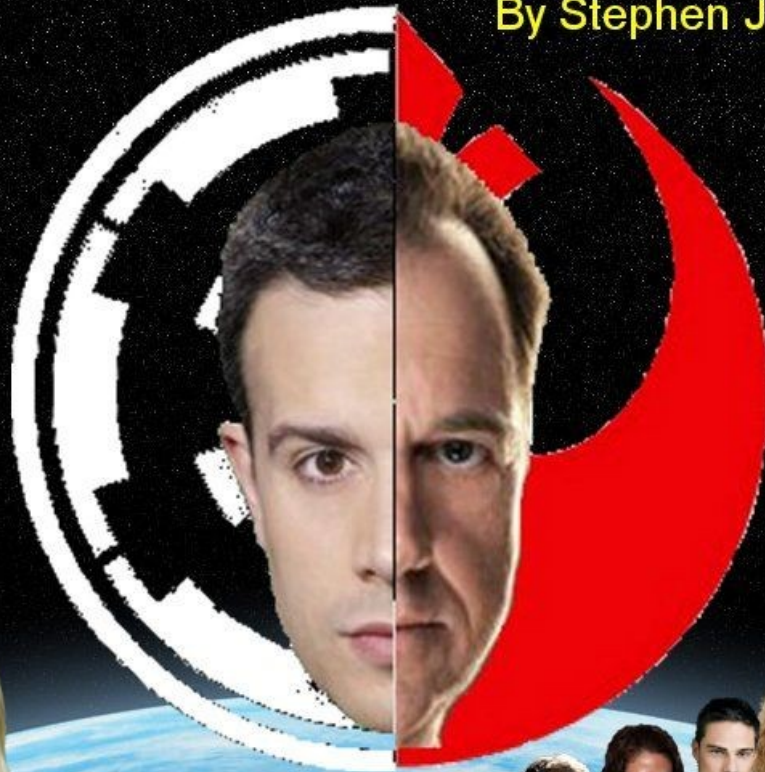


STAR WARS

8-12: Family Heirloom

By Stephen J Dutton



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Civil war turns father against son

IT IS A TIME OF CRISIS. REBEL FORCES FIGHTING AGAINST THE EVIL GALACTIC EMPIRE ARE OUTNUMBERED AND OUTGUNNED BY THEIR FOES. THEY MUST INSTEAD RELY ON 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...

FAMILY HEIRLOOM

MANY FAMILIES HAVE SECRET HISTORIES THEY KEEP TO THEMSELVES AND WHEN A GROUP OF STRANGERS ARRIVE IN THE SECTOR VORN LARCUS FINDS THAT A 4000 YEAR OLD SCANDAL IS ABOUT TO CATCH UP WITH HIM...

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

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1.

The restaurant was closed and a droid was sweeping the floor as the handful of people sat watching a news broadcast on a large holographic projector that was normally used to project copies of artwork while customers dined.

The footage showed a rioting mob being put down violently by Imperial stormtroopers and this was only one of many such stories now being circulated. Even the Imperial censors of the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order could not suppress what had happened indefinitely and word was out.

Emperor Palpatine was dead.

"Well I don't think that any of us quite expected that." one of the gathered individuals commented.

Of the six people present all of them were human and all but one were dressed in expensive formal clothing. On the other hand the sixth person, a large man who sat apart from the others wore military fatigues and had a weapon holstered at his waist.

"So what do we do now?" a dark skinned man asked, looking around at his lighter skinned associates and two men who's family connection was obvious from their near identical appearance looked at one another and smiled.

"What else?" one responded.

"We pick up where we left off." the other added.

"Fifteen years and you two are still finishing off what one another starts." the only woman among the group said.

"It's a twin thing." one of the two brothers replied.

"Nothing to be concerned about." the other brother added.

"But starting again now?" the dark skinned man asked, looking around, "Are we sure that it isn't premature?"

"It's the perfect time." the first brother said.

"The Empire is in disarray right now. If we act quickly then we can take advantage of that." his sibling added.

"And what if the new emperor just picks up where the last one left off?" the first man to have spoken asked.

"We ceased our operation because the Empire made it too dangerous to continue. The Emperor-" the dark skinned man began before the woman interrupted him.

"The Emperor was using powers that less than one in a billion beings have." she said, "We all know that the mindless masses have been conned into thinking that those powers never existed. Who else could take over who has that sort of power? Vader's dead and the emperor's little legion of witches and warlocks were never granted the sort of power that they'd need to claim the throne for themselves. Karlo and Den are right. This is our opportunity to pick up where we left off when the Empire forced us to go to ground."

"And what about you?" the brother Karlo asked, looking at the man in combat fatigues who had remained silent throughout the discussion.

"You're insane if you think we can just pick right up where we left off." the man replied, "You know as well as I do that the Empire found some of our stashes. That's why we split up and halted our operation in the first place. We'd need to check all of them just to be sure that they're still there."

"Then that's what we should do." the dark skinned man said, "Find out what we still have and decide how best to build on that."

"I have something else for us to consider." the first man to speak said, "This." and he tapped at his datapad to bring up an image that looked hand drawn, a sketch of a piece of jewellery.

"We don't have that though do we Verren?" Den asked.

"All we have is that picture." Karlo added.

"Perhaps not." Verren replied, "But I think I know where it is. Roughly anyway."

"How?" the woman asked, "We searched for-"

"We were looking in the wrong place." Verren interrupted, "But a few years ago I was on a business trip and I happened to see a news report about a high profile defection to the Alliance. A politician on Estran decided that he didn't like what the Empire was doing and spoke out."

"Nerf herder." the man in military clothing said abruptly, "Speak out against the Empire and you won't be speaking to anyone much longer."

"Quite." Verren said, "The guy I heard about got thrown out of his cushy job and joined the Alliance. Just minutes ahead of being arrested by the ISB apparently."

"This is all very interesting Verren. But it doesn't get us anywhere." the first woman said, "Get to the point."

"The point is the guy's name." Verren said, "Vorn Larcus."

"Larcus." the dark skinned man commented, "As in the maiden name of-"

"The wife of Erill Crassis." Den said before he could finish.

"So the traitor took what she stole and went back to her mother's home." Karlo said.

"I suppose if our families are going to start again then it's only right that we should start by tying up an end that's been loose for four thousand years, wouldn't you agree Mister Mott?" the first woman asked, looking at the man in combat fatigues.

"Find the man. Take what is ours." Mott replied.

"Vorn Larcus is a man who won't want to be found." Den pointed out.

"A man with powerful friends to hide among." Karlo added.

"A man with enough enemies that he may not notice one or two more getting close to him." Mott said.

"Perhaps two of us should go and find this Vorn Larcus." the dark skinned man suggested.

"Volunteering Harlen?" the woman asked.

"If necessary, yes." Harlen responded.

"I'll go with you." Verren said, "It was my ancestor that identified what we're looking for after all."

"It could be dangerous." Den pointed out, "If he's part of the rebellion then this Vorn Larcus is likely to be surrounded by armed rebels, even if he's not a fighter himself."

"Then I'll send a squad of my men with them." Mott said, "Besides, a few mandalorians may prove useful for other things as well."

"That's settled then." the woman said, "While Harlen and Verren go and find Vorn Larcus the rest of us will take stock of what remains of the artefacts we've gathered over the years. Emperor Palpatine and his agent may have been able to sniff out some but I doubt they got them all."

