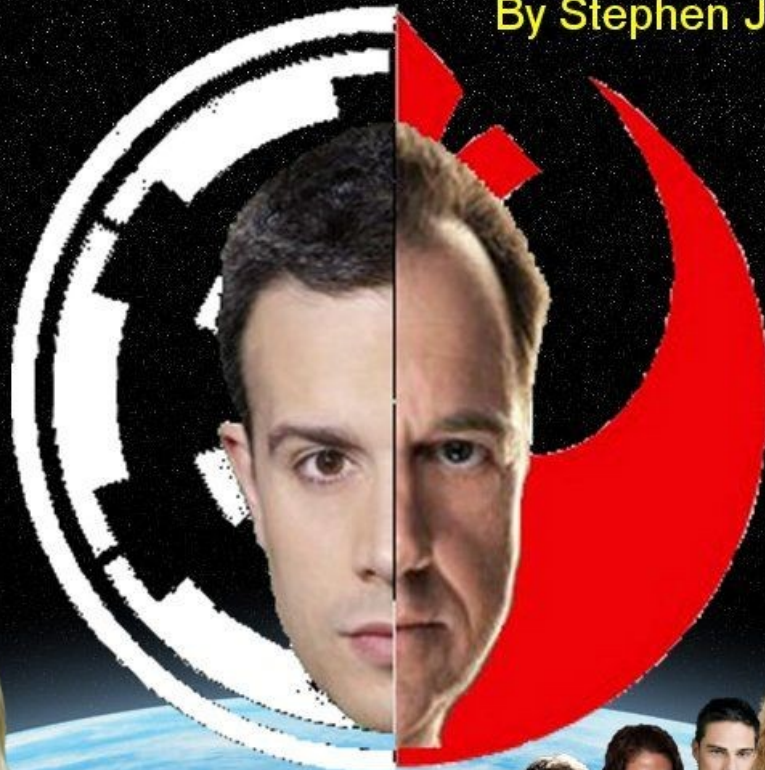


STAR WARS

7-04: Keep Your Enemies Closer

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...

KEEP YOUR ENEMIES CLOSER

THE CHURCH OF INFINITY HAS BEEN SUPPLY FORAN FALLIR AND HIS TERRORIST GROUP WITH WEAPONS. BUT THE CHURCH'S MOTIVATION IS NOT ONE OF SHARED IDEOLOGY, INSTEAD THEY NEED FORAN HIMSELF FOR THEIR OWN PURPOSES AND NOW THEY ARE READY TO MAKE HIM COME TO THEM...

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

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1.

The weapons laid out in the warehouse were intended for a whole series of attacks and no matter how careful those carrying them out were, there would be an evidence trail that would lead the authorities whether local or Imperial right back here to the warehouse. False names and documents had been used to rent it of course, but there would still be wealth of evidence that forensic droids would be able to use to build up profiles of many members of the People's Liberation Army of Estran. But Foran Fallir, the leader of the outlawed terrorist group, had already planned for that. The same benefactors that had supplied the explosives and blasters to be used had also supplied a quantity of an industrial incendiary compound that Foran was overseeing the spreading of. The compound would be left in place until the security services arrived at which point Foran himself would trigger its ignition, burning the entire warehouse and its contents including any law enforcement agents caught inside to the ground in a matter of moments and thus destroying all of the evidence.

"My group is loaded and ready to go." a woman's voice said and Foran stared at the human female who had just approached him.

"Excellent Comrade Gyano." Foran replied, "What about Comrade Toker?"

"Should be ready in about fifteen minutes." Gyano told him, "There's some problem with the repulsor trucks that needs seeing to."

Foran snorted. Toker's group was to be responsible for placing six repulsor trucks filled with explosives and it seemed ironic that their systems would be repaired just before they were deliberately blown to pieces. But Foran was less concerned about the weapons and equipment to be used in these attacks than he was about some of those he was trusting to carry them out. Gyano and Toker were the latest in a line of lieutenants that had served under Foran in the past few years but when a string of failed attacks, deaths and arrests had struck the PLAE Foran had been forced to look for scapegoats to blame before the finger of blame could be pointed at him and there had been purges of the PLAE ranks including of his own inner circle. A major disaster that had struck the PLAE recently was a failed attack on a defence force base during which the entire attack force had been slaughtered by a force of Imperial troops that had not been expected to be present. The Imperial forces had deployed poison gas that the PLAE forces still had no defence against and so the decision had been taken to shift back to more vulnerable targets. But since the failed attack both Gyano and Toker had seemed less respectful towards Foran and he was starting to wonder whether another purge may be order soon.

"We have time yet comrade." Foran said, "Just make sure that the building is properly sealed when you leave. I do not want anyone wandering in here by accident afterwards and interfering with the explosives."

"Where are you going?" Gyano asked as Foran then turned to leave.

"I must meet with our benefactor." Foran replied.

"The reverend isn't thinking of warning his flock to avoid the target sites is he?" Gyano asked.

"Of course not. Such behaviour would call attention to his church's involvement and he does not want that any more than we do. But he does want to make sure that he does not become a casualty himself."

Gyano then waited, watching as Foran left the warehouse.

"Where's he gone?" Toker asked as he walked over to her and she turned to look at the man.

"To see the reverend." Gyano replied, "No doubt to tell him what an excellent job he's doing and how poor our input is."

"And will the reverend believe him?" Toker said.

"Of course not. But he will let us know exactly what was said, you can count on that."

"Everything is ready?" Darall Harber, the public face of the Church of Infinity asked when Foran entered the luxury speeder and sat down opposite him. The Church of Infinity had a presence on most of the settled worlds in the sector and because of this they operated a number of private starships used to move followers from planet to planet. These ships now moved more than missionaries however, they were now the means by which the weapons to be used by PLAE were smuggled onto Estran.

"Almost." Foran replied, "My part is complete and now all that remains is for my people to get into position and act when the time comes."

"Very good Mister Fallir." Darall said, "I do hope that this attack goes better than the attack on the Mollo Ridge barracks. My church may be keen to see you establish an independent Estran where we may be granted more religious freedom than under the Empire but we must see some signs of progress for our effort."

"Oh don't worry, you'll get change all right." Foran said, thinking about how he would expect the Church of Infinity and all other churches for that matter to conform to his way of thinking once he was in charge of

Estran.

"So what will you do now?" Darall asked, pouring himself a drink from the cabinet built into the rear of the speeder and taking a sip from it.

"Return to the headquarters I have established for this operation." Foran answered.

"Not the warehouse?"

"No. I do not want to be seen there again. I've put in place some of the sensors you provided that will tell me when the government arrives to investigate and I will trigger the incendiaries."

"Excellent." Darall replied, "Then I suggest you get going, the more time we are together the more dangerous it becomes for us both. Remember that my church can only support your organisation so long as we are both alive and at liberty."

"Of course." Foran said, smiling before he exited the speeder.

The passenger compartment of the speeder was fitted with one way blacked out windows that allowed the occupants to see out while preventing them from being observed themselves. This meant that Darall was able to watch as Foran walked away from the vehicle to make certain that he was not about to suddenly open the door again as Darall activated the communication system built into the speeder.

"Fallir is using the incendiaries and sensors just as we expected him to." Darall signalled, "Wait until the warehouse is empty then deactivate them and enter and make sure those incendiaries do not go off."

"Yes your eminence." a voice replied and Darall shut off the channel.

The attacks came in three forms. The first were truck loads of explosives driven by droids towards high priority targets. Well defended, these reacted by engaging the trucks with blaster fire from emplaced weapons or small arms carried by security troops and the vehicles were all rapidly brought to a halt. But when the security forces moved in to investigate the explosives were triggered. The second form of attack used much smaller charges placed in areas of low security and intended to cause more confusion than damage. But they were also intended to pave the way for the third wave of attacks. Many of these charges were placed in locations overlooked from vantage points that the PLAE could control for at least a short time and set up marksmen with blaster rifles to ambush whoever was sent to investigate the explosions and then slipping away before tactical teams could be mustered to deal with them.

Foran's command centre consisted of a rented office that had been filled with video screens showing commercial broadcast channels that could be counted upon to report on the attacks as soon as they took place as well as the feed from the sensors that he had left in place at the warehouse. There were also a handful of monitors showing the feed from various other cameras that either the PLAE had been able to hack into or set up covertly to monitor the attack sites.

He smiled as he watched the first images and reports. One of the repulsor trucks filled with explosives that had been targeted against an air base detonated when the defending security forces employed a grenade launcher and the smaller explosive charge was sufficient to trigger those carried by the van but apart from that the truck based attacks appeared to be a resounding success with government casualties rapidly climbing to more than forty for the loss of a few clapped out repulsor vans and second hand droids all bought for cash and thus untraceable. The smaller bombs also achieved their aims. No deaths were being reported yet, though there were numerous injuries from the explosions. However, when investigators arrived they soon found themselves under fire and were forced to flee while urgently trying to summon help. Foran particularly liked this. Many of the investigators had been beaten to the scenes of the attacks by news media and so when they were forced to take cover they appeared helpless and foolish on live network broadcasts. Of course when support did arrive it arrived in overwhelming strength, with a mix of Estranian police, defence force and Imperial troops forcing the PLAE terrorists from their positions. Fortunately these had been chosen with retreat in mind and none of the marksmen were caught.

Foran then sat back and waited while the investigators got to work.

"Trouble." Detective Murr said when he saw the two uniformed Imperial Security Bureau agents approaching and his partner, Detective Thom, snarled.

"Probably here to grab all the credit." Thom said. But before the agents, a man and a much younger woman, reached them he got to his feet and smiled at them, "Agents." he said, "How may I help you?"

"You can let me know what you've found." the man said.

"And don't worry." the younger woman added, looking directly at Thom, "We're not here to steal the credit."

"Right then." Murr said and he looked towards the gates of the reserve military base they were outside, "A vehicle was driven towards the gates and failed to stop at the marked point. The driver also failed to react when challenged so the guards activated the perimeter defence guns which promptly put six blasts per second into the driver's cabin and brought the truck to a stop within ten metres of the gate. The guards moved in to secure the truck and that is when the explosives were triggered. We're presuming by remote control since a speeder bike seen on camera over there had remained in place during the shooting but sped off just moments before the truck exploded."

"Casualties?" the male ISB agent asked.

"Four guards killed in the explosion. Four more wounded." Thom replied.

"And can you identify the vehicle?" the agent asked.

"We've found plates yes." Murr told him, "I suppose you want the details?"

"Of course." the female agent said, "And in return you can have what we've got from the other attacks." and both detectives looked confused.

"Whoever did this wasn't worried about hiding the identity of the vehicles they used." the male agent explained, "Which makes it likely that they are untraceable. Or at least not traceable to the culprits. But it does offer us an opportunity to track their movements. We're distributing the details of each vehicle involved to all law enforcement departments so they can check traffic cameras."

"If we're lucky then we'll be able to track them back to a central staging area and hit that." the female agent added and she held out a datapad, "Here, copy the data from this and add your own."

Aerial gunships were used to transport the assault force to the warehouse as rapidly as possible. It had been located after the registered owner of one of the repulsor trucks used in the attacks confessed to selling the vehicle for cash and delivering it to the warehouse. The description he gave the police matched that of a suspected PLAE terrorist and from there the Imperial authorities took over, deploying troops to seal off the area before sending in the assault force.

The gunships surrounded the warehouse before one descended above the roof and deployed a force of stormtroopers. At the same time more of the white armoured soldiers were deployed to assault the building from the ground and micro probe droids were deployed to check for booby traps. All of this was picked up by the sensors Foran had placed and he watched from the safety of his command centre as the perimeter was created and the droids entered the building. It took only a few seconds for the droids to detect the incendiaries placed around the building and the stormtroopers ceased their advance. Knowing that this was the best chance he would get to inflict maximum casualties, Foran picked up the remote trigger for the incendiaries and pressed the button.

"Boom." he said to himself. But then his face fell as the feed from the sensors remained constant, with no signs of an explosion. In desperation he jabbed at the trigger repeatedly, hoping that the signal commanding the incendiaries to detonate had failed to get through but each time the result was the same, "I've got a very bad feeling about this." he then said to himself.

2.

"Mister Larrs!" the reporter Neema Gorord called out as she rushed towards Rodge Larrs, the sectors head of COMPNOR as he walked from the Imperial capital building to the waiting speeder and a pair of stormtroopers moved to prevent her getting too close to him. The Committee for the Preservation of the New Order formed much of the executive branch of the Imperial government and as its head Rodge was second only to Moff Horatian himself in terms of power in the sector, "Can you tell me how the investigation is progressing into the recent wave of attacks? Are they linked to the theft of a star destroyer by the Rebel Alliance?"

"I'm sorry I can't comment on military matters." Rodge replied, "But I can tell you that the ISB is working hard to process the evidence that has been recovered during the warehouse raid yesterday."

"Did the terrorists not try to destroy any of the evidence?" Neema asked.

"Yes, incendiary devices were found throughout the building but they were made safe by units of the Imperial Army. Thankfully the terrorists failed to set any of the detonators properly and they all failed to explode."

"And will Moff Horatian be making a statement soon?" Neema said.

"That hasn't been decided yet." Rodge said as he got into the speeder at which point the door closed and the vehicle drove off, leaving Neema and her cameraman behind.

"That really was unfortunate wasn't it?" Darall said, using the remote to turn off the video screen and the news feed before turning to face his guests. He had invited Gyano and Toker to meet with him as soon as the clip was first broadcast, "So can either of you tell me what went wrong?"

"Fallir." Toker replied, snarling.

"He set the incendiaries. Or rather he was supposed to." Gyano added.

"And apart from that how long did he spend inside the warehouse?" Darall asked.

"It was his only visit there." Gyano answered.

"So therefore very little of the forensic evidence, if any at all can be used to connect him to it." Darall said,

"On the other hand you two are rather more exposed." and Gyano and Toker exchanged nervous glances.

"We'll have to go underground." Toker said.

"Yes you will." Darall agreed and I can certainly help with that. But there is another more long term and pressing issue."

"Fallir." Gyano said, snarling.

"Precisely. Foran Fallir." Darall said in agreement, "When the Church of Infinity agreed to support your organisation's quest for planetary liberation it was on the understanding that you could deliver this. But the succession of failures that have plagued you has continued even now that we have been able to supply you with effective equipment. At great risk I might add. The Empire is not known for tolerating any religious group that goes against its own narrow doctrine. And since your parts of the plan were carried out flawlessly I would suggest that there is an obvious solution."

"Fallir needs to go." Toker said, looking at Gyano.

"Of course he does." she replied, "Quickly as well. You know that he'll already be looking for someone to blame for this and he's bound to point the finger at us."

"He still has plenty of people loyal to him though." Toker pointed out, "If we try to move against him and fail then we'll just be setting ourselves up. Even if we succeed there's no guarantee how his supporters will react. We could be looking at a bloodbath."

"But one in which you would have all the advantages." Darall said.

"How so?" Gyano asked.

"For starters Foran does not suspect you of planning to move against him." Darall replied, "If he did then I doubt we would be having this meeting, your bodies would already be being disposed of. Plus I can guarantee that if there is a schism in your organisation then the church will direct its support towards your groups alone. Foran's supporters will get nothing more from us."

"Fallir's paranoid." Toker said, "He moves around from one safe house to another. We never know where he'll be."

"Then how do you contact him?" Darall asked, "And how do my communications reach him?"

"Couriers." Gyano said, "Some of those he keeps close as an inner guard. He's expanded them recently."

"Mercenaries." Toker added, "I've never heard of any of them taking part in any of our operations. I think he's using some of the credits you supply to pay them off."

"Interesting." Darall said, "But a man who fights only for credits is easier to deal with than one who fights for an ideology. They invariably have a price at which they will change sides. The trick is in determining what it is. How soon can you provide me with details of at least one of these mercenaries?"

"By nightfall." Gyano replied, "There's always at least one of them hanging around to take messages back and forth."

"Excellent. I shall await your information and then we can determine the best way to rid ourselves of Mister Fallir." Darall said and a smile spread across his face.

Gyano and Toker both got up to leave, watched silently by Darall. Then when he was alone Darall exhaled. "You got all of that I suppose?" he said as from a passageway hidden behind a curtain an alien figure stepped.

Horsa was the true head of the Church of Infinity, one of the rakata species that sought to rebuild their ancient empire and had created the church to give them influence in first the Republic and then Imperial society.

"I did." Horsa said, "The others will not wish to continue supporting these terrorists after we have the one known as Fallir."

"Why not?" Darall asked, "If we supply their weapons and their funds then we control them. Our experience at using our own worshippers as cannon fodder has been less than successful so perhaps they will be more useful. Added to which they cannot be linked to us as easily. We have come close to being exposed several times before now."

Horsa paused to think as he sat down in one of the seats vacated by Darall's previous guests.

"Perhaps I can convince them of the need to maintain our links with the group." he said, "But the one we need is Fallir. Only his sensitivity to the Force can control the star forge. Then we can make all the ships, weapons and battle droids we need without needing to bother with outsiders. Even the Galactic Empire will be powerless to stop us. They are temporary, we are infinite."

Bablo liked to fight and combined with the wandering lifestyle of many male devaronians he had found that he naturally drifted towards becoming a mercenary. The problem was that unless you joined a formal private military company the employment opportunities for mercenaries were severely limited by the Empire that disliked the idea of organised fighting forces it could not control existing. Of course it helped greatly to be human when enlisting with a licensed PMC and so Bablo had instead ended up like many other non-human mercenaries in being employed by those individuals who were acting outside the law. Again his wandering lifestyle was an advantage here, he had nothing to tie him down when it invariably became necessary to move on to escape the law or an employer who wanted to remove any potential witnesses. On Estran he had accepted what was in effect a bodyguard position with Foran Fallir and along with several others in similar positions to him he made sure that the terrorist leader remained safe. The drawback was that the opportunities for violence were few and far between. His employer moved often to remain hidden from the authorities and he only used his hired guards as an assault force when he wanted to purge his own ranks rather than employing their skills in furthering his cause and this all left Bablo in a poor mood most of the time.

Therefore, when he was approached in the street by a smiling young man clutching a datapad and a bundle of leaflets printed on flimsiplast he was not interested in whatever it was he had to sell.

"Excuse me sir, but have you considered the infinite nature of our universe?" the man asked, still smiling.

"Out of my way!" Bablo snapped.

"This will only take a moment of your time for the promise of infinite reward – Oof!"

The man made the mistake of stepping in front of Bablo and the devaronian mercenary delivered a sudden blow with the palm of his hand to his stomach, causing him to drop the datapad and the leaflets as he doubled over in pain. There were gasps from those around, including from the man's associates and several of them rushed to help him. Bablo was about just walk on past when a siren sounded for a brief moment and looking around he saw a police speeder that had been monitoring the pedestrian area descending to land nearby.

"Remain where you are devaronian." an amplified voice sounded from the speeder before it touched down and two uniformed police officers got out. Both wore armoured vests and helmets and had their hands resting on the grips of their stun batons though for now at least they seemed to think that the blaster pistols they had holstered on their waists were not needed. Of course that could be because the stun batons could be used to beat Bablo for longer than shooting him would take and as an alien he knew that nothing would be done about it.

"Now explain what's going on here." one of the police officers demanded as the man Bablo had just assaulted was helped back to his feet by his associates.

"I was just attempting to speak with this man and give him a leaflet." Bablo's victim said and the devaronian prepared himself for him to then tell how he had been struck, "But I dropped some them and then slipped on them accidentally."

With the visors of their blast helmets covering most of their faces it was hard to determine the reaction of the police officers but Bablo guessed that they did not believe what they had been told. The problem for them was that they could not arrest Bablo for a crime that the victim claimed had never happened.

"Yes it was just an accident." a woman who was part of the assaulted man's group added as she crouched down to scoop up the dropped leaflets and then she handed one to Bablo and patted him on the shoulder, "There you go brother. Life is infinite."

"Yeah, whatever you say." Bablo responded.

"You should be nicer." one of the police officers told him sternly, "Can't you see that she's trying to save your worthless alien soul? Or whatever it is you have in place of one?"

"Of course." Bablo said, snarling and he looked at the woman, "Thank you." he added.

"That's better." the police officer said, "Now move along. Move along." and Bablo continued on his way, tossing the leaflet into the first wandering refuse droid he came across. He would have simply dropped it onto the ground but he knew that the officers would inevitably arrest him for littering as well as resisting arrest, regardless of whether he resisted them or not.

"Ma'am." the officer then said to the woman, nodding and she nodded back. Both officers then returned to their speeder and as it took off the passenger took out a comlink that was not standard police issue and activated it, "The tracker is in place your eminence." he transmitted.

Darall looked across his desk at Gyano and Toker and smiled at them.

"There, just like I said." he said, "Easy."

"So now we just sit back and wait right?" Toker asked.

"Correct." Darall answered, "My followers will trail the mercenary until he meets with Mister Fallir."

"And then we strike." Gyano said.

"Not so hasty." Darall replied, "First we must assess his defences. There is no point attacking if we do not know exactly what we face. It will probably be best to watch Mister Fallir for a time while we evaluate his protection and also any possible escape routes. Ideally we would like to determine when he is to move from one safe house to another. That way we can set up an ambush for him en route where he will be more vulnerable than in a potentially well defended position."

"I'm sure we can find someone who can scout out a safe house from a distance." Toker said, looking at Gyano, "It'll be just like any other op."

"I think not." Darall said before Gyano could reply and both of the PLAE terrorists looked at him.

"Why not?" Gyano asked.

"Because all it would take is for one being loyal to Fallir to notice their absence and word could get back to him that you are up to something. Worse still you could accidentally pick someone loyal to him to act as your scout and they could inform on you directly. Then where would you be?" Darall said.

"I take it you have an alternative solution then?" Gyano said and Darall smiled.

"Of course I do. It was my followers that planted the tracker and my followers can follow the signal to Mister Fallir's hiding place just as easily. They can move more openly as well. My church sends missionaries to settlements all over the sector to recruit new members. No matter how insular the community where he is hiding may be, my people can go there openly. Yours would have to try and remain hidden."

Toker snorted.

"You've got a point there. People may think they're the cops or ISB." he said.

"And what should we be doing in the mean time?" Gyano asked.

"Go and start assembling your assault force." Darall told them both, "I suggest two teams. One for ambushing a vehicle on the move and the other for assaulting a fixed position. If you're both working on something different it will make Fallir less likely to suspect that you are plotting together."

"What about these little meetings of ours?" Toker said.

"They have to stop for the time being." Darall replied, "When I have news for you I will send a messenger with the information you need along with more arms, something special that will be helpful to your task. We can talk again after Fallir has been dealt with."

Gyano smiled as she and Toker got up to leave.

"It occurs to me that I haven't thanked you for your help yet." she said to Darall, "Rest assured that when I lead the People's Liberation Army of Estran your assistance will be fondly remembered." at which point Toker scowled momentarily. Clearly Gyano's claim to that she would become leader following Foran's removal did not meet with his approval and Darall smiled back and got to his feet as well.

"Rest assured that my loyalty and that of the Church of Infinity lies with the PLAE and not with just one person." he said and he noticed Toker smile while Gyano was still focused on Darall.

Then after watching the two terrorist leaders leave Darall turned towards the curtain just in time to see Horsa appear from behind it.

"They will fight one another for leadership." the rakata said.

"Of course. They are fanatics and all fanatics are convinced of their own righteousness above all others." Darall replied, "Haven't we made use of such people before? Those that are left will be weakened enough that they will be entirely dependent on us."

"Indeed. Now follow me, the elders wish to speak with you." Horsa said and Darall paused in surprise.

"With me?" he asked. Though he was well aware that there were other rakata within the nebula that neighboured the sector he rarely communicated with any other than Horsa himself.

Horsa then led Darall along the passageway concealed behind the curtain to the area that members of the Church of Infinity believed were the private meditation quarters of their high priest. In reality as well as being the rakata's private quarters the area also featured a state of the art communications suite. Centuries earlier the Republic had established the holonet to allow information to be exchanged securely at near instantaneous speeds across the galaxy. One of the early acts of Emperor Palpatine's New Order had been to dismantle a great deal of this to limit the spread of any news unfavourable to the Empire but before that the Church of Infinity had been able to procure several of the hyperspace transceivers for themselves and establish their own private communications network. So when Darall entered the communication suite behind Horsa he knew that the holographic images of the rakata elders were real time representations.

"I present our loyal servant Darall Harber." Horsa said, indicating Darall and stepping aside so that the elders could see him clearly as he stepped into the scanning field of the holotransmitter.

"My lords." Darall said, dropping to one knee and averting his eyes.

"Horsa tells us you are about to procure us another core for the star forge." one of the rakata said.

"Yes my lord."

"The last one had allies that came for it." another of the rakata said.

"This one will not." Darall replied, "You have my word on it."

"How can you be sure?" the first rakata asked.

"This human discards his associates regularly and that prevents them from trusting him. I have set in motion a plan to turn his current allies against him so that it will not even be necessary for us to take him by force." Darall explained.

"Ah." a third rakata said, "He will come to you and you will bring him to us."

"Exactly." Darall said, "I will require only a transport ship that can get through the Imperial blockade of the nebula."

"And you shall have it." the most decorated of the holographic rakata said, "No resource will be spared to get the star forge operating again. With it the blockade will crumble and then this entire region of space will be the centre of our new empire."

"An Infinite Empire." another rakata added.

"But you will not be forgotten in our new empire Servant Harber." the rakata leader went on, "There are too few of us to rule the entire galaxy alone. There will be many worlds for you to rule in our name."

"But when will the new core be available?" another rakata asked.

"Soon." Darall replied, "I have convinced the subject's underlings to move against him and now I must go to him and warn him of their plans. They think I will help them kill him and he must think that I will help him kill them. In reality they will destroy each other."

"Excellent." the rakata leader said, "Now go Servant Harber, go and do our work." and then the holograms vanished into thin air.

"Stand." Horsa said and Darall got to his feet, "You heard what they said?" he asked and Darall nodded.

"I did." he replied.

"Then go. Be successful and your rewards will be infinite."

3.

The room Foran sat in was littered with datapads, each of which contained information about either a potential target or an idea for propaganda. Coming from all over Estran, Foran sometimes struggled to remember which of his subordinates was behind each one though he would be certain to make sure that he knew who was responsible for it if the idea was good. This was not so that he could make himself look like a true man of the people by memorising the names of all of his followers, though that was useful at times, instead it was so that he could determine whether the idea had come from someone he favoured or not. There was a careful balance to be struck here. By promoting the best people he had he also created potential rivals but if he only allowed lesser candidates to advance through the ranks of the PLAE then the organisation would inevitably collapse and that would be the end of Foran as well. Thus although he did allow the best ideas to be implemented by those best able to carry them out he also selected some of the poorer ideas sometimes, giving them to more capable subordinates once again. Then when they failed he would use that failure to discredit his potential rivals.

Foran sensed the approach of someone in the hallway outside through the Force and he reached for the carbine he kept beside his seat. Foran had never had any formal training despite having been born under the reign of the Republic and thus liable to be taken by the now defunct Jedi Order. Much of Foran's hatred of the Republic and the Empire that replaced it had been passed on from his parents and so they had avoided the tests that would have revealed his abilities to the Jedi. But over the years he had been able to hone the ability to not only sense the presence of other living beings but also concentrations of the Force itself on his own and it had saved his life from more than one assassination attempt.

"Mister Fallir?" a voice asked from outside the door as someone knocked and Foran recognised the voice of one of the mercenaries he had hired to act as a personal guard.

"Enter." Foran replied, putting the blaster back down again as the door slid open, "Now what brings you here?" he asked the zabrak warrior who entered the room. The mercenaries were employed to look after his physical security, nothing more and they were not the sort to make social visits. This was especially true of this particular being who had had the ring of small horns around his hairless head tipped with a hardened metal alloy that allowed him to use them as improvised weapons simply by lowering his head as he charged into someone.

"A vehicle is approaching. A landspeeder." the mercenary told him.

"So?" Foran responded, "Your orders are clear. If they will not leave of their own accord then they will never leave at all."

"Indeed sir." the zabrak said, "But the vehicle is known to us. It belongs to your associate Reverend Harber."

"Harber? Here?" Foran exclaimed, "But how did he find us?"

"No-one knows sir. No-one here would talk."

"Then I think I need to speak with this bothersome priest myself." Foran said.

Foran stood back from the doorway of the building he was sheltering in, an abandoned cantina, and looked out at the approaching land speeder. Just as the zabrak mercenary had told him it was the one that often transported Darall Harber. However, given the blacked out nature of the windows it was not possible to tell whether he was the being inside or not. Foran's mercenaries tensed as the speeder came to a halt and the driver's door opened, but Foran signalled for them to relax.

"Let's wait and see who it is." he said, "No point in shooting a useful ally."

Sure enough the driver opened one of the rear passenger doors and Darall stepped out, nodding in gratitude to the driver who then returned to his place at the front of the vehicle. Darall then began to walk towards the old cantina, heading directly for the open doorway where all he could see were some of Foran's mercenaries.

"I am here to speak with my good friend." he called out, "Tell him that Mister Harber is here."

"You can tell him yourself." Foran responded, pushing his guards aside and standing in the doorway. Taking up such an exposed position made the mercenaries nervous and Darall paused as he saw weapons rising, "Stand down." Foran ordered them before addressing Darall again, "Do come in." he said and he stepped back inside again to let Darall through.

"Thank you." Darall said as he entered the building and Foran began to lead him to the room where he had been reviewing the datapads, "I must confess I was not certain of the welcome I would receive." he added. "Do sit down." Foran said as they entered the room and he pointed to a vacant chair, "And begin by telling me how you found me here."

"Mister Fallir, I am sorry to say it but you have been betrayed." Darall said and Foran glared at him.

"Go on." he said.

"As you know my followers have a certain degree of contact with other members of your organisation when

they make deliveries of arms and other equipment.”

“It is inevitable, yes.”

“Well during those meetings my people have apparently been asked some strange questions. Such as whether there are more arms being delivered to other cells, in particular if any are being supplied for the express purpose of protecting you.”

“Really?” Foran said.

“Yes. Naturally my people answered honestly and told your followers that we have no contact with you other than when you allow it.”

“Until now.”

“Precisely.” Darall said, “When the shipment was delivered today my people were questioned again and this time some of your followers mentioned this place. They were sufficiently alert to inform me of this and since you have a habit of not advertising your location I thought it best to come and investigate for myself.”

Foran lent forwards.

“What arms shipment today?” he asked.

“Ah, that is something else.” Darall replied, “It has come to my attention that certain shipments may be being diverted by some of your subordinates and that they are gathering forces privately. I have a very bad feeling about all of this my good friend and now that I see you are indeed here I fear that it is their intention to try and kill you.”

Foran lent back in his chair. He had got so used to disposing of his subordinates when the need arose that he had overlooked the possibility that one day the tables could be turned and that they would pre-empt him before he could organise a purge. The danger facing Foran if Darall's tale was true was great. It was too late to organise a purge now, anyone he instructed to carry it out could already have been recruited by his enemies.

“Who do you think is trying to kill me?” Foran asked, thinking that if he at least knew the identity of his enemy then he could take steps to defend himself.

“My followers have reported strange behaviour from those who serve under Gyano and Toker.” Darall answered, “Though there could be others.”

“Gyano and Toker are two of my most trusted lieutenants.” Foran said even as he remembered their lack of respect for him recently.

“Would you really expect a coup from someone who hadn't wormed their way into you trust?” Darall asked and Foran nodded.

“We must move quickly.” he said, “They know that I change my safe houses regularly so if they have been asking about this one they must be ready to strike.”

“I have no forces capable of undertaking a military strike.” Darall lied. Though past military operations had been less than successful when confronted with any real opposition, the Church of Infinity did have a small pool of trained fighters and a larger pool of far less disciplined thugs if the need arose.

“And all I have are the mercenaries who guard me.” Foran replied.

“How many?” Darall asked.

“I keep fifty on the payroll.” Foran said.

“That sounds enough.” Darall commented, “You could send twenty against each of the traitors and still have ten left to guard you.”

“Ten is not very many if there are more of them.”

“But if you can take out both Gyano and Toker it could make any others hesitate. They won't know whether or not you suspect them and by the time they know for certain your men will be back here.”

“I like that.” Foran said, “A rapid strike to decapitate the opposition before withdrawing to safety. You make a good freedom fighter for a priest.”

Darall smiled.

“I must live in the real world like everyone else.” he said, “And I've read a lot of data files about the Clone Wars. I get a lot of it from them.”

At this point Foran got to his feet.

“As much as I would like to continue with this,” he said, “I must act quickly.”

“Of course you do.” Darall replied, also getting out of his chair, “I shall pray for your success Mister Fallir.” he added and Foran forced a smile.

“I would expect nothing else your eminence.” he replied.

Back in his landspeