied.

"But that means no-one can get in or out." Jaysica said, "What about the invasion?"

"Ah, I think we should go and tell the colonel." Tobis said and taking Jaysica's hand he got up off the bench and the pair of them hurried inside the house.

Entering the kitchen they found Tharun and Cass in the process of preparing a meal from the food supplies they had brought with them.

"Something wrong lad?" Tharun said, looking around at them.

"Err, it's the shield." Tobis replied.

"What shield? Does the house have a shield?" Cass responded.

"Sure it does. What sort of millionaire politician wouldn't have a deflector shield to protect his home?" Tharun told her, "Mind you if we used it then all the neighbours would know we were here."

"No, not the house shield, Estran's planetary shield." Jaysica said excitedly, "It's been raised."

"Is the rebel fleet attacking already?" Cass said.

"If they are then the plan's changed. I've got a very bad feeling about this." Tharun said.

"We were going to tell the colonel." Jaysica added.

"Good idea. I'll come with you." Tharun said."

"What about dinner?" Cass asked.

"Make enough for everyone kid." Tharun answered as he rushed from the room with Tobis and Jaysica, heading for the stairs.

"Colonel!" Jaysica shouted as they ran up the stairs but in her haste she tripped over one of the steps, hitting both Tharun and Tobis as she fell forwards and all three rebels collapsed and tumbled back down the stairs.

"What the hell's going on out here?" Mace asked as he emerged from the lounge to find the trio in a heap at the bottom of the stairs before Vorn and Nassar appeared on the landing and looked down.

"I think one of the steps is loose. It tripped me." Jaysica said.

"Loose step. Right little lady." Tharun said, rubbing his head as he sat up.

"Do you mind explaining what all the fuss is about?" Vorn said as he calmly came down the stairs, "Kara and Ajay are trying to make Jenessa more comfortable and it doesn't help when it sounds like a legion of stormtroopers is storming the house.

"Oh, err, the planetary shield has been activated." Tobis replied and Vorn frowned.

"That's a problem." he said.

"That's a kriffing big problem." Mace added before his comlink chimed and he took it from his belt, "Mace." he said.

"Mace it's Colonel Ergard." Harris' voice responded, "We're on our way back but the planetary shield just went up."

"Find out how quickly they can get back here." Vorn said, "We're going to need Geran's help in getting hold of Dayle and Grayce."

"So we've been told." Mace said, "We're back at the house. How soon until you can get here? There's a lot more that you need to catch up on."

"We're ten minutes from the hangar. We'll be with you in half an hour." Harris said.

As soon as the *Just Cause* dropped out of hyperspace a flight of X-wing fighters performed a close range flyby, scanning the ship as they checked its transponder against their database of Alliance vessels. More than one Imperial ship had attempted to get close to the assembled rebel fleet and the wreckage of those ships now drifted close to where the *Just Cause* had arrived in the system.

"*Just Cause* you are cleared to approach." the squadron leader announced.

"We need to find General Kain and Admiral Aphanar." Carli said.

"Open a channel to the *Wave Rider*." Lorn ordered. The he looked at Carli, "Perhaps you should be the one to tell the admiral." he suggested and when the comscan officer from Admiral Aphanar's flagship identified himself she responded.

"This is Lieutenant Carli Sentis, Alliance liaison officer aboard the *Just Cause*. I need to speak with Rear Admiral Aphanar immediately." she said.

"The admiral is not currently aboard." the comscan officer replied.

"Stang. Then where is she?"

"The admiral is attending a meeting aboard the *Golden Empress*." the other officer told Carli and she nodded.

"Okay we'll head over there and see her in person. *Just Cause* out." she said before closing the channel.

"Helm, lay in a course for the *Golden Empress*." Lorn ordered and again the helmsman turned the frigate towards one of the main rebel vessels in orbit around Tarlen. The fleet that the Alliance had managed to gather consisted of a wide variety of ships from relics of the Clone Wars to a number of vessels that were considered state of the art. A significant number of the ships had once been vessels of the Imperial navy and to assist Alliance crews in distinguishing these from their Imperial counterparts they had the symbol of the Alliance to Restore the Republic known as the star bird, painted prominently on their hulls so that it was easily visible from any angle.

At three thousand metres across, the *Golden Empress* was one of the biggest starships available to the rebel fleet in the sector, dwarfing even the Imperial-class star destroyer *Night Wraith* that the Alliance had captured several years earlier. A heavily modified *lucrehulk*-class transport that had once belonged to the Trade Federation, now the ship boasted a vast array of refining and manufacturing machinery inside its vast internal spaces and although the ship was capable of defending itself it was not considered a battleship like so many others of its class, including the other *lucrehulk* class ship present. Instead the vessel was used as a support ship for the Alliance military, turning raw materials into vital equipment and spare parts to keep it all running. Enough room had been left in the hangars to allow smaller transport ships to land though and the *Just Cause* was able to fly straight into one of them before setting down on the deck.

"Where is the admiral?" Carli asked as she and Lorn ran down the frigate's ramp and met one of the deck crew of the *Golden Empress* at the bottom.

"There's a big meeting on in the briefing room. Central core, level ten." the crewman replied and Lorn and



Carli ran off without a further word.

The briefing room aboard the *Golden Empress* used a pair of half ring shaped table with a holographic display in the central space so that everyone could see it clearly. Only a handful of the Alliance's top staff in the sector had been called to this meeting and Lyssa Larcus, daughter of Vorn Larcus III, wife of Tharun Verser and captain of the *Golden Empress* was the lowest ranked of those present. In addition to both Rear Admiral Aphanar and General Kain from the Alliance military the civilian side of the Alliance to Restore the Republic had representatives present as well in the form of Shyla Nerin from Alliance Support Services whose role it was to make sure that all branches of the Alliance were as well supplied as possible and also the kaminoan Doctor Lona Na who acted as the Alliance's senior medical officer in the sector. This left most of the seats around the tables empty when Lorn and Carli rushed in.

"I take it you have a good explanation for bursting in so rudely." Lyssa commented, glaring at the new arrivals.

"Lieutenant Sentis, isn't the *Just Cause* supposed to be monitoring events in the Estran system? I know the vessel is a privateer but it was agreed that the ship would be operating under control of the fleet in this instance." Admiral Aphanar said. Like many senior mon calamari she had never been entirely comfortable about the Alliance's policy of using privateers to raid Imperial shipping, especially since the ships usually operated outside the regular Alliance fleet command structure.

"I'm sorry admiral but we've got important news." Carli said.

"Then you may as well spit it out." Lyssa said, "You've already interrupted us after all."

"Not a moment too soon either I'd say." Lorn commented, looking at the large central display that showed a rotating image of Estran.

"The Empire has activated Estran's planetary shield." Carli said.

"Were you detected?" Admiral Aphanar asked.

"No, the Empire had no idea we weren't one of their own patrol ships. If they suspected we were then they'd have sent a navy vessel to check us out." Lorn answered, "They may have noticed our rather rapid departure mind you."

"We couldn't risk sending a transmission. That would have given us away before we could escape." Carli added.

"How are we supposed to proceed with the invasion with the planetary shield active?" Lyssa said, looking at the others around the table.

"We can't." General Kain replied, "As long as the shield remains up we can't land a single soldier on the planet."

"That leaves only the units we already have on the surface to take care of the situation." Doctor Na said.

"Units that we can't contact from here while the shield is up. It will block our long range communications." General Kain pointed out.

"What about from within the Estran system itself?" Shyla suggested.

"Short range communications will be able to penetrate the shield. Though the bandwidth will be limited." Admiral Aphanar told her.

"But what will we tell them in any case?" Doctor Na said, "We cannot land troops or supply them with weapons while the shield remains up."

"Nor can we engage the Imperial fleet in a protracted battle. They will just call in reinforcements from other systems." Admiral Aphanar added.

"Lieutenant Sentis do you think that your ship can return to Estran without drawing any undue attention to itself?" General Kain asked and Carli and Lorn looked at one another.

"It's worth a try." Lorn said, "One customs frigate looks pretty much the same as another and a bit of tinkering can alter our transponder."

"Then we need you to establish contact with Colonel Sallir." General Kain said, "He needs to find a way of opening that shield in whole or in part long enough for us to get troops through. When he does you need to alert us and we can move forwards with the landing."

"The fleet must be brought to immediate stand by." Rear Admiral Aphanar said, "Any sabotage of the shield will alert the Empire to our attack and they will bring in reinforcements. We must be ready to attack Estran at the same time as Colonel Sallir's field teams make their move against the shield."

"That's going to leave us in a pretty vulnerable spot." Lorn said, "To get any signal through the shield we'll have to be in orbit around Estran and there are still hundreds of ships there."

"You'll be well compensated for the risk we're asking you to take." Shyla said.

"What good's a reward if you're not around to spend it?" Lorn responded. Then he glanced at Carli and sighed, "Okay I'll do it." he said, "Just tell me how to get through to this Colonel Sallir."

"Mister Larrs!" Neema Gorord called out, rushing up as close to his chauffeur driven speeder as she could as it tried to leave the capitol building only to find its way blocked by a throng of reporters being held back by a line of stormtroopers, "Do you have any comment on why the planetary shield has been raised? Are there

rebel warships in the system? Is the rebellion about to launch its invasion of Estran?" but Rodge did not even turn his head to look out of the speeder's windows, instead focusing on the datapad in his lap while the stormtroopers pushed the reporters back to make way for him to leave and as his vehicle sped off Neema turned to her cameraman, "There you have it, there is still no official statement about why the planetary shield was activated leaving hundreds of vessels stranded on both sides and making communication with other worlds in the sector impossible for anyone except the Imperial military. Already there are growing calls for the Estranian Parliament to summon Moff Horatian himself to account for why this has been done in spite of the effect it is likely to have on the planetary economy."

It was then that Lord Torr paused the news feed and turned to look at the hologram of Lady Sharva in the chair beside his.

"Well?" he asked.

"I don't know." Lady Sharva answered, "Gregor won't even take my calls right now. I've got a bad feeling about this Max."

Prior to becoming a member of the Estranian Parliament, Lady Sharva had served as the sector's representative in the Imperial Senate and before that as an assistant to Gregor Horatian when he had held that post. Since the pair had a good history of working together this meant that the moff had always been open to her attempts at communication outside of official channels. However, on this occasion this had not happened and this left the two nobles as much in the dark as everyone else on the planet.

"We can't let Parliament summon the moff. The image that would send just wouldn't be right. Either he appears to answer questions and looks weak or he refuses and it looks like the Empire doesn't care about Estran." Lord Torr said.

"Then we need to head off Parliament instead." Lady Sharva said, "What if one of us put down a motion calling for Parliament to send a delegation to the moff instead?"

"If we could pass that it would work but how do we convince Parliament to adopt it instead of making demands that Gregor is likely to just ignore?"

"What about Couran? Why isn't he joining us anyway?" Lady Sharva said.

"I don't know. I was told he was out for the night but he seems every bit as elusive as Moff Horatian right now." Lord Torr replied.

"If we could get him to appear at Parliament and endorse our motion then it's bound to pass. Especially if he agrees to join the pair of us in going to speak to the moff." Lady Sharva said, "I assume that you would want to be part of the delegation?"

"Of course. This block on trade is costing me a fortune. Do you think I'm really going to let some idiot who thinks he's actually representing the working masses handle this?" Lord Torr replied, "Okay, you keep on trying to get through to the moff. If we can tell Parliament why the shield is up and give them a reasonable timetable for it being lowered to permit shipping to move again then hopefully all of this fuss can end right away. If not then we'll need Couran's help so I'll keep trying to get hold of him. He can't have just vanished."

"Leave it with me. I'll try the moff's home line instead." Lady Sharva said and then her image faded away and vanished.

Lord Torr then reached for the control unit for his holographic communications signal, calling up Couran's communication details. The very idea that the sector's Imperial governor could be called to account even by the Parliament that Lord Torr was a member of filled him with fury. Years earlier Lord Vorn Larcus III had used his place in the assembly to criticise the Empire's actions and Lord Torr had been at the forefront of having him expelled, Lady Sharva being elected to take his place. Now though it appeared that the same seditious thoughts that Vorn Larcus held were spreading to others in Parliament and Lord Torr hoped that the respect that Lord Couran Desh was still held in even after all the years he had been retired as speaker would quell these before a major purge became necessary. However, Lord Torr was to be disappointed once again when he recognised the hologram that appeared in front of him as Couran's automated answering message.

"Hello I'm Lord Couran Desh and unfortunately I can't answer your call right now. Why don't you leave a message and maybe I'll be able to deal with it as soon as I'm able." the hologram said and Lord Torr frowned.

"Couran it's Maxamillion. We need to discuss these ludicrous ideas to summon Moff Horatian to address Parliament about the planetary shield. Lynn Sharva is trying to reach the moff to arrange a private face to face meeting and we need your support to get Parliament to agree to that instead. Call me back as soon as you get this message." Lord Torr said, adding this latest message to the ones he had already left for Couran. Then after ending the call he frowned and said to himself, "Stang Couran, where the hell are you?"

## 15.

Odras knew that Vorn had been very wealthy before defecting to the Alliance but he had never stopped to consider that he might still have access to assets he had supposedly been forced to abandon when he fled until he answered the invitation to his home. As was usual he took with him a number of henchmen, including his wookiee bodyguard though none of them were permitted inside when the door was answered by both Mace and Tharun as well as the iotran bounty hunter Tell Cash from Grayce Myrell's team and her ship's wookiee engineer Crombowda, all four of them holding powerful weapons that made it clear they would not be intimidated.

"Oh my gods." Odras Balve said when the two rebels then showed him into the lounge and he saw who was already there.

"Gods?" Couran responded with a grin, "Well I suppose we are rather impressive though I think of myself as more of a saint than a god."

"You mean to tell me that after all these years of us working together Mace you never bothered to tell me that you had a direct line to the most influential politician on the planet?" Odras said.

"Former politician if you don't mind. I retired when the Empire took over. Officially at any rate." Couran said, "I understand that you are the man who will be helping us get the Alliance troops to the surface without being noticed. Assuming that we can get the planetary shield down anyway."

"That's right. My business interests mean-" Odras began.

"By business interests he really means criminal organisation." Mace interrupted and Odras frowned at him just as there was the sound of another vehicle pulling up outside the house.

"It's Commander Kord's team." Cass said from the window and a wide grin appeared on his face.

"Colonel please may I be the one to greet them?" he asked.

"Why?" Jaysica said, wondering why he was so keen to carry out such a menial task.

"Err, I err, I think it has something to do with Inra." Tobis suggested.

"You bet it does." Mace replied.

"Go on then." Vorn said, smiling back at Mace as he dashed from the room.

"Hold on dad, I want to see this." Cass called out after him and also running from the lounge.

"Can I-" Trent Myrell, Grayce's pilot and husband began as he started to get out of his chair.

"Leave it Trent." Grayce interrupted and he said back down again.

Cass made it into the hallway just in time to see Mace reach the front door at the same moment that Dayle Kord's team stood outside it and rang the bell.

With Cass standing beside him, Mace opened the door and the pair of them smiled at the rebels standing on the doorstep.

"Welcome to the residence of Lord Vorn Larcus the third." Mace said, "Do you have an appointment?"

"Oh knock it off Mace." Inra snapped at him and she attempted to step through the doorway only for Mace to block her path.

"No-one gets in without wiping their feet first. Who knows what grubby floors you've been walking on in that ship of yours." he said.

"Grubby?" Inra hissed.

"Just do it Inra. We don't have time for this poodoo." Dayle said and Inra wiped her feet on the matt before Mace stepped back to allow her inside. Then he simply waved the others through without making them wipe their feet at all.

"I've got to hand it to you Captain Grayle," Sen Verid, Inra's engineer said as he paused to look around, "this is a fancy place. Don't you think so Coll?" and he glanced at the team's scout.

"Yep." Coll replied simply.

"Everyone's in the lounge." Cass said, "I'll show you the way."

"And I can show you where the servants' bathrooms are if you need to clean yourself up Inra." Mace added.

"So not funny." Inra said.

"Dayle, glad you could join us." Vorn said as the final team of rebels entered the lounge where the others waited, "May I introduce Lord Couran Desh who has been supplying me with information about the political situation here on Estran since I joined the Alliance and Odras Balve whose operation has also been of use to us from time to time."

"For a fee." Mace added.

"I'm not in this for your revolution." Odras replied.

"Mister Balve may not share many of the Alliance's moral values but he can be trusted to do what he says he will." Vorn said.

"Unless there are unforeseen circumstances of course. Circumstances like the planetary shield going up and cutting off shipping before I can bribe customs agents to look the other way." Odras said.

"Yes that has thrown all our plans out of the air lock hasn't it?" Dayle said.

"Coll had scouted out more than twenty sites where we could have landed troops without them being noticed. Didn't you Coll?" Marse Horkin, the former naval trooper from Dayle's team said.

"Yep." the scout replied without looking at him.

"That's what we're here to discuss." Vorn said, "I know bringing everyone together like this is a big risk in light of what happened to Jenessa and Colonel Sallir, but it's too important not to take a risk on. Thankfully Lieutenant Pay was able to provide me with the details of how to contact you all."

"Where is Jenessa?" Dayle asked.

"Upstairs. Ajay is with her." Nassar answered.

"Perhaps we should get on with why we're here." Odras said, "I still have a business to run and I don't have time to worry about a cripple."

"That's horrible." Jaysica said.

"That's business." Odras said.

"Geran." Vorn said, looking at the intelligence officer who then stood up to address the gathered rebels.

"Okay so far we know that the planetary shield has been raised, trapping us inside and preventing the fleet from deploying any troops. Beyond a covert surveillance vessel the Alliance fleet has been under orders to stay aware from the system for the time being so that we know that the shield can't have been raised as a result of fleet activity. Sadly that leaves us. The shield has been raised to trap us here and prevent reinforcement while the Empire roots us out."

"The local cells we spoke with have noticed a recent upsurge in counter-insurgency operations." Grayce commented, "Though only a handful of them have been uncovered so far."

"Those cells don't have the firepower we need to seize control of the planet though." Harris pointed out, "We need more troops and heavy weapons to do that."

"Raising the shield hasn't been popular." Couran pointed out and he held up his datapad, "Max has been calling me repeatedly about it. Parliament is almost ready to summon Gregor to explain himself."

"That in itself is significant." Dayle commented, "If the government of Estran turns against the Empire then-"

"Then you'll have a bloodbath on your hands." Odras interrupted, "Estran has no army and the police are no match for legions of stormtroopers backed up by AT-ATs. The Empire will crush any attempt by the government to force a change in policy."

A shrill whistle then attracted the rebels' attention as Harvey came rolling into the lounge accompanied by Jeeves.

"Colonel Larcus sir," Jeeves exclaimed, "I think everyone needs to see this."

"See what Jeeves?" Vorn asked.

"Harvey and I have been monitoring the *Silver Hawk's* communication system remotely and there is a signal coming in for Colonel Sallir from the *Just Cause*." Jeeves explained.

"Lorn Kruger's vessel." Mace commented and Vorn nodded.

"The *Just Cause*? Is that one of your fleet's ships? My boy you said that your fleet was avoiding the system." Couran said, looking at Vorn.

"The *Just Cause* is a privateer. An old customs frigate, perfect for a covert mission like monitoring Estran." Vorn explained, "Harvey, let's hear the message." he added and the astromech droid activated its built in projector. The signal being sent could only carry a limited amount of data if it was to get through the planetary shield and so Harvey projected a two dimensional video image onto the wall beside the large fixed screen instead of generating a hologram but this was enough for the rebels to see Carli on the bridge of the *Just Cause*.

"Colonel Larcus?" she said, "Where is Colonel Sallir?"

"Dead I'm afraid." Vorn replied, "The *Harpoon* was located by the Empire and attacked. Only Captain Nassar and Lieutenant Ajay made it out alive. I've taken control of what's left of our teams here on Estran. We were about to discuss how to bring down the shield."

"That's why I'm here." Carli said.

"The Alliance has a way to bring down the shield?" Sen asked.

"No but they'll be standing by when you do." Carli answered, "If you can disrupt the shield for just a short time then the fleet is ready to jump in and create enough of a distraction for some of our transports to get through. The timing has got to be precise though. The fleet can't hang around indefinitely or the Empire will just bring in more ships from other systems and overwhelm them."

"Geran can you recommend anything?" Vorn said and Geran sighed as he considered this.

"You mean like slice into the shield system? I doubt it. The security on that won't have been left to some bored NCO. Plus it'll be monitored in real time around the clock by droids that will spot instantly if anyone tries to tamper with it."

"What about blowing up one of the generators?" Odras suggested, "I thought you were supposed to be good at that sort of thing."

"There are dozens of shield generators around the planet." Grayce pointed out, "Take one out and another

will be refocused to cover the gap."

"Maybe, but that could just be the disruption we need." Vorn said, "All those shield generators don't work alone. They all report back to a central control point that monitors each one. That way if one generator is destroyed then another can be used to compensate for the loss within a minute or two. However, if we could disrupt the communications between the individual generators and the control centre then-"

"Then the Empire won't be able to control its own shield." Kara interrupted, "Genius plan boss."

"It's a stupid plan." Geran said, "Like all of Estran's fixed defences the shield is controlled from inside the capitol building and security there is too tight now for us to sneak in."

"What about your slicing? Can't you disable their security?" Jaysica asked.

"Oh, err, the Empire will know about that by now." Tobis told her.

"They'll have scrubbed their system clean as soon as they found out that I manipulated it so that we could rescue Captain Drame." Geran added.

"So what if we don't try and sneak inside? What if we just attack the building directly. Storm it and do as much damage to the shield control system as we can before getting the hell out of there?" Vorn said and there was silence from around the room.

"Boss there are twenty-three of us." Kara said eventually, "Twenty-two after you take into account how useless Jaysica is."

"Hey!" Jaysica exclaimed.

"There'll be at least two companies of troops inside that capitol building and it won't take long for more to be brought in as soon as the shooting starts." Harris said.

"But what if the Empire couldn't call on any reinforcements?" Vorn said, "Supposing the Empire thought that there was a general uprising in progress?"

"Then they'd declare martial law and all the troops they need to defend the capitol would be deployed in the streets." Dayle responded, smiling.

Tharun snorted.

"So we'll be left facing just a depleted security force." he said.

"Ten to one odds." Marse added, "Maybe we ought to let them bring a few more guys to make it a fair fight." and then Combrowda let out a roar of laughter.

"I'm not so sure I share your confidence." Brak Laeven, the final member of Dayle's team said, a former producer in the music industry, Brak now acted as a communications specialist who monitored and decrypted Imperial signals.

"Sounds like you need some extra muscle." Odras said, grinning and Vorn nodded.

"That's why I asked you here." he said, "We'll need our local cells and most of your beings to create the image of a mass uprising to draw out the Imperial garrison but you must have some who would be useful in an operation like this."

"Thugs with blasters." Kara added.

"Of course I do. One call and I can have a hundred of them here within two hours." Odras said, "If the terms meet my requirements of course."

"You mean if we can afford to pay." Mace said.

"I thought your rebellion objected to slavery." Odras replied, "My troops don't work for nothing."

"Would a hundred thousand credits do?" Couran suggested, "That's a thousand credits per mercenary for a single mission."

"Couran you shouldn't-" Vorn began but Odras interrupted him.

"Cash?" he asked.

"It'll take a few hours to organise." Couran replied.

"So will the plan of attack." Vorn said and then he turned his attention back to the communication link with the Just Cause, "Okay lieutenant you can tell Alliance Sector Command that we'll organise things on Estran so that we can take out one of the shield generators and disrupt the command and control system in conjunction with a fleet attack on the system. Shall we say the day after tomorrow at eleven hundred hours Estran City time?" and he looked around for any objections from any of the other gathered rebels.

"Two days should be enough." Dayle said.

"Then two days it is." Vorn said, "Lieutenant Sentis, I recommend you return here ahead of the fleet to confirm that everything is set down here. Then Admiral Aphanar can commence her attack."

"Understood Colonel Larcus. We'll speak to you again in two days. Good luck and may the Force be with you. Just Cause out." Carli responded before the channel went dead.

A pair of stormtroopers stood behind the commanding officer of the tracking station Geran had used to gain access to the Imperial communications network as Garm and Vay walked down the ramp of the shuttle that had brought them from the capital. Unlike Garm who wore a heavy overcoat over his ISB uniform Vay's temperature controlled bodyglove kept her comfortable without needing the extra layer of insulation over it. "Deputy director this is an honour." the officer said, "I can assure you that-"

"You may dispense with the pleasantries commander." Garm interrupted, "We are here to investigate your failure."

"Deputy director I-" the commander began before all of a sudden Vay raised a hand towards him and he reached for his throat as he started to choke. Behind him the two stormtroopers did not react, standing as still as they had been before.

"I'm not here for excuses commander." Garm said sternly, "The rebels were able to gain access to our network because your staff failed to carry out their duties properly and left us vulnerable. Thanks to your failure loyal soldiers are dead and an important terrorist prisoner has escaped."

"I didn't realise that the network wasn't secure." the commander gasped, dropping to his knees as he continued to clutch at his throat, "I can't watch my men every moment."

"Of course you can't commander. We understand, don't we Agent Udra?" Garm said.

"Of course we do deputy director." Vay replied and she tightened her telekinetic hold on the officer's throat, causing him to drop to all fours.

Vay no. Open the doors.

"I'm sorry." the commander croaked.

"Vay release him." Garm said and as Vay opened her hand the commander let out a gasp, finally able to breathe freely again, "Apology accepted commander. Now perhaps you can tell us what you've found out about how the rebels were able to take advantage of the incompetence of you and your men. You can start by telling us what you've been doing since you were told that the rebels had sliced into your system."

"I've had my men working around the clock." the officer replied as he staggered back to his feet.

"Fixing the stable door after the cracian thumper has bolted?" Vay commented.

"I had the area swept for evidence and we found where the rebels acted from." the officer continued, able to breathe and speak more easily now that the effect of Vay's Force based attack had ended.

"The landing site." Garm said, "I need to see it." and the commander nodded.

"I'll arrange an escort for you." he said.

The tracking station's commander assigned a squad of cold assault stormtroopers to provide Garm and Vay with an escort to the landing site his men had found as well as an armoured troop carrier to get them there in a reasonable amount of time. When they reached their destination these soldiers disembarked from the transport and spread out to form a perimeter, keeping watch for any signs that there were any rebel forces still in the area while overhead a flight of TIE strikers provided air cover.

The rebels took advantage of the terrain to be able to avoid the tracking station's sensors and landed too far out to be picked up by the omniprobe array."

"Too bad it wasn't good enough to pick up the rebels themselves." Vay said.

"If it was sensitive enough to pick up the rebels themselves then it would keep picking up the local wildlife."

Garm pointed out, nodding towards a cluster of furred creatures could be seen grazing on the limited amount of vegetation that penetrated the snow before he turned his attention to the marks left in the ground where Harris had landed his scout ship, "They definitely landed here." he said, crouching down beside the marks.

"From the size, shape and layout of the prints left behind I'd say that it looks like an Incom A-twenty-four scout ship." Vay said, standing behind Garm as she examined the marks for herself.

*Looking at indentations left in the snow? This is a waste of your time Vay. You should just leave well alone while there are still more pressing things to worry about. Open the doors Vay. You need to open the doors.*

"A rebel courier ship." Garm said, nodding in agreement without looking at Vay and so not noticing the irritated look on her face as Lara repeated the same cryptic message she now delivered every time she communicated. Then he pointed towards the tracking station where there were footprints in the snow, "The tracks lead off that way." he said.

"It looks like two people to me. Human or similar. One of them was used to walking in these conditions, the other wasn't." Vay commented.

"So they sent a slicer escorted by a scout or possibly special forces operative." Garm said as he took his comlink from his belt and held it to his mouth, "Jaynie are you there?" he asked, his signal being relayed from the tracking station back to the capitol building where Jaynie had remained.

"Yes sir." Jaynie's voice responded.

"Jaynie I need you to run a check with all of the planetary tracking stations and patrol ships. We're looking for an Incom A-twenty-four that arrived at some point before the attack on the convoy. Limit the search to the last month though. I doubt they'll have been here longer than that." Garm said.

"Unless it belongs to a local cell." Vay pointed out.

"Okay, checking." Jaynie said as in Garm's office she entered the details given to her by Garm into the computer terminal in front of her. Then after a few moments the computer showed the results of her enquiry, listing all incidents logged involving an Incom A-24 within the time frame Garm had specified, "Wow there aren't many results." she said, frowning as she looked at the list, "In fact I've got three entries within the space of an hour not long before the ambush and nothing before that. All three look like the same ship though."

"Go on." Garm said.

"Well first of all we've got a ship detected as it dropped out of hyperspace in relatively close proximity to the planet, then we've got the record of the communication between it and the venator-class star destroyer *Ferocious*. They listed it as the *Corellian Sunset*, a vessel operated by Incom here on a commercial visit. Then the last one comes from the main starport in Estran City that just records the ship veering off and leaving its control zone."

"Sounds like someone bluffed their way past the blockade and then changed course to avoid a physical inspection when they landed." Vay said when she heard this.

"Because a physical inspection would have revealed that the occupants didn't have the correct ID for representatives of Incom." Garm said, getting back to his feet, "Okay Jaynie we need to figure out exactly where that ship went. Run a check on the sensors that were active at the time that ship arrived. Since it didn't show up on any of them we know it must have made its way through the dead spots. See where it could have got doing that."

"I'll get right on it." Jaynie replied.

"Good. We're just about done here and I want to see the results when we get back." Garm told her and then he shut off his comlink, returning it to his belt, "Come on," he then said to Vay, "let's get back to that shuttle. it's far too cold out here for my liking."

"Really? I hadn't noticed." Vay replied, smiling as they began to head back towards the tracking station where their shuttle waited for them, "So do you think Jaynie will be able to find that scout ship for us by the time we get back to headquarters?" she added.

"Unlikely. I expect her to have at least the beginning of a search area for us to investigate but actually finding the ship is going to take work." Garm said as they walked back towards the transport.

Rear Admiral Aphanar was already briefing her fleet captains when Carli and Lorn entered the room.

"Ah, Captain Kruger and Lieutenant Sentis. were you able to contact Colonel Sallir?" she asked when she saw them.

"Colonel Sallir's dead admiral." Lorn replied and there was muttering from around the room at the news.

"What about the other field teams we have on the planet?" the admiral said.

"Colonel Larcus, Commander Kord and Captain Myrell are all fine. Colonel Larcus has taken control of the units on the planet and brought them together. They believe that they can organise what will look like a general uprising to the Empire, distracting them, long enough to allow our people to disrupt the planetary shield so that General Kain can get his transports through to the surface." Carli explained.

"And how are we to know when this will happen?" Admiral Aphanar said.

"Colonel Larcus has scheduled it for two days time." Carli replied.

"Will you be ready by then?" Lorn added.

"We are ready to leave as soon as we return to our vessels." the admiral said and then she turned back to the assembled fleet captains, "You have heard the situation and you know the plan." she told them, "Return to your vessels and await my orders. The timing of this mission is critical. If the Force is with us then in two days the war in this sector could be over."

## 16.

"Find anything?" Vay asked Jaynie when she and Garm returned to his office.

"The rebel ship headed south after the rebels withdrew from the tracking station." Jaynie answered and she turned the computer monitor around to show Garm and Vay the map she had been compiling. This had the tracking station near the top and a single red line further south that she pointed to, "It was spotted on the radar of a private weather monitoring station here. Fortunately the owners upload all their sensor logs to an online forum. Some sort of weather nerd group."

"I'm impressed." Garm said and he and Vay sat down together on the couch while Jaynie remained sat behind Garm's desk.

"I take it the shaded areas represent sensor coverage." Vay said and Jaynie nodded.

"Yes. None of the others picked up anything that matched the ship you described to me so the rebels can't have passed through any of those areas. They could have made it through this gap down here at the south east and out over the ocean but I think that they're more likely to be somewhere in this area here." and she moved her hand to where there was a large gap in the sensor coverage in the central area of the map where a rural area was devoid of sensor coverage.

"How big?" Garm said.

"Ah." Jaynie responded, "That's the bad news. This area is about seventy kilometres by forty."

"That's a lot of ground to cover." Vay said.

"Then first we find out what's there." Garm said, "The rebels won't just leave their ship out where anyone could see it. They'll have somewhere to keep it hidden from view. We're looking for large structures or natural terrain features that could be used to hide a ship."

"There's not much out there." Jaynie said, "There's woodland that I suppose could be used to camouflage a ship but the only buildings are on some private land right here."

"Who owns it?" Vay said but before Jaynie could answer Garm spoke up.

"I already know." he said, "I'm pretty sure I went out there as a kid."

"Does it belong to your father?" Vay said, "That would explain how the rebels knew about them."

"No," Garm answered, "they belong to Lord Desh."

"Lord Torr has made repeated attempts to contact you sir." Couran's butler droid said when he returned home and the nobleman nodded.

"Yes, I got all the messages he left." he replied.

"Would you like to speak with Lord Torr now sir? He requested that I ask you to call him as soon as you returned."

"Giving orders to my droid now is he? How very predictable of him." Couran said, "Oh very well I'll speak to him now but inform the kitchen that I'm back would you? I'm hungry after my meeting. My host didn't have a terribly wide variety of refreshment even if his heart is in the right place. Oh and I also need a hundred thousand credits in cash"

"Yes sir." the droid said, linking remotely to the chef droid in the kitchen and then as the butler followed Lord Desh towards his office it added, "A hot meal will be ready for you in twenty three minutes sir."

"Good. In the mean time I'll grab a starter." Couran said, walking over to the drinks cabinet in his office and pouring himself a glass of whiskey that he then carried to his desk and sat down before activating his communication system. After a short pause a hologram of Lord Torr materialised sat in one of the other office chairs and Couran smiled as he raised his glass, "Cheers Max my boy." he said before taking a sip, "Now why all the urgency in wanting to speak to me?"

"Didn't you get my messages?" Lord Torr asked.

"Of course I got them. I just didn't look at any of them, that's all. Now how about you tell me what all this fuss is about." Couran responded and Lord Torr sighed. Couran knew that the other nobleman would be annoyed at not having his messages listened to but he also knew that Lord Torr would not dare pick an argument with him for fear of making an enemy of such an influential figure.

"I'm sure you're aware that Moff Horatian has ordered the planetary shield activated." he said.

"Yes, that sort of thing doesn't tend to go unnoticed." Couran commented.

"Well Parliament is furious." Lord Torr said.

"I'm not surprised. I've got a few friends that have been heavily inconvenienced by it myself."

"Many Parliamentarians have and more than a handful are openly calling for the moff to be summoned before Parliament to explain himself."

"Max my boy Parliament has no power to summon any Imperial official. They may only issue an invitation. Hasn't anyone pointed that out yet?" Couran said.

"Of course everyone knows that but I don't think you understand just how angry people are. Parliament will



issue their demand and that will pitch them against the Empire. If we're not careful we could end up with half of Parliament being arrested for treason and if that happens the trouble won't end with Parliament, we could be looking at large scale protests."

"Yes, how terrible that would be." Couran said, not caring whether Lord Torr noticed the sarcasm or not, "I assume you have a plan to avoid all this Max?"

"Parliament won't settle for anything less than an personal explanation from the moff but Lady Sharva and I are confident that we can change the scope of this by sending a commission to meet with him rather than having him come to us." Lord Torr said.

"Well if anyone can get us to Gregor it's Lynn." Couran commented.

"Perhaps, but right now even she can't get through to him."

"So exactly what do you intend to do then Max my boy?"

"I'm going to put a motion before Parliament tomorrow suggesting that we send a commission to meet with Moff Horatian. I'd like your support when I do."

"Ah so you don't think that Parliament will go along with your idea unless you get my support?" Couran said, smiling.

"Your endorsement would make passing the motion easier. I doubt that anyone would oppose it. If we can get the motion passed right away then I'm sure we could meet with the moff the day after tomorrow." Lord Torr replied and it occurred to Couran that this would place the meeting at about the same time as the expected arrival of the rebel fleet.

"Oh very well Max my boy, since you put it like that I'll come to Parliament to offer my obvious support for your little idea."

"Thank you. I'd also like you to be a part of the commission along with myself and Lady Sharva." Lord Torr said and Couran nodded.

"It would be my pleasure Max. Now if you don't mind I have my dinner to get to so I'll leave you to practice making your speech for tomorrow." Couran said.

"Yes, I'll speak to you-" Lord Torr began before Couran cut him off and the hologram sat in the chair in front of him abruptly vanished.

"Excuse me sir." Couran's butler droid said as it walked into his office.

"What, is dinner ready already?" Couran asked.

"No sir."

"Then what is it?"

"There are three agents from the Imperial Security Bureau to see you." the droid said, "One of them is Garm Larcus."

"Garm's here?" Couran said, "Show them in."

"Of course sir." the droid replied before turning around and exiting the office again.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Couran muttered to himself and he quickly worked some of the controls to his communication system again.

Vorn, Mace and the other rebel team leaders and ship captains along with Harris and Geran gathered around Vorn's desk to study the options in attacking Estran's planetary shield system.

"This is the generator with the weakest defences." Geran said, highlighting a generator station located in the planet's southern hemisphere, "The problem is that it's located right next to a tibanna refinery and is surrounded by residential units."

"Blow up that generator and we risk incinerating the entire settlement." Grayce said, looking at Vorn and he nodded.

"Yes, that's too much of a risk. I can't go back to the Alliance and tell them that to take this planet we had to carry out a massacre." he said. All of a sudden a hologram of Couran appeared in the office and the gathered rebels looked around, "Couran? I wasn't-" Vorn began but Couran began to speak before he could finish.

"Good evening." he said, "I must say this is a surprise."

"What?" Mace said, frowning before Garm, Vay and Jaynie all walked into the field the holographic communication system in Couran's office, their images being transmitted along with his.

"He must have set his comm system to transmit only. He's letting us watch what's going on." Dayle said.

"That could lead the Empire right to us if they notice." Trent Myrell pointed out.

"He obviously thought it worth the risk. We should see what happens." Vorn replied.

"Won't you sit down?" Couran said, "Can I get you a drink?"

"No thank you my lord. We're here on official business." Garm said as he sat down, unaware that all of this was being captured by the room's holographic communication system.

"My lord? Since when did you call me 'my lord' Garm young boy?" Couran said.

"I don't want there to be any suggestion that our past relationship is affecting what I have to say." Garm told

him.

"This sounds serious. What's wrong my boy?" Couran asked but Garm hesitated.

"We need to search your land for a rebel starship." Vay answered when she sensed Garm's reluctance to. *Surprise.*

*Fear.*

Outwardly Couran appeared to remain calm but Vay could sense his true reaction.

"You think my land is being used as a rebel base?" Couran said.

"A rebel ship used in an attack on an Imperial tracking station may have been hidden on one of your estates.

The one you and my father took me and my sister to when we were young." Garm said.

"Yes, I have known you a long time haven't I Garm? In fact I remember when you first put on that uniform and you were full of hope for the good you would be able to do. How has that worked out for you my boy?"

Couran said, staring at Garm.

"Lord Desh are you still in contact with my father?" Garm asked suddenly and Vay looked at him in surprise.

"Yes." Couran admitted without breaking eye contact, "Garm your father and I have been friends since before you were born. After he joined the Alliance to Restore the Republic he kept in touch."

"It was your duty as a citizen of the Empire to report this." Jaynie said and Couran snorted.

"I don't know who you are young lady but perhaps I should tell you something about myself. I was the Speaker of Parliament for quite some time and during my tenure I saw the way the Empire was taking away the freedoms Sheev Palpatine had pledged to protect when he became Emperor. Garm's father decided to take a stand and try to fight against it. On the other hand I decided that retirement was probably a better option. I couldn't support the Empire but at my age I decided that there was little I could do to stop it so I made way for those could do one or the other. Every so often Vorn would contact me and we'd talk about what was happening. My security clearance ended when I retired so it's not like I could pass him any formal state secrets. I never had access to Imperial secrets anyway. I have no duty but to my own conscience and that tells me that people who get arrested by the ISB end up with their eyes gouged out and tongues ripped from their heads. Don't they Garm?"

"So you've had contact with Vorn Larcus very recently. Do you know where he is?" Vay asked.

"Vorn does not share his exact movements with me." Couran responded, well aware of Vay's powers and so being careful to avoid telling a blatant lie that would give him away, "Are you going to arrest me for that?"

"It's still treason." Jaynie said.

"And when the public find out that we've arrested Lord Desh, the most popular politician on Estran in living memory there'll be an outcry." Garm pointed out.

"Yes, I suppose I am quite popular aren't I?" Couran said, "Now how about you answer me one question Garm my boy. Are you happy about what you do for the Empire?" and Garm answered without hesitation.

"Perfectly."

*Deception.*

"We need to move the ships." Harris said when the rebel officers watched Garm describe their hiding place.

"Where to?" Grace asked.

"One of Balve's warehouses." Mace suggested, "He's got more than enough space to store them now that his goods can't get through the shield and there are no Alliance soldiers being billeted in them."

"Get going." Vorn said, "The Empire could already be on their way. Mace you'll have to send Tobis or Cass to fly the *Sliver Hawk*. I need you to get in touch with Odras and let him know what's going on. If the Empire's closing in on us then we may need to bring forwards our plans for drawing out their forces."

"Okay I'm on it." Mace replied before he left the room with Anzar, Inra, Trent and Harris and when they reached the hallway he looked up the main stairs and yelled, "Cass!"

"What is it dad?" Cass responded, leaning over the edge of the upper landing.

"You need to go and get the Silver Hawk. The Empire knows about us using Lord Desh's land. The others will take you there." Mace replied and he pointed to where the other ship captains waited.

"Do I get to ride in that fancy speeder?" she asked, looking at Trent and he smiled back at her. In her time as a holoivid celebrity Grayce Myrell had purchased a luxury landspeeder and when she and her husband defected to the rebellion they had brought the vehicle with them. Despite it being an uncommon vehicle the privacy it offered in its spacious interior made moving around populated areas anonymously much easier, an important thing to consider when their team included three none human members.

"Sure Cass." he replied.

"Such a shame she'll be flying back in that pile of junk you call a ship." Inra said to Mace and he glared at her before looking back up towards Cass.

"Cass just get down-" he said.

"I'm coming." she interrupted.

"And don't-" he began but he was too late to prevent Cass from sliding down the bannister rail to the bottom of the stairs and he sighed.

Rushing from the house, the rebel pilots got into Trent's speeder and he drove off. Although he was anxious to reach their starships before the forces of the Empire could discover them he made sure to keep within the speed limit. Being flagged by any of the multitude of automated traffic cameras along the route could alert the authorities to the rebels' location and avoiding that was more important than getting to the starships. Upon reaching their destination the rebels were relieved to see that there were no signs of Imperial agents anywhere near their ships and they hurried aboard to get them ready to fly.

"Dad it's Cass," Cass said, activating the *Silver Hawk's* communication system at the same time as the ship's repulsorlifts came to life, "I've got the *Silver Hawk* ready for lit off. Where am I taking her?"

"Good work Cass," Mace's voice responded, "I've spoken to Balve and he's letting us use a hidden landing pad he's got just off the coast."

"Just off the coast? So like on a boat or something?" Cass asked.

"Or something, yes. Look just follow the course I give you and you'll be given landing instructions by one of Balve's men when you get close. Oh and you need to make sure that the ship's seals are all good." Mace told her and then the channel went dead.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Cass said and then she saw the course and destination information Mace had promised appear on the flight console in front of her, "Oh well, here goes." she said, taking hold of the controls and lifting off.

Following a course that avoided Imperial tracking stations the five rebel starships all made their way towards the coast but when the ocean came into view Cass saw no sign of a landing field anywhere. The terrain was too rocky and uneven for a ship to set down safely and there were no ocean going craft with large, flat decks in view that could function as carriers. The only craft in view at all was a small skiff hovering over the ocean about a kilometre off the coast.

"Can anyone see this landing field?" Cass asked, broadcasting her question to the pilots of the other rebel ships.

"I've got nothing." Inra responded.

"Hold on, I'm sure that Mace knows what he's doing." Harris said before another voice that Cass did not recognise spoke up.

"Bantha." it said simply.

"Makes good eating." Anzar responded from the *Scarlet Knife* and with the correct coded response having been given the pilot of the skiff hovering over the ocean below pressed a single button on a control box added to his craft's ordinary control console.

Moments later the secret landing field that Odras Balve maintained off the coast came into view as it rose up out of the murky ocean on powerful repulsorlift units. The circular platform was more than three hundred metres across and was constructed of a thick meshing that allowed water to pass through it as it submerged or returned to the surface. There were already several small ships landed on the platform but the size meant that there was still more than enough room for the rebel craft to set down. Knowing that the platform would be submerged when they left, the rebels made sure that their vessels were prepared to be submerged along with it, using docking clamps to prevent the inherent buoyancy of a pressurised starship from keeping them on the surface and ensuring that all intakes and vents were properly sealed to prevent flooding. Then as the pilots emerged onto the platform the pilot of the skiff brought his craft down towards them.

"Come on!" he shouted, waving to the rebels, "We've got less than five minutes before the Empire's likely to notice what's going on here." and the rebels ran towards the skiff and climbed aboard, Harris helping Cass onto the deck of the skiff before it started to move off. As soon as the skiff was clear of the platform the pilot activated the controls to the platform's repulsorlift units again and Cass watched as it began to sink back beneath the ocean, taking with it the rebel starships.

"Wow." she said.

"Impressive isn't it?" the skiff pilot said, "Fortunately the water here is polluted enough to not only obscure the landing field from aerial detection but it also keeps fishermen away because not much lives down there.

"Polluted?" Inra said, frowning, "I swear that if there are any stains on my ship then someone's going to pay."

"Aren't you worried that someone might decide to clean up the water?" Cass asked and the pilot smiled.

"Mister Balve takes care of that." he said.

"He just bribes anyone who could authorise it." Anzar added.

"Two minutes to target." the gunship pilot announced as the squadron approached the cluster of buildings on Couran's land.

"Are there any indications of starships at the target location?" Garm asked.

"None sir." the pilot responded and Garm nodded.

"Why didn't we arrest Lord Desh?" Jaynie asked from cross the gunship's troop carrying compartment that was empty apart from the three ISB agents, all of the stormtroopers assigned to them aboard other gunships in the squadron, "Are you really that worried about public protest?"

"Right now we can't afford to take chances." Garm replied, "Besides I've arranged for a tap on his

communications and for him to be tailed. If he speaks with my father again or if he is meeting with him then Lord Deth will lead us right to him."

"What if there are rebels on his land though?" Jaynie said.

"In that case we will arrest him. Public outcry or not, we'd have caught him red handed." Garm answered while Vay just watched him.

*He doesn't want to be doing this, you know that Vay. The pair of you should leave this alone. You need to be ready to open the doors.*

"We've got a job to do." Vay said, drawing her lightsaber as the gunship descended into the field beside the cluster of buildings large enough to conceal several small starships.

"Jaynie stay behind us." Garm said as he drew his blaster, knowing that if there were armed rebels present then she was ill equipped to defend herself.

When the gunship's hatch opened he and Vay immediately leapt out and Garm raised his blaster and pointed it towards the largest of the buildings ahead of them. To either side of them more gunships touched down just long enough to allow the squads of stormtroopers plus their commanding officer to disembark before they began to advance on the buildings.

"Spread out. I want every building searched." Garm ordered and the stormtrooper officer began to wave at his men, assigned specific squads to search different buildings. The armoured soldiers moved rapidly towards their assigned targets, using their blasters to blow open doors before they stormed inside while Garm and Vay watched from beside their gunship. However, as the results of the search of each building came back all of them were the same.

"Building clear. No rebel presence." the squad leaders reported in turn as they completed their sweep of their assigned building.

"You're relieved aren't you?" Vay said to Garm, "Now we don't have to arrest Couran."

"Not yet at least." Garm replied, glancing back towards their gunship, the only one of the squadron to have remained on the ground, to make sure that Jaynie was not close enough to overhear them speaking, "If he and my father do get in touch with one another again though we may not have much choice."

"Starting to regret not choosing to just run away before the shield went up and trapped us here like everyone else?" Vay asked.

"You tell me. You're the mind reader." Garm said and Vay smiled.

"Oh Garm I know you well enough by now that I don't need the Force to tell me what you're thinking." she said.

"So why ask?" Garm said and Vay shrugged.

"Maybe I just like hearing you tell me." she replied before the stormtrooper's black uniformed officer came marching up to them both, snapped to attention and saluted.

"Deputy director my men have secured the buildings as ordered. They have found no evidence of a rebel presence now but some squads did report that they found signs of a break in prior to them forcing their way inside.

"Any signs of recent habitation?" Garm asked and the officer shook his head.

"No sir." he answered.

"So it wasn't squatters that were scared off by our approach then." Vay said and she looked at Garm,

"Rebels aboard starships wouldn't leave any mess." Vay pointed out.

"Neither would anyone that broke into an empty building in the hope it contained something valuable." Garm said and he looked directly at the officer, "Captain have your men sweep the buildings again. Never mind about what there isn't here, I want to know what is. Burglars would take anything they thought they could sell so if there's anything valuable still here then the break in wasn't part of a robbery either."

"Yes sir." the stormtrooper captain responded and then he turned around and started to shout orders to his men again.

## 17.

The first of the acts meant to convince the Empire that Estran was on the point of revolt occurred just after sundown on the fringe of Estran City itself where a swoop gang led by career criminal Gill Harnser began defacing an Imperial monument dedicated to its late Emperor. Rather than simply ride up to the monument and spraying it with paint before departing they made sure to make as much noise as possible so as to attract attention to their actions. In addition to hurling paint across the monument half a dozen gang members ran the engines of their vehicles loudly while they attacked the monument and also hurled whatever came to hand towards nearby windows while yelling anti-Imperial slogans at the tops of their voices. Gill himself was not a part of this group, instead he remained close by and watched with a larger group of his gang waiting for a response from the authorities.

This came in the form of a squad of Imperial scout troopers from a nearby military base. Since the incident appeared to be anti-Imperial in sentiment the reports to the police, one of which was called in by Gill himself to guarantee that it was reported, were forwarded to COMPNOR and that body subsequently called in support from the military rather than leaving it to local law enforcement.

"Here they come lads." Gill said when he saw the speeder bikes approaching, "Let's move." and he and his followers accelerated towards the unsuspecting scout troopers.

The gang members attacking the monument withdrew as soon as the scout troopers came into view. Their powerful swoops could easily outrun Imperial speeder bikes given a clear enough run but in the built up surroundings of the city they had to be more careful to avoid crashing. Many members of swoop gangs, including some of those in this particular group, would ignore such risks but on this occasion escaping the pursuing scout troopers on their less powerful speeder bikes was not the intention. All they had to do was get the scout troopers to follow them and avoid being shot down by the blaster cannons mounted beneath their vehicles. Meanwhile, Gill and his force circled around behind the scout troopers while they were focused on the swoops ahead of them. Gill then waved his group forwards.

"Time to rock!" he yelled over the noise of his swoop's engine and as he accelerated forwards he pulled the battered blaster pistol he carried from his belt and pointed it towards the closest scout trooper before firing several rapid shots.

Taken completely by surprise the first thing the scout troopers knew about being under attack was when a bright red blaster bolt flashed past them just moments before the rearmost trooper was hit. The shot from Gill only clipped the trooper, his lightweight armour deflecting most of the energy away from him in such a way that he would survive had the injury not caused him to lose control of his speeder bike and plough into a nearby wall, screaming as he realised at the last moment that he was about to die.

"It's a trap. Break and engage." the squad leader told his men before activating his speeder bike's comlink, "This is patrol leader trill herf xesh one-one-three-eight. My patrol is under attack by insurgents mounted on swoops. Support required."

Rather than continue to focus on pursuing the gang members who had attacked the monument the scout troopers decelerated, weaving from side to side as the swoop riders behind them passed between them while firing randomly with an assortment of ranged weapons. Some of the scout troopers returned fire with their vehicles' cannons as the swoops sped past them and a pair of the outlaws' vehicles exploded with them still riding them.

"Keep going." Gill shouted at his gang, "There'll be more of them on the way." and the swoops continued to speed ahead of the scout troopers. Now though the gang was trying to escape, combat other than a single rapid strike not being part of their plan. Behind them the scout troopers gave chase once more but at every junction the gang members divided their numbers, one or two of them breaking off from the main group. The scout troopers' squad leader was unwilling to do the same, all too aware that it would rapidly leave his men isolated and easy for the gang to pick off and so he kept the squad focused on pursuing what appeared to be the largest group. No effort was made to try and get the swoop riders to stop and surrender after they had already attacked the squad and instead the scout troopers used their blaster cannons freely, bringing down more of the gang.

Gill had chosen his gang's target well though, the monument was located close enough to the edge of the city that it took only a few minutes for them to reach more open countryside at which point they were able to bring their swoops up to full power and speed away, leaving the scout troopers far behind.

Neema Gorord ducked as a parked speeder burst into flames behind her before she continued to address the camera in front of her.

"It was just after eight this evening that the residents of this starport neighbourhood gathered to protest the continued operation of Estran's planetary shield. Workers here have seen their incomes cut by up to ninety-five percent since all interplanetary and interstellar shipping was cut off. What began as a peaceful

demonstration became violent when individuals in the crowd not only called for the deactivation of the shield but also began to demand that the Imperial sector government surrender its authority to the rebel alliance currently headquartered on Tarlen and it was at this point that the police were ordered to break up the crowd, triggering the violence that has now spilled out over several city blocks." she said before she was interrupted by the sound of repulsorlift engines and she looked up into the sky.

"Neema can you tell us what's happening now?" the news anchor in the studio asked.

"It looks like the Imperial military is being deployed in support of the police. I can see several transports deploying infantry units equipped with canister launchers and -" Neema began before she ducked again and the camera showed the smoking trails of several canisters being fired into the crowd behind her. This triggered cries of alarm from within the crowd and it began to retreat while the Imperial troops advanced with breath masks covering their faces. Someone in the crowd hurled a container filled with flammable liquid that broke open and created a small fire when it hit the road in front of the soldiers. This did nothing to slow the army units' advance but a number of them did raise their rifles and there were flashes of red as they opened fire, their rifles obviously set to deliver lethal blasts.

"The army is engaging the crowd now. It looks like they aren't using stun settings on their weapons." Neema said, "It isn't safe here now and so we're going to have to end this broadcast and withdraw."

The cameraman promptly shut off the camera before the entire news team leapt back up against a wall as a Imperial soldier yelled at them to get out of the way as he and a squad of other soldiers charged down the street.

"We need to get out of here." one of Neema's team said and she nodded.

"You'll get no argument from me." she said, "This entire city is rapidly becoming a war zone and I'm not a war correspondent."

Like many well developed worlds in the Galactic Empire, Estran retained a planetary government of its own. In Estran's case this was an elected assembly that met in a large building not far from the Empire's own capitol building. The debating chamber was a more basic version of what had been used by the Imperial Senate before it was dissolved and the Republic Senate before that. Each Member of Parliament spoke from one of the hundreds of small private balconies that lined the walls of the room while the Speaker of Parliament, the head of Estran's government, sat in the centre of the room with his staff. However, unlike the Imperial Senate, where the balconies were in fact compact repulsorlift platforms that would move away from the wall as the occupants spoke, the ones in Estran's Parliament were fixed in place. Generally each Member of Parliament would sit in an individual balcony but on some occasions more than one would share a single balcony if they were intending to present a joint motion to Parliament and on this particular morning both Lord Torr and Lady Sharva sat together, along with Couran behind them. Not being a currently serving Member of Parliament Couran would not be allowed to address the assembled lords but his mere presence was enough to tell everyone present that he supported what Lord Torr was about to say.

"I call Lord Maxamillion Torr to speak." the speaker announced and Lord Torr bowed as he got to his feet and then adjusted his microphone while a recording droid moved in close to record what he had to say.

"Lords and Ladies of Parliament," he began in the standard form of address to Parliament, "two days ago in response to the continued violence of the banned terrorist group calling itself the Alliance to Restore the Republic, the Imperial government on Estran took the decision to activate the planetary shield. This has cut us off from the rest of the sector and indeed from the galaxy at large. Since this planet was first colonised four millennia ago Estran has been a centre of trade, dependent on ships passing by. Sadly the reaction to this has been all too predictable with political agitators turning simple protests against the decision to keep the planetary shield raised into riots on behalf of the rebellion that have required the help of the Imperial military to control. I know that there are some in this chamber that believe Moff Horatian should be approached to seek answers surrounding the operation of the shield and with this idea I and those joining me are in agreement. Therefore, I wish to lay before Parliament a motion seconded by Lady Lynn Sharva that calls for a group of representatives to approach the moff for a private meeting at which the issue may be discussed in a discrete manner befitting of such an obviously delicate situation. Thank you Mister Speaker." Lord Torr then sat down and from around the chamber there was applause from other Members of Parliament.

"That obviously went down well." Lady Sharva said, smiling at the reaction.

"Not exactly overwhelming though Max my boy." Couran added from behind them, looking around the chamber and taking note of the numerous balconies where the occupants were not joining in with the applause.

"I call this chamber to order!" the speaker called out as he stood up and the applause came to a halt, "The motion is put before the chamber. Proposed by Lord Torr and seconded by Lady Sharva. In accordance with procedure I open the floor to questions and statements." and then he looked at the display in front of him to see if any of the Members of Parliament were indicating that they wished to speak. A handful of names appeared on the screen and the speaker chose the first name on the list, "I call upon Lady Nesst to speak."

he said before sitting back down.

"Lords and Ladies of Parliament. I would ask Lord Torr who will be the representatives to approach the moff." the noblewoman said and as she sat down Lord Torr got back to his feet.

"I of course volunteer to speak with the moff." he said and there were a few jeers from around the chamber as other Members of Parliament saw this as a means for him to promote himself.

"I call this chamber to order." the speaker called out and the jeering stopped to allow Lord Torr to continue.

"In addition Lady Sharva who has worked closely with Moff Horatian both as a member of this chamber and the Imperial Senate before that should be one of our delegates. I would also like to nominate our former speaker Lord Desh to be a delegate. The wealth of experience he possesses along with his high public profile should demonstrate to the public how seriously we take this matter."

Lord Torr then sat down again and as the speaker checked his display again he saw that most of the other requests to speak had been withdrawn, leaving only one name.

"I call upon Lord Restik to speak." the speaker announced.

Confined to a repulsor chair, Lord Restik was unable to get to his feet as he began to speak.

"Lords and Ladies of Parliament I wish to put forth an amendment." he said, breathing heavily as he spoke, "Instead of the self appointed list of representatives to be sent to the moff, I move that the Interstellar Affairs Committee draw up a list of names for us to choose from."

"We don't have time to discuss this in a committee." Lord Torr muttered.

"I remember him from when I was speaker." Couran commented, "He was a self righteous moof milker back then as well. I'll lay odds that he doesn't want anyone to go to see the moff at all and thinks that he can keep that committee talking long enough for the problem to sort itself out."

"He also has a financial interest in several farming companies here on Estran that will increase in value now that there are no shipments coming in from off world." Lady Sharva added.

"Is there a second to this amendment?" the speaker asked and when he saw another Member of Parliament get to his feet and register that he was seconding the amendment he added, "The amendment is added."

Lord Torr frowned while Lord Restik leant back in his repulsor chair and grinned, "Lord Torr, do you accept this amendment?"

"I do not mister speaker." Lord Torr responded.

"Very well. Given that there are no further requests to speak we shall now vote." the speaker said and as he sat down one of his aides stood up instead.

"Motion one-one-three-eight by Lord Torr." she announced, "Amendment by Lord Restik. Vote now."

Lord Torr jabbed at his datapad when the voting screen appeared while Lady Sharva was more calm as she also voted to reject the amendment. There was a brief pause as the speaker's assistant waited for all the votes to be cast and then the result was shown in a hologram above the speaker's position.

"For the amendment seventy-four. Against the amendment three hundred and sixty-two. Fourteen abstentions. The amendment is rejected." the assistant said and it was Lord Torr's turn to grin at Lord Restik, "Motion one-one-three-eight by Lord Torr. Vote now."

"Yes." Lady Sharva said as the holographic display then showed a clear majority in favour of the motion even before the speaker's assistant formally announced the result.

"For the motion two hundred and eight five. Against the motion one hundred and forty-two. Twenty-three abstentions. The motion is carried." she said. Then as she sat back down the speaker got back to his feet.

"Lord Maxamillion Torr, Lady Lynn Sharva and Lord Couran Desh this chamber requests that you meet with Moff Gregor Horatian to discuss the continued operation of the planetary shield. How say you?"

"Lords and Ladies of Parliament I speak for all of us when I say that we accept this invitation and will seek an audience with the moff as soon as possible." Lord Torr responded and when he sat down again there was applause from around the chamber.

"I'll contact the moff's office." Lady Sharva said, "I'll try and get us a meeting later on today."

"You asked to see me Moff Horatian?" Rodge Larrs asked as he entered the moff's office.

"Yes Rodge, do take a seat." the moff responded and Rodge sat down in the chair that he pointed to, "I've just had an interesting conversation with Lynn Sharva."

"Is this the request to meet with you to discuss the planetary shield? An attempt to get it shut down no doubt." Rodge replied.

"You seem well informed." Moff Horatian said and Rodge smiled.

"A large numbers of Members of Parliament are also members of COMPNOR. Whether they admit it or not is another matter but I can assure you that nothing is said in Estran's Parliament even in closed sessions that I don't become aware of very quickly." he said.

"I take it you've seen the protests that the activation of the shield is causing." Moff Horatian said.

"Of course I have. They seem to be in hand though."

"General Dern has deployed tens of thousands of troops to the streets, that's why they're under control." Moff Horatian said, "I had a bad feeling about activating the shield when there are no rebel warships in the system

and it seems I was right. Now perhaps you can explain why it is that my public relations representative has been unable to convince the public that it is in their best interests to keep the shield active."

"I'm waiting for Admiral Hall to confirm how long it will take to get a shield gate set up." Rodge replied, "Until then all I can offer is a call for patience."

"Which is what I'm supposed to tell the local politicians tomorrow I suppose." Moff Horatian replied and then he sighed, "Oh well at least the three coming here are nominally loyal. Though I did see a report that Couran Desh has been put under observation by the ISB. Would you care to elaborate on that?"

Rodge was taken by surprise at this, not having seen the order to maintain a watch on Couran.

"I didn't know." he said, "Obviously it must be some sort of mistake."

"Not according to Deputy Director Larcus it isn't." the moff replied, "I double checked when I saw a copy of the order and he is concerned that his father may try to make contact with Lord Desh to turn him against us."

"For a moment I thought he might be suggesting that Lord Desh himself is a traitor." Rodge said before the intercom on the moff's desk activated.

"I have Admiral Hall for you sir." his secretary said and Moff Horatian nodded.

"Put him through." he said and a hologram of the admiral appeared in front of his desk, "Admiral, you have news?" Moff Horatian asked.

"Yes sir. I have just spoken with Edvars Kurrad and he has confirmed that the components for a basic shield gate will be ready for despatch from his plant in the Rilless system in four days. I intend to despatch the ships currently defending Estran to collect it. Our three venator-class ships can act as transports for the components while the others will be more than adequate to defend them if the rebels try and ambush them." Admiral Hall answered.

"You're removing all the ships from the Estran system?" Moff Horatian asked and Admiral Hall nodded.

"Yes sir. By our estimates it should only take eight hours for the fleet to reach Rilless, load the gate components and then return here. In the meantime if the Alliance do chose to attack Estran while the ships are absent then the planetary shield will protect us long enough for the fleet to return and drive them off."

"Excellent. How long will the gate take to install?" Rodge said.

"The gate is being built in sections for easy assembly. It should take no more than twenty-four hours to put them together."

"Assembly isn't installation admiral." Moff Horatian commented, "How soon can we have traffic passing through the shield?"

"It will take at least seventy-two hours to ensure that it is correctly attuned with our shield and during that time-

"During that time we won't be able to raise the shield." the moff interrupted.

"Not without destroying the gate while it is within the area of the shield, no." Admiral Hall said.

"So for three days we'll be vulnerable to attack." Rodge Larrs responded.

"Not entirely, no. Raising the shield is possible but to do so will first require us to move the gate structure out of the way. That will be possible at any point up to the final phase of installation but it will take up to an hour to do. We aren't talking about a starship or even an ordinary space station. More significantly any interruption would require us to start the installation and configuration from scratch." Admiral Hall explained.

"At least I can tell the representatives from Parliament that traffic will be moving again soon." Moff Horatian said, "Thank you admiral, I'll leave you to make all the necessary arrangements." and as the image of Admiral Hall faded away to nothing the moff turned to look at Rodge, "We have to bring the shield down." he said, "I'm sure that even your committee will see that soon."

Vorn gathered the rebels together together one last time to explain to them his plan of attack, with Harvey displaying an image of one of the planet's shield generators onto the wall mounted video screen that the droid was hooked into.

"You see here the shield generator we intend to attack." he announced, "It's well defended by anti-aircraft batteries and three full companies of troops. Two regular army and one stormtrooper. Fortunately it's remote enough that there will be no collateral damage to civilian targets and even once they realise that they're under attack reinforcements will take time to reach them. The attack will be two pronged, coming from both the air and the ground. The air attack will be launched using the *Artist's Impression* and the *Beauty Queen* to carry out strafing runs on the target. Given how heavily fortified and shielded the structure is I doubt that you'll be able to inflict any significant damage but all you need to do is take out their communication antenna and put several holes in the perimeter. This will allow our field teams on the ground to launch the second phase of the attack, infiltrating the facility and destroying it. Assuming Odras Balve comes through with the troops he promised then Commander Kord and Captain Myrell will be commanding about fifty men between them. Odras has also promised us Imperial uniforms. The supply of these is limited but there should be enough for all of you. Use his troops to create a distraction and then sneak in behind their lines without engaging the garrison directly if you can."

"Sounds straight forwards enough." Dayle said.



"Hey hold on a moment," Inra said, "what about my ship? Where am I supposed to go after I've let the Empire know I'm there?"

"What's the matter Inra? Don't think your ship's up to the job?" Mace asked and Inra glared at him angrily.

"Just get out of sensor range quickly." Harris told her, "If you take out their communications fast enough then you'll be able to prevent them from calling for air support but if you don't then you'll need to hide your ship before the first TIEs show up."

"What about me and Lannaye? I expected you to send us on that run. What will we be doing?" Anzar asked.

"You'll be coming with my team to attack the capitol building." Vorn replied, "Again we'll have support from Odras Balve's mercenaries and I want you and Tharun to make sure they know what they're doing. As with the attack on the shield generator we'll be using Odras' troops as a diversion while we make use of Imperial disguises to slip into the capitol building, find our way to the shield control room and do as much damage as we can before getting out of there. Nassar and Ajay will join our assault team as well. The uniforms Odras has obtained for us included a few gunners and their helmets should be enough to conceal the features of even a mon calamari."

"Sounds easy when you put it like that boss." Kara said, smiling at Vorn.

"Battle plans usually do." Dayle said, "Though as we all know, no plan-

"Survives first contact with the enemy." Mace interrupted.

"You all know what we're doing. I've put more detailed instructions for each team on datapads for you to study." Vorn said, "Now we won't all meet again before the mission starts so I thought I'd send you all off in style. Mace will you pass out the glasses while I get the bottle?"

"The only reason I came to this meeting." Mace replied as Vorn left the room, reaching down beside the chair he was sat in and picking up a box filled with small drinking glasses, "Okay take one and pass the rest on." he said, removing a glass and then handing the box to Tobis.

"Hey Tobis perhaps you should get a glass out for the klutz as well." Kara suggested and Jaysica frowned at her before Tobis handed her a glass and then passed the box past her to Cass.

"Me as well?" Cass asked and Mace nodded.

"This time yes." he said, "This is good stuff."

"Indeed it is." Vorn added on his return to the room with a bottle of Corellian whisky in his hands. As the glasses were passed round Vorn followed and poured a shot of the drink for each person until everyone had one, including himself, "We've lost a lot of good people over the years." Vorn said, holding up his glass, "So as well as drinking to our success I'd like to toast their sacrifice. To fallen heroes of the Alliance and may the Force be with us all."

"May the Force be with us." the other rebels said together as they raised their glasses and then downed their drinks.

The mercenaries provided by Odras to attack the shield generator were armed with a wide variety of weapons left over from the Clone Wars. Many of these were support weapons capable of bombarding the generator facility from several hundred metres away such as blaster cannons, missile launchers and mortars. "How much ammunition do you have for all this?" Dayle asked as he and Marse walked along the row of repulsorlift vehicles on which the weapons had been mounted. Being able to rapidly redeploy these weapons was an essential part of the rebels' attack plan. They did not know exactly where the perimeter would be most seriously damaged by the initial air assault and so they would have to be able to position and fire their weapons very quickly. In addition the Imperial troops defending the shield generator were likely to have heavy weapons of their own and keeping the rebel weapons from being destroyed was going to require changing their positions more rapidly than the Imperial weapons could be brought to bare on them.

"The lasers are all rigged to generators built into the speeders." the leader of the mercenaries told him, "As for all the launchers we've got about fifty rounds per tube, that should keep us going for a while. Oh we've also got a bunch of smoke rounds for the mortars. Those will be the first ones we send in to try and screw up their targeting."

"Smoke won't stop stormtroopers targeting you." Marse pointed out, knowing that stormtrooper armour like the stolen set he had been provided with as a disguise included an advanced tracking system known as Multi-Frequency Targeting and Acquisition System, or MAFTAS that massively improved their vision in low light conditions or through smoke.

"Stop, no. But it will make it harder for them. Plus it will make your movement easier to conceal." the mercenary said before Inra came walking up to them.

"Well commander the *Beauty Queen* is all set." she said, "I've got all the seaweed cleaned off her." and Marse smiled, knowing that she really meant that she had ordered Sen to clean off all the seaweed from the ship's hull. "So do you think those disguises will get you inside?"

"What, don't we look the part?" Dayle replied, looking at Marse's stormtrooper armour and also at the black officer's uniform he wore.

"You do. But that snivvian from Grayce's unit is never going to pass for anything other than a snivvian." Inra said.

At less than one and a half metres in height Druvvon was far too small to pass for a member of the Imperial military, even if his prominently non-human features could be disguised as Tell's were to be under a stormtrooper's helmet.

"Don't worry, we've got that covered." Dayle told her.

"You better had. Because if the real Imperial troops spot him then this could be one of the shortest offensives of all time." Inra said.

At the same time Dayle was meeting with the mercenaries that would be supporting the attack on the shield generator, Vorn and his assault team were in one of Odras Balve's warehouses in Estran City preparing for their attack on the capitol building itself. Planning their attack for late morning meant that the rebels had to begin their preparations well before dawn and it was still dark outside as they worked.

"They're here!" Cass called out from her position on look out by an upper storey window when she saw the headlights of several land speeders as they pulled up outside the warehouse and Odras Balve got out in the company of his wookiee bodyguard.

"About time too." Mace said.

"Tharun, Anzar, with me." Vorn called out to where the two former mercenaries were checking that their weapons and armour were in order.

"Coming colonel." Tharun responded and the two men made their way over to the doorway Vorn, Mace and Harris were also making for. Together the five rebels walked outside to meet Odras.

"Glad you could finally make it Balve." Mace said.

"Hey, there's plenty of time before your little revolution kicks off." Odras responded.

"Your revolution as well." Harris pointed out and Odras grinned.

"Yes, I suppose it is." he said, "I assume that the uniforms I've provided for you are satisfactory?" he added, looking at the disguises worn by the rebels. Vorn, Mace and Harris all wore officers' uniforms that bore their actual Alliance ranks according to the badges they were adorned with though the code cylinders in the tunic pockets were all fake and useless for bypassing Imperial security checks. On the other hand both Tharun and Anzar wore the uniforms of infantrymen in the Imperial Army.

"Fine. Though I'm hoping that these speeders contain the troops you promised us." Vorn said.

"Some of them, yes. What you're after here in the capital is a bit different to out by the shield generator so I've gathered up a more varied force." Odras said as he walked to the repulsortruck behind his own speeder

and banged his fist on the side. This prompted the occupants to open the large side door and two of them got out.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Mace said when he saw them.

"I know you know Gill Harnser and I believe that you've already met Corva Dratt. Mister Dratt found himself unemployed recently and when I saw his credentials I accepted him into my organisation." Odras said.

"You gave that sleemo a job?" Mace said, glaring at Corva Dratt, the former agent of Lord Torr. The nobleman used Corva as both an enforcer and undercover agent. On several occasions he had attempted to capture Vorn specifically as part of the grudge between the two noblemen. Every attempt had of course ended in failure and after the last time it was now obvious that Lord Torr had tired of him and decided to dispense with his services.

"Mister Dratt knows how to follow orders." Odras said, "I like that in an employee."

"What happened between us in the past was purely business." Corva said.

"Did you know he worked for Balve?" Mace asked, looking at Anzar.

"We've met." Anzar answered, "I didn't know that he had a history with any of you though."

"In our line of work we all have to operate with people we perhaps would rather avoid." Harris pointed out.

"Yes we do." Vorn added, "Mister Dratt I may not like you but I know you are good at what you do."

"We're just better." Tharun muttered and he smiled at Corva.

"Nevertheless I hope that I can count on you to approach this task with the same dedication you did when we were adversaries."

"I'll do as I'm ordered. Either by Mister Balve or by you." Corva said.

"Likewise." Gill added and then he looked at Vorn and nodded at him, "Nice to meet you again my lord." he said, "I hear this time you're out for more than just revenge."

"We're going to bring down a government." Vorn said and Corva smiled, "I take it that Odras has explained your roles in this?"

"We cause trouble and make sure the Empire's so busy looking at us that you get to hit them where they aren't looking." Gill said and Vorn nodded.

"That pretty much sums it up." he said.

"My gang knows how to cause trouble. We'll make sure that there's plenty of noise to grab their attention." Gill said.

"At which point the men under my command will be waiting to ambush the troops sent out to deal with it." Gill added.

"Good. If you don't mind I'd like Captain Deller and Sergeant Verser to take a look at your men. They'll be commanding them for the initial stages of the operation." Vorn said and Corva nodded.

"Fair enough." he said.

"Good. In that case I'll leave you to it. I have other people with important jobs to do and it's time for them to get going." Vorn replied before he turned around and accompanied by Mace and Harris he headed back inside the warehouse.

"I can't believe I used to work there." Cass said, looking along the road towards the cantina that sat opposite the capitol building. She was sat in the back of a landspeeder along with Geran, Tobis and Jaysica, the four rebels studying the Imperial forces outside the capitol. The cantina was currently closed but the former waitress knew that it would not be long before its owner, a man called Corayle Hanasham arrived to prepare for the early morning rush as Imperial personnel on their way to work stopped by for breakfast from a menu they considered superior to their staff canteen.

"Is this guy we're going to meet friendly to the Alliance?" Geran asked as he glanced at the darkened diner and then looked across the street at a unit of stormtroopers marching up the steps to the main entrance of the capitol building.

"He was friendly to me." Cass replied, "Although I did kind of leave him in the lurch when I joined you and dad adopted me."

"Surely he'll understand that you had to leave or you'd end up in prison or executed." Jaysica said and Cass shrugged.

"I hope so. But given that I was using his cantina to steal Imperial secrets he might not be too happy to see me again.

"Make sure you have your blasters set on stun." Geran said, "If he tries to raise the alarm then we need to take him out quickly."

"Oh, err, my blaster is the only one with a stun setting." Tobis pointed out. While he carried a military issue sidearm holstered on his hip the other rebels all had smaller hold out or sporting weapons tucked into pockets or a shoulder bag in the case of Cass's sporting blaster pistol.

"Fine. Then make sure your weapon is set on stun." Geran said before Cass prodded him and pointed to a figure walking along the street.

"That's him." she said, "That's Corayle Hanasham."

"Then let's move. Before he gets too close to any of those Imperial troops." Geran ordered and the four rebels quickly got out of their speeder before hurrying along the street towards Corayle. The rebels reached Corayle just as he got to the door of his cantina and was in the process of unlocking it. "I'm sorry." he said when he noticed the rebels, assuming them to be exactly what they looked like, a pair of junior officers and a pair of infantrymen, "I won't be open for another hour yet."  
"Corayle it's me." Cass said, smiling at him and his eyes widened.  
"Cass?" he exclaimed.  
"Quiet." Geran hissed.  
"Cass, what are you doing here dressed like that? I was told you were arrested as a rebel." Corayle said, looking at her uniform.  
"I was." Cass replied.  
"Look I hate to interrupt this reunion but can we continue this discussion inside?" Geran asked.  
"Can we?" Cass added.  
"Oh very well. But I hope this isn't going to get me in trouble." Corayle said, opening the door to his cantina and as soon as he'd stepped inside the four rebels darted in behind him. Corayle then reached for the light switch and Jaysica held out her hand.  
"Wait. What if the soldiers outside see?" she asked.  
"Oh, err, I think that they'll be more suspicious if there aren't any lights." Tobis pointed out.  
"Of course. I knew that." Jaysica replied.

Corayle turned on the cantina's lights and began to walk towards the kitchen.  
"Now while I get ready to open my business how about you tell me what's going on here Cass?" he said.  
"The Alliance is going to invade Estran soon." Cass answered, "Today in fact."  
"Way to maintain the security of classified information." Geran commented.  
"Today? Are we in danger here?" Corayle said, coming to a sudden stop.  
"Hopefully not, no. But we'd like your help to carry out our mission." Cass said and Corayle's eyes widened.  
"Me? What can I do?"  
"Just let me do my old job." Cass told him, smiling.  
"You mean as a waitress?" Corayle asked.  
"Yes a waitress." Geran said suddenly, "She'll serve food to the Imperial officers from the capitol building and do exactly what she was doing all the time she worked here."  
"Stealing datapads." Jaysica added, smiling.  
"Then I'll slice into them and find out what the Empire's up to right now." Geran continued.  
"I don't know. I've got a bad feeling about this Cass." Corayle said.  
"Help us Corayle. You're our only hope." Cass said.  
"Well, err, ah, not our only hope." Tobis said, "The attack can still go ahead if-"  
"Having up to date intelligence will make our job much easier." Geran said, "The Empire's main network security is too good for me to be able to slice into it in the time available."  
"What do you say Corayle?" Cass asked and Corayle sighed.  
"I must need my head examining." he said, "Yes, you can do it."  
"Thank you" I knew you'd help us!" Cass exclaimed, throwing her arms around Corayle and hugging him.

On the bridge of the *Wave Rider* Rear Admiral Aphanar activated the communication system built into her console.  
"All units report." she broadcast to the fleet now moving out from orbit around Tarlen and the captains of the other capital ships began to report their readiness.  
"*Ocean Queen* ready."  
"*Night Wraith* ready."  
"*Trading Dream* ready."  
"*Golden Empress* ready."  
"*Rancor's Claw* ready."  
"*Renegade* ready."  
"*Outrider* ready."  
"*Nova's Claw* ready."  
"*Ranger* ready."  
"*Justice* ready."

The list went on, more than thirty capital ships varying from Corellian corvettes to the massive *lucrehulk* class battleships that the Alliance had been able to amass in the sector. In addition to this the leaders of almost fifty squadrons of assorted X, Y, A and B-wing starfighters confirmed that their craft were also ready to make the jump to Estran.

"All ships reporting ready admiral." one of the *Wave Rider's* bridge crew reported.

"Very good. Commence the jump to hyperspace immediately." Admiral Aphanar ordered and outside the stars blurred into the bright tunnel of hyperspace as the mon calamari cruiser accelerated to faster than light speed, accompanied by the rest of the Alliance fleet.

When her parents had been arrested by the ISB because of their rebel activities the fifteen year old Cass had dropped out of school and taken up waitressing to support herself financially. It was when an officer from the capitol building opposite had accidentally left his datapad behind at the cantina that she had hit upon the idea of stealing datapads from customers and cloning their drives before returning them, claiming that the devices had been left behind accidentally. Although she had eventually been caught when she had tried stealing a datapad from Vay Udra she had been able to pass a great deal of information to the Alliance and now it was hoped that she would be able to deliver key information to them one last time.

Now dressed in the uniform of a waitress again Cass behaved exactly as she had done when it had been her genuine job, taking orders from Imperial personnel who rarely looked her in the face and then bringing them their food. It was at that point that she would make her move, positioning the tray she carried over the datapad so that she could covertly transfer the device into the hidden pocket inside the uniform she had brought with her. Previously she had taken these home with her to where she could clone the device's drive but this time all she had to do was take them into a storeroom that Corayle had provided to the rebels to use without bothering any of his other staff. Once Geran had copied the datapad's contents to his portable computer and transmitted any relevant data about Imperial deployments to the other rebels she would then return it to the owner under the guise of checking that everything was in order with their meals and offering refills of drinks. For his part Corayle had told the rest of his staff that the rebels were in fact agents from one of the many Imperial security services conducting a secret operation and that they were not to be disturbed, enabling the rebels to work uninterrupted.

Cass had just provided Geran with the third datapad she had been able to steal and was on her way to return it when she saw a young woman in an ISB uniform enter the cantina and she froze as she recognised the woman. Spinning around on the spot she rushed back to the room where the other rebels were waiting. "Jaysica!" she exclaimed before the other rebels could ask why she had returned so quickly. "Your sister's here."

"Jaynie?" Jaysica replied and Cass nodded.

"She's working for the ISB now isn't she?" Geran said.

"Err, yes. She, err, she turned in Captain Drame and her team." Tobis said.

"She works with the colonel's son." Jaysica added.

"Oh, err, and she can also recognise any of us." Tobis said and he pointed at Jaysica and Cass as well as himself.

"Even so, we could do with getting hold of her datapad if she's got one. Especially if she works with the deputy director of the ISB." Geran said.

"If I go back out there she might recognise me." Cass pointed out.

"She doesn't know me." Geran said as he got out of his chair, "I'll go."

"Can you steal a datapad?" Cass asked.

"No. But I can tell her that there's someone wanting to speak to her." he answered, "I'll get her to come back here and then you can be ready to ambush her. Okay?"

"We aren't going to hurt her are we? She's still my sister after all." Jaysica said nervously.

"Oh, err, no. My blaster is set on stun if we need it." Tobis replied.

"I'll be right back." Geran said before he left the room and Cass frowned.

"What's wrong?" Jaysica asked when she noticed this.

"Isn't that what people say in horror movies before they die horribly?" Cass commented.

Walking out in the serving area of the cantina Geran took a look around, searching for an ISB uniform. There were several ISB agents in the cantina at that time but most of them were men or clearly much older than Jaysica, making them too old to be her younger sister. The only young female that he saw sat at a table in an ISB uniform had dark skin and unless she or Jaysica had been adopted and no-one had bothered to tell Geran she also could not be the person he was looking for. Then he heard a woman's voice speaking with a Tarlen accent and he turned to see Jaynie standing at the counter reading from a datapad as she ordered food to take out.

"Excuse me, are you Agent Horbid." Geran asked when he walked up to her.

"Yes, that's me. What do you want sergeant?" Jaynie responded, taking note of the rank markings on Geran's uniform.

"There's an individual asking to speak to you." Geran said, leaning in closer and whispering, "She hasn't said why but she asked for you by name."

"So why didn't she come out here herself?" Jaynie said.

"I don't know." Geran said and Jaynie sighed.

"Where is she then?" Jaynie asked and Geran pointed towards the doorway leading to the kitchen and other

areas of the cantina.

"She headed in there. I think she's one of the staff."

"Okay let's check this out. You better come with me just in case it's a trap." Jaynie said and Geran smiled.

"I intended to." he replied as Jaynie started making her way towards the doorway.

Geran followed close behind Jaynie, checking that he was not being watched as he reached into his pocket and produced the compact hold out blaster he carried.

"In there." he said, pointing past Jaynie to the room where the other rebels were waiting for her.

It suddenly occurred to Jaynie that if Geran had only seen the mystery woman supposedly waiting for her in the main area of the cantina then he would not know if she was in the room he was pointing to.

"How do you-" Jaynie began, turning around but she stopped speaking as soon as Geran pressed the muzzle of his blaster against her.

"Just get inside and keep quiet." he told her and Jaynie nodded nervously.

Opening the door to the room Jaynie stepped inside and her jaw dropped when she saw her sister inside with Tobis and Cass.

"Jaysica!" she hissed.

"I said keep quiet." Geran said as he closed the door behind him, "Now if you don't mind I need this." and he snatched the datapad from her hand, "Okay Cass, get back out there." he added and while he sat back down at his computer Cass nodded and headed back out of the room.

"What are you going to do to me?" Jaynie asked, her mind focused on the muzzle of the blaster Tobis was aiming at her.

"What are we going to do with her?" Jaysica added.

"Just keep her here and keep her quiet while I work." Geran replied, "Get something to tie her up with and we'll figure out what to do with her later on. If she causes any trouble just shoot her."

"Err, perhaps you should just sit down. Jaysica there's tape in the kit bag." Tobis suggested and Jaynie sat in a vacant chair, scowling at her sister.

"You'll never get away with this." she said while Jaysica rummaged through the kit bag they had brought Geran's computer as well as an assortment of other equipment in until she found a reel of tape to secure her sister to the chair.

A pair of Corellian corvettes and a gunship were the first Alliance ships to arrive in the Estran system, escorted by a full wing of starfighters consisting of three squadrons of Y-wings. Ahead of them lay an Imperial light cruiser flanked by a pair of system patrol craft on each side positioned to monitor ships dropping out of hyperspace in the usual commercial exit point and aboard the *Renegade* Krissa turned to Malia.

"Captain we have Imperial ships in sector four." she said.

"I see them." Malia responded, looking at the console in front of her, "Send to squadron, break and attack. Shields up, fire at will."

Almost immediately there were bright red flashes of turbolaser fire from the rebel warships as their escorting fighters rushed ahead to engage the patrol craft while the Imperial crews were still hurrying to their battle stations. The cruiser's captain reacted fast enough that his ship's shields were already up when the first volley of fire from the rebel ships struck the vessel and they failed to inflict any damage. The cruiser swiftly started to return fire from its own turbolaser turrets as it ominously turned towards the rebel squadron, bringing its forward missile launchers to bear on them. However, the crew of the Corellian gunship in the centre of the rebel formation achieved a weapons lock before the crew of the cruiser were able to and a pair of powerful concussion missiles burst from the small warship's forward launch tubes and accelerated towards the cruiser. Using its lighter laser cannons, the cruiser attempted to shoot down the missiles but its crew had too little time to react and both slammed into the ship one after another and exploded, ripping open its entire forward half. Instantly the cruiser's main guns fell silent as the surviving crew members struggled to get the fires now raging aboard it under control.

"Okay that's the big one down, now let's deal with those patrol ships." Malia said, "Helm bring us around. Whichever ship is taking least fire from our fighters, that's the one I want us to hit."

"They're running captain." Krissa announced when she saw the four patrol ships all turn sharply away from the rebels, their turrets still firing at the fighters buzzing around them. So far the Y-wings had done little damage to any of the patrol ships, their laser and ion cannons were not powerful enough to do serious damage to ships not much smaller than the two Alliance corvettes and the pilots did not yet want to expend the proton torpedoes they carried just in case they were needed against more vital targets later on. On the other hand even the relatively slow Y-wing fighters were nimble enough to evade most of the fire from the patrol ships' heavy laser cannons and only two of their number had been shot down. With the three rebel capital ships now free to engage them as well the commander of the line of Imperial warships had decided that in this case discretion was the better part of valour and was seeking to save his ships from what he saw as a likely defeat.

"Hold back." Malia ordered, "If we follow them we'll only be drawn onto the bigger guns of their main fleet."

Let's wait for the admiral to get here." and then, as if summoned by Malia's words, there was a succession of flashes outside the Renegade as the main rebel fleet arrived with the *Wave Rider* at its fore.

"This is Admiral Aphanar to all ships. Commence the attack." the admiral announced from the bridge of her flagship.

Admiral Hall rushed into the command centre of the orbiting fleet headquarters. Klaxons were sounding across the station and as soon as he entered the command centre he saw the main tactical display showing a large number of hostile ships approaching Estran.

"What's going on?" he demanded.

"Admiral it's the rebel fleet. Three small ships and some fighters dropped out of hyperspace a few minutes ago and engaged one of our patrols. Now it appears their entire fleet is here. We count more than thirty rebel capital ships plus support vessels and starfighters." one of the command staff told him.

"Well what are you waiting for?" the admiral snapped at him, "Order our own ships to attack and have one of them contact other systems. We need reinforcements quickly. Then put me in touch with Moff Horatian, he needs to know what's going on." and then Admiral Hall ran to his office adjoining the main command centre, getting there just as a hologram of Moff Horatian appeared in a chair.

"What's this about admiral? I'm in a meeting with several Members of Parliament about the planetary shield. They want to know how soon it can be lowered." the moff said.

"I'm afraid you'll have to tell them not yet sir." Admiral Hall said, "The rebel fleet is attacking."

"This is just what we were looking for." Geran said, grinning as he examined the contents of Jaynie's datapad and he picked up his comlink, "Colonel Larcus, are you there?" he signalled.

"Yes lieutenant, I'm here." Vorn replied, "I've been distributing the intelligence you've gathered to our troops. It should make it a lot easier for them to target the Imperial forces and draw them out."

"Well Colonel I've got even better news. We've managed to get the datapad of Jaysica's sister. It's got a full profile on the Imperial capitol's security system. I think we can use it to help get a few of us inside the building. Then we should be able to clear the way in for the rest of you."

"Excellent timing lieutenant." Vorn said, "We've just received word that the rebel fleet has arrived and is engaging the Imperial ships defending the planet."

"Then we need to move quickly." Geran said, "They'll be locking down the capitol building soon. I'll let you know how we get on." and then he shut off his comlink and looked at Jaysica, "You need to get changed." he told her and she frowned.

"This uniform is the only set of clothes I brought with me." she said.

"I know. You need to take hers instead." Geran replied and he looked at where Jaynie was taped to her chair.

As soon as it became clear that the Alliance was launching an all out attack on Estran the Imperial ships defending the planet began to reposition themselves to defend it. The Imperial navy's system force outnumbered the Alliance's battlegroup by a factor of almost two to one in capital ships but owing to losses already taken they lacked any of the bigger vessels that they would need to meet such an attacking force head on and expect to win. This resulted in a far more cautious mindset from the various squadron and line commanders than would have otherwise been expected and they began firing on the approaching Alliance ships at extreme range, avoiding getting too close and hoping that they would be able to thin out their numbers before the rebels were able to close the distance themselves for a more traditional broadside to broadside engagement at short range where attacks could be targeted with more precision.

On the other hand the captains of vessels that carried squadrons of TIE fighters of any kind did not hesitate to launch their craft, sending them straight towards the Alliance fleet. The purpose of this was twofold, firstly the swarms of hundreds of TIE fighters that when deployed in their full numbers would heavily outnumber the Alliance starfighters would be used to provide a defensive screen against their Alliance opponents and keep their heavily armed starfighters away from the Imperial capital ships. Secondly the fighters and interceptors would not only be used to create gaps in the Alliance starfighter formations that the slower moving and more vulnerable TIE bombers could slip through to attack the Alliance capital ships, they too could attack these powerful ships in the hope that their overwhelming numbers would be able to have some effect.

Aboard the venator-class star destroyer *Firebrand*, one of the three most powerful vessels now available to the Imperial sector group, Captain Sayla Naje studied the tactical situation while holograms of the two captains subordinate to her, Captains Celtis and Yay appeared to be stood at the tactical station with her. In reality each of them was aboard her own star destroyer and looking at an identical display with holograms of the others. Captain Naje's line was not yet engaged against the rebels. her three ships were on the far side of Estran and the holographic images they were looking at were being relayed over the horizon by other Imperial starships.

"I don't know if they planned it this way but the rebels caught us on the far side of the planet when they dropped out of hyperspace." Captain Naje said, "Admiral Hall has ordered us to break off from our assigned



patrol station and engage them."

"That ship is the *Night Wraith*." Captain Yay said, pointing to where the tactical display showed an Imperial-class star destroyer operating under rebel control. With the recent destruction of most of the Imperial sector group's most powerful ships now only the Alliance had such a vessel operational in the sector, "We've a score to settle with that ship."

The three venator-class star destroyers had been engaged by the stolen Imperial-class ship before.

Masquerading as the flagship of the late Fleet Admiral Vretan, the captain of the stolen star destroyer had been able to get in close to the smaller ships and taken them completely by surprise and they had suffered serious damage before the rebels were finally forced to withdraw by the arrival of a larger Imperial force.

"Yes we do Louisa, but I'm not going to let revenge dictate our strategy." Captain Naje said, "I want us to deploy our fighters in a screen ahead of us. It's essential that we keep those rebel starfighters away from our ships. We'll make a pass along the left flank of the rebel fleet and launch our bombers as we pass. With any luck they'll be able to take out that star destroyer without us needing to risk our own ships. Understood?"

"Yes captain." Captain Celtis responded while Captain Yay frowned.

"Louisa?" Captain Naje said, knowing that Captain Yay's preferred tactic was to close to point blank range with her ship as quickly as possible. Given the amount of firepower available to the Alliance in this instance though, such an act was likely to be suicide.

"Understood captain." Captain Yay replied.

"Good. Then launch your fighters and let's engage the enemy." Captain Naje ordered.

"Admiral I have enemy ships in sector fourteen." the *Wave Rider*'s comscan officer reported when the three venator-class ships came into view, their massive dorsal hangar bay doors already open as they disgorged the hundreds of TIEs of various kinds that each of the star destroyers carried.

"Order our frigates to form a screen between us and those fighters." Admiral Aphanar ordered. Then tell Captain Kase aboard the *Night Wraith* to take his ship and the *Justice* and attack those star destroyers from their starboard side flank. Have the *Ocean Queen* form up with us and we will attack them from port. We'll deal with them ourselves while the rest of the fleet presses on."

## 20.

The information contained in the datapads Cass stole for Geran to copy at the cantina enabled the troops gathered to create the distraction that would keep enough Imperial troops occupied for the small rebel strike team to penetrate the shield control room and disrupt its operation. The surface attacks in Estran City began small, with individuals or small bands of people in civilian clothing hurling improvised bombs at Imperial patrols and then fleeing before their weapons even exploded. As expected this drew more Imperial troops from their barracks to try and maintain order on the streets and in some instance the patrols gave chase after coming under attack.

This was also part of the plan to keep the Empire distracted and better equipped troops were lying in wait, suddenly firing from the windows and roofs of empty buildings or the ends of alleyways and side streets that were too narrow for large Imperial armoured vehicles to fit down.

Accompanying a unit led by Corva Dratt, Tharun and Anzar watched an Imperial platoon advancing on foot along a street in the aftermath of a brief skirmish that had seen several stormtroopers killed by sniper fire before they withdrew.

"Just like you said." Corva said, "They soon return and in greater numbers."

"Can't let the taxpayers think all that spending on the military is going to waste." Tharun commented.

"Check out the unit at the back." Anzar added, "The comlink is there."

Corva and Tharun then both pointed their macrobinoculars towards the pair of soldiers bringing up the rear of the platoon and saw the telltale signs of it being the command element. The officer in command wore the same armour and flared helmet as the rest of his men but he still had the rank badge of an army lieutenant fixed to his chest plate. It was not the officer that interested the rebels though, it was the man standing right behind him with the large comlink unit on his back.

"Typical officer thinking. Put the regular troops in front of him." Tharun said and Anzar frowned at him.

"Gee, thanks." he said and Tharun shrugged.

"I call it like I see it." he responded. Then he looked at Corva and added, "So do you think that you can get that comlink set?"

"Easy. Watch this." Corva replied and he turned and nodded to one of the mercenaries under his command. This man then rushed from the roof and shortly after the firing began as more of the hidden mercenaries began shooting at the Imperial troops.

A few of the surprised soldiers were cut down before they had the chance to react but most of them were able to get to cover as they searched for where the firing was coming from. Corva's men were well disciplined though and each time they fired from within the building they pulled back from the window and moved to another one before opening fire again. This lowered their rate of fire considerably but it also left the Imperial troops not only unsure of where they were exactly but also the number of their attackers.

The platoon's command unit took cover with the rest of the soldiers, their officer leading his second behind a row of commercial trash containers. Once Corva had seen where the command section had gone he also hurried from the roof, using a fire escape ladder to get to the ground on the far side of the building from where the fighting was taking place. He then broke into a run and sprinted around the building so that he emerged behind the platoon command team and he peered around the corner to look at them. Corva then put on a breath mask that covered his entire face and produced a stun gas grenade from his belt. Pulling the pin from this he hurled it towards the two Imperial soldiers and even while it was still flying through the air he drew his knife from its scabbard. The grenade bounced once before it went off and a thick cloud of choking gas began to build up around the two man command unit. The moment the gas was released Corva ran from behind the corner towards the two men that now struggled to put on their own breath masks while the cloud of gas itself kept him hidden from the rest of the Imperial troops.

Charging through the cloud of gas the first soldier that Corva encountered was the officer. He had just about been able to put on his mask and clear it of gas when Corva appeared and before the officer could retrieve the blaster he had dropped while putting on the mask he slashed at the man's throat with his knife. With the officer out of the way Corva could now turn his attention to the platoon sergeant with the comlink set. This other man had also got his mask on by this point and even managed to recover his rifle, however Corva was so close that he was able to push the blaster aside as it was turned in his direction and then he thrust the blade of his knife up under the soldier's protective chest plate. Corva then heard a muffled cough from under the soldier's breath mask as the man went limp and Corva twisted the knife as he withdrew it to open up the wound and finish off the soldier even quicker. Having used only his knife to kill the two soldiers Corva had avoided alerting any of the rest of the platoon to his presence and after returning his knife to its sheath he was able to remove the comlink set from the dead man at his feet, strap it to his own back and then run back around the rear of the building without any of the remaining Imperial soldiers knowing he was there.

"One comlink set." Corva told Tharun and Anzar as he pulled his breath mask from his face.

"Great, now we can use that to see who's being ordered to go where." Tharun said as Anzar took the comlink set from Corva, "Should make keeping out of the Empire's way easier."

"Captain we've got enemy vessels closing from port and starboard." one of the *Firebrand's* comscan officer called out.

Looking from side to side through the viewports at the front of the bridge Captain Naje could see the flashes of turbolaser fire coming from the approaching rebel ships. With the *Firebrand* located at the centre of her attack line's formation and the rebel ships closing in from the sides, her vessel was so far untouched by the fire coming from the rebels but she could make out the impacts of the energy blasts against the shields of both the *Ferocious* and the *Falchion*.

"Get me Captains Yay and Celtis, I need a status report from them." Captain Naje ordered.

"Putting you through now captain." another comscan technician responded and holograms of the other two captains appeared beside Captain Naje.

"Report." she said.

"Shields holding for now." Captain Celtis responded first, "Fortunately those mon cal ships can't focus enough of their firepower straight ahead to be a threat from this range but we need to do something about them soon."

"Those damned rebels are hitting us with our our kriffing ships. We've got some minor structural damage and the starboard hangar access is out of commission." Captain Yay added, "If we don't do something quickly that damage is going to get worse. I recommend we go on the attack."

Captain Naje had expected a suggestion like this from Captain Yay. Always favouring aggressive tactics, her first instinct was always to attack.

"She's right captain." Captain Celtis said. Normally more cautious than her opposite number aboard the *Falchion*, the captain of the *Ferocious* generally opted to let her fighters do the work where possible while keeping her own ship further back to support them from a distance. On this occasion Captain Naje agreed with Captain Yay as well though. Once in an optimum firing position the four rebel capital ships would be able to tear apart her line while their own fire would be split between a superior number of ships.

"Helm bring us to port." she ordered, "I want the entire line to turn towards those two mon calamari vessels and accelerate to attack speed. Take us straight between them and tell the gunnery crews to fire at will."

"About damned time." Captain Yay said, smiling before her hologram faded away as she shut off the link between the two ships.

In unison the three venator-class star destroyers turned towards the two MC-80 cruisers bearing down on them and began to accelerate. At the same time the screen of fighters they had launched split, some also breaking off from their run on the main body of the Alliance fleet to maintain a screen ahead of their mother ships while the rest, including all of the TIE bomber variants continued on their previous heading, aiming to get among the Alliance capital ships with their heavy weapons.

"They're turning towards us." Admiral Aphanar said when she saw the three star destroyers change their heading and come straight for the two MC80 star cruisers.

"Admiral they're locking onto us." the comscan officer called out.

"Take evasive action. Fire all ion cannons at that lead ship, instruct turbolaser crews to-" the admiral began before the three venator-class ships unleashed a wave of proton torpedoes from their forward launchers.

"Incoming!" the *Wave Rider's* first officer called out.

Acting under the admiral's orders the gunnery crews of the ion cannon batteries aboard both mon calamari ships focused their fire on the *Firebrand*, the admiral having correctly identified it as the lead ship of the Imperial line. Passing unhindered through the star destroyer's shields the disruptive energy blasts struck the *Firebrand's* hull and lightning danced across the surface, the interior lights flickering as the power grid was disrupted. At the same as this was happening the two mon calamari ships' turbolaser crews were firing their weapons as rapidly as possible into the space in between the two opposing sides, attempting to intercept the proton torpedoes as they raced towards them. Each hit on a torpedo produced a brilliant flash of light as the stored energy was released prematurely but there were too many torpedoes in the combined spread for them all to be shot down in time and four of the weapons still managed to strike their targets.

The first torpedo hit the *Wave Rider's* prow, blowing a large hole in the very front of the ship and destroying the sensor clusters and several weapon batteries located there. The second torpedo hit the *Ocean Queen* amidships and filled its docking bay with flames before the magnetic shield containing the atmosphere inside failed and the bay was violently decompressed, the flames shooting out into space with the air in a short lived column of bright orange. Then the third and fourth torpedoes hit the *Wave Rider* together. One of them impacted at the base of one of the ships wing assemblies, causing an explosion that shut down one of the cruiser's massive ion drives right before the other slammed into the cruiser's hull close to its bridge.

The explosion of this final torpedo sent a shock wave through the surrounding areas of the ship and several crew members were hurled across the bridge as it was rocked by secondary explosions.

"Admiral we're-" the first officer began as he recovered his composure, having narrowly avoided being hit by shrapnel from an exploding console himself but he stopped talking when he turned towards where Admiral Aphanar sat and saw her slumped forwards in her chair, "Get a medic in here!" he yelled, rushing across the bridge to where she sat and he saw the blood pouring from a wound in her side where a piece of shrapnel had struck her and penetrated deeply. Though she was still alive it was obvious that Admiral Aphanar was in no shape to continue commanding the fleet and the first officer knew that she had to be replaced quickly to stop the offensive falling apart. Fortunately the admiral's control console remained intact and the first officer activated the communication system to address the rest of the fleet.

"This is Commander Asran aboard the *Wave Rider*. Admiral Aphanar has been injured and is out of action. Our ship is badly damaged we cannot continue to fight effectively. Captain Kase is next in the chain of command and I am turning over control of the fleet to him." he announced.

The force assembled to attack the shield generator on the ground had massed in dead ground ten kilometres from the installation and the troops were making the most of what was likely to be their last chance for a break before the operation was to take place.

Mack Hurnon, the professional gambler who also acted as unit medic for Grayce's team looked up and waved as the *Artist's Impression* flew overhead, followed by the *Beauty Queen*. Then he looked at Grayce herself who was watching as the two ships sped towards the shield generator. Like Mack Grayce wore the uniform of a medic in the Imperial army

"There they go. Not long now." he said and when he noticed the blank expression on Grayce's face he added, "What's wrong?"

"I've just got a bad feeling about this." she replied, "Like I'm not going to see her again. Or my husband for that matter."

"No time for thinking about things beyond our control." Dayle said as he walked up to the pair, "If the ships are going in then we need to move as well."

All around the rebel and mercenary troops embarked on their vehicles again and there was the sound of repulsorlifts as their engines were started up.

Meanwhile in the cockpit of the *Artist's Impression* Crombowda sat at the controls while Trent manned the turret.

"Attention unidentified craft you are approaching restricted airspace. Increase altitude to above two hundred metres and break off your approach." a stern sounding voice announced over the communication system and the wookiee growled.

"Yeah I heard it too buddy." Trent responded, "Time we raised the shields I think." and Crombowda activated the ship's shields, focusing them forwards.

"Trent this is Inra." Inra's voice said, transmitting from the *Beauty Queen*, "I'm raising our shields. Are you ready to go?"

"Affirmative. Ready and able. Gun charged and shields raised." Trent answered.

"Good. Then let's do this. Jamming their comms now. I've got the lead." Inra said and Trent frowned.

"You would have." he muttered, not caring whether the communication link between the two ships picked up the comment.

The *Beauty Queen* suddenly pulled ahead of the *Artist's Impression* as Inra raced towards the shield generator installation. As soon as the target came into view the control console began to produce a warning sound, letting her know that someone was attempting to lock onto the ship with a surface to air weapon system.

"Sen find that gun and kill it." Inra ordered and in the freighter's turret Sen searched for the weapon emplacement targeting them.

"Got it." he said when he found what he was looking for, a CoMar tri-tracker anti-aircraft battery. The weapon's advanced tracking system made it accurate but slow to lock on to a target and Sen took maximum advantage of this weakness, firing his own heavy laser cannon as rapidly as he could towards it. The barrage of energy blasts sent the two man Imperial gun crew diving for cover before one of Sen's shots penetrated its armour plating and it was blown apart.

"Nice shooting Sen." Inra said as the *Beauty Queen* sped over the shield generator and she turned her head to look at the large energy emitting dish pointing upwards to act as the projector for the shield segment this generator created, "Trent, you're up next."

"We're right behind you." Trent responded, lining his own laser cannon up on the perimeter fence. Like Sen before him Trent fired a sustained burst of energy blasts from his weapon, aiming them at the ground and blasting a series of craters in the dirt before one struck the energised fence itself and there was a brilliant flash as a hole was blown in the barrier and Crombowda roared when he saw this.

"That's one buddy." Trent said, smiling, "Now take us round again and let's make a few more holes."

The two starships began to circle around. Crombowda kept the speed of the *Artist's Impression* high and this

resulted in a wide turning circle that delayed the ship's second pass over the facility. However, Inra opted to decelerate and spin the *Beauty Queen* around while maintaining the same heading until the ship was pointing back towards the shield generator, at which point she accelerated once more and headed back towards it. Once again Inra's flight controls alerted her to the Imperial defenders trying to lock onto her ship and when the alarm indicated a lock she turned sharply to try and break it. However, the Imperial anti-aircraft batteries were designed specifically to take such manoeuvres into account even from vessels more agile than a light freighter and moments later a laser blast struck the *Beauty Queen*.

"We're hit!" Inra exclaimed over the intercom.

"How bad?" Sen responded as he returned fire, narrowly missing the weapon emplacement that had just fired at them.

"Not bad, the shields took most of it." Inra told him right before there was another flash as a third tri-tracker opened fire and the *Beauty Queen* was hit again, this shot striking the freighter's unshielded aft section and there was a massive explosion that rocked the freighter.

"Inra are you okay?" Trent asked when he saw the explosion and then watched as the *Beauty Queen* began to lose altitude, trailing smoke behind it. Already flying as low as she dared to try and avoid detection, the ship ploughed right into the ground and smashed through the perimeter fence and there was a shower of sparks as the barrier's power discharged through the freighter's hull. The *Beauty Queen* continued to skid along the ground after crashing through the fence, leaving a deep furrow in its wake before crashing through the fence again on the far side of the perimeter. This time the *Beauty Queen* had already lost a great deal of momentum and instead of just breaking through the fence the freighter ripped the supporting posts out of the ground and dragged the fence itself along with it for another twenty metres before finally coming to a halt.

"The *Beauty Queen* is down!" Trent exclaimed while Crombowda roared out loud at the sight of the wrecked freighter. His words were carried to the rebels on the ground by the Artist's Impression's communication system and Dayle responded immediately.

"We saw her go in. Can you tell if there are survivors?" he asked.

"Not from here commander." Trent answered as he lined his cannon up on the first of the two tri-tracker emplacements that had brought down the *Beauty Queen*. The complicated targeting procedure of the anti-aircraft weapons limited their rate of fire and Trent was keen to take out both of them before they could fire on his ship as well. Squeezing the trigger of his cannon he fired a rapid burst of shots at the ground based weapon and smiled as he saw it explode, "Scratch one AA battery. just one more to go."

"Captain you need to get out of there." Dayle ordered, "With the *Beauty Queen* down the generator's communications aren't being jammed any more. There'll be TIEs on the way for sure now. Leave this to us."

"If you say so commander." Trent said before switching to the intercom, "Okay Crombowda you heard the commander, let's get out of here." and the wookiee roared back at him as he turned the *Artist's Impression* away from the shield generator and flew away from it as quickly as possible before the remaining anti-aircraft battery could lock onto the ship.

In the back of the transport shared by Dayle and Grayce's teams Grayce looked at Dayle.

"Do we divert and check out the *Beauty Queen*?" she asked but Dayle shook his head.

"No, we can't risk it. We need to hit that shield generator. If Inra and Sen survived the crash they'll have to wait a while longer for rescue." he said and then he leant towards the vehicle's driver, "Tell the others that the time has come. Commence firing." he ordered.

Finally given the permission to fire they had been waiting for, the mercenaries began their attack with mortars fired at the shield generator facility that was still out of sight. Knowing that the *Beauty Queen* was located close to the base perimeter, the mercenaries concentrated their fire on the far side of the perimeter hoping to widen the breaches in the power fence around it.

Guessing that this bombardment was only the preliminary stage of a ground assault that would culminate in a direct infantry attack the commanding officer had his garrison prepare to deploy to pre-prepared defensive positions, braving the mortar bombardment as they ran from the bunker in which the shield generator was housed to the compact trenches that were designed to provide cover for a squad of troops each. The explosive bombardment suddenly switched to canisters of smoke that unlike the explosive rounds were targeted all around the facility, covering it and the ground outside the perimeter with a thick cloud of smoke before the rebel vehicles came into view.

The sound of the multiple repulsorlift engines told the defending troops which way the next phase of the attack was coming from and they took cover in their trenches as blaster bolts came flying at them through the smoke obscuring their vision. The Imperial army troops present could do little about this but the advanced systems built into the helmets of the stormtroopers present enabled them to see the approaching vehicles with their mounted heavy weaponry and they opened fire immediately. Two of the mercenary speeders exploded, their burning wreckage tumbling across the ground while the others pressed their attack. Those carrying heavy weaponry continued firing on the dug in Imperial troops while the transports raced ahead to deploy the troops they carried as close to the Imperial positions as they could before deploying the

mercenaries they carried.

## 21.

Captain Kase looked around the bridge of his ship, the Imperial-class *Night Wraith* and saw his crew looking back at him now that he had been named as the new fleet commander. Then he looked forwards again through the bridge viewports to where the glowing engines of the three venator-class ships they were pursuing could be seen.

"Order the *Justice* to focus all fire on the ship to the right of that formation." he ordered, "I want our batteries to target the ship to the left. Helm keep us close to the *Justice*. If those venators can separate us then they'll be able to out gun us each individually."

Alongside the *Night Wraith* the venator-class star destroyer *Justice* adjusted its heading slightly to face directly towards the vessel assigned as its target. The ship's captain, Owen Halowan stood by the tactical display to the rear of the bridge and listened as his command crew called out their readiness to attack. "Torpedoes locked on target captain." the senior gunnery officer reported and Captain Halowan nodded. "Fire torpedoes. Full spread." he ordered and almost immediately four proton torpedoes burst from the ship's forward mounted launchers and accelerated towards the *Falchion*. The Imperial vessel had no weapons that could be brought to bear directly astern and the rebel ship was so close when it fired its torpedoes that there was no time for Captain Yay to order her ship to come about. With a clear lock achieved by the *Justice*, all four of its torpedoes struck the *Falchion*. One of them hit the secondary bridge that functioned as a flight control centre for the star destroyer's vast compliment of fighter craft while the other three all hit ion drive units. This produced a series of explosions that rocked the entire vessel.

"Damage report!" Captain Yay yelled over the sound of klaxons on her bridge as she picked herself up off the floor where she had fallen.

"Secondary bridge destroyed captain. Also we have fires on four decks, bulkheads have dropped to prevent decompression and we've lost seventy percent of our engine power." the first officer reported from one of the crew pits.

"The engines. Kriff." Captain Yay hissed, knowing that losing that much power meant that her ships would barely be able to manoeuvre, let alone keep up with the rest of the line, "Get me Line Captain Naje." she added.

"I have Captain Naje for you now captain. Audio only though, our holographic system is out as well." a comscan operator responded and Captain Yay frowned.

"Louisa are you okay over there?" Captain Naje asked and even though she was not visible to her superior Captain Yay nodded.

"Just about, we've lost our flight control bridge though. When our fighters return you and Jayan will have to deal with them." she replied.

"What about the rest of your ship? What state are you in?" Captain Naje said.

"Our engines are damaged, we can't keep up with you." Captain Yay responded, looking at the crewmen rushing back and forth on the bridge as they attempted to determine the full extent of the damage to the *Falchion*'s systems.

"Can you make repairs?" Captain Naje asked and Captain Yay looked at her first officer who shook his head at her.

"No captain, our engines are gone. We need to pull out and hope the rebels don't come after us."

"Very well, the *Firebrand* and *Ferocious* will cover your retreat."

"Thank you. Good hunting Captain Naje." Captain Yay said and then as the channel was cut off she looked towards one of the crew pits, "Helm, get us out of here. Best speed and keep us the hell away from those rebel ships."

"Excellent shooting Captain Halowan." Captain Kase said to himself as he saw the *Falchion* limping away while both the *Firebrand* and *Ferocious* began to come around to face the two Alliance star destroyers.

"Coming into range now captain." the *Night Wraith*'s comscan officer announced and Captain Kase nodded.

"Target, maximum firepower." he ordered and the star destroyer's turrets opened fire in unison on the *Ferocious*.

Geran and the rebels with him double checked that they were not being watched as Tobis slammed shut their speeder's storage compartment, trapping Jaynie inside bound and gagged with tape.

"Will she be okay in there?" Jaysica asked, now wearing her sister's ISB uniform.

"Oh I'm sure she'll be fine." Geran said, "Now let's see about getting inside that building before all the fun starts."

Just then there was the sound of an explosion in the distance and the rebels turned to see a plume of smoke

rising up in the morning sky.

"Looks like it's already starting." Cass said.

"Oh, err, isn't it too early for the larger scale attacks?" Tobis asked and Geran nodded.

"Much." he said, "Unless of course not everyone attacking the Empire is part of our plan."

"What do you mean?" Jaysica asked.

"I mean that any number of anti-Imperial groups could be deciding to fight back." Geran said.

"And these groups would target any small and vulnerable Imperial unit, right?" Cass said.

"Yes, probably." Geran answered.

"Say like four people in Imperial uniforms standing by a speeder in a side street." Cass added and Geran's eyes widened as the rebels all looked around again, this time looking for more than just any passing Imperial patrols.

"I really think we should get inside Imperial headquarters right now." Geran said.

The four rebels then hurried along the street towards the Imperial capitol, all the while watching for any signs that they were about to come under attack whether by Imperial troops or insurgents. When the capitol came into view the rebels saw that there were numerous other Imperial officers and staff rushing towards it, being waved through the entrances by the security troops on guard.

"Ready with that ID?" Geran asked and Jaysica nodded.

"I've got it right here." she replied and she reached into her tunic for Jaynie's security pass. However, as she was focusing on the pass she failed to notice the kerb in front of her and she tripped over it, knocking Cass over as well and both women squealed as they fell forwards. Cass landed face down on the pavement in front of the capitol building while Jaysica landed on top of her, "It's alright, I'm okay." Jaysica said as Tobis reached down to help to her feet.

"I'm not." Cass added, rolling over to reveal the blood pouring from her nose.

"What's going on here?" a voice demanded and the rebels looked around to see one of the stormtrooper patrols standing close by. Having heard the two rebels scream and seeing them fall the armoured soldiers had rushed to make sure that they were not under attack.

"It was an accident." Jaysica explained, "Look, here's my identification."

"We don't need to see your identification." the stormtrooper squad leader said, "Move along." and he waved the rebels towards the main entrance to the capitol building.

"We'll get them inside." Geran said, smiling at the stormtrooper but the soldier was already turning aside,

"Come on, let's go." Geran added and the rebels hurried up the steps towards the entrance to the building.

They came to a halt just outside the door and Jaysica looked at the security pass in her hand.

"Tobis do you think this will work?" she asked.

"Oh, err." Tobis replied, uncertain of what to say.

"Of course it will work. You and your sister look similar enough that they'll wave you through. Trust me."

Geran said.

"And then I find another way to let you in." Jaysica said, smiling.

"Exactly." Geran said.

"Near a bathroom." Cass commented as she dabbed a handkerchief at the blood still coming from her nose. Jaysica then walked up to the main entrance and went inside. The rest of the team instead turned away and began to walk around the building, still within the grounds but without having to approach any of the security checkpoints. Inside the building Jaysica found herself standing in a queue behind a number of other Imperial personnel waiting to get through security and looking down the line she saw that as each person got to the front they presented their security pass to a guard who then scanned it before allowing them to enter the rest of the building.

"This is going to take ages." Jaysica muttered to herself as she watched how long it took each person to get through security and estimated the number of people in front of her in the queue.

"Excuse me ma'am but you're in the wrong queue." a voice said from behind Jaysica and when she looked around she saw an Imperial technician point towards a much shorter line nearby. A sign above this indicated that it was for commissioned officers and she was about to point out that she was not an officer when she remembered that she was wearing Jaynie's uniform and that even a junior ISB agent was considered to hold a commission.

"Silly me. Thanks." Jaysica replied and she dashed across to the much shorter and faster moving queue.

It then took just a few minutes for Jaysica to reach the front of the line and she held out Jaynie's security pass for the guard. Then as the guard placed the pass over his scanner she smiled at the nearby stormtroopers.

"Cleared. Next." the guard said, having not even bothered to give the data the security pass brought up on his monitor more than a cursory glance.

"Thank you corporal." Jaysica said as she hurried past the check point.

"Hey!" the guard suddenly called out and Jaysica froze in panic, her hand moving towards the pocket where her hold out blaster was concealed, but as she turned around she saw the guard holding out the security



pass, "You forgot this." he said and then as she took it from him he added, "And you do know that the ISB offices are that way, don't you?"

"Sorry. Still getting used to the layout. I'm new here." Jaysica replied before she hurried off in the direction that the guard had pointed her in, passing through a doorway just moments before several security agents from the Parliament of Estran escorted Lord Torr, Lady Sharva and Couran in through the main doors and up to a reception desk.

"My name is Lord Torr and we are here to speak to the moff. We are expected." Lord Torr told the woman behind the desk.

The transport that carried the rebels of Dayle and Grayce's teams had held back from the main assault, its driver waiting to see how the fight developed.

"It looks pretty quiet to the west side of the perimeter right now commander." the transport's driver told Dayle. "Good, then take us there." Dayle ordered before he looked at the other rebels inside the transport, "Okay this is it. Helmets on, we're going in."

Around him the rebels disguised as stormtroopers, Coll, Marse, Tel and Druvvon all put on their helmets, covering their features entirely. Druvvon wore only the top half of a stormtrooper's armour, there not being any produced in a size that would fit a member of his species. Rather than walking into the bunker, the snivvian was going to be carried and Grayce, Mack and Brak began to unpack a stretcher that once assembled Druvvon climbed onto and lay down while a blanket was placed over him and strapped in position so that nothing below his chest was visible as Mack and Brak picked him up.

"Make sure to groan when we get seen Druvvon." Grayce said, "Remember you've had your legs blown off by a mortar bomb."

"Ready to lean on me Coll?" Marse asked, looking at the armour worn by the scout that had already been damaged by blaster fire in several places before Coll had even put it on.

"Yep." Coll responded simply and as the transport's hatch opened Coll and Marse put their arms around one another's shoulders so that it looked as if Marse was helping Coll to remain upright.

"Okay let's move." Dayle said, rushing out of the transport and behind him the other disguised rebels followed.

The outline of the shield generator bunker was visible through the smoke ahead and the rebels headed steadily towards it, the sound of battle coming from several different directions before a voice suddenly called out through the smoke.

"Halt! Who are you and where are you going?" it said and when Dayle looked towards its source he saw a unit of Imperial army soldiers in a trench.

"Casualty party." Dayle responded, "My men have been hit and they needs treatment." and then Druvvon suddenly let out an unconvincing scream, "Urgently." Dayle added, wincing at the bad acting.

"Tone it down." Grayce whispered, leaning over Druvvon as if she was checking on his injuries.

"Go on then, hurry." the army trooper replied and Dayle nodded to the other rebels before leading them past the trench.

They encountered another set of guards, this time a pair of stormtroopers at the entrance to the bunker and Dayle ran towards them.

"Let us past, we have casualties." he told them.

"Yes sir." one replied when they saw his black uniform and the rank badge on his chest and Dayle and the guards stepped aside for the other disguised rebels to pass between them as they entered the bunker.

"Watch out for infiltrators." Dayle told the two guards, "We were ambushed by rebel troops inside the perimeter. We need to seal the bunker."

"Yes sir." the stormtrooper said again and the two guards moved just far enough away from the doorway that Dayle could close it behind him before looking at Brak.

"Okay Brak, do your thing. I don't want anyone coming in that way before we're ready." he said.

"Yes commander." Brak replied as he and Mack set down the stretcher and then from a pouch on his belt that was incorrectly marked as a medical kit he took a set of electronic tools. It took him just a few seconds to remove the cover from the control panel to the door and expose the circuitry behind it and then he quickly cross connected a pair of components in different places on the main board, tricking the system into thinking that it had just received a priority security signal from the bunker's command centre. From the other side of the door there then came a rumbling sound as the extra reinforced blast door rolled shut, "It's done." he said, "No-one's getting in through there until we release the door from here."

"Good." Dayle replied as he took out his comlink and lifted it to his mouth, "Vorn, we're in." he transmitted.

Jaysica looked around nervously as she searched the ground level of the capitol building for a suitable means of entrance for the rebels waiting outside. She needed a way in that was sufficiently isolated that no-one would notice when it was opened for just long enough to let them inside. Then they could find a entrance more suitable for a larger and heavily armed raiding party. The problem was that although most of the rooms

on the outside of this level had windows or doors that Jaysica would be able to bypass the security on for a minute or two without triggering any alarms the increase in activity as personnel were called in when they should have off duty meant that more rooms were in use than normal to give them enough space to work in. After failing to find a suitable vacant room Jaysica decided to try her luck taking advantage of her disguise. "Excuse me." she said when she saw a pair of technicians pushing an equipment cart ahead of her, however neither of them turned around and she was about to give up when she decided otherwise, "You there!" she yelled and the technicians then turned to face her, snapping to attention when they saw her uniform and rank badges. Jaysica marched towards the two technicians and despite their both being significantly taller than her she stood in front of them as if trying to stare them down. while they faced forwards, "I need a private office on this floor." she said, "Direct me to one."

"What resources do you require ma'am?" one of the technicians asked, anxious to avoid being brought up on disciplinary charges by an officer of the ISB.

"Just privacy. Oh and a window. I do so like natural light." Jaysica told him.

"Room one-one-three-eight is available but it has no network connection at the moment." the other technician said.

"That's okay. I don't require network access. Just privacy." Jaysica said as she looked around, "Now which way is room on, err."

"One-one-three-eight is this way. We were just heading there to fix the network ports." the first technician told her and Jaysica nodded.

"Thank you. You may return to your duties but stay clear of room one-one-three-eight." she said.

"Yes ma'am." the technician said before they both turned around and headed back down the corridor.

Jaysica waited until they were out of sight before she hurried along the corridor in the direction they had pointed out to her until she found the room labelled 1138 and opened the door.

The room beyond was a meeting chamber that had open wall panels where wiring trailed out from behind them. None of this mattered to Jaysica though and she rushed over to the nearest window. As expected this was fitted with an alarm sensor that would be triggered if the window was opened more than a few centimetres to allow fresh air inside and Jaysica took her tools from inside her tunic before beginning to work on disabling this.

It took just a few minutes for her to rig the alarm sensors so that they would register the window as closed now matter how wide it was opened and then she pushed it open at the same time as she took out her comlink.

"Tobis can you hear me?" she said into the device softly even though she was alone.

"Oh, err, yes. Yes I can hear you." Tobis responded.

"Tobis I've opened a window on the south side of the building." Jaysica said.

"Okay, err, we'll be there in five minutes." Tobis said and then he shut off his comlink.

Jaysica stood by the window and looked outside, waiting for the other rebels to arrive. When they finally did come into view they walked along the side of the building at a casual pace with Cass in front of Geran and Tobis. Their path took them past numerous other rooms that were occupied and their speed and formation gave the impression of a junior officer carrying out an inspection while escorted by a pair of infantrymen. Only in the last few metres where there were no windows did they break into a run before reaching the window Jaysica had opened for them.

"Cass you first." Geran said before he and Tobis helped her through the window. Then they followed one after another and Jaysica closed the window behind them.

"No what?" she asked.

"Now we find a way into this building big enough for us to get everyone in through." Geran said as he looked around, "Now where do I plug into the network? We should be inside most of their computer security here."

"Ah." Jaysica said and Geran frowned.

"What?" he asked.

"Well the reason this room is empty is that the network connection isn't working." Jaysica answered.

"Oh great." Geran said, "So now we need to go and find a working connection."

"Couldn't we just find a suitable door ourselves?" Cass suggested.

"That could work but I'd rather know what we were getting ourselves into in terms of security." Geran replied. Then he sighed and added, "Oh well I suppose we can do both. Jaysica I may need your help in getting through security so you need to come with me. Tobis, you take Cass and see if you can find a door that's suitable and at least relatively unguarded. At least one way ought to work."

## 22.

Despite having an appointment the three members of Estran's nobility had not been shown straight into the moff's office despite and instead had to wait outside it until the doors opened and Moff Horatian himself appeared.

"I'm sorry to have kept you waiting." he said, "I was just being briefed on the current security situation. You can come in now though." and he disappeared back into his office.

The three nobles followed him inside and found chairs waiting for them. In addition to the moff, General Dern and Rodge Larrs were also present and a hologram of the city was being projected into the middle of the room.

"I've asked General Dern to sit in on this meeting so that you can be properly apprised of the military situation on the planet. I would have asked Director Helios to join us as well but he is otherwise engaged right now so Rodge Larrs will fill you in on what our intelligence can tell us." the moff said.

"And what is the military situation?" Lady Sharva asked and Moff Horatian looked at General Dern.

Standing up the general pointed towards the map, picking out coloured lights that blinked in numerous places.

"The red dots represent attacks on Imperial personnel and property." he began, "The yellow are other incidents believed to be associated with this sudden insurgency but not directly targeted at the Empire. Some of these are against local government targets and others against civilians that have a connection to one or the other."

"And the green?" Lady Sharva asked, noticing a number of green dots among the red and yellow.

"Those are the locations I have deployed forces to. From them they can control key areas of the city." General Dern replied.

"It looks like you've gathered quite an army in the city general." Lord Torr commented.

"Yes, it meant reducing the size of the garrison here and pulling in troops from other areas but we currently have more than two thousand troops on the street, including armoured units and some artillery for support." the general said and Lady Sharva frowned.

"Artillery?" she said, "Isn't that a bit drastic?"

"Not really." Rodge replied before the general could speak up, "The rebels have been making use of disused buildings in several areas to attack our troops from and we suspect that they are using others as forward operating bases. Our artillery can be used to take these out in one go before we sift through the rubble to see what's left afterwards."

"An artillery strike to deal with a sniper?" Couran said, "My you are taking this situation seriously general. But to my untrained ears it does sound a tad extreme."

"It may sound extreme but it is quick and efficient." General Dern said, "Of course we're limiting these strikes to areas where the collateral damage can be contained for now but we have the capability to carry out larger barrages if needed."

"This is all very important of course, but we were sent here to enquire about the planetary shield." Lady Sharva said.

"The rebel fleet is currently attacking the planet Lady Sharva." Rodge reminded her, "We cannot lower the shield at this time."

"Maybe not, but what about afterwards?" Lord Torr asked, "Our constituents are eager for life to return to normal."

"Then you may assure your constituents that we have plans in place to set up a shield gate once the immediate emergency is over. This will enable us to provide safe passage through the shield while still guaranteeing the security of Estran." Moff Horatian replied.

"Well that's that dealt with. Problem solved." Couran said, smiling.

"Not quite. There is still the matter of the local rebels." General Dern said.

"Local rebels?" Lady Sharva said.

"You don't think that the rebels' so-called military is behind all of this do you Lynn?" Moff Horatian responded and he pointed at the map showing the extent of anti-Imperial activity.

"Our intelligence reports that there is a core of a few hundred people carrying out these attacks within the city." Rodge said.

"In addition to that there is another group attacking one of our shield generators and a larger number of irregular troops being used to carry out the more minor attacks before withdrawing. What is important to note is the degree of co-ordination there appears to be between these groups. We don't believe that the rebels could have infiltrated a large scale military force onto Estran and that means that this army came from here." General Dern added.

"Local rebel cells?" Lord Torr suggested.

"Some perhaps, but the larger units are working too well together to be made up of small cells suddenly brought together for this operation. Added to which they have heavy weapons that the rebellion is unlikely to leave in the hands of local cells instead of reassigning them to their central forces." General Dern said.

"So where did they appear from?" Lady Sharva asked.

"That is a very good question and I believe General Dern has an answer." Moff Horatian replied.

"Indeed I do." General Dern added, "In addition to its small standing army, Estran has allowed private military companies to exist to fill the void, using them for limited operations when regular troops were either unavailable or their use deemed politically difficult. The result of this has been a number of armed groups who are known to have operated outside the law at times."

"Yes, and those outlaw units were punished." Lord Torr said.

"At least one unit was paid by the Estranian government to attack its own troops." Moff Horatian said and Lord Torr's eyes widened. He had been part of the group of nobles who had come up with the idea of staging attacks against Estranian troops to justify stronger security but had thought the knowledge of the plan was limited to just a handful of Members of Parliament.

"Yes, Imperial Intelligence and the ISB easily discovered that there was no rebel connection to that attack after Vorn Larcus made his allegations in Parliament." Moff Horatian added, "Of course we weren't about to hand the rebellion a propaganda coup so we kept it secret as well."

"The larger issue is that there are numerous well armed groups on this planet who are well armed and trained yet owe now loyalty either to the Empire or to the government of Estran. It is most likely that the core of the forces that form this insurgency are drawn from them." General Dern said.

"I think we need to have a little talk about what we're going to do about them." Moff Horatian told the three nobles.

Moving ahead of the rest of their team, Dayle and the rebels in full and undamaged stormtrooper armour took advantage of their disguises to make their way towards the control room of the bunker while the other remained further back until they encountered a unit of stormtroopers coming the other way.

"Where are you going?" Dayle asked, his voice loud enough to warn the other rebels that they had encountered Imperial troops in their path.

The leader of the squad looked at Dayle and the two rebels wearing stormtrooper armour.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Who am I?" Dayle said, glancing at his rebels before looking back at the armoured Imperial soldier and then he pointed to his rank badge, "Doesn't this tell you."

"No it doesn't. You're not part of this garrison. What's your operating number?" the stormtrooper demanded.

"Now!" Dayle snapped, drawing his blaster and shooting the stormtroopers' squad leader in the chest from point blank range. At the same time Marse and Tell brought up their own weapons and opened fire on automatic. The sudden barrage took the stormtroopers by surprise and more than half of the squad were cut down in seconds. However, with Dayle standing in front of them, Marse and Tell had limited fields of fire where Dayle blocked it. Within this area a stormtrooper reacted in time to bring up his own blaster rifle and he aimed it at Dayle as the rebel officer was turning his blaster pistol towards the stormtrooper. The stormtrooper fired before Dayle could and the rebel collapsed on the spot, his weapon falling from his grasp and clattering to the floor.

"Rebels have infiltrated the bunker." one of the other remaining stormtroopers said into the comlink built into his helmet, "Rebels have-" and then he was shot dead as Tell swung his repeating blaster around, emptying what remained of the power cell into the stormtroopers.

"Coll get out here now. The commander's hit." Marse called out as he ripped off his helmet and rushed to crouch by Dayle's side.

Dayle was still alive but obviously badly injured. The blaster shot had hit him just below his ribs and burned his diaphragm and parts of his lungs, making it almost impossible for him to breathe.

"Grayce." he gasped.

"Right here." Grayce replied as she rushed towards him with the other rebels.

"You're in charge now. Get to the-" Dayle began before his eyes widened and he stopped breathing.

"Coll?" Marse said, looking at the scout who had also removed his helmet but the man just looked at him and shook his head.

It was then that a klaxon started to sound and the rebels looked at one another.

"Okay you heard Commander Kord." Grayce said, "Grab your gear and let's get a move on. Anyone who doesn't have a rifle already pick one up from one of these stormtroopers. We're going to need all the firepower we can get."

"Blue leader you have a TIE on your tail." one of the other pilots of Blue Squadron warned Jarad when she saw the Imperial fighter roll in behind his X-wing and Jarad banked sharply to avoid the stream of fire from the Imperial fighter's twin laser cannons.

"Thanks blue six. I've got him." Jarad responded and then he spun his fighter without changing its direction of travel, a manoeuvre that caused his astromech droid let out a shrill squeal. The new facing of Jarad's fighter left it pointing directly towards the TIE fighter that had just attacked him and he smiled, "I have you now." he said to himself as he pressed the triggers on his control column and in a staggered pattern to provide the maximum volume of fire his four wing tip mounted laser cannons fired. The pilot of the TIE fighter attempted to evade the barrage but he could not move quick enough to avoid all of the laser blasts and one of them ripped one of the hexagonal wing assemblies from his fighter, sending it into an uncontrolled spin before it impacted against the shields of the nearby Corellian corvette *Renegade* and was smashed to pieces.

"Careful there Blue Leader." Malia told him but Jarad grinned.

"Careful gets you killed." he responded before turning his X-wing towards another group of Imperial fighters.

"What's wrong?" Vay asked when Garm returned to his office after leaving to consult with other ISB officers to find Vay sat at his desk.

"When did you last see Jaynie?" he replied and Vay shrugged.

"When she left for caf. She was heading for that place over the road with a list. I figured that she got held up sorting out getting paid back by the people who aske her to pick food up for them. Most of the investigation department will try and get out of it if they can." Vay said but Garm shook his head.

"No," he said, "I was just down there and she never came back. They thought I'd sent her off on an errand or something."

"Let's see." Vay said, accessing the building's security logs and searching through the list of admissions,

"Here we are. She returned to the building about half an hour ago."

"So where is she?" Garm said, "She should be back here by now."

"There's a security camera inside the front entrance." Vay pointed out, maybe that will tell us where she went and as Garm walked around the desk to stand behind her she called up the recording taken at the time that Jaynie's security pass had been used to enter the building. The woman wore a standard uniform cap that hid enough of her face to prevent her being identified in the image but Garm could still tell that it was not Jaynie.

"That's not her." he said, pointing to the screen when a woman in an ISB uniform passed through the checkpoint and Vay froze the playback, "Look at her hair. It's a different style to what she had this morning."

"Then who?" Vay said.

"Jaysica."

"Her sister?" Vay replied and Garm nodded, "It would seem that my father's team of rebels is trying to get into the building right now. Give me a list of everywhere that pass has been used. I'm going to find her."

*Don't waste your time with this Vay. There are more important things to worry about. You need to be ready to open the doors.*

"Downloading it now." Vay said, ignoring Lara and then picking up the datapad she had copied the data to as she got up.

Jaysica and Geran made their way to the civil administration offices of the capitol building. The staff here knew better than to challenge anyone wearing an ISB uniform and they watched nervously as the two rebels walked through their work areas until Geran spotted an unused network port.

"There." he said softly and Jaysica nodded as he headed for it and then pulled up a chair from nearby before sitting down and plugging his portable computer into the port.

The Imperial administrative staff watched while Geran did this, assuming that he was operating under Jaysica's orders. When Jaysica looked around though they immediately returned to their own work, fearful that she could be instructing Geran to examine their activity.

"Do you need anything?" Jaysica asked Geran, keeping her voice low so that none of the Imperial staff would be able to hear her.

"Just time." Geran answered, "I'm logged on but this part of the network doesn't have the information we need. I need to-"

"Can I assist you?" a flat voice said suddenly and both rebels looked around to see a man whose head had been shaved to make way for the cyborg construct unit he had been fitted with. As a civilian administrator he wore no uniform or rank badge that would identify his role but the cyborg construct made it likely that he was the head of the department, able to monitor the activities of the other staff present at all times. Worryingly this meant that he would also have detected Geran's entry into his department network.

"No, we don't need your help thank you." Jaysica answered, hoping that the cyborg would just go away but the suppression of the man's emotions that resulted from the integration of the advanced technology wired directly into his brain meant that he was not intimidated by Jaysica's disguise as an ordinary being would be.

"You are attempting to establish a connection to the-" the cyborg began.

"Perhaps we should discuss this in private." Geran interrupted, not wanting his actions to be made known to the other staff just in case any of them were informers for the genuine ISB.

"Yes, yes we should." Jaysica agreed when Geran looked at her.

"My office is this way." the cyborg administrator said, indicating a nearby doorway.  
"Lead the way." Geran replied and he smiled at Jaysica when she looked at him nervously.  
As Geran had instructed the cyborg led the way towards his office and opened the door, stepping through before the two rebels followed him. Unseen by the cyborg, Geran reached into a pocket as he was stepping through the doorway and he took out his hold out blaster. Reaching out behind him, Geran then closed the office door to give them complete privacy and at the same time he pressed the muzzle of his blaster to one of the ports on the back of the administrator's cyborg construct unit and pulled the trigger. There was a sudden shower of sparks as the cyborg unit was destroyed and the administrator collapsed on the spot, both the construct unit he had become dependent on and large sections of his brain destroyed by the energy blast.

Jaysica looked back towards the closed door.

"Do you think they heard?" she asked.

"I hope not." Geran replied, "Now I need my computer."

"What's wrong with his?" Jaysica said, glancing down at the body of the cyborg.

"Take a closer look at it." Geran told her, pointing at the desk on which a bank of computer monitors sat.

Jaysica stared at the desk and for a moment she notice nothing odd. Then she walked around it and saw that although there was a row of four monitors on the desk and a computer processing unit beneath it there was no keyboard or any other form of manual data input. Obviously the cyborg who had occupied this office had accessed his computer wirelessly using the construct interfaced with his brain.

"I'll go and get it." Jaysica said.

"Yes, you do that." Geran responded, crouching down to drag the body of the cyborg further from the office doorway so that it would not be visible from outside the office when the door opened again.

Exiting the office Jaysica made her way to the network port where Geran's portable computer was still connected, unplugging the device and carrying it back into the office.

"Thanks." Geran said as he plugged the computer into the office network port, "Now hopefully we can work without being disturbed."

Whereas Jaysica and Geran had headed upwards, Tobis and Cass made their way down to the capitol building's main underground parking lot. There were guards immediately outside the turbolift in the parking lot but other than that they saw no-one patrolling the parking lot itself.

"Tobis do you think we could bring the others in here?" Cass asked as she looked around.

"Err, well, err." Tobis said, also looking around and searching for any signs of security in the parking lot, "I, err, I think there are guards at all the exits."

"But not anywhere else. So the colonel and the others could unload from their transport without being seen." Cass said, smiling.

"Oh, err, yes. yes they could." Tobis replied and Cass took out her comlink.

"Jaysica can you hear me?" she transmitted.

"Yes, I'm here." Jaysica's voice responded after a few moments.

"Tobis and I have found a way in for the colonel." Cass told her.

"That's brilliant. I knew Tobis could do it." Jaysica said.

"Just get to the point." Geran's voice then added.

"There are no guards in the parking lot." Cass said, "We've seen small units of guards at each exit and the street entrance but that's it."

"Hang on, I'm into the security deployment net now." Geran said, "Yes, I see it. There's a fire team at every access point to the parking lot and a full squad at the main entrance. I should be able to-"

All of a sudden the door to the cyborg administrator's office slid open to reveal Garm and Vay standing outside, both agents pointing blasters through the doorway.

"You rebel scum!" Vay snapped.

"If you wouldn't mind raising your hands. You may consider yourselves under arrest." Garm added.

In the parking lot Cass turned off her comlink as soon as she recognised Vay's voice and she looked at Tobis.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." she said and Tobis nodded.

"We, we should tell the colonel." he said.

## 24.

Vorn, Mace, Harris and Odras stood around a holographic display of the city not too dissimilar to the one in Moff Horatian's office.

"I told you it would work." Odras said, "My men have drawn out those Imperial creeps."

"This might help as well." Anzar added as he and Tharun entered the room with the comlink set they had taken from the Imperial platoon.

"It certainly will." Vorn said when he saw the device. Then his own comlink chirped and he pulled it from the pouch on his belt, "Go ahead." he said.

"Colonel it's me." Cass said softly.

"Cass?" Mace said when he heard her voice, "Is she okay?"

"Cass are you okay?" Vorn asked.

"Tell my dad Tobis and I are fine." Cass answered.

"I don't like the sound of that. What about Geran and Jaysica?" Harris commented.

"They've been arrested." Cass said when Vorn's comlink picked up the question, "It was Garm. We heard his voice."

"Stang." Mace said, "That puts a spanner in the works."

"Oh, err, maybe not captain." Tobis said suddenly, "Err, Cass and I have an idea."

"Go on sergeant." Vorn said.

"Well, err, well the security on the parking lot is spread out. There, err, there's just a single squad on the street access." Tobis explained.

"We can take out a single squad. Especially if Tobis and Cass can hit them from behind at the same time." Anzar said.

"There must be a catch." Tharun said, "Now way would the Empire leave such an obvious way in so lightly guarded."

"The interior exits are all guarded as well." Cass added, "But only by a handful of troops at each. Fewer than on the street entrance."

"Using that comlink we should be able to get to within about a block of the capitol without being seen colonel." Mace said and Vorn nodded.

"Yes, then our disguises should get us close enough to take out the guards without being shot first." he said.

"Then it's straight to the shield control centre." Harris added.

"I don't like it. Sounds too easy." Odras said.

"Believe me there is plenty that can go wrong." Vorn replied, "The guards could realise we aren't Imperials and open fire as soon as they see us, something about the security arrangements could have been missed or maybe something will happen that we can't even predict. The fact is though that we need to get to that control room if the attack on the shield generator is to have any benefit at all. Tell everyone to grab their gear and get into the transport. We're moving out."

A squad of stormtroopers had set up a barrier outside the main control room in the shield generator bunker and Tell leapt backwards out of their line of fire before nearly getting shot.

"Looks like they don't want us going this way." he said.

"What have we got?" Grayce asked.

"Looks like a full squad behind a portable blast shield. It'll take too long to go around them." Tell told her.

"And since they know we're here it'll only be a matter of time before any of their friends arrive to trap us between them." Mack pointed out.

"What about grenades? Would they do any good?" Grayce said.

"If we can get them over the barrier, yes." Tell answered.

"Then do it. Marse, you too." Grayce ordered and both the rebels plucked grenades from their belts. Pulling the pins from these they threw them around the corner towards the fortified stormtroopers.

One of the grenades hit the front of the blast shield and bounced off before it exploded, filling the corridor with fragments but failing to cause any injuries to the stormtroopers who simply ducked down behind their barrier and allowed it to absorb the blast. However, the second grenade flew over the barrier just as the stormtroopers were taking cover and landed among them. Seeing the grenade, one of the stormtroopers quickly reached down to grab it with the intention of tossing it back over the barrier but he was not quick enough and the grenade exploded while he was still holding it. The explosion killed the stormtrooper instantly, ripping off his arm and sending shrapnel through his armour but because he had turned away from the rest of the squad most of them were protected from the brunt of the blast by his body and most of them survived.

The rebels were not finished yet though and Tell took advantage of the confusion that the grenades caused

to the stormtroopers to lean around the corner and fire his repeating blaster towards them, using short bursts aimed above the top of the blast shield to keep them pinned down.

"That blast shield is still a problem captain." he said.

"I know. We need a way to get past it." Grayce replied.

"What about that?" Brak asked and he pointed at a ventilation panel in the ceiling.

"Coll, think you can fit up there?" Marse added as he looked up as well. Also looking up at the vent Coll smiled and nodded.

"Yep." he replied.

"Brak, you and Druvvon go with him. We'll keep them distracted." Grayce ordered before she pointed her sporting blaster pistol around the corner and fired several rapid shots down the corridor.

While the other rebels were keeping the stormtroopers distracted Brak and Coll lifted Druvvon up onto their shoulders so that he could release the vent cover and climb through into the cramped vent above the ceiling. Then he reached down to help the other two rebels climb up after him. Being the smallest of the rebels in the vent Druvvon led the way as they crawled the short distance around the corner, moving slowly to avoid alerting the stormtroopers to their presence as they made their way over where the blast shield had been set up to an access point that was right above the stormtroopers.

Druvvon pointed down when he saw the stormtroopers in the corridor beneath them and Brak and Coll both nodded, drawing their blasters. Coll then delivered a single strong kick to the latch that sent the grill tumbling down towards the surprised stormtroopers. All three rebels in the vent fired together, sending a volley of fire down into the stormtroopers who had not expected to come under attack from above. Three of the stormtroopers were killed in the first few seconds of fire from the vent and now that they were caught between the rebels at the end of the corridor and those above them, the remaining stormtroopers opted to withdraw.

"Fall back." one announced as he got to his feet and tried to lay down suppressing fire to cover their withdrawal. In doing so however, he exposed himself to fire from the end of the corridor and Marse shot him before he could open fire on the rebels. Only two stormtroopers remained at this point and both began to crawl along the floor, doing their best to stay below the level of the blast shield while also getting clear of the vent.

"There are two trying to get away." Druvvon shouted when he saw this.

"I'm on it." Marse said to Grayce and keeping close to the wall of the corridor so that the other rebels could continue to fire past him he ran towards the barrier, using the stormtroopers' own fortified position for cover and support as he knelt down and fired a sustained burst from his rifle at the crawling stormtroopers, "Clear!" he called out as he got back to his feet and Grayce waved the other rebels forwards.

Dropping down from the vent Brak immediately went to the control panel for the doors leading to the bunker's command centre and inspected it.

"Locked. Should take about a minute to deal with." he said and Grayce nodded.

"Okay, everyone else get ready." she ordered and the rebels lined up outside the door, their weapons trained on it so that when Brak finished bypassing the lock and the door slid open they were pointing their blasters into the command centre at the startled technicians and officers, "Hello boys." she said, smiling at them, "How about you all just raise your hands and we can avoid any further unpleasantness."

After being dropped off as close to the capitol building as the rebels were willing to risk Tharun and Anzar led the rest of the disguised assault team through the streets of Estran City. Normally the streets would have been filled with traffic on the roads and pedestrians on the side walks. Now though they were almost entirely deserted, the beings who lived and worked in the city knowing that it was far safer to stay indoors while the fighting that could be heard all around was continuing. The only signs of life came from the occasional Imperial vehicle that sped past as the military struggled to try and maintain control of the city.

"Target up ahead." Tharun announced as he and Anzar came to a halt and took cover where they could observe the entrance to the capitol building's basement parking lot.

"Any activity?" Vorn asked as he, Mace, Harris and Nassar moved forwards to join the two former mercenaries.

"Plenty." Anzar responded, "Looks like two E-web heavy repeating blasters set up behind blast shields and a full squad of COMPForce troopers to man them."

Kara snorted.

"COMPForce." she said, "They're just thugs with blasters and fancy armour."

"Repeating blasters." Nassar pointed out, "If they realise who we are then we're done for."

"Is there another way in?" Lannaye asked.

"No. Tobis and Cass are waiting for us to give them the signal to hit this way in from behind." Mace replied.

"Speaking of which." Vorn said, taking his comlink from his pocket and lifting it to his mouth, "Tobis do you read me?" he asked.

"Oh, err, yes. I'm here colonel. Cass, err, Cass and I are just inside the parking lot. We can see the guards



from here."

"Good. Now listen carefully. I want you and Cass to be ready to fire on them as soon as we launch our attack. We're just across the street so the shooting is going to start soon." Vorn told him.

"Yes colonel. We'll be ready." Tobis replied and Vorn shut off his comlink and returned it to his belt before turning to look at the other rebels, "Anzar I'm leaving you here with Tharun. I want the pair of you to be ready to fire on those COMPForce troops when I point down the street towards the front of the building."

"I get it." Anzar replied, nodding.

"I guess that means the rest of us are just going to walk up to them, right boss?" Kara asked.

"You know me so well Kara." Vorn answered.

"Intimately and often." Kara responded, grinning.

"Yes, we are going over there. We'll run though rather than walk. We'll tell them that we're survivors from an artillery unit that was overrun. We'll get as close as we can to that repeating blaster on the left and then when I give Anzar and Tharun the signal we'll attack."

"You want us to hit the other repeating blaster colonel?" Tharun asked and Vorn nodded.

"You should be capable of hitting it from here." he replied.

"Sure am." Tharun said.

"In that case unless anyone has any questions we'll move out now." Vorn said, looking around at his assault team one last time. Then when no-one spoke up he turned and darted into the street watched over by the COMPForce troops, "Hey there!" he called out as the other rebels he had ordered to accompany him followed and across the street the COMPForce troops all turned and raised their weapons, "Whoa!" Vorn exclaimed, raising his hands.

"Keep your hands where we can see them." the COMPForce squad leader called out, "Who are you? What's your operating number?"

"Colonel Morro. Artillery platoon trill herf xesh one-one-three-eight." Vorn responded as he and the other rebels slowed from a run to a walk, still closing on the COMPForce troops.

"What are you doing here?" the squad leader demanded.

"We were heading for the main starport to take over operating an anti-aircraft battery when our convoy was ambushed. The rebels acted like they knew exactly where we'd be and what our strength was. They took out our infantry escort first and-" Vorn explained, getting right up to the squad leader as he spoke.

"I don't care." the squad leader interrupted, the army rank badge on Vorn's chest not enough to cow the COMPForce member despite the obvious difference in their ranks, "Where did this happen?"

Vorn looked around as if trying to get his bearings when in reality he was double checking where the other rebels were positioned in relation to the COMPForce troops. Although they had not been able to get right up to the metre tall blast shield surrounding the E-web heavy repeating blaster located to the left of the parking lot entrance they were all positioned where they would have a clear line of fire to it while staying clear of the other repeating blaster.

"Hang on, all these streets look the same." Vorn said as his hand reached under the back of his tunic for the compact hold out blaster concealed there and as he subtly drew the weapon he pointed down the street, "That way." he said and all of a sudden there was the sound of blaster fire when Tharun fired his heavy blaster rifle at the armoured trooper crewing the E-web repeating blaster to the right of the entrance to the parking lot. The powerful weapon easily punched right through the trooper's armour and he fell backwards as the other members of the squad turned towards the corner Tharun and Anzar were using for cover. Taking full advantage of the distraction Vorn thrust his hold out blaster under the jaw of the squad leader and shot him in the head. At the same time the other rebels were reaching for their own weapons while Tharun and Anzar continued to fire at the repeating blaster on the other side of the entrance to the parking lot to prevent any of the other nearby troopers from taking over control of the weapon and turning it on the rebels.

As soon as the shooting started both Mace and Harris rushed the nearest repeating blaster position with heavy blaster pistols in their hands. The gunner was already turning the weapon but before he could open fire the two rebels fired at him. It was not either of these rebels who killed the gunner though, their shots passed close by and impacted on the wall of the capitol building before there was another shot that came from behind the gunner and struck him between his shoulder blades when Tobis opened fire from within the parking lot. Slumping forwards over his weapon, the weight of the dead gunner's body pushed the muzzle upwards as a final muscle spasm caused his hands to tighten around the weapon's triggers and a sustained burst of powerful energy blasts was fired into the building across the street before the gunner toppled sideways and released the trigger.

Lacking much of the conventional military training given to regular army soldiers or stormtroopers and without their leader to maintain discipline the remaining COMPForce troops all began to look out for themselves instead of co-operating to deal with the rebels. Had the troopers acted together to lay down covering fire then it was possible that one of them could have made it to the now unmanned repeating blasters but instead each of them concentrated on taking cover and protecting themselves. Three more of the COMPForce troopers were cut down as they tried to make it to safety while the others were able to take

cover behind the blast shields surrounding the repeating blasters where rather than attempting to take over the heavy weapons they tried to keep out of the rebels' line of fire.

The protection offered by the blast shields did not extend all the way around though and from inside the parking lot Tobis and Cass could still pick out the soldiers. Their line of sight was partially obscured by the repeating blasters themselves but this did not stop either of them firing at the pair of soldiers crouching behind the right hand weapon. One of this pair turned around and crawled to the repeating blaster's tripod mounting, using it to steady himself as he returned fire. The burst he fired punched several holes in the speeder Tobis and Cass had concealed themselves behind and Tobis pushed Cass aside as the vehicle burst into flames and then exploded. The flames from this washed across the ceiling of the parking lot to a fire detector and an alarm began to sound at the same time as the sprinkler system engaged, spraying fire suppressing fluid from multiple locations.

Meanwhile outside the parking lot Mace and Harris reached the blast shield around the other repeating blaster and they pointed their weapons over the barrier to fire at the two troopers using it for cover. At the same time Nassar vaulted over the barrier and rushed to the repeating blaster, grabbing hold of the twin grips at the rear of the weapon and spinning it around to face the other one. Depressing the triggers the disguised man fired a sustained burst of fire at the other repeating blaster position. More powerful than ordinary small arms fire, the energy blasts blew the other repeating blaster apart and the explosion threw the soldier crouched beside it back into the inside of the blast shield set up to protect it.

The last of the COMPForce troopers knew that it was only a matter of time before the burning repeating blaster caused the weapon's power generator to overheat and triggered a bigger explosion and so he vaulted over the blast shield to try and escape before this could happen. In doing so though he lost all cover and both Kara and Lannay fired several shots into him.

"Grab their weapons and let's get inside quickly." Vorn ordered, the rifles the COMPForce troopers were armed with being superior to the pistols that most of the rebels were carrying to try and maintain their disguises and they scooped them up, also grabbing hold of any spare power cells or grenades they saw in the dead troopers' webbing before rushing into the parking lot where Cass rushed up to Mace and embraced him.

"I'm so glad you made it here dad." she said.

"Me too Cass." he replied.

"I suppose it's too much to hope for that the Empire won't realise that we're down here now that alarm's going off." Harris commented, looking at Vorn.

"Probably." Vorn responded, "But that can't change our plan. We need to find a way up to the shield control room. Tobis, Cass, do either of you know which way will get us there the quickest?"

General Dern stepped outside of the moff's office to deal with the call that came in on his comlink but he rushed right back in after he had been told what the problem was.

"What's wrong general?" Couran asked when General Dern burst back into the room.

"Moff Horatian we have a security situation in the parking lot." the general said.

"What sort of security situation? Are we in danger?" Lady Sharva said before the moff could respond.

General Dern looked at Moff Horatian and he nodded back at the general.

"It seems that a small rebel strike force has penetrated the building's outer defences and is attempting to break in. Security footage suggests that the attack is being led by Vorn Larcus. Two other rebels, one of whom is a known associate of Lord Larcus have also been arrested elsewhere in the building." General Dern explained.

"Can you show me the footage?" Moff Horatian asked.

"Of course sir." the general answered and he walked over to the moff's desk, using the control panel for the holographic display to replace the map of the city with an image taken from the parking lot that showed Vorn and the other rebels rushing past the burning speeder.

"No!" Lady Sharva exclaimed when she saw this.

"Something wrong Lynn?" Couran asked, guessing exactly what it was that had alarmed her so much.

"That rebel there." Lady Sharva replied, pointing to where Mace's face was clearly visible in the image,

"That's Mace Grayle. I vouched for him."

"Oh dear. That is a pity. I expect the ISB will have some questions for you when this is all over." Couran said, suppressing a smile.

"Don't be ridiculous. Lynn Sharva is as loyal to the Empire as you or I." Lord Torr snapped.

"I'm sure she is." Couran responded, "However, the Imperial Security Bureau will have to be convinced as well. They even questioned me recently after all."

"General what security measures are you taking?" Moff Horatian asked, ignoring the bickering of the local nobles.

"All of the exits from the main parking lot have been sealed. In addition I would like to order the COMPForce company that we have in the building to move in and flush the rebels out." the general replied.

"Rodge? COMPForce is under COMPNOR's command." Moff Horatian pointed out and Rodge nodded. "Of course, I'll tell Major Kramm to accept the general's orders." he said, "We'll soon have this situation under control."

The *Firebrand* was rocked by explosions as it and the *Ferocious* flew past the *Night Wraith* and *Justice*, the two pairs of star destroyers exchanging broadsides with one another. The larger and more modern Imperial-class ship mounted more turbolasers along just one side than both the ships under Captain Naje's command mounted in all facings combined. Added to this the rebel controlled *Night Wraith* was more heavily armoured against attack and the limited number of shots that the two obsolete Imperial vessels could fire back at it could barely scratch its hull.

Captain Kase smiled when he saw the effect of the latest broadside his ship had delivered to the *Firebrand*, confident that it would take only one or two more passes to reduce the entire vessel to a burning wreck. However, before he could order his helmsman to come around for another pass another of his command crew spoke up.

"Captain we have enemy ships exiting hyperspace." the officer called out as he leant over the shoulder of a comscan operator.

"What types?" Captain Kase asked, hoping that the Imperial reinforcements would have come from the local sector group only. Had Moff Horatian somehow managed to call in help from outside the sector then the new ships could include star destroyers that would seriously upset the tide of battle in favour of the Empire.

"They look like cruisers sir. they ran into the gravity wells our interdictors have set up in the outer system." the officer said. Then she nodded and added, "Definitely cruisers captain. Six gladiator-class light cruisers and four arquitens-class light cruisers."

"Probably what's left of a battle squadron after they lost their star destroyer." Captain Kase commented.

"Sir those ships could inflict heavy losses on our interdictors." the officer pointed out.

"I'm aware of that." Captain Kase said, "Order our own gladiators to fall back and cover the interdictors. Send a pair of gunships as well. It'll be best to engage those ships with missiles from beyond the range of the gravity wells. Alert the nearest fighter squadron as well. Those interdictors need protecting."

## 25.

In the shield generator bunker the Imperial command staff were lined up along one wall, their arms bound behind their backs and watched over by Druvvon and Mack while Marse and Tell stood watch by the door and the other rebels set explosives in preparation to destroy the bunker from within.

"Pass me another charge." Grayce said, reaching down from the console she was stood on to Coll who then handed her a preformed explosive charge that she clamped to a duct that ran across the ceiling towards the ledge that overlooked the machinery of the shield generator itself, "There, that should do it." she added as she climbed down off the console and took out her comlink, "Time to find out how things are going outside." she said, activating the device, "This is Captain Myrell, what's the situation topside?"

"We've over run pretty much all of the compound captain. We're just mopping up now." the leader of the mercenaries responded, "We think there's still about a platoon of Imperial troops to be dealt with, a mix of army and stormtroopers. Oh and there's good news about the crew of that freighter that got shot down. We secured the wreckage and both of them survived. There are a few bumps and bruises but the worst injury seems to be to Captain Vayne's pride. She's having a hard time coming to terms with her ship being wrecked."

"I bet she is." Grayce said, "Send a platoon of your men to the entrance to the bunker. We've got prisoners in here and we're going to need your help to get them clear before we blow this thing."

"Why bother?" the mercenary asked, "Let them go up in smoke with it."

"That's not how the Alliance works. Besides, there's a bounty on prisoners for privateers. I'm sure you'll be rewarded for them."

"In that case we're on our way captain." the mercenary said and Grayce turned off her comlink.

"Now all we need to do is wait for the word from Colonel Larcus." she said to the other rebels.

"Where the hell are you taking us Tobis?" Kara asked as he led the other rebels through the parking lot beneath the capitol building.

"Err, there's a secure storage unit up ahead." he replied, "It, err, it has its own turbolift that connects to the operations section."

"The problem is that someone's closed the door since we were last here." Cass said, pointing ahead to a door large enough to permit a speeder to pass through.

"So let's get it open." Vorn said and Tobis walked up to the control panel only to find that the door was sealed.

"Oh, err." he said.

"What's wrong lad?" Tharun asked.

"Let me guess." Lannaye added, "It's locked."

"Err." Tobis said.

"Oh great." Kara said, "Tobis, can you hot wire it?"

"I, err, I should be able to. But, err, Jaysica is better at-"

"The klutz isn't here though is she?" Kara interrupted.

"Tobis just get that door open." Mace said and then he looked at Vorn, "Perhaps we should think about going back for that repeating blaster. It might have the firepower to blast right through-"

All of a sudden there was a flash and the sound of a blaster shot and Nassar let out a cry as he was hit and fell to the floor.

"Ambush!" Tharun yelled as he opened fire with his rifle set on automatic at the COMPForce troops now closing in behind the rebels, cutting off their only avenue of escape.

"Tobis hurry up with that door." Vorn ordered as he took cover behind an expensive looking landspeeder and opened fire with the rifle he had picked up from one of the dead troopers earlier on.

Beside the door where the locking panel was located Tobis ducked, checking that he was hidden from the attacking Imperial troops' line of sight before continuing to try and circumvent the lock. Meanwhile the other rebels found whatever cover they could as the COMPForce assault troopers continued to attack.

Garm answered the intercom in his office as soon as it sounded.

"Deputy Director Larcus." he said.

"Garm," Director Helios' voice responded, "I have news about your father."

"You've located him?" Garm asked, not sure how he felt about this and when Vay sensed his confusion she moved to stand behind him, placing an arm around him for support.

"After a fashion, yes. In fact he's downstairs now with his co-conspirators attempting to break into the building via the parking lot. Don't worry though, Major Kramm and Captain Layne have the matter well in hand. Even if they do manage to bypass the security on the door they're attempting to override they'll find

themselves caught between two different units of COMPForce troops. I did ask if they could try and take your father alive but I'm afraid I can't make any promises about it." Director Helios said.

"Of course not." Garm said, "Thank you for letting me know. Is there anything else?"

"No. I just wanted to make sure you were aware of what was happening." Director Helios replied before he shut off his intercom.

"Garm, are you okay?" Vay asked.

"Of course." Garm answered.

*Deception.*

"Garm when will you learn that you can't lie to me?" Vay said, sitting down in Garm's lap so that they were face to face and she draped both arms over his shoulders.

"What could I do in any case Vay? My father isn't going to surrender just because I go down there and ask him to." Garm said.

*You need to open the doors Vay.*

Vay's eyes widened.

"Vay, what's wrong?" Garm asked.

"Open the doors." Vay replied, "Director Helios said that the rebels under your father's command were trying to override the security on a door from the parking lot. We need to open it for them."

"And lead them into a trap?"

"Not if we can take out the troops standing by to ambush them." Vay said.

"Vay that's treason."

"Treason against what Garm?" Vay said as she got back to her feet, "Treason against an empire whose emperor is already dead? Against an Empire that murdered your wife and tortured Jenessa Drame for no good reason? How long have we followed orders now even when we knew what the Empire was capable of. Perhaps it's time we finally took a stand against the darkness."

Garm stood up.

"The two prisoners we took." he said, "We'll need to free them. This will be easier with four than two."

Entering the ISB detention section, Garm and Vay walked right up to the control station where the custody officer was located.

"Deputy director, how may I help you?" he asked.

"Prisoner transfer from cell one-one-three-eight." Garm told him, "Open their cell."

"The two you brought in earlier? I wasn't informed of this sir." the custody officer said.

"We're informing you now." Vay replied, "Now open their cell."

"I need to check this with Director Helios." the custody officer said and he reached for the intercom.

"There's no need to bother the director with this." Vay said, waving her hand at the custody officer as she used the Force to turn her suggestion into a command.

"There's no need to bother the director with this." the custody officer repeated.

"Open the cell door." Vay said and the custody officer opened the door to the cell holding both Jaysica and Geran.

Still wearing the disguise they had been captured in, the two rebels were stood beside the far wall when Garm and Vay entered their cell and they stared at the uniformed ISB agents in silence.

"We're here to rescue you." Garm said, "Come on, there isn't much time. My father and the rest of his friends need our help quickly."

"Do you take us for nerf herders?" Geran asked, frowning at Garm, "Why should we trust you?"

"Because the alternative is sitting in this cell and waiting for Director Helios to order your eyes gouged out."

Vay commented.

"It's a trap. They're planning something. If we leave they'll kill us." Jaysica said.

"I'm in agreement with Corporal Horbid. I think we'll stay right here in this cell until someone we trust comes to get us out." Geran added and Garm sighed.

"Okay, how about you get out of this cell or I'll shoot the pair of you?" he said, drawing his blaster and aiming at Geran.

"You make a good point." Geran said and he and Jaysica moved towards the exit from the cell, stepping out into the corridor ahead of Garm and Vay.

"Well isn't this interesting?" Director Helios said, standing at the end of the corridor and flanked by another pair of ISB agents, "Garm you do disappoint me. Though I must say I'm not entirely surprised."

"It was you that told him his father is downstairs. You meant to test his loyalty." Vay said as Garm kept his blaster trained on Geran's back where Director Helios could not see it.

"Quite." the director said, smiling, "After your reaction to the methods used to interrogate Professor Drame I decided that you could not be relied upon to stay loyal to the Empire and so I decided to see how you would react to a threat to your father. Sadly it seems that my suspicions have been confirmed and the pair of you have been revealed as traitors."

"You mean you were telling us the truth? You really did come to help us escape?" Jaysica exclaimed, looking around at Vay and Garm.

"Nice work confirming the director's accusation there." Geran muttered.

"Yes they were young lady." Director Helios said, smiling at Jaysica, "Now if everyone wouldn't mind handing over their weapons you can all-"

Director Helios stopped talking at the exact moment that there was a flash of red when Garm moved his blaster out from behind Geran and shot him in the chest. Either side of Director Helios, the two ISB agents accompanying him looked on in surprise as he died and then reached for their sidearms. However, before either of them could draw their weapons there was a sudden 'snap-hiss' as Vay drew and ignited her lightsaber. Lunging forwards she swung the weapon in a sideways arc that cut across both men and their blasters clattered to the floor.

"Grab those blasters!" Garm snapped at Jaysica and Geran who were both as surprised at what Garm and Vay had done as the ISB staff in the detention section were and he turned his blaster on the custody officer, shooting him before he could reach for the alarm on his console.

By this point one of the ISB guards had managed to draw his weapon and he fired it at Vay. However, she easily deflected the blast and sent it into one of the security monitors covering the room before charging at the guard and impaling him on her blade. Behind her Garm opened fire on another of the guards, firing his blaster rapidly to prevent the man from taking aim with his own weapon before one of his shots finally struck the guard.

"Come on corporal." Geran said as he came to his senses and he darted forwards to scoop up a blaster from the floor. However, before he could fire it he was forced to dive for cover as one of the remaining four guards in the detention section opened fire at him and the energy blast passed close over Geran's head. Jaysica dived for the other dropped blaster but in doing so she tripped over Geran and went rolling into Garm, all three of them landing in a heap beside the main control station where the custody officer lay dead.

"What the kriff?" Garm exclaimed, glaring at Jaysica.

"I'm sorry." she replied, "It was an accident."

"I could do with a hand here Garm." Vay called out as she used her lightsaber to deflect fire from all of the remaining guards, angling one of the shots so that it struck a guard instead of her and the man fell dead on the spot.

"Be right with you." Garm said, dragging himself out of the tangle of bodies before he looked at Geran and added, "Can you be ready to follow me when I say so?" and Geran nodded.

"What about me?" Jaysica asked.

"Just try not to get in our way until this is all over." Garm replied and she frowned at him, "Now!" Garm yelled and both he and Geran leapt out from behind the control station and ran across the room, firing as they moved and another of the guards was hit.

One of the three guards left attempted to reach the control station, hoping to be able to raise the alarm but Vay vaulted over the consoles herself and cut him down just before he could get within reach of the controls.

"Let's get out of here!" one of the last two guards exclaimed and he broke into a run, heading for the exit from the detention section. He made it only half way there though before Geran shot him in the leg and he fell to the floor, dropping his weapon and screaming in agony as he clutched at the injury before a second shot from Geran finished him off.

"I surrender." the final guard called out after he saw the last of his comrades killed and knew there was no way for him to escape and he raised his hands as he stepped out into the open.

"Good idea." Garm said as he walked towards the man. Then he looked at Geran and asked, "So do you think you could fit into his clothes?"

In the parking lot the COMPForce troopers continued firing towards the rebels but their fire was inaccurate and no more of them had been hit. In addition although they had spread out to keep the rebels trapped close to the sealed door they had not pressed their attack by moving in closer.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Vorn said, "It's like they aren't really trying."

"Seriously boss?" Kara responded as she ducked for cover while she reloaded her blaster, "Because those are live rounds they're firing at us."

"Not at us. Towards us but not right at us." Mace pointed out, "They're up to something. Tobis, how are you doing with that door?"

"Oh, err, I think I've got it." Tobis responded before there was a flash from the circuit board he was working on and Tobis flinched.

"I guess that means he's still got work to do." Tharun commented.

In the room beyond the door another platoon of COMPForce troopers under the command of Major Kramm had cleared a large area around the door. In this they had then erected a row of blast shields that deployed behind so that they all had a clear field of fire towards the door.

"Layne, what's your status?" Major Kramm said into the comlink built into his armour.

"We've got the rebel pinned against the door major. We can take them out any time you want." Captain Layne responded.

"No, stay back and give them time to get through the door. The general asked for us to take Vorn Larcus alive and there's too much risk he'll be killed in an assault. We'll be able to pick off his fellow traitors more easily when they're out in the open." Major Kramm told him.

"I'm surprised you're so concerned."

"Deputy Director Larcus has been chasing his father for five years now. I just want to be able to rub his face in how we were the ones to catch him in the end." Major Kramm said before the door to the turbolift at the side of the room opened and Garm and Vay stepped out, two more individuals in ISB uniforms behind them just out of sight, "Just give them the time to open that door." he added before shutting off the comlink,

"Deputy director, what brings you down here?" he then called out, walking towards Garm.

"I'm here to order you to stand down major." Garm replied and Major Kramm grinned.

"No chance." he said.

"Just who do you think you're speaking to major? I'm the deputy director of the Imperial Security Bureau." Garm said sternly.

"Yeah and I don't work for you. I work for Mister Larrs and he's ordered me to follow General Dern's orders, not yours. The general says we stay so we stay. Don't worry though, we'll try and take your treasonous father alive. You can stay and watch if you want but if you get my men's way there could be nasty consequences." the major said.

"Very well you leave me with no choice." Garm said and he turned to Vay, "Ready?" he asked and she nodded, "Then let's get on with this." Garm told her.

Vay suddenly thrust out her arm towards the row of blast shields and unleashed a powerful wave of telekinetic power through the Force. This struck several of the blast shields and, despite their weight, sent them and the soldiers using them for cover flying away from her. At the same time Garm drew his blaster and fired it at Major Kramm. The shot struck him in his shoulder but the energy absorbent armour he wore deflected most of the power of the shot away from him, causing him to stagger backwards.

"Shoot them!" he yelled as he straighten up and brought up his rifle.

At the same time both Jaysica and Geran opened fire from the turbolift, targeting the COMPForce troopers who had been struck by Vay's Force based attack and were still trying to process what had happened to them. Meanwhile Garm dropped his blaster and lunged at Major Kramm, pushing his rifle away before the armoured soldier could fire it and the pair of them fell to the floor as they started to wrestle for control of the major's rifle.

Vay on the other hand opted to charge directly at the rest of Major Kramm's men, drawing her lightsaber and there was a 'snap-hiss' as she activated the weapon moments before using it to decapitate one of the COMPForce troopers.

It did not take long for the rest of Major Kramm's men to react to coming under attack, turning their attention towards the turbolift and the ISB agents who had emerged from it. While Garm and Major Kramm were still grappling with one another they could not risk firing at Garm but that still left Vay and the two rebels still inside the turbolift. Fortunately Jaysica and Geran had the turbolift itself for cover while Vay simply swatted the blaster bolts that came towards her aside as she continued to charge through the COMPForce troopers, striking at them with her lightsaber.

"We need to get out of here." Geran said to Jaysica.

"How?" she responded, "If we try and run they'll shoot us."

"One at a time." Geran told her, "I'll lay down covering fire and you make a run for that stack of crates over there. Then you can cover me while I join you."

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

"Just go!" Geran snapped as he fired his blaster again, pulling the trigger as rapidly as he could to suppress the COMPForce troops in the storage room outside the rather than specifically aiming at any of them.

Jaysica burst out of the turbolift and ran towards the crates that had been moved to make room for the more durable blast shields, squealing as she fired her blaster to add to the weight of Geran's fire before she came to a sudden halt behind them.

"I made it." she called out and then she leant around the crates and opened fire.

*Danger.*

Vay sensed a tremor in the Force and rolled out of the way just in time for one of Jaysica's shots to pass by her.

"Hey! I'm on your side." she shouted.

"I'm sorry. I'm not used to it." Jaysica responded, turning her blaster aside and opening fire again to give Geran the opportunity to get out of the turbolift as well. All of a sudden Major Kramm's finger tightened around the trigger of his rifle and the weapon went off, sending a shot towards the crates that Jaysica was using for cover. Jaysica let out another squeal and ducked behind the crates when the blaster shot blew a

chunk out of one. When her fire ceased one of the COMPForce troopers emerged from his own hiding place behind a blast shield to take aim at Geran while he was out in the open but before he could fire Vay struck him down with her lightsaber.

"Keep shooting." she called out, glancing at Jaysica for a moment before she deflected another blaster bolt aimed at her back at the trooper who had fired it and the man fell backwards.

"Do as she says." Geran added, reaching the crates and moving to the far end so that he and Jaysica could fire around them at the same time, "But be careful who you're shooting at."

Jaysica nodded and then resumed firing, picking out a pair of COMPForce troopers who had been among those struck by Vay's telekinetic attack. They had made it back to their feet and were trying to circle around behind the Force sensitive ISB agent, holding their fire until they thought they could get past the lightsaber blade that she continued to use both defensively to block attacks aimed at her and also offensively whenever any of the COMPForce troopers came within arms reach.

All of a sudden there was a crashing sound and Jaysica was knocked over when something hit the other side of the stack of crate. Looking up from where she landed she saw that Garm and Major Kramm had rolled into the other side of the stack and that Garm had been momentarily stunned by the impact. On the other hand Major Kramm's armour had protected him from the impact and he was able to wrest his rifle away from Garm and point it at him.

"Now we'll see who's in charge here." he hissed, snarling as his finger tightened on the trigger. However, before he could fire his blaster he felt something press against the back of his helmet.

"Not you." Jaysica said before she fired her blaster. The energy bolt punched right through the back of Major Kramm's helmet and then his skull, killing him instantly.

Garm looked up as Major Kramm collapsed beside him and saw Jaysica kneeling exactly where she had been when she shot him, still pointing her blaster forwards.

"Would you mind pointing that elsewhere?" he asked, reaching up and gently pushing the muzzle of her weapon aside and Jaysica nodded, "Thank you by the way." he added before he picked up Major Kramm's rifle and looked around. Most of the platoon of COMPForce troopers were now dead, most of them cut down by Vay but some also killed by the two rebels and Garm took note of where the remaining troops were.

Only a single squad of them now remained and they were all clustered behind a pair of the modular blast shields they had erected to use as cover when the door to the parking lot opened. All of them were looking towards Vay and only the fact that she had kept moving so quickly and always been too close to other troopers for them to get a clear shot had prevented them from firing at her en masse and bringing her down with the sheer weight of fire that they could muster between them. However, now that she had just killed the last of the troopers elsewhere she presented this last squad with a clear target.

"Vay get down!" Garm shouted and he fired a burst from Major Kramm's rifle towards the troopers. Most of his shots either hit the blast shield or went too high to hit the troopers but one shot did strike one of them and he slumped into one of his comrades as he collapsed.

This alerted to the troopers to the threat coming at them from their side and some of them turned to face Garm and the rebels, forcing Garm and Jaysica to retreat back behind the crates as they opened fire.

"Garm are you okay?" Vay called out as she too took cover behind one of the blast shields that her telekinetic strike had knocked out of position and peered around it at the COMPForce troopers.

"Oh I'm just fine." Garm replied, "I don't suppose you've got any ideas about what we should do next do you?"

Vay looked back and forth between where the COMPForce troopers were dug in behind their blast shield and the stack of crates Garm and the two rebels were using for cover. Then she noticed that there was another stack of crates behind the blast shield, the COMPForce troopers being positioned between the crates and the shield.

"As a matter of fact I do." Vay answered, "All of you be ready for when I act."

"How will we know that?" Jaysica asked.

"Trust me, we'll know." Garm told her.

Vay reached out from behind her blast shield, pointing her hand towards the lower half of the stack of crates behind the COMPForce troopers and focused her mind on them. Through the Force she felt the crates and pictured them moving towards her before suddenly pulling her arm back. As she did this the stack of crates wobbled and then toppled over, falling towards the troopers.

"Look out!" one cried out when he noticed the crates falling towards them but it was too late for any of them to try and get out of the way and the crates came crashing down on top of them.

"Go!" Garm snapped and he burst out from behind the crates he and the rebels were using for cover, running towards the pile of smashed crates and firing short bursts from his rifle at wherever he could see part of a COMPForce trooper sticking through the debris. At the same time Vay emerged from behind the blast shield and advanced towards the pile of debris with her lightsaber held up in front of them.

"Are they all dead?" Jaysica asked as she cautiously came out from behind the crates and Garm looked at Vay.



"I think so." she said, nodding, "I can't sense any of them."  
"So what's our next step?" Geran asked and Vay smiled.  
"As someone I know told me, we open the doors." she answered.

## 26.

The COMPForce troopers surrounding the rebels in the parking lot continued to fire at them without making any obvious effort to push forwards. All of a sudden there was a hiss from the door Tobis was trying to open and it began to slide upwards slowly.

"Well done Tobis." Mace said, smiling as he fired another shot towards the attacking troopers.

"Oh, err, I don't think it was me." Tobis replied.

"Oh kriff." Kara said, looking around to see the door open far enough to reveal Vay standing on the other side with her lightsaber in her hand.

"Get inside quick!" Vay called out as she advanced through the door but the rebels remained where they were, some of them turning their weapons towards Vay.

"Dad, come on." Garm called out as he also stepped into view and fired a rapid burst towards the COMPForce troopers.

"Tobis hurry." Jaysica added, appearing unexpectedly behind Garm with a weapon in her hands as well.

"Vorn what's going on?" Harris asked, confused.

"I don't know but I'll go along with it." Vorn replied, "Everyone through the door. Quick!" and he got up and ran through the open doorway.

Seeing that the door was open but that Major Kramm and his platoon were not firing on the rebels told Captain Layne that there was something wrong immediately and it was obvious to him that Garm and Vay were somehow responsible. Therefore, in the absence of an alternative plan he opted to improvise.

"Forget the suppressive fire." he said, "Shoot to kill. Take out that witch with the lightsaber."

"Who are you calling a witch?" Vay shouted across the parking lot, "How's this for witchcraft?" and with a wave of her hand she created another telekinetic blast that lifted several speeders off the ground and flipped them over, crushing two of Layne's men and scattering others before they started to fire at her.

Vay began using her lightsaber to deflect as many of the incoming blaster bolts as she could but she knew that she could not hold off the entire COMPForce unit on her own for long.

"Make it fast." she said before she noticed a pair of figures in the uniforms of Imperial infantrymen appear either side of her.

"We've got your back." Tharun said before he and Anzar opened fire together, laying down covering fire for the rebels as they raced through the open doorway. This caught several of the COMPForce troopers out in the open as they sought to find fresh cover after Vay had forced them from their precious hiding places and even their armour was inadequate to protect them from Tharun's heavy rifle. The combination of the two rebels and Vay created enough of a diversion that the other rebels were able to make a break for the doorway, protected from the fire of the Imperial soldiers.

As soon as Tobis was through the doorway Jaysica rushed over to him and embraced him.

"Tobis, thank the gods you're safe." she said.

"Can't that wait until later?" Garm asked.

"Tobis Garm rescued us. Vay too." Jaysica said, smiling as she looked at Garm.

"Only fitting since he's the one that arrested us to begin with." Geran commented.

Vorn watched the other rebels falling back through the door until only Tharun and Anzar remained in the parking lot with Vay and he waved them towards him.

"Come on! Get in here." he called out and as Vay and the two rebels continued to keep Captain Layne and his men from following them.

"Go." Vay said, "I'll be right behind you." and Tharun and Anzar turned around and raced through the open doorway.

"Vay come on." Garm shouted, wondering why she was delaying. Then he spotted Captain Layne circling around to try and get behind Vay. He was about to call out a warning to her when he suddenly realised that she already knew.

Vay spun around and charged at Captain Layne. In response he brought his rifle up to his shoulder and opened fire with it set to automatic. Placing her lightsaber in front of her Vay deflected each blaster bolt aimed at her, swatting them aside with little difficulty without caring where they went. Then she leapt at Captain Layne, using the Force to extend her leap and as she descended she kicked one of his legs out from under him. Dropping to his knees Captain Layne tried to bring his rifle to bear on Vay but she knocked it aside as she raised her lightsaber.

"You've always been a creep, you know that?" she said before she thrust the tip of her blade through his chest plate and he gave out a final gasp before he slumped forwards.

With the remaining COMPForce troops now closing in around Vay she turned and ran towards the doorway. Ahead of her she saw the rebels pointing their weapons towards and for a brief moment she thought that they might be about to fire on her. Then they opened fire though and the energy blasts passed by either side

of her, hitting the COMPForce troopers behind her while she continued to sprint towards the doorway.

"She's clear!" Garm snapped as Vay dived through the opening and Geran slammed his hand down on the controls to seal it behind her.

"That should hold them." Mace said.

"Good." Vorn responded and then he turned to Garm, "Now perhaps we can discuss your sudden change of heart."

"You could say we finally saw the Empire for what it is." Garm answered, "You raised me to always do the right thing and for a long time doing my duty to my government was that. Over the past few years I started to have my doubts though and things finally reached a breaking point when I saw what Director Helios did to Professor Drame."

"He's dead by the way. Garm shot him." Jaysica said.

"There's no going back for you now junior." Kara added, "You're a rebel now."

"I'm just happy to have my son back." Vorn said before he and Garm embraced one another.

"And I have my family." Garm said as they separated again, "How is Lyssa by the way? I know she married him." and he looked at Tharun.

"Captain of her own starship." Vorn told him.

"The rebellion gave my sister a starship? You must be desperate." Garm said.

"This catching up is all very nice but how about you tell us why you're here before someone in command finds out what we've done and sends more of those goons." Vay said and she pointed to the bodies of the COMPForce troopers scattered around the room.

"We're here to take out the planetary shield control centre." Mace said.

"What for?" Garm asked.

"We've got another team attacking one of the shield generator stations. Take out that and delay the others from compensating for the loss and we can create a hole in the shield long enough to start landing troops." Vorn explained.

"Sounds like a good plan." Garm said, nodding, "Follow me and I'll show you the quickest way there."

Only two stormtroopers stood guard outside the entrance to the control room for Estran's shield generator and Vorn pulled his head back around the corner after taking a brief look at them.

"Okay there are only two of them but we need to be able to do this quickly and quietly. There's a blast door but it isn't sealed yet." he said.

"Blaster fire could alert the technicians inside colonel." Tharun pointed out, "If they seal that blast door then we're stuck. We'd never get through before they brought an army down on us."

Vay snorted.

"Amateurs." she said, "Let me show you how it's done." and returning her lightsaber to its pouch on her belt she calmly walked past Vorn and around the corner towards the stormtroopers.

"No wait-" Vorn began but Garm placed a hand on his father's shoulder.

"Trust me, she knows what she's doing." he said.

"I don't know. I've got a bad feeling about this." Lannaye commented.

Meanwhile Vay walked right up to the two stormtroopers and looked at them.

"You are dismissed. You may return to your barracks." she said, waving her hand as she used the Force to push the idea into their minds.

The two stormtroopers exchanged looks and for a brief moment Vay thought that their minds could be strong enough to resist her mental manipulation. However, all of a sudden they looked back at her and one spoke.

"We are dismissed. We will return to our barracks." he said and the two armoured soldiers turned around and started to march down the corridor, heading away from where the rebels were hiding.

"I told you she could do it." Garm said, smiling at Vorn and then he too walked around the corner.

"Come on, let's do this." Vorn then told the other rebels before following his son towards the now unguarded door.

"How many staff can we expect to be in there?" Mace asked.

"Perhaps thirty, but they'll be technicians and officers mainly. Only a handful of security, if any." Garm replied.

"We still need to try and keep this quiet if we can." Vorn said, "I'd like to get as many of us in there as possible without alerting anyone to our presence."

Garm nodded.

"Then I suggest just those in officer or ISB uniforms. Sidearms only as well. We can tell the staff that it's a security inspection while we assess what sort of resistance we can expect."

"Then that's how we'll proceed." Vorn said, passing his rifle to Kara.

"Careful in there boss." she said as she took the weapon from him and he smiled at her.

"Don't worry Kara." he said and he glanced at Garm and Vay, "I'll be in good hands." and Kara sighed.

"Everyone not going in with us should stand back from the door. The last thing we need is someone seeing all of you lurking outside." Vay said and the rebels not wearing either officer or ISB disguises backed away.

Then when they were clear of the door Garm reached out to open it. Inside the shield control room was dominated by a massive holographic sphere that represented Estran itself. This was marked with the location of every shield generator and lines to indicate where the portion of the shield being generated by each extended to. The hologram was surrounded by a ring of control consoles manned by technicians that were overseen by a small number of officers. As Garm had suggested there were few of the black uniformed security guards present, each of them armed only with a blaster pistol while none of the officers or technicians appeared to be armed at all.

"Can I help you sir?" one of the officers in the room asked when he saw the eight new arrivals, seemingly split equally between ISB and military officers and he saw the rank badges on the chests of Vorn, Garm and Harris.

"We are here to conduct a security evaluation of the shield system." Garm replied.

"How quickly can you compensate for the loss of a single generator?" Harris asked, pointing to the hologram.

"We can adjust the-" the officer began, looking back towards the hologram but before he could finish Mace drew his blaster and shot the man in the back.

"Go!" Vorn yelled as he pulled his hold out blaster from inside his tunic and fired it at a nearby security guard while the startled man was still reaching for his own weapon.

As the other rebels drew their weapons and started shooting the various technicians and officers present dived for whatever cover they could find. In most cases this meant hiding beneath their control consoles but some also tried to use the holographic projector itself for protection. Even Vay, whose lightsaber would make short work of anyone within arms' reach, opted to draw her hold out blaster and use that instead to lessen the chance that anyone would realise who she was. For the time being there was still the chance that she and Garm would be assumed to be rebel infiltrators until word of what was happening reached the higher ranking Imperial officers in the building. Upon hearing the first blaster shot the rebels still in the corridor outside burst in through the doorway and started shooting as well and the air in the control room was filled with blaster bolts. The few security guards present also attempted to take cover, though two of them were cut down before they could reach any and at the same time they drew their own blasters.

A nearby technician looked at Jaysica and Cass before he decided that the two short statured women would be easy targets and despite being unarmed himself he launched himself towards them, reaching out to grab hold of Jaysica's blaster while elbowing Cass in the face.

"No!" Jaysica exclaimed as she fought to keep hold of her weapon but the technician was much stronger than her and he ripped the blaster from her grasp and pushed her to the floor. However, in doing this he gave Tobis a clear line of fire at him from the doorway and before the technician could shoot either of the rebel women Tobis shot him dead.

"Cass are you okay?" Mace asked as he took cover behind a nearby console before one of the security guards fired at him.

"I'll be fine." Cass replied, picking up the sporting blaster she had dropped when she fell.

Across the room one of the officers dived at a console and activated the intercom.

"This is the shield control room. We're under attack. Help us!" he yelled before being hit by two blaster shots in rapid succession and he collapsed over the console.

"We're going to have company." Garm said.

"The controls. Smash the controls." Vorn called out before turning his blaster on the nearby control consoles and emptying the power cell of his hold out blaster into them.

It was the rebels at the door that did most damage as they turned their weapons on the control consoles. Armed with rifles capable of automatic fire they sprayed energy blasts around the room that blasted hole in the control panels whenever they struck them. Many of the consoles promptly burst into flames and the hologram in the centre of the room flickered for a few seconds before it disappeared entirely.

"That's it." Garm said as he shot another security guard, "The system's disabled."

"Time for us to leave then. Everyone fall back." Vorn replied.

Still firing, the rebels began to retreat back towards the doorway, exiting the room before Imperial reinforcements could arrive and once in the corridor outside they ran back the way they had come.

"We need somewhere to lay low for a while." Mace said and Vay pointed to an unmarked door just a few metres ahead of them.

"In there. It's empty." she said.

Mace was the first to reach the door and as soon as he opened it he and Kara rushed inside. However, rather than the totally empty room they had been told to expect they found themselves in a storeroom that was staffed by a service droid.

"What is the meaning of this captain?" the droid asked, reading the rank shown on Mace's uniform, "This is a restricted-" but before the machine could finish Kara shot it and there was a brief flash of flame before it toppled over and crashed to the floor.

"So much for being empty." Kara said, frowning at Vay as she rushed into the room behind her.

"It's a droid. I can't sense droids through the Force." Vay replied defensively.

"I can just see that being written on your memorial stone." Kara commented.

"Everyone inside." Vorn said as he entered the room and waved the other rebels past him. Then when the last of them had made it into the storeroom he closed the door and took out his comlink, "Let's hope I can get a signal out." he said as he activated the device, "Grayce can you hear me?"

"Yes colonel, I hear you. The charges are set at our end." she responded.

"Good. The control system for the shield should be out of action for a while now. Blow the charges."

As soon as the explosive charges had been set inside the shield generator bunker Grayce had pulled her rebels out and joined up with the mercenaries outside. Now they were all positioned just outside the bunker's perimeter close to the wreck of the *Beauty Queen*.

"Ready Brak?" she asked, looking at the rebel holding the remote trigger for the explosives and he nodded at her.

"I'm ready." he answered.

"Then do it." she told him.

"Fire in the hole!" Brak shouted and everyone, rebels, mercenaries and Imperial prisoners alike ducked as he pressed the trigger switch.

Immediately there was a sudden flash and wave of heat that was followed a fraction of a second later by an almighty booming sound as the shock wave of the explosion reached them. Looking out from her hiding place Grayce saw that the explosives had done their job and the bunker had been utterly destroyed. No longer powered, the stream of energy coming from the shield emitter itself ceased and the structural damage caused by the explosion sent it crashing sideways, thankfully away from the rebels until it smashed into the ground and all around Grayce rebels and mercenaries cheered.

"Captain there's a hole opening in the planetary shield." one of the *Night Wraith's* command crew called out and Captain Kase spun around to face the crew pits.

"Get me the *Trading Dream* and *Golden Empress*." he ordered, naming the two *lucrehulk-class* ships that were part of the Alliance fleet.

"You're through now captain." one of the communication officers responded.

"This is Captain Kase. There's a hole in the shield. Take your ships in and start deploying your troops." Captain Kase said.

"I know my role in this captain." Captain Kaaro of the *Trading Dream* responded. The neimoidian had been a part of the Confederate fleet during the Clone Wars while Captain Kase had fought for the Republic so the two officers had never seen eye to eye during their years with the rebellion, "I'll get our troops through the shield. You just keep the Imperial fleet off our backs."

"This is the *Golden Empress*, we're moving in now. Deploying fighters." Lyssa added from her own ship and the two massive vessels, the largest taking part in the battle over Estran moved towards the hole in the planetary shield.

As well as the hyperdrive equipped starfighters used by the Alliance fleet, the task force that Rear Admiral Aphanar had put together for this attack included a number of Z-95 headhunters that were capable only of sublight travel. These had been held back aboard the *Golden Empress* for just this moment and the sleek craft sped from the massive vessel's hangars along with the Gallofree medium transports that were being used to transport the invasion force itself, all making for the hole in the planetary shield. Considered too out of date to be truly effective in space combat, the Z-95s were still potent fighter craft inside an atmosphere where combat took place at much slower speeds and they had been brought along to provide the invasion force with air cover that would not mean sacrificing the fighter cover for the fleet that remained in orbit.

"Admiral one of the planetary shield generators has been destroyed. I'm reading a hole in the shield and we have rebel ships already positioned above it. Sir, they're deploying transports, it looks like an invasion." a technician in the command centre of the orbiting fleet headquarters called out while Admiral Hall continued to monitor the progress of the battle on the displays all around the room.

"Why aren't the other shield generators compensating?" Admiral Hall asked.

"I don't know admiral. All shield output from the adjacent generators is holding steady. No-one down there is trying to plug the hole." the technician said.

"Then it's obviously up to us. Get some ships there to intercept those transports now. And get me Moff Horatian or General Dern. I want to know why nothing is being done about that hole." Admiral Hall ordered.

Although the Imperial capital ships around Estran were heavily engaged against their opposite numbers in the Alliance fleet there were still more than enough TIE fighters available for several squadrons to be able to break off from their previous duties to try and intercept the transports and fighters heading for the hole in the planetary shield that was just a visible to the Imperial sensors as it was to the Alliance ones.

"Captain we've got enemy fighters closing fast." Lyssa's comscan officer warned her.

"What's the status of our hangars Emsee?" she responded, looking at the protocol droid she kept with her to assist with the logistics of running a large starship.

"All of our transports and fighters have cleared the hangars mistress." the droid told her, "However, the *Trading Dream's* hangars are significantly larger than our own and they are still in the process of deploying their transports."

This came as no surprise to Lyssa. Although Captain Kaaro was a far more experienced starship commander than she was, the modifications made to the *Golden Empress* to turn it into a mobile mineral refinery and manufacturing vessel had severely limited its hangar capacity when compared to a standard *lucrehulk-class* battleship that could carry hundreds of starfighters and shuttles of various sizes.

"Bring our shields up to full strength and pull us back from the *Trading Dream*. Our weapons may not be up to her standards but we can handle a few TIE fighters." Lyssa ordered and through the viewports in front of her she saw Estran and the other *lucrehulk-class* vessel receding as the helmsman of the *Golden Empress* repositioned the ship to provide cover against the approaching starfighters.

The weaponry of the *Golden Empress* consisted of numerous quad mounted laser cannons intended as a defence against pirates rather than for use in naval engagements. The weapons were identical to, though fewer in number than those fitted to the first *lucrehulk-class* battleships employed by the Trade Federation in the years running up to the Clone Wars and were ideal for use against the lightweight TIE fighters. The gun crews of Lyssa's ship opened fire on the fast moving TIE fighters as soon as they came into range. The speed and manoeuvrability of the various classes of TIEs was the only defence that the Imperial pilots had and they immediately began to take evasive action to avoid being shot down. This tactic was moderately successful since despite the impressive rate of fire that the *Golden Empress's* laser cannons could achieve the targeting systems were decades out of date and many of the TIE fighters, especially the latest TIE interceptors that made up the first wave of fighters to fly past the *Golden Empress* were able to avoid being hit. Such was the volume of fire that the turrets could produce en masse though that a significant number of the TIE fighters were still hit and when that happened their fragile construction provided minimal protection and most of them were blasted apart instantly while others spiralled out of control only to be destroyed when they collided with the *Golden Empress's* powerful shields. Some of the Imperial pilots that were able to slip through the screen of defensive fire from the ship's laser cannons returned fire in a defiant manner, strafing the massive starship as they flew past it but the laser cannons mounted on TIE fighters were incapable of penetrating the *Golden Empress's* shields and the ship remained undamaged.

"*Trading Dream* this is *Golden Empress*," Lyssa said, activating the communication system built into the arm of her chair, "you've got company coming. We've taken off some of the heat but most of them got past us."

"Understood *Golden Empress*." Captain Kaaro's voice answered from the other *lucrehulk-class* starship.

"*Trading Dream* and *Golden Empress* there's no need to panic yet. This is Blue Leader and we're on our way in." Jarad's voice added over the communication channel.

"Mistress Lyssa there are Alliance fighters closing in." Emsee announced before Lyssa saw a squadron of X-wings fly through the centre of her ship and immediately begin to engage the Imperial fighters that had already made it past her guns.

The fighters of blue squadron turned and fired without changing their heading, instead strafing the lead Imperial fighters from behind and several of the advanced TIE interceptors exploded. The Imperial fighters then began to split into two distinct groups, the remaining TIE interceptors pivoted to face back towards the Alliance X-wings before reversing direction to head straight at them, firing their own wing mounted quad laser cannons. Meanwhile the older TIE/In fighters continued towards the *Trading Dream* and the stream of troop transports coming from its two large hangar launch doors.

"All batteries fire!" Captain Kaaro ordered and the laser cannons aboard his own ship also began to target the TIE fighters now buzzing around it.

Once more the pilots of the Imperial fighters used their crafts' manoeuvrability as a defence but each time they were forced to change their heading they were also forced to break off away from the transports they were attempting to intercept before they could make it into Estran's atmosphere. This gave more of the transports the time they needed to get through the hole in the shield and some of them began to deploy the forces they carried for the invasion even before they reached the ground.

Some of the gallofree yards medium transports had been retrofitted as light carriers and inside their holds rebel pilots were already standing by in T-47 airspeeders that had been fitted with extra powerful repulsorlifts to enable them to be deployed at much higher altitudes than their usual one-hundred and seventy-five metre limit would allow. Green lights set into the ceilings of the holds flashed to warn the pilots that they were approaching their deployment altitudes and the insides of the transports were filled with the sounds of repulsorlift engines starting before large panels at the sides of the hulls slid back and the speeders shot out into the sky, joining the Z-95 headhunters as they too raced downwards along with the other Alliance transports.

The invasion of Estran was underway.

## 27.

"Ground stations are confirming the admiral's reports." General Dern said as he checked his datapad for up to date information on the military situation on Estran, "Rebel craft have been sighted about six hundred kilometres from the capital."

"Six hundred kilometres?" Lady Sharva exclaimed, "They could be here in less than an hour."

"I'm sure that the general's troops can contain the invasion." Rodge said to try and reassure her.

"I've already got four divisions moving to try and engage the rebels before they can set up a beachhead." General Dern replied.

"Admiral Hall," Moff Horatian said to the hologram of the admiral standing in front of his desk, "can your ships be of any help?"

"I'm afraid not your excellency." Admiral Hall responded, "Not only do the rebels have a strong fleet in the system that my capital ships are all tied down engaging but the rebels predicted that we would try and get reinforcements from other systems and have positioned interdictors along the approach routes to force them out of hyperspace early where they can be ambushed."

"It wouldn't matter anyway." General Dern added, "The rebels aren't deploying directly under the hole in the shield, their transports are moving away from it before offloading their forces."

"You mean they're using our own shield to prevent us from bombarding them from space?" Lord Torr said angrily.

"Hardly seems fair does it?" Couran commented.

"It doesn't matter anyway." General Dern said, "The rebels are just as unable to give orbital support to their invasion force as we are to bombard it from space and my troops will be there in under ten minutes."

Air mobile Imperial army units reacted quickly to the rebel landings, rushing from airbases across the continent to reach the landing zones. TIE strikers escorted the gunships and AT haulers carrying the ground troops and light walkers such as AT-STs and AT-DTs needed to drive back the rebels and these were met head on by the Z-95 headhunters and T-47 airspeeders providing air defence to the rebel forces that were still in the process of landing and deployment. This was just the first wave of Imperial forces though and behind them came several larger gozanti-class cruisers that each had a pair of massive AT-AT walkers clamped beneath their hulls. These vessels hovered above the ground just long enough to release the clamps holding the walkers in place before rising up into the sky once more and withdrawing before the Alliance airspeeders and starfighters could race to intercept them.

As soon as they were free of their transports, the crews of the AT-ATs began to advance across country towards the Alliance positions. Their towering height enabled them to fire over the army and stormtrooper units already engaged with the Alliance front lines at the supporting unit behind them.

The Alliance troops responded to this in two ways. Firstly some of the artillery units that had been providing support to their infantry turned their weapons on the lumbering walkers, firing at them with lasers, missiles and ballistic cannons. Though slow, the AT-ATs' hulls were very heavily armoured and most of the artillery strikes launched against them failed to inflict any damage. Only when an old fashioned high explosive shell happened to land against the vulnerable neck section connecting an AT-AT's head to its torso and the resulting blast decapitated one of the walkers did any of them fall to the artillery before the Alliance's second wave of attack came in the form of a wing of T-47 airspeeders.

Now flying at just above treetop level, these rapidly moving aircraft sped towards the somewhat irregular line of Imperial walkers from the flank, concentrating their fire on the closest walker. Despite the accuracy of their fire, the laser cannons carried by the airspeeders could not penetrate the thick armour of the AT-ATs and no more of the machines fell. This did not surprise the Alliance pilots, however and as they flew along the line to strafe the other AT-ATs one of them broke off from the rest of the squadron to keep focused on the first of the walkers they had come to. As the pilot circled around the walker the gunner sat behind him fired a harpoon tipped with a magnetic grappling disk that promptly fixed itself to one of the walker's ankles.

"Hold on." the pilot said as she banked sharply, continuing to circle the walker while the cable fixed to the back of the harpoon continued to unravel and wrap itself around the walker's legs. This technique had been well practised by Alliance pilots since its first use at the Battle of Hoth two years earlier. However, it was difficult and dangerous to carry out and even as the speeder was still circling its target another of the walkers turned its head towards it and fired a brief volley from its main head mounted laser cannons that blew the Alliance airspeeder apart. This was too late to save the AT-AT targeted by the speeder though and even as the crew of the walker that had just shot down the airspeeder were trying to warn their comrades of the danger it began to try and take another step towards the rebel lines and the cable wrapped around its legs pulled tight, tripping the towering machine and causing it to come crashing down to the ground where it promptly crushed a unit of army engines moving just ahead of the walkers to make sure that the ground was clear of booby traps such as trip wires and land mines designed to impede walkers.

"Inside quick." Garm said, opening the door to his office and waving the rebels inside while checking to make sure that no-one was watching.

"This is bigger than the office we left you tied up in junior. I'm impressed." Kara said as she looked around and Garm frowned at the mention of the time he and Vay had been left bound and gagged overnight in his last office prior to his promotion to deputy director.

"It's still a bit of a squeeze though." Tharun commented as more than a dozen people attempted to get into the office. Now that they were out of sight Ajay finally removed the gunner's helmet that had been concealing her mon calamari features and she set it down on the floor.

"Just sit down wherever you can find space." Vorn said.

"Is that terminal hooked up?" Geran asked when he saw the computer on Garm's desk.

"Of course it is." Vay replied.

"Though it may be being monitored. Director Helios did suspect my loyalty after all." Garm added.

"Never mind, as long as it works I might be able to use it to see how close the Empire is to finding us." Geran said.

"Just try not to give us away in the process." Harris commented.

"I'll log you on." Vay said, being closer to the desk than Garm and she quickly activated the computer, giving the rebel slicer access to the Imperial network from the inside.

"So what's our status?" Mace asked after giving Geran a few moments to see what he could find.

"Well no-one's tracking this terminal, I can tell you that." he said.

"How can you be sure?" Lannaye said.

"Because to do that this terminal would have to be reporting to another and it isn't. In fact pretty much all of the external communications are blocked. Other than those specifically enabled by user commands of course." Geran explained.

"that's all very interesting but it doesn't do us much good." Tharun said, "Are the Empire hunting for us?"

"Yes, of course they are." Geran said, "Though they seem to think that we may have headed back down towards the parking lot. Oh and it seems that they've managed to rig up an alternative shield control system by having individual generators control their own output guided from fleet headquarters."

"Can we do anything to disrupt that?" Jaysica asked.

"Probably not." Vorn said, "Even if we did manage to get out of here I doubt we'd be able to get all the way up there without being caught."

"I just wish we knew how the fight was going." Vorn said and Geran smiled.

"I can get that on here." he said, "Look." and he turned the monitor around so that more of the rebels could see it as he called up the data feed coming in from the Imperial units around the planet as well as fleet units outside the shield.

"I don't understand that." Cass said, trying to make sense of all the information she was looking at.

"Oh, err, it looks like the fighting in orbit is going well but, err, but the troops on the ground are boxed in still." Tobis said.

"That pretty much sums it up, yes." Geran added, "Our fleet controls space in near orbit. The Imperial navy has been bringing in reinforcements just like we expected but they're being forced out of hyperspace early and they can't link up with the Imperial squadrons already in the system. This is odd though." and Geran stared at some of the information on the display.

"What's wrong?" Mace asked.

"Neither the Wave Rider or Ocean Queen appear to be doing much. It looks like both ships have pulled back. I think they've taken heavy damage." Geran said.

"If Admiral Aphanar is no longer in command then who is?" Ajay asked.

"Captain Kase would be the next in the chain of command." Vorn said, "Though I'm not sure he's ever commanded an entire fleet before."

"Is there anything we can do from here to help? Send a few fake orders or maybe tell our people what the Imperial military is doing perhaps?" Harris suggested.

"What about a genuine order?" Vorn added, smiling, "Like a general surrender."

"Have you lost your mind boss? How is us telling the Empire to surrender supposed to be a genuine order?" Kara responded.

"Because we wouldn't be the ones sending it." Vorn told her.

"Moff Horatian would." Garm added and he and his father smiled at one another.

"All we need to do is convince him that he's in an un-winnable situation." Vorn said.

"Which looking at this feed shouldn't be too difficult." Geran said, "Our forces are pinned down for now but the rate at which the Empire is losing troops and equipment they won't be for much longer and then its only a matter of time before the Alliance gets here."

"Err, they could also destroy more shield generators." Tobis pointed out.

"How many would it take to open a permanent hole lad?" Tharun asked and Tobis thought about this for a



moment.

"Err, probably about another five or six." he said eventually, "Then, err, then the Alliance could land as many troops as they wanted."

"Or even bring larger ships through." Anzar added, "A few corvettes operating in the atmosphere could take out army units easily.

"Combine that with street fighting here in Estran City and casualties would mount massively." Vorn said, "I don't see Gregor Horatian being willing to tolerate that."

"Or any of the local lords." Garm added, "Three of whom are in his office right now. Including your good friend Lord Couran Desh, who I believe you have been in contact with since you left to join the rebellion."

"Alliance to Restore the Republic thank you junior." Kara commented.

"Yes, Couran and I have been in contact. I've found his help invaluable. Perhaps he can help us one last time and convince Moff Horatian to surrender." Vorn said.

"Who are the other lords here?" Mace asked.

"Lord Torr and Lady Sharva." Vay said.

"Oh how poetic." Mace responded and a wide grin spread across his face, "Colonel please let me be in that room."

"Very well." Vorn said, "Garm, can you and Vay take myself and Mace to the moff's office? We'll masquerade as your prisoners until we get there and deliver our ultimatum."

"Which is what exactly?" Harris asked.

"Surrender Estran to the Alliance or we'll kill him and as many people in this building as we can." Vorn answered.

"Seems straight forward enough. But exactly what do you intend to do if Gregor rejects your proposal?" Vay said and Vorn looked around the room.

"When Mace and I leave to see the moff the rest of you should split up into small groups. Don't tell us beforehand how you're organising yourself or where you're thinking of going. Geran I want you to call up a floor plan of the building and hand out copies, that way everyone can find their way to where they can do most damage. After half an hour, if you haven't heard from any of us then just do whatever you can to reduce the Empire's ability to operate from this building. Destroy power and communication lines, attack senior officers, start fires, anything that will prevent them from controlling the forces defending the city." he said.

An AT-ST bursting into flames and exploding was the first indication to the Imperial forces that the Alliance had been able to offload its heavy armour from its transports and was moving to counter the walkers that made up the bulk of their heavy support. The Alliance forces were equipped with a wider variety of armoured vehicles than their Imperial foes and many of these such as the Clone Wars vintage AT-TEs were obsolete. This did not mean that were not dangerous though and several more of the lighter Imperial walkers were destroyed in a matter of seconds, forcing the infantry units these had been protecting to fall back and regroup.

This opened up a gap in the Imperial lines and before the commanders in the field could do anything to plug it using the AT-ATs still advancing behind their first wave a number of Alliance special forces mounted on fast moving speeder bikes and swoops sped through it. Moving beneath the level of the trees these elite troops were able to ride right up to the advancing line of AT-ATs without being seen by the crews whose vision at ground level was disrupted by the trees ahead of them. Bypassing the engineers moving ahead of the walkers, the SpecForce troopers attached explosives to the legs of the towering war machines and raced away again before these exploded and bringing yet more of the AT-ATs crashing down in flames.

A concussion missile fired by an Imperial heavy cruiser slammed into the side of an Alliance nebulon-B class frigate just behind the main hull, snapping the vessel in half. However, the Imperial success was shot lived as a squadron of B-wings pounced upon the cruiser. Lightning danced across the hull of the warship as a volley of ion torpedoes found their mark and the cruiser began to suffer massive power outages in all systems. As soon as they saw that the cruiser's shields had collapsed the Alliance pilots charged straight at it, firing the powerful laser cannons mounted on their fighters as they went. The killing blow was not delivered by the starfighters, however. Instead this came from a pair of fast moving Corellian gunships. These sped past the already crippled cruiser and poured fire from their main turbolasers into the ship, triggering explosions all along its length before each gunship fired a single missile from its rear launchers and the cruiser was reduced to nothing but a burning wreck.

Aboard the Justice, Captain Halowan smiled when he saw the Imperial cruiser vanish from his ship's sensors but his attention was soon caught by one of the command staff.

"Captain those two star destroyers are coming around for another run." a comscan technician announced.

"What's the status on our torpedo launchers?" Captain Halowan asked.

"Three and four are still out of action captain. One and two are functional but we're running low on ammunition. We only started the engagement with-" the ship's weapons' officer replied.

"Yes I know what we started out with lieutenant." Captain Halowan interrupted, "Lock torpedoes on the lead target and get me Captain Kase."

"Putting you through now sir."

"Captain Halowan, I take it you've seen those two destroyers?" Captain Kase said when a hologram of him appeared at the same tactical display that Captain Halowan was stood at.

"Yes sir, I'm preparing to launch our torpedoes, though two of our launchers remain out of action."

"That should be enough. As soon as you've fired them I want the *Justice* to drop in behind the *Night Wraith*. We'll try and pass alongside the enemy and hit them with a combined broadside as we pass."

Captain Halowan nodded.

"We'll be ready to follow your lead sir." he replied.

Aboard the *Firebrand* Captain Naje saw the two Alliance star destroyers flying side by side, in an identical formation to the one adopted by her ship and the *Ferocious*. Crewmen rushed around the bridge as efforts to repair the significant damage her ship had taken continued. However, although both the *Firebrand* and *Ferocious* had taken serious damage already neither was out of the fight yet. Both ships still had functional weapons, engines and shields and Captain Naje was keen to avenge the losses that the Imperial Navy had suffered in this battle. She knew that if her remaining two star destroyers could destroy, or at least cripple the *Night Wraith* then that would go a long way towards improving the odds for the Imperial navy in the rest of the engagement.

"Captain the enemy is locking on." one of the comscan operators reported and Captain Naje nodded.

"That was to be expected." she said, "Return the favour. Lock onto that venator. let's see if we can't take out-"

"Incoming!" another crewman exclaimed at almost the same moment that Captain Naje saw the twin flashes of torpedo launches from the *Justice*.

"Weapons, defensive fire. Bring down those torpedoes." she ordered and the next flashes of light she saw came from her own vessel as its laser cannons fired on the rapidly closing torpedoes, bringing down first one and then the other in rapid succession.

While her focus had been on the torpedoes the *Justice* had fired its lateral thrusters, bringing it in behind the much larger *Night Wraith* and the two Alliance vessels now sped towards the Imperial ships. Captain Naje realised immediately what the two ships intended to do, concentrate their fire on just one of hers while preventing her second ship from returning fire. However, she still had the time to try and do something about that.

"Hard to starboard!" she shouted, knowing that aboard the *Ferocious* Captain Celtis would order her crew to match the manoeuvre.

Captain Kase saw the two Imperial star destroyers start to turn and he knew that if they were able to complete their manoeuvre then they would be able to do to the *Night Wraith* what he was attempting to do to their ships, concentrate the fire of both onto a single target. Fortunately the *Night Wraith* was much better armed than the older venator-class ships and while carrying out their manoeuvre they were particularly vulnerable to certain kinds of attack.

"Fire forward ion cannons. Concentrate on the rear target. Turbolasers stand by to fire on the other target on my mark." he ordered and blasts of brilliant white energy erupted from the *Night Wraith's* forward ion cannon batteries. The barrage struck the *Ferocious* and all of the lights visible from inside the vessel flickered as its power system began to fail. At the same time the star destroyer's engines dimmed and shut down while the ship was still only part way through its turn. Now drifting forwards helplessly the prow of the *Ferocious* struck one of the rear wing assemblies of the *Firebrand*, shearing off hull plates from both ships.

Klaxons sounded and the entire ship lurched as the *Ferocious* collided with the *Firebrand* and Captain Naje found herself being thrown sideways while the sound of grinding metal threatened to drown out the alarms. "Keep turning. Get us away from the *Ferocious*." she ordered as she started to pick herself up again.

While the *Firebrand* continued to turn the *Ferocious* continued to drift onwards and the two vessels separated, trailing debris behind them both and atmosphere leaking out from where their hulls had been breached. The *Firebrand* had almost been in position to deliver a broadside against the oncoming *Night Wraith* and by continuing to turn Captain Naje had presented the rear of her ship to the much larger Imperial-class vessel.

"Turbolasers fire. Maximum firepower." Captain Kase ordered and the white ion cannon blasts were replaced by the red streaks of turbolaser fire.

These energy blasts struck the *Firebrand's* glowing ion drives and these exploded in massive if short lived balls of flame, leaving the venator-class vessel crippled and burning.

"Damage report!" Captain Naje ordered.

"Sublight engines out. Weapons out. Shields collapsing. Main fusion plant approaching critical. Overload in six minutes." one of the bridge crew responded rapidly and Captain Naje knew that there was only one order she could give now. The last order any starship captain could give.

"All hands abandon ship." she announced.

"I'm afraid we've just lost the *Firebrand*." the hologram of Admiral Hall announced to Moff Horatian and those gathered in his office.

"How much longer are we going to have to hear about losses admiral?" Lady Sharva said angrily, "Where is the rest of the sector group?"

"They'll be here I'm sure." Rodge Larrs said.

"The first elements of our reinforcements have already arrived in the system." Admiral Hall added, "However, the rebels are using interdicator cruisers to force them from hyperspace where they are unable to co-ordinate their actions with the rest of the fleet. I'm trying to get orders to other systems to have their ships rendezvous in interstellar space before jumping here en masse. That way they'll be able to deal with the interdictors before moving to support us."

"How long will that take admiral?" Moff Horatian asked.

"At least four hours to get a force strong enough to deal with the rebel blockade into position. Then possibly another hour or two to take out all of the interdictors they are using." Admiral Hall answered.

"Thank you admiral. That will be all." Moff Horatian said and the hologram promptly faded away.

"So another six hours then." Lord Torr said, "General what about your troops? Can they deal with the rebels already here on the surface?"

"In six hours? No." General Dern replied, "Like Admiral Hall's fleet, the army is faced with having to assemble a force large enough to defeat the rebels before actually attacking them. Right now all we're doing is trying to slow them down. We might be able to prevent them from getting to the capital but-"

Just then the intercom sounded.

"Yes?" Moff Horatian said.

"Sir, Deputy Director Larcus is outside. He has a pair of rebel prisoners with him." the moff's secretary said and Moff Horatian smiled.

"At least someone has some good news." he said, "Send him in."

The doors to the moff's office then opened, revealing not only Garm and Vay standing either side of Vorn and Mace but also the full squad of stormtroopers now standing guard outside the office to prevent any of the rebels known to be in the building from attacking him.

"Inside you rebel scum." Garm said, shoving Vorn through the doorway.

"Watch it." Vorn commented as he and Mace entered the office ahead of Garm and Vay and then the doors closed behind them.

"Well isn't this interesting?" Lord Torr said, getting to his feet and walking towards Vorn, "Lord Vorn Larcus the third. Murderer and traitor brought to justice at last and by his own son no less."

"Lady Sharva I don't suppose I could count on you for a character reference could I?" Mace said sarcastically, rubbing in the fact that she had previously intervened on his behalf to prevent Garm from pursuing an investigation against him.

"Don't you dare speak to me like that!" Lady Sharva snapped.

"So what do you have to say for yourself now Vorn?" Lord Torr asked, looking Vorn in the face.

"I'm here to see if I can negotiate a surrender." Vorn replied.

"A surrender? You're already in custody. It's a bit late for that." Lady Sharva said before turning to look at Moff Horatian, "Just have him executed and be done with him. Him and that scruffy pirate."

"Scruffy?" Mace said defensively, looking down at the Imperial uniform he still wore, "Who's scruffy looking?"

"He isn't here to talk about an Alliance surrender, he's here to talk about an Imperial surrender." Vay said and all of the Imperial personnel and local lords suddenly turned to look at her.

"Young lady, your sense of humour escapes me." Lady Sharva said.

"Well a lot got past you in the past few years." Garm added, "That even one of your own handmaidens was an agent for the Alliance for example."

"How dare you!" Lady Sharva yelled, leaping to her feet but with a wave of her hand Vay used the Force to push her back down and she let out a cry of alarm. Meanwhile Garm turned his blaster towards General Dern at the same time as tossing the bag he had over his shoulder to Vorn. Vorn then reached inside to take out an E-11 blaster rifle before passing it to Mace so that he could take his heavy blaster pistol from it.

"I think it would be better for all if you handed over that sidearm of yours general." Vorn said, aiming his rifle at General Dern and slowly the general lifted the blaster from his holster and placed it on the floor before kicking it towards Vorn.

"I'll make sure we're not disturbed." Garm said, backing up to the door and engaging the lock. It was at this point that Rodge recovered enough of his senses to intervene.

"Deputy Director Larcus, what is the meaning of this? How dare you attempt to hold us hostage?" he snapped.

"No attempting about it I think." Couran commented and then he looked at Vorn.

"How can you take this so calmly Couran?" Lady Sharva said angrily, "I always knew Garm Larcus was a traitor and now I've been proven right. I'll see you hang for this Garm, right beside your father."

"Actually it was only when Director Helios decided to have Professor Drame tortured that I decided my future did not lie with the Empire." Garm said.

"On the other hand I made that decision at the same time as Vorn did." Couran added and Lord Torr glared at him.

"What are you saying?" he asked.

"He's saying that he's been feeding me information about all your petty little schemes for years." Vorn responded and he crouched down to pick up General Dern's blaster before handing it to Couran.

"Thank you my boy. Now perhaps you should tell everyone exactly what it is you want." Couran said.

"It's quite simple really." Vorn said, "Moff Horatian is to order all Imperial forces in the sector to surrender."

"Ridiculous!" Rodge snapped.

"Why would we surrender when we've just heard about how the rebellion's efforts are doomed?" Lady Sharva asked, "The Imperial navy will overwhelm your puny fleet and the army will defeat your invasion."

"Given enough time I'm sure they will." Vorn replied, nodding, "But that time is something none of you have. The only thing keeping any of you alive is the fact that I need Moff Horatian to give the order to surrender."

"Killing us won't do you any good. Admiral Hall still commands the sector group and Director Helios will deal with the rebels here on the surface." Rodge said.

"There might be a bit of a problem with that." Vay said, "Director Helios is already dead. Garm shot him." and Rodge turned towards Garm, dumbfounded.

"You'll find his body in a cell in the ISB's detention section." Garm added.

"You have to give the order to surrender." Vay said, looking directly at Moff Horatian.

"Not trying to use your powers on me are you?" Moff Horatian responded and Vay shook her head.

"I could never do that to you." she told him.

"Moff Horatian your fleet currently in the Estran system is out gunned and your ground forces will not be able to stop the Alliance from reaching the capital. How many more ships and troops do you think you'll lose before your forces can gain the upper hand?"

"Not to mention the collateral damage to the capital itself." Couran pointed out, "Do you really think the people will stand for that? What sort of world will you be left in charge of?"

"I'm afraid that Lord Desh is correct." General Dern said and Rodge glared at him angrily.

"Are you joining in with this treason as well now general?" he snapped.

"I am providing the moff with the most accurate information about the military situation I can." the general responded, "We do have the forces to defeat this invasion eventually but we can't do it before the capital is destroyed. Not to mention that all of us will certainly die."

"Then you think that I should surrender our forces general?" Moff Horatian asked.

"That is a decision only you can take sir." General Dern answered.

"Do it." Lord Torr said.

"What?" Lady Sharva exclaimed when she heard this, "He can't surrender."

"He must. If the capital falls then we lose everything Lynn." Lord Torr responded.

"Ah Max, always concerned about how events will affect him personally while not caring about anyone else." Couran said, "Now it looks like your own self interest could just put a stop to this war." and Lord Torr frowned at him.

Moff Horatian sighed and got to his feet.

"In the interests of the people of Estran and citizens of the Empire across the sector I agree to surrender to you Lord Larcus." he said.

"No!" Rodge exclaimed and he too leapt to his feet, reaching into his jacket and producing a hold out blaster that he aimed at the startled Moff Horatian. However, just as he was about to pull the trigger there was a 'snap-hiss' as Vay activated her lightsaber and dived in between him and the moff. Rodge was just about able to get off a single shot that Vay easily deflected before General Dern tackled him and he was knocked to the floor. The blaster went off again as the two men fell and General Dern collapsed, clutching at a wound to his stomach. Rodge then turned his weapon back towards Moff Horatian but by this time Mace had taken aim and he fired a split second before Rodge could, the shot hitting the COMPNOR leader right between his eyes and killing him instantly.

"We're going to need a medic for the general." Vay said as she shut off her lightsaber and crouched down beside him.

"He'll get one." Vorn told her, "In the meantime Moff Horatian, you have a call to make."

The moff's message was sent out to every military unit as well as broadcast on every civilian channel on every Imperial-held world in the sector simultaneously.

"Citizens of the Empire," he announced, "it is my unfortunate duty to inform you that the civil war between the

forces of the Galactic Empire and the Alliance to Restore the Republic that has been raging for more than five years now has developed in such a way that there is no longer any reason to believe that the outcome will be favourable to the Galactic Empire. Therefore, as the duly appointed Imperial governor of the sector I have taken the decision to surrender unconditionally to the Alliance. I have done this to prevent the catastrophic losses to both our military and civilian population on both sides that would result if the fighting was allowed to continue to its inevitable conclusion. As a result of this surrender I am ordering all Imperial forces under my command to cease all combat operations and either return to their bases immediately or surrender to units of the Alliance armed forces. I have received assurances that all prisoners will be well treated in accordance with the rules of war. It is my hope that from this point onwards we can move forwards and heal the rift in galactic society that has resulted from this war and create a new society where peace and justice for all will reign. Now for the last time as your Moff I, Gregor Horatian thank you for your loyalty and wish you good fortune in the future."

## EPILOGUE

Above Estran the planetary shield was finally lowered and citizens came out of their homes to celebrate as Imperial troops began to retreat back to their barracks. Elsewhere on the planet other military units also followed Moff Horatian's order and either started to return to their barracks or, in the case of those engaged against Alliance troops they surrendered. Here and there a handful of military units, mostly soldiers from COMPForce, attempted to defy the order and continue fighting but such instances were few and far between and after putting up a brief fight these were either overpowered or fled taking whatever weapons and equipment they could with them.

In space the situation was similar and as the warships on both sides ceased firing the vast majority of the Imperial vessels lowered their shields and broadcast their surrender. Again there were a few fanatical starship captains who refused the order but none of them were willing to fight on alone and their ships quickly vanished into hyperspace, never to be seen in the sector again.

"So this is the end of the war then." Garm said as he and Vay stood on the roof of the capitol building with Vorn and his rebels while they waited for a shuttle carrying General Kain to arrive for him to take over military control of the city.

"Yes it finally is." Vorn replied, "Have you given any thought to what you might want to do now that the ISB is going to be disbanded."

Garm shrugged.

"I hadn't given it much thought until you mentioned it." he said, "Though Lady Sharva is up for re-election next year. Perhaps I should consider running for office."

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Kara commented.

"Err, what about you Jaysica?" Tobis asked as he held Jaysica's hand, "Do, err, do you think you'll be able to make amends with your sister now?" and Jaysica gasped, her eyes widening.

"What's wrong little lady?" Tharun asked.

"It's Jaynie." Jaysica said, "She's still tied up in the trunk of the speeder."

Vay found herself unable to sleep that night. A strange disturbance in the Force kept her awake while she lay in bed beside Garm who was sleeping soundly after his lengthy evening discussion with his father about how to organise an election campaign. All of a sudden there was a pale glow from the corner of the bedroom and as Vay looked towards it she saw an apparition appear there. The figure was of a human male dressed in jedi robes and Vay immediately recognised the man from the one time they had met before.

"Father." she said to the spirit.

"Yes Vay, it's me." Kieran Udra replied.

"What are you here for? How am I even seeing you?" Vay asked.

"I have a message for you Vay. It's very important that you listen to me. It is taking a lot of effort for me to be here like this and I do not have long. Something is coming to Estran Vay. Something big. You need to open the doors."