The region known as the Spire Worlds was home to numerous small outposts and settlements established by groups that wanted to avoid the attention of the Empire. Chief among these was the Alliance to Restore the Republic but there were also many other groups that had a similar desire for privacy that the partially charted and difficult to navigate region could offer them. Among these was the criminal organisation of Onell the Hutt, the leading crime lord in the sector who had managed to take over the claim of a prospector to take ownership of a remote planet where he established a shadow port. Here contraband goods could be traded freely just as long as Onell received a suitable cut. More recently a deal had been struck between Onell the Hutt and the rebel alliance to allow the rebellion to operate more openly in the shadow port in exchange for the rebel fleet providing protection. News of this had spread through large parts of the underworld in the sector and so Harlen and Verren had a place to start their search for Vorn.

As soon as their transport dropped out of hyperspace they could tell that they were in the right place from the sight of a mon calamari built MC-80 cruiser in orbit around the world escorted by a smaller MC-30 frigate and a squadron of X-wing fighters.

"They're scanning us." the mandalorian pilot of the transport said to Harlen and Verren who were sat behind him in the cockpit.

"Probably trying to determine whether our cargo hold is crammed full of slaves. Part of the deal between the rebels and Onell the Hutt was no more slavery." Verren commented. Then looking at the pilot he added,

"Ignore them. Just keep going and set us down."

"Yes Mister Karn." the pilot replied.

Entering the planet's atmosphere revealed a largely barren surface but this was criss crossed with numerous long interconnecting canyons and it was within these, sheltered from the powerful sand storms that often swept across the surface that the shadow port was located.

"Look for rebel ships." Harlen told the pilot, "Set down as close to them as you can but don't make it look like you're trying to get close to them. Understood?"

"Yes Mister Drud." the pilot replied as he descended towards the surface.

The area of the shadow port used by the rebellion turned out to be easy to identify. Knowing that they were surrounded by criminals, the rebels had acted to secure a perimeter using a power fence that was clearly visible from the air and the mandalorian pilot found a landing zone just outside this before setting the transport down.

Harlen and Verren disembarked in the company of four mandalorian mercenaries while the pilot and one other remained aboard the transport to protect it, the mandalorians having no more trust in the shadow port's inhabitants than the rebels did. The two men had adjusted the style of their clothing from carefully tailored to something with a more practical appearance, but as a group the mandalorians' distinctive armour still made them stand out. The group headed away from their transport as one and despite their objective being to infiltrate the rebellion in the shadow port they did not head directly for the secured area. Instead they made their way towards the nearest drinking establishment.

"Told you." Verren said when they entered and saw several clusters of rebel uniforms among the patrons of the cantina, "The rebellion's not going to bother setting up entertainment for its troops when there's already plenty here."

"I never argued with that." Harlen replied, "But now what do we do?"

"Get their uniforms of course." Verren said and he looked at the leader of the mandalorians escorting them,

"Think you can manage that?" he asked.

"Shouldn't be too difficult sir." the armoured soldier replied and he turned around and pointed towards the way they had just come into the cantina. All four mandalorians then proceeded to exit the establishment, leaving Harlen and Verren alone.

"So what do we do while we're waiting?" Harlan asked.

"We're in a cantina aren't we?" Verren responded, "I suggest that we get a drink and see whether anyone here's heard of Vorn Larcus."

The two men walked up to the bar, deliberately heading for a part of it where there were several beings in identical overalls that bore various rank markings. None of them were armed but their appearance was definitely that of a military unit off duty.

As he walked right up to the bar Verren deliberately knocked into one of the rebels, spilling his drink.

"Hey!" the rebel exclaimed, glaring at Verren as the other rebels in the group also looked towards him.

"Sorry about that." Verren said, "Look, let me get you another. Whatever you want." and the rebel grinned.

"Lum." he said, "The twenty-four over there." and he pointed to an expensive looking bottle on a shelf behind the bar, "You did say whatever I want."

"That I did." Verren said, smiling and he waved the barman towards him, "My friend and I will each have a beer." he said, "Also I'd like that bottle of twenty-four vintage lum you have to make up for my mistake."

"Two hundred." the barman said, "I want to see the money first."

"Of course. How sensible." Verren said as he produced a credit stick.

"This isn't some posh tap caf on Estran." the barman said, "Cash only."

"Of course." Verren replied and he produced a roll of banknotes to pay for his drinks.

The barman promptly got the two beers for Harlen and Verren, then took the bottle from the shelf and handed it to the rebel who smiled at his comrades as he took it.

"That's a lot of money to be flashing around here." the rebel then said.

"A lot to be spending over a spilt drink as well." Harlen commented.

"Spoils of war." Verren said, "Taken from an Imperial tax collector's secret vault."

"Guess I should be thanking the hard working taxpayers of the Empire for this then." the rebel said as he raised the bottle.

"Actually we were hoping to celebrate our success with a friend of ours." Verren said, "I don't suppose you're familiar with Vorn Larcus are you?" and the rebel snorted while some of the others in his group laughed.

"Oh yeah, we know him. We served on the *Primarch*. Major Vorn Larcus and his team helped us defect." he answered.

"Lieutenant colonel now." someone else said.

"Too bad he couldn't have helped save our ship." another of the rebels added, "It was much better than the rust buckets the Alliance has us bringing back up to spec."

"Another great victory of Vorn Larcus." another of the rebels added.

"Let's not forget that daughter of his." another commented.

"His daughter?" Harlen responded, "You know her too?"

"Stang yes." the rebel replied, "They sent us to make sure that the *Golden Empress* was able to make the parts the fleet needed and she pulled a bunch of us off that to redecorate her quarters so they were just the way she wanted them and I really mean just the way, everything had to be perfect."

"You don't like her then?" Verren asked, "Don't worry, we won't tell her father."

"A perfectionist who demands everything right away?" another rebel commented, "Stang, that's the dictionary definition of an officer. Especially a commanding officer of a starship." and Verren smiled.

"Well I'm guessing that he's not going to show here." he said before gulping down what remained of his drink, "So enjoy that lum, but take your time with it." and then he turned to leave, Harlen following him.

"Not bad." Harlen said quietly as they left the cantina, "Now we have a rank and assignment for Vorn. He's a lieutenant colonel and from the sounds of it he's one of their field agents."

"Plus he's got a daughter in the rebel fleet." Verren added, "Funny, I expected him to be some rear echelon nerf herder playing at being a soldier. I never really expected a guy with the background he must have to be more-"

"Like us?" Harlen suggested before Verren could finish and he smiled.

"Yeah, like us. But we were raised to this." he said.

"Ever wonder whether Vorn Larcus could have been raised to it as well?" Harlen said and Verren came to a halt, causing Harlen to stop as well and Verren looked around to see if anyone was close enough to overhear what they were talking about.

"You think that his family's been trying to find more artefacts around here?" he asked.

"Why not? Charity Crassis took the pendant from the archive before the Jedi got to it, we know that. So maybe she knows what it is and it brought her here."

"Her mother came from this sector." Verren pointed out.

"Perhaps, but not Charity. She could have stayed put but she chose to leave. Perhaps there's more than just the one artefact in play here. Plus it would explain why someone like Vorn Larcus would decide that he didn't

want to go along with what the Empire was doing. Or are you really telling me that he really was some great man of the people who defected to the rebellion in the name of justice? I'm telling you, the reason he makes such a good subversive is that he always was one. I bet a member of the sector's most important legislative body gets access to all sorts of interesting information about things never mentioned in public."

Verren sighed.

"We're getting ahead of ourselves." he said, "For now we just need to find that pendant. If there is anything else with it then we can grab that as well but the pendant has to be our primary objective."

"I'm not arguing with that. I'm just saying that when the time comes we shouldn't be in too much of a hurry just to grab it and run. We should make sure that we're not leaving anything behind." Harlen said.

"I suppose so. But unless Mister Mott's men have managed to get us some uniforms then our plan's not going anywhere."

2.

Returning to their transport Harlen and Verren found that the mandalorians had all returned, bringing with them the bodies of several uniformed rebels and the mandalorians were already changing into some of these uniforms.

"Where did you get these?" Harlen asked.

"All over the place." the mandalorian leader replied, "We made sure to just target individual rebels. That should give us the maximum amount of time before they're missed. We stunned them, then smothered them to avoid damaging their uniforms."

"Any electronic ID?" Verren asked as he crouched down to start removing a uniform from a body.

"None." the mandalorian answered, shaking his head.

"It's a new base." Harlen pointed out, "They probably haven't had the chance to set up an electronic security system. The guards will just be watching for uniforms going in. They'll be watching people leaving the base more closely to make sure they aren't stealing anything."

As expected the rebel troops on guard just waved the six men through the gate and from here they headed towards the landing zone that had been set up where numerous small and medium transports were located. This was where some careful planning was required. Harlen and Verren needed to get to wherever Vorn Larcus was located, which could be almost anywhere in the sector. The rebellion made a point of having as many bases in a sector as it could reasonably operate rather than concentrating all of their resources in one easily destroyed location. Now that the Empire was crumbling this number was likely to be increasing as the rebellion saw an increase in resources and tried to keep the pressure on the Empire everywhere it could and the result was an even larger number of places that a field team could be hiding, even assuming that Vorn's team was not currently deployed.

"So, got any ideas?" Verren asked as he and Harlen looked at the various starships in front of them.

At first Harlen did not reply, but then he noticed a rebel directing a group of binary load lifter droids as they carried cargo aboard one of the transports and he smiled.

"Hey, it's me." he said, "Come with me." but then he looked around at the four mandalorians, "Not you. You wait here, I don't want to make him nervous."

"Yes sir." the unit leader replied as the other two men set off towards the rebel load master.

"Hey!" Harlen called out as he hurried up to the load master. Significantly he had noticed that the rank badge that the rebel wore was the same as the ones on his own and Verren's uniforms, meaning that neither needed to worry about the rebel being able to give them orders.

"What?" the load master asked in reply.

"Does that datapad have all of the manifests on it?" Harlen asked.

"Yes. Why?"

"Because some laser brain has gone and lost a pair of fusion generators and our CO thought that they may have ended up being being loaded onto one of these transports by mistake." Harlen lied and he was convincing enough for the rebel to hold out the datapad to him.

"Here, check." he said, "I've not seen any generators but I've only loaded three transports this shift. They could be on one of the others."

"Thanks." Harlen said as he started to review the datapad. But rather than inspecting the log of cargoes loaded onto each transport he was reviewing the destinations of each. These were given in various terms, sometimes the bases to which the transports were heading were listed by the name of the planet on which they were located or other times by a name given by the rebels themselves and to an outsider like Harlen names such as 'Fishbowl' and 'Hive' were meaningless. In addition some were stated as being sent to rendezvous with fleet units rather than bases. However, there were several transports all with the same very specific destination given and Harlen took note of these.

All of them were heading to a base that was simply described as 'HQ'.

"I don't see them anywhere." he said as he made a mental note of the vessels heading for the rebel headquarters and then he handed the datapad back to the rebel, "Thanks anyway. Someone must have stashed them somewhere else."

"Wouldn't surprise me." the rebel replied, "I don't think anyone's got a clue how things work around here at the moment."

"Don't we know it." Verren commented and he waved before he and Harlen turned and headed back towards the waiting mandalorians, "So what did you find?" he asked quietly when they were far enough away from the rebel to prevent him hearing.

"There are a number of transports heading for a headquarters base." Harlen answered.

"Are you sure that it's in this sector? Not the Alliance's high command itself?"

"If it was just one or two ships then that could be a possibility. But there are about a dozen of them going there so my guess is that it's the rebellion's centre of operations for the sector. If anywhere has a record of where Vorn Larcus is hiding then it'll be there. Failing that I'm sure they'll know where the *Golden Empress* is."

"His daughter's ship?" Verren said and Harlen nodded.

"If we can't find one member of the Larcus family then the other will have to do." he said, "All we need to do now is hitch a ride."

After rejoining with the four mandalorians, Harlen and Verren made their way to the transport destined for the rebels' sector headquarters that was due to leave soonest and Verren walked up to one of the crew who was stood outside performing some last minute checks on the vessel.

"Any chance of a ride?" he asked, "Our transport has a faulty hyperdrive motivator that's not going to be fixed until tomorrow."

The crewman looked at the newcomers for a moment and Verren started to wonder whether he suspected something. Fortunately though, his fears were unfounded.

"Sure. Hop aboard. We're just about to leave." the man said and he led the way into the transport. Inside much of the ship had been converted for carrying cargo and there were no seats visible anywhere, "Just sit down wherever you can." the rebel told them, "We may not have much in the way of comfort but the flight won't take long."

When the transport dropped out of hyperspace, Harlen and Verren had expected it to be above a remote planet similar to the one that the shadow port was located on. However, looking out of a viewport set into the side of the ship the men instead saw that they were still in deep space, far from any star system. But the transport was by no means alone and the first thing that they saw was the odd sight of a mon calamari MC-80 cruiser at a stop beside an Imperial-class star destroyer. Then as the transport flew past these two monstrous warships they saw that they represented only a small fraction of the rebel fleet in the sector as they saw dozens of other ships, mainly older classes that had been used on both sides during the Clone Wars but there were some smaller modern frigates and corvettes mixed in with these other battleships, cruisers and destroyers.

But it was what was beyond these that made the two men smile. There they saw a space station, one of the Republic's ancient navigational beacons that in the days before navigation computers had been capable of calculating hyperspace jumps on their own had provided starships with the information needed for these. Now though this long abandoned station had been used by the rebellion as its headquarters in the sector, providing them with a secure base far from the prying eyes of the Empire.

"So much for all the Imperial propoganda about scattered and ineffective terrorists." Verren said softly, "This represents a lot of firepower."

"Don't forget what our ancestors learned the hard way. All this is insignificant compared to the power of the Force and when we control that power we'll be so rich you'll be able to buy one of these as your own personal yacht." Harlen replied.

"Two." Verren said, "I'll need a second one for when my wife wants to borrow one." and Harlen smiled.

"Two then." he said.

The transport flew directly towards the space station, landing in the large hangar bay located near the top and the passengers disembarked before the crew started to unload their cargo. There were other transport ships in the hangar along with several squadrons of starfighters, including a number of Imperial TIE fighters. "We're going to need to find a computer terminal." Harlen said as he looked around the hangar, "Then we can look up Vorn."

"Or maybe we can just ask for directions." Verren suggested and before Harlen could respond he strode towards a nearby group of rebel pilots that were gathered around a squadron of X-wing fighters, "Excuse me." he said and the pilots turned towards him and glared at him, "I was wondering-"

"You know what I'm wondering?" one of the pilot's interrupted, "I'm wondering whether you're about to salute the officers you're addressing."

"I'm sorry sir." Verren replied, annoyed at making such a basic mistake and he stood up straight and saluted.

"Very good." the bad tempered officer said, returning the salute, "Now what do you want?"

"I was wondering whether you could direct me to Vorn Larcus." Verren said and the officer snorted, looking round at the other pilots.

"Well that hunk of junk over there is the ship Lieutenant Colonel Larcus and his team of over-rated nerf herders fly in." the officer told Verren, pointing across the hangar to a Corellian Engineering YT-1300 class light freighter, "So they're all probably around somewhere. I suggest you try the bars and medical bays. At least one of his people is probably either getting drunk or getting first aid and they'll be able to tell you where the old fool is. Now get out of here, we've got work of our own to do." and then he turned back towards his own men and started talking to them, obviously not discussing matters related to the rebellion.

"That was weird." Verren said as he returned to the rest of the group.

"Yeah, I guess Vorn Larcus isn't that popular with everyone." Harlen replied. Then he looked at the four mandalorians, "Two of you stay here." he told them, "Watch that YT-thirteen hundred and let us know if anyone goes aboard. You all know what our target looks like so keep an eye out for him especially. If he shows up then follow him."

"I think we should split up as well." Verren said to Harlen.

"You're thinking that one of us looks for Vorn and the other takes his daughter?" the other man responded and Verren nodded.

"If he doesn't know what the pendant is then he may have given it to her." he said.

"Fair enough. You take Vorn, I'll track down his kid." Harlen said.

"Agreed. We'll take one of Mister Mott's men with each of us for protection. Check in if you find anything."

3.

Being unfamiliar with the layout of the space station Verren located a computer terminal to provide him with a map. Unfortunately the system did not list the whereabouts of every individual's quarters publicly but it did list a communication address for Vorn Larcus and also allow Verren to determine which section of the station had been set aside for officers' quarters and with these two pieces of information he hatched a plan.

Making their way to the officers' quarters Verren and the mandalorian began to search them. Each door had a name marked on the wall above it, identifying the individual who lived in the rooms on the other side and the two men continued to search until they found one that read 'LARCUS'.

"Think you can deal with this lock?" Verren asked the mandalorian and the mercenary knelt down to inspect it.

"It's junk." he said, "Probably the original lock from when this station was built. Thousands of years out of date."

"So that's a 'yes' then is it?" Verren said.

"Yes sir. Shall I begin?" the mandalorian asked and he reached out towards the lock.

"No, not just yet. We need to make sure that the coast is clear." Verren answered and he retreated away from the door, heading around a nearby corner to where he had seen a communication panel that he promptly activated and entered the details he had for Vorn Larcus.

"Larcus." Vorn said as the face Verren had committed to memory appeared on the screen in front of him.

"Sorry to disturb you sir," Verren said, "but you're wanted in command. There's a signal coming in for you."

"Can't it be routed down here?" Vorn asked.

"Apparently not sir. I've been told it's classified. Urgent too."

"Okay, I'm on my way." Vorn said, sighing and the screen went blank.

Seconds later the door to Vorn's quarters slid open and he came rushing out. Verren gave him time to get out of sight before looking at the mandalorian behind him.

"Okay, now let's see how quickly you can get us through that door. Hurry though, I doubt we have more than a few minutes."

The mandalorian just nodded before he rushed up to the door and removed the lock panel from beside it.

Then in just a matter of seconds he had overridden the lock and the door slid upwards.

"Clear." he said and both he and Verren darted inside Vorn's quarters.

Inside Verren found that the quarters were larger than he had expected but the reason for that soon became obvious. There was a double bed rather than a single and a smaller room adjoining the main one contained a crib. Furthermore there were photographs positioned on furniture that showed Vorn with a much younger woman, including one of her in a wedding dress standing beside him and Verren realised that he had made an error. Obviously Vorn was married and had a young child, meaning that not only could his wife potentially return soon but also she could easily have been inside when the mandalorian broke in. Though he doubted that she would have been able to overpower the pair of them, she could easily have caused enough of a disturbance that other rebels would have heard it and known that something was wrong. But after this a smile crossed Verren's face and he picked up Vorn's wedding photo.

"Lucky bastard." he said, holding the photo towards the mandalorian.

"Bet she's just after his money." the mercenary replied.

"Maybe." Verren said as he put the photo back down, "But you better get back into the corridor and keep a look out for any of them returning."

"And if they do?" the mandalorian asked.

"Signal me and slow them down." Verren answered. Then just as the mandalorian was heading for the door Verren added, "But don't shoot them."

Being thousands of years behind the technological curve, the control systems of the space station that served as the rebel headquarters in the sector were somewhat inefficient and required more personnel to operate than would have been the case on a similar sized Imperial space fortress. Therefore, when Vorn entered the command section he found himself among a large number of rebels, all busy with their own tasks. He had served on the station for a number of years now though and he knew his way to the communication posts where more than a dozen rebel technicians worked to process the signals coming in from other rebel bases and starships around the sector as well as from beyond it. Standing at a large monitor beside one of these technicians Vorn saw a familiar man in a lieutenant's uniform.

"Geran." he said in greeting.

"Lieutenant colonel." Geran replied, "What brings you up here today?"

"Summoned to take a call." Vorn said.

"That's odd." Geran commented, "I've been here more than an hour trying to match these Imperial transmissions with what we know about their fleet deployment and no-one's called you while I've been here."

"Weird." Vorn said, "The instruction was quite clear."

"Maybe General Kain wanted to see you." Geran suggested, "Look, he's over there now." and he pointed across the command centre to where a dark skinned human was talking with several other officers.

"Thanks, I'll go check." Vorn said and he made his way towards the general who looked around as he approached and smiled.

"Colonel Larcus, is something wrong?" he asked.

"I'm starting to wonder sir." Vorn replied, "I got a call telling me to report to command to take an encrypted call that couldn't be transferred down to my quarters but now that I'm here no-one seems to know anything about it."

"You can include me in that." General Kain replied and he stepped towards a nearby control station, "Did anyone summon Lieutenant Colonel Larcus here?" he asked and the rebel officer sat there checked his console, "Nothing's noted here general." he replied.

"I'm sorry to say it but it looks like you've been the victim of a practical joke Vorn." General Kain said.

"Perhaps, but I've got a bad feeling about this." Vorn said, "Mind if I check something general?"

"Be my guest." the general replied and Vorn headed back to the communication stations.

"Can you pull up the call log from my quarters?" he asked the technician.

"Yes sir. What time frame are you interested in?" the woman replied.

"The most recent call I received. Where did it come from?" Vorn said.

"I have a call from just under ten minutes ago." the woman said, "It came from a communication terminal in the same section as your quarters. Less than twenty metres away in fact."

"He was watching." Vorn said.

"Who was watching." Geran asked as he walked over to Vorn.

"The guy who called me and told me to come here. He was probably watching my quarters to see when I left."

"But what for?" Geran said.

"Nothing good I'll bet." Vorn said. Then he looked down at the technician and added, "Excuse me, I just need to use this a minute." and he activated the station's internal communication system, inputting a specific address.

"Mace Grayle." a male voice replied. Mace Grayle owned the *Silver Hawk*, the YT-1300 class freighter that Vorn's team was assigned to.

"Mace it's Vorn. Are you alone?" Vorn said.

"Sure am. Malia's still off wherever she and Kara went and Cass is over on the *Golden Empress* babysitting for you."

"Can you meet me at the turbolift near my quarters? And bring a spare blaster for me."

"A blaster? What's wrong?" Mace asked.

"I've got a bad feeling that there's an intruder in my quarters." Vorn told him, "I'm up in command and I didn't think to bring a weapon with me."

"You're kidding." Mace replied. As with any place with a population numbering in the tens of thousands there was a certain degree of criminality aboard the rebel headquarters, but most of this consisted of arguments getting out of control and turning into fights. There was also some petty theft, but breaking and entering was almost unheard of.

"I wish I was. Someone wanted me out the way." Vorn said.

"Okay then, I'll meet you there." Mace said.

"Thanks." Vorn replied and he shut off the channel.

"Take a couple of guards with you." General Kain told Vorn as he walked over, "If there is an intruder then you can hand them over to security and we'll find out what's going on."

"Yes general." Vorn replied and as he rushed to the turbolift leading back to his quarters pair of fleet troopers from the command centre's security detail fell in behind him.

Mace met Vorn and the two guards outside the turbolift and handed a blaster pistol and power cell to Vorn. The weapon was a standard military issue blaster, the same DH-17 model as the two guards carried. On the other hand Mace himself carried a heavier model.

"Here," he said, "it's Malia's."

"Thanks." Vorn replied as he took the weapon and loaded it. Then he nodded at the two guards, "Let's go." he added before setting off towards his quarters.

4.

"Incoming." the mandalorian's voice said from Verren's comlink as he was in the process of emptying every possible hiding place for the pendant he hoped was hidden somewhere inside Vorn's quarters, "Four men with blasters. Vorn's with them."

"Okay I'm on my way out." Verren responded, already on his way towards the exit, "Just try and keep them busy."

"Understood." the mandalorian said before putting his comlink away and walking towards the approaching group of rebels, "What's going on?" he asked, looking at the weapons the four rebels held.

"How long have you been in this area?" Vorn asked in response, noting the blaster that the man holstered had on his waist that seemed out of place for a technician aboard the headquarters station.

"About five minutes." the mandalorian replied, "Why? What's going on?"

"Hold him here." Vorn told the two guards and he pushed past the mandalorian towards his quarters and was just in time to see Verren running away from the open doorway, "Hold it right there!" Vorn yelled and he took aim with his blaster. But before he could fire the mandalorian suddenly lashed out at one of the guards, striking the man in his throat. Rather than draw his own weapon, the mandalorian then pulled the disorientated guard's blaster from his hand and used it to shoot the other guard before she could react.

"Stang!" Mace hissed as he spun around and pointed his weapon towards the disguised mandalorian as Vorn also looked around in surprise.

The mandalorian swung the butt of his stolen pistol at Mace, hoping to incapacitate him with a blow to the head. But the former smuggler was an experienced fighter and he saw what was happening. In response he dropped to his knees and let the mandalorian's attack pass over his head. Then before he could attempt a second attack Mace pointed his blaster upwards at the mandalorian's chest and shot him from point blank range. The powerful energy blast struck the mandalorian in the centre of his chest and he fell backwards, dead before he hit the floor.

Satisfied that there was no further threat from behind him, Vorn turned back in the direction he had seen Verren run off in and headed down the corridor after him. But by the time he reached the corner he had seen the fleeing man turn down and looked around it himself there was no sign of Verren at all.

"Stang." Vorn muttered, "He got away."

"I'll call a medic." Mace said as he crouched down beside the injured guard to check that he was still breathing, "You see what he was doing in your quarters." and Vorn nodded.

Vorn gasped when he saw the mess that his quarters had been left in. Knowing that he had little time available to him in which to search, Verren had resorted to simply tipping the entire contents of drawers and cupboards onto the floor. He had not got as far as ransacking the room belonging to Vorn's son, also named Vorn, but not a single drawer or cupboard in Vorn and Kara's room remained closed and full. Then he heard Mace enter his quarters behind him and he looked around.

"How is the guard?" Vorn asked.

"He'll be fine, the medics are with him now." Mace replied, "We've still got one dead though. Any ideas why?"

"I think it's going to take some time to see if anything's missing." Vorn said, looking at the mess again, "Even then, I don't see why anything I own would be worth killing for."

"Well someone did," Mace said, "and they had a professional do it as well."

"What do you mean?" Vorn asked, confused.

"Come with me." Mace said and he beckoned for Vorn to follow him back out into the corridor and to where the body of the mandalorian lay, "Now look at this." Mace said as he crouched down and pulled back the mandalorian's collar to reveal a tattoo on his neck.

"What's that writing? I don't understand it." Vorn said.

"It's Mando'a." Mace replied and Vorn's eyes widened, "Our killer was a mandalorian."

"I've got a very bad feeling about this Mace." Vorn said, staring at the tattoo.

"No Tharun, I said higher." Lyssa Verser, the daughter of Vorn Larcus III told her husband as he held up a painting in front of his head. Taking full advantage of being made the commanding officer of the *Golden Empress*, Lyssa was making sure that her quarters were decorated to her precise specification. The *Golden Empress* was a Lucrehulk-class battleship that had been converted into an industrial vessel capable of refining raw ores and turning the metal produced into almost any spare part imaginable using its onboard fabrication plants. This was how someone like Lyssa, who had no fleet experience at all had been given command of the ship. Her skills lay in management and organisation, making her ideally suited to running what was in effect a massive mobile arms factory. She had also been able to use her knowledge of the luxury items that the Alliance had in storage to acquire a number of them for her quarters.

"This is about as high as I can get it." he replied, lowering the painting so that he could see over it. Then he looked towards the teenage girl who was sat on the floor not far from his wife supposedly watching the two infant children playing in front of her but currently looking at him and smiling, "What's so funny kid?" he asked.

"The sight of you getting bossed around by Lyssa." she replied.

"Now Cass," Lyssa said, "in every relationship both partners must be able to communicate properly."

"Yeah and Tharun responds to communication with you in the same way as he does to your father." Cass said.

"My brother-in-law is about to eat a crayon." Tharun said and Cass looked down at where the older of the two children she was watching, a boy of just over a year old was sticking a crayon in his mouth.

"No Vorn, give that to me." she said as she took the crayon away from him.

Just then the intercom at the door to Lyssa's quarters chimed.

"Get that Emsee." Lyssa called out and a protocol walked into the room and over to the door.

"Captain Verser's quarters." the droid announced in a programme female voice.

"Is the captain there? Maintenance has reported a fault with the nitrogen regulation in this section. They'd like to evacuate it." a man's voice said and Lyssa frowned.

"That sounds bad." Cass commented.

"It is kid." Tharun said as he set down the painting on the floor and leant it against the wall Lyssa was planning on hanging it on, "Get the level too high and we'd all just pass out and never wake up again. We wouldn't even get a headache like we would if it was CO-two."

"Very well. We'll evacuate while it's being fixed." Lyssa said with a sigh. "Then as Emsee opened to the door to reveal two men in technicians' uniforms she added, "Emsee bring Hallanah. Tharun don't forget your blaster. It's not proper for a captain not to have an armed escort." and she walked over to a cabinet that she unlocked before removing not only Tharun's military-issue blaster pistol but also her own sporting weapon. Then with Cass and Emsee carrying the two young children the rebels left Lyssa's quarters.

They walked as far as the turbolift, at which point Lyssa took a comlink from her pocket and activated it.

"Bridge this Captain Verser." she said.

"Bridge here captain. How can I help."

"Bridge we have intruders in the officers' quarters. Send a security team."

"What?" Tharun said, surprised.

"What's going on?" Cass added.

"My chief engineer knows not to just send a pair of scruffy looking technicians to my quarters." Lyssa replied, "If there was a problem with the life support he'd tell me himself."

"That's why you brought the blasters, you wanted them to see that you were armed." Cass said.

"Of course." Lyssa replied, "But I couldn't say anything when Hallanah and Vorn may have been harmed in a blaster fight."

"Captain," the voice of the bridge officer said, "headquarters also just went on intruder alert."

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Tharun said as he drew his blaster, "Get the kids out of here, "I'll deal with this myself." Then before anyone could stop him he began to head back towards his wife's quarters.

Keeping his weapon held at the ready, Tharun kept close to the wall and moved as quietly as he could. Had the two men in technicians' uniforms been genuine then after Lyssa's quarters had been evacuated they would have moved on to the next quarters to make sure that they were empty. But as Tharun rounded the corner to his wife's quarters he saw that the door she had closed behind them was now open again and the corridor was empty. As he crept closer to the door he could hear the sounds of people moving about inside his quarters but could not immediately tell what they were up to.

"Come on, what's taking so long? You got that door open quick enough." the voice of the supposed technician who had claimed there was an issue with the life support system said.

"That was just a door lock. This is a safe." the other man responded and Tharun frowned. Something about the idea of this being a simple burglary seemed wrong. But then it occurred to him that Lyssa may keep classified information relating to the Alliance fleet in her private safe. In which case these two men could be Imperial spies.

"Freeze!" he yelled as he leapt through the open doorway, aiming his blaster towards the two intruders. Both men turned around and looked at him.

"Take it easy." the man who had been attempting to get into the safe said, staring at the blaster pointing directly at him. Tharun chose to aim at him because unlike his dark skinned companion, he was armed and also his general appearance was more threatening.

"Ditch the blaster. Nice and slow." Tharun told him and the mandalorian slowly reached down towards his weapon. Then just as his hand was just about touching the weapon Harlen suddenly hurled his datapad at Tharun.

Startled by this, Tharun ducked and the mandalorian drew his weapon and fired several rapid shots meant to

drive Tharun away from the door, forcing him to dive for cover behind a couch. The couch would provide no protection against a blaster bolt but it did keep Tharun out of sight and made it harder for the mandalorian to aim at him, but killing him was not what Tharun's opponent had in mind..

"Mister Drud. Move!" the mandalorian hissed as he continued to fire shot after shot over the couch at the same time as he edged towards the door. Tharun attempted to return fire, but he was only able to put a couple of poorly aimed shots into the wall behind the mandalorian as Harlen fled into the corridor, followed by his bodyguard. The mandalorian then closed the door behind them and fired at the access control panel that was already damaged from the tampering needed to open the door. The control mechanism promptly exploded, trapping Tharun on the other side and allowing Harlen and the mandalorian to flee.

5.

Verren avoided making eye contact with anyone as he made his way back to the hangar. The rebels now knew that there was an intruder aboard and he saw several groups of fleet and army troopers wandering the corridors. Fortunately for him the station was so large and had so many rebels aboard that these troops could not take the time to stop everyone they encountered and check whether they matched the limited description available of the man who had fled from Vorn's quarters. Instead they were concentrating on securing key areas of the station and making sure that no-one could leave.

This meant that the massive external hangar doors were now sealed to prevent any ships from leaving but there were still numerous rebels at work within the hangar itself and when he entered Verren saw the mandalorians he and Harlen had left to watch Vorn's ship and he hurried over to them.

"Your friend didn't make it." he told them before they could ask where his bodyguard was, "Vorn returned while we were searching his quarters and he wasn't alone. Has anything happened here?"

"Only that." one of the mandalorians replied and he pointed towards the sealed hangar doors, "I'm guessing that's a reaction to your being found out."

Verren nodded in agreement.

"Most likely." he said, "I suppose you've heard nothing from Harlen?"

"No, Mister Drud hasn't checked in yet." the mandalorian replied. Then the other one tapped him on the shoulder.

"I think they're heading this way." he said, looking in the direction where Mace and the rest of his group were hurrying towards the *Silver Hawk*.

"That guy at the front was with Vorn." Verren said.

"Could he have tracked you here?" one of the mandalorians asked.

"I don't see how.." Verren replied, "But perhaps we should think about finding somewhere better to hide. Just in case."

"Hiding will only keep us safe for so long sir." a mandalorian warned him.

"Hmm. Yes, you're right." Verren replied, "I need you to come up with a way to get us off this station."

"Stang, what happened here?" Kara asked when she saw the mess that her and Vorn's quarters had been left in. Along with Mace's wife Malia and Vorn's protocol droid Jeeves, Kara had returned to her quarters as soon as she had been informed about the break in and when they got there they also found Mace's engineer Tobis and the final member of Vorn's field team Jaysica there. Both of them were examining the lock that had been forced to gain access to Vorn and Kara's quarters.

"We had guests." Vorn replied.

"And here was me thinking I could trust you not throw any wild parties while I was gone." Kara commented.

"Oh Colonel Larcus sir, I blame myself entirely." Jeeves said and the droid waved its arms, "If only I'd been here."

"That mandalorian would probably have just blasted you into a thousand pieces." Mace said.

"Would this be the same mandalorian you took on Mace?" Malia asked, "We've barely been married five minutes and I'm not ready to be a widow yet."

"Err, it – it's just as we expected." Tobis said from beside the door, "The lock was, err, spoofed into thinking it had been presented with a valid key."

"It's what comes from using a four thousand year old lock." Jaysica added.

"Well whatever they were looking for, I don't think they found it." Vorn said.

"You don't think this was just a burglary then?" Malia said and Vorn shook his head.

"No." he replied, "There are still credit sticks and Kara's jewellery here. Though the jewellery box was tipped over."

Just then another man appeared in the doorway. This was Colonel Collis of Alliance special forces and he looked around the room.

"So it's true." he said, "I have to admit that I thought for a moment it could be a drill that General Kain had cooked up for my men."

"Any luck in catching the nerf herder who ran off colonel?" Mace said.

"Not yet. But we'll find him." Colonel Collis said, "But I came here to let you know that the *Golden Empress* just reported intruders as well. Guess whose quarters they broke into."

"Lyssa." Vorn said.

"Cass was with her." Mace said.

"Along with Vorn and Hallanah." Vorn added, "Are they-"

"Everybody's fine." Colonel Collis said before Vorn could finish, "But the two intruders managed to escape."

"Only until I get my hands on the sleemo who's responsible for this." Kara said, "This is going to take ages to clean up."

"I could help." Jaysica offered.

"No thanks. I want everything put back unbroken." Kara replied and Jaysica frowned.

"If your family is being targeted then whoever's doing it may know about the *Silver Hawk*." Mace said.

"Go check on the ship." Vorn told him, "Take Tobis and Jaysica as well."

"I'm with you too." Malia added, "That ship's half mine by right and if Mace is going to get himself killed I want to make sure it stays in one piece."

"I'm leaving it to Cass." Mace commented as he walked past her and left the room.

Verren and the mandalorians had moved further from the *Silver Hawk* and were mixing keeping an eye on the ship with discussing how to escape from the station while it was on lock down when Verren called for quiet.

"Shush." he said, placing a hand against the earpiece he wore.

"Sir, what's wrong?" one of the mandalorians asked him.

"We're going to have company." Verren said, "Oh and Harlen and your comrade have managed to evade capture so far."

"You bugged his quarters." the mandalorian said and Verren grinned.

"I figured that if I couldn't find the pendant then maybe Vorn would mention it to someone and I'd learn where it was right from the bantha's mouth." he replied.

"What sort of company?" the other mandalorian asked.

"Some of Vorn's people are on their way down." Verren answered, "Four I think."

"Then we should leave sir. If they ask around then those pilots may remember you asking about the target and be able to point you out." the mandalorian said as he looked around.

"Okay let's go." Verren said, nodding and the three men headed for one of the hangar's exits.

Just as they reached it Verren came to a sudden halt as Mace came charging through the doorway with his blaster in his hand.

"Clear the way!" he yelled as he narrowly dodged Verren and the mandalorians, clearly not recognising him. Verren turned, watching Mace as he ran towards his ship with Tobis following him. But as it sank in that Mace had no idea who he was Verren turned back around only to have Jaysica crash right into him as she rushed through the door as well, sending the pair of them sprawling across the floor.

"Kriff!" Verren exclaimed as he struggled to push Jaysica off him, "Get off me you nerf herder and watch where you're going."

"It was an accident." Jaysica protested as Malia entered the hangar behind her and stopped to help her up,

"There's no need to be so bad tempered. Or to be so grabby. My boyfriend's over there and he'll-

"Never mind that now Jaysica." Malia told her, "Mace and Tobis need our help."

"Well he was grabbing me in places he shouldn't." Jaysica said as Malia dragged her along after her as she followed Mace and Tobis towards the *Silver Hawk*.

"That was a close one." Verren commented as he was being helped up by the mandalorians, "I felt sure she was about figure out who I was. I get the feeling she's a lot smarter than she appears."

"Well we need to be out of here before someone does identify us sir." a mandalorian said and with Verren taking one last look towards the *Silver Hawk* the three men left the hangar.

Meanwhile Mace continued to run towards his ship, circling it to inspect it for damage.

"I don't see any signs of damage." he said when Tobis joined him.

"Oh, err, no." Tobis agreed, "But, err, what about the top hatch?"

"Hey!" Mace then called out to a nearby member of a technical crew that was working on the adjacent ship,

"Have you seen anyone messing with my ship?"

"No sir." the technician replied and Mace looked around.

"What's wrong?" Malia asked when she and Jaysica arrived moments later.

"I don't know." Mace answered, "I just get the feeling that we were close to figuring this out but our chance has just slipped right through our fingers."

"Hey Grayle! Worried that someone broke into your ship and cleaned it up?" a voice then called out from across the hangar and Mace winced as he turned around.

"Have you seen anyone hanging around Jarad" he asked the leader of the X-wing fighter squadron nearby and the pilot smiled.

"You mean you really are looking to see if someone broke in?" he said.

"Someone broke into Vorn Larcus's quarters here and his daughter's aboard the *Golden Empress*." Malia said, "Now did any of you fly boys notice anything or were you all too busy figuring out which of you is the biggest nerf herder?"

Jarad scowled.

"As a matter of fact there was some guy asking questions about Vorn." he said. Then he looked at Jaysica,"

He's the guy that she just tried to mate with in the doorway." and Jaysica gasped.

"I did not!" she exclaimed.

"I knew it!" Mace hissed, looking in the direction of the doorway, "We just missed him."

"Err, should we get after him?" Tobis asked.

"No, let security know. I want to make sure my ship is okay first. They could have broken in and done who knows what to the inside." Mace responded and then he went over to the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp and opened it.

Walking up the ramp Mace came to the lounge area where an R5 astromech droid was stood in a low power mode.

"Harvey." Mace said, "Wake up." and the droid suddenly came to life, "Has anyone else been in the ship since we left?" he asked and the droid let out a brief burst of unintelligible beeps and chirping noises while moving its head back and forth, "I'm guessing that's a no." Mace said, looking at Tobis.

"Oh, err, I think so." the engineer replied and Mace sighed.

"Well at least that's something." he said, "Though it doesn't get us any closer to figuring out what they're after."

6.

It did not take long for a technical team to force open the door to Lyssa's quarters and when she saw the damage that had been inflicted by blaster fire her eyes narrowed and she scowled.

"I can sense your anger," Tharun said to her, "and I'd just like to point out that—"

"Look what they did to my quarters!" Lyssa yelled and all of the other rebels present flinched.

"I tried to stop them." Tharun said, smiling nervously.

"All of this is going to have to be repainted." Lyssa said, striding into the room and looking around as Tharun edged towards the door. As he did so he almost trod on the datapad that Harlen had thrown at him and when he realised what it was he bent down to pick it up.

"What's that?" Cass asked when she looked around the door frame, still holding young Vorn.

"I think it belonged to one of the guys who broke in." Tharun answered.

Just then Lyssa's comlink sounded and she plucked it from her belt.

"Captain Verser here." she said.

"Captain I've alerted headquarters to our situation and their security has informed us that they also have intruders. They broke into your father's quarters. One intruder was killed but the second escaped."

"Two break ins on the same day?" Tharun commented, looking at Cass, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Are we any closer to locating the two men who broke into my quarters?" Lyssa responded to the bridge officer.

"No captain. I was hoping to bring in extra personnel from headquarters, but all their forces are hunting for the intruder still at large over there." the officer told her.

"Then contact some of the other ships here. Captain Case has more than two thousand fleet troopers aboard the *Night Wraith*. I'm sure he'll provide some and if he doesn't then remind him that if not for my father then he wouldn't have a ship." and then she shut off the comlink and returned it to her belt.

"I think that they were trying to get into your safe when I interrupted them." Tharun said and Lyssa walked over to the wall mounted safe before inputting the combination to open it."

"Well everything appears to still be here." she replied.

"So why are people breaking into your and the colonel's quarters?" Cass said, looking at Tharun and Lyssa in turn.

"That's the billion credit question kid." Tharun replied and then he looked at his wife and held up the datapad, "I think we ought to get this to Tobis." he said, "That lad can break through whatever encryption has been used on it and maybe there'll be a clue as to what's going on here."

"I'll have to clear that with General Kain." Lyssa said, "If headquarters is on security alert they may not allow a shuttle to land."

"Just tell them we have evidence that could lead to the intruders." Tharun told her, shaking the datapad in front of him.

The sheathipede-class shuttle that brought Tharun, Cass and Lyssa to the Alliance headquarters station was met by Mace and the other rebels who had gone to the hangar to make sure that the *Silver Hawk* had not been interfered with.

"Is everyone okay?" Mace asked as the three passengers disembarked from the shuttle.

"The walls of my quarters are ruined. It will be days before I can have the damage repaired. Plus I need a new couch." Lyssa replied and Malia averted her gaze as she smiled.

"I think you have something for Tobis?" Mace said and Tharun stepped forwards and held out the datapad.

"What do you think of this then lad?" he said.

"Oh, err, it's an expensive model." Tobis replied as he examined the datapad visually at first, "It – it's not much better than a standard type though."

So the sort of thing someone with more money than sense would buy?" Malia said and Tobis smiled nervously.

"Err, I suppose so." he said.

"Well try not to damage it Sergeant Dorfus." Lyssa said, "If it's valuable then I want it to make up for the damage to my walls and furniture.

"More money than sense." Malia whispered into Mace's ear and he smirked.

"I, err, I think I ought to get this aboard the *Silver Hawk* to take a look at it." Tobis said.

"No, we should take it to my father. He needs to see it." Lyssa insisted.

"Err, well, okay. But I may need Harvey's help as well." Tobis said.

"Then go and get him sergeant. But hurry. We don't have all day." Lyssa told him.

With Harvey fetched from inside the *Silver Hawk*, the two groups of rebels headed back to Vorn and Kara's

quarters where they found the pair still tidying up after the break in with Jeeves's help.

"Hello daddy." Lyssa said, smiling. Then she looked at Kara and in a flatter tone added, "Oh and hello mother dear."

"I wish she'd stop calling me that." Kara said, frowning.

"It is technically accurate mom." Tharun added and Kara pulled a face at him.

"Never mind that now." Vorn said, "What's this I'm hearing about a datapad?"

"Oh, err, I have it here." Tobis replied.

"One of the guys who broke into Lyssa's quarters aboard the *Golden Empress* tried to take my head off with it." Tharun said, "Nerf herder really ought to have used an axe."

"Well see what you can get out of it." Vorn said, "You can use that table over there."

Tobis nodded and went over to the table to work on the datapad.

"I'm sure that he'll be able to access it in no time at all." Jaysica commented, smiling towards him.

"Gods, do I have to listen to her bragging about him as well?" Kara said and Jaysica frowned at her.

"Oh, err, I've got it." Tobis said and everyone looked at him.

"Already?" Cass said.

"See? I told you so." Jaysica added, staring at Kara who continued to frown at her.

"That was quick lad." Tharun said.

"Yes, how did you manage it?" Malia asked.

"Err, ah, well you see, it wasn't secured." Tobis said, "I just had to turn it on."

"Just had to turn it on?" Mace commented and he turned towards Tharun.

"Well don't look at me." he said, "I'm a mercenary, not an engineer. I didn't want to risk losing data by turning it on wrong and triggering some security trap."

"So what's stored on it then Tobis?" Vorn asked, "Can it tell us why people are suddenly breaking into our homes?"

"Err, I think it belongs to someone called Harlen Drud." Tobis said, "At least if the registration file is correct."

"Ring a bell boss?" Kara asked, looking at Vorn.

"Sort of." he replied, "But I can't remember for the life of me where I've heard the name before. I think it was just the family name as well. Drud. No, I can't remember, tell us more Tobis."

"Well a lot of this stuff looks like financial information." Tobis said, "Lots of spreadsheets and investment details."

"Spreadsheets and investments?" Tharun said, "That settles it, the guy's an evil genius."

"Err, there is one thing here, an image file." Tobis went on.

"It's not a dirty picture is it?" Cass said.

"Cass!" Malia exclaimed. Then she looked at Mace, "What exactly are you teaching her?"

"Not that. She already knew all that when I adopted her." he replied.

"Err, it looks like a sketch of something." Tobis said, "A piece of jewellery I think."

"That's why they tipped over my jewellery box." Kara said.

"Show us." Vorn added and Tobis looked at his astromech.

"Err, I need your projector." he said and the machine chirped as it rolled towards him.

"Really Harvey, Sergeant Dorfus is your master and is entitled to make use of your design features." Jeeves said in response to whatever Harvey had said.

Tobis then plugged the datapad into Harvey and the astromech droid activated its built-in holographic projector. Just as Tobis had said the image that appeared in mid air in the centre of the room was taken from a hand drawn sketch of a piece of jewellery, in this case a pendant on a chain.

"I've never seen that before." Kara said.

"I have." Lyssa added, "When Garm got married."

Garm Larcus was Vorn's eldest child and unlike his father he had remained loyal to the Empire, now being a senior member of the Imperial Security bureau who had attempted to capture his father on more than one occasion.

"Junior's wedding?" Kara said and she looked at Vorn and added, "What's he got to do with this?"

"I leant that pendant to Jennay to wear." Vorn said, "It's been in my family for generations." then he stopped and frowned.

"What's wrong boss?" Kara asked him, taking his hand.

"I just remembered where I heard the name Drud before." he said, "I've got a very bad feeling about this." and he pulled his hand free and rushed into the main bedroom, reappearing seconds later with a memory stick in his hands, "Harvey there's a video file on this called 'Dear Family', find it and play it." he said as he rushed over to the droid which responded with a rude sounding noise.

"It doesn't matter that Lieutenant Colonel Larcus isn't your owner Harvey." Jeeves said, "He is the senior officer here so do as he says." and Harvey produced another rude sound as Vorn plugged in the memory stick. However, the astromech droid still did as it was told and moments later the sketch of the pendant was replaced by an image of a young and obviously pregnant woman sat in a luxuriously decorated room.

"Who's she boss?" Kara asked, "That better not be an old girlfriend."

"That is Charity Larcus." Vorn said, "She came to this sector around four thousand years ago."

"Hey, didn't your friend Lord Desh mention something about that?" Cass said, remembering a conversation she and Kara had had with an old friend of Vorn's from his time in Parliament.

"Probably. Couran always did like to remind me of how long our families had been friends." Vorn said, "Harvey, play the file." and the still image became a moving one.

"Hello," the woman said, "I don't know how long it will be before this message is played so I'm going to start with an introduction. My name is Charity Larcus, though until about two years ago it was Charity Crassis of the Crassis family in the Narthis Sector and I am ashamed to say that I had a good reason to abandon my old family name in favour of my mother's maiden name. Along with nine other families, Callan, Delvad, Drud, Fayl, Karn, Narthis, Runn, Shill and Torin, the Crassis family has been part of a plot that lasted for three hundred years. Most of them were known as the Founding Families because they were descended from the original survey team that charted the Narthis Sector. When they first explored it they found that the Narthis Sector had been settled by the Sith a thousand years ago and set about trying to gather together as much of that hated civilisation's knowledge and power as they could for their own benefit. They failed and most of the heads of these families were either killed or arrested. But some escaped justice and there is the possibility that they could try to continue with their scheme and that means that they could come looking for this." and at that point Charity held up the pendant that had been pictured in the previous sketch, "I took this from a storehouse of Sith artefacts on the ocean world of Delvad. It was made by the Sith and as such it contains a fragment of their power, power that the Founding Families will do anything to possess. I know I ought to dispose of the pendant but just throwing it away risks it falling into the hands of someone who may not realise the danger it poses and handing it over to the Jedi Order risks them accusing me of trying to continue my family's scheme. Therefore I am going to entrust custody of this artefact to my descendants. Keep it hidden and keep it a secret. Should the Founding Families come after it then do not just go to the police. People like them infiltrate such organisations and manipulate them for their own ends. Go to the Jedi Order and find a Jedi called Udra. That family stopped the Founding Families once and they can do so again. I was close with one of them and I'm sure that what he achieved in the Narthis Sector will be remembered by the Jedi forever. To whoever you are and no matter how much time has passed since I recorded this message I can only say that I am sorry for placing this burden on you and all I can wish is that the Force will be with you. Remember, trust the Udra family for help. They are your only hope." and at that point the message ended and the image of Charity vanished.

"You leant a cursed amulet to your daughter in law for her wedding day? That's seriously messed up boss." Kara said.

"I was young when my father showed me this." Vorn replied, "I thought it was a joke and we never spoke of it again. I never bothered showing Garm or Lyssa before now."

"So what happened to this evil necklace afterwards?" Cass asked.

"For generations it was kept in a bank safe deposit box." Vorn replied, "I never had chance to get to the bank when I had to leave Estran so the Empire will have seized it. What happened to it after then is something I can't tell you."

"Can I just make the point that she just said we should seek out Jedi called 'Udra'." Mace pointed out, "As in Vay Udra, your son's current girlfriend."

"The little blonde witch." Kara added.

"She couldn't have known." Vorn said, "Four thousand years ago no-one would have suspected that the Jedi Order would fall or that the Udras would become servants of the Dark Side."

"Well these Founding Families appear to have come for what they think is theirs." Tharun said, "So we better come up with a way of stopping them on our own."

Verren smiled as he listened to the feed from the listening device still hidden in Vorn's quarters. Then he took the earpiece from his ear and looked at the two Mandalorians standing in front of him.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I know how to find what we are looking for. Vorn Larcus told me himself. Now his failure is complete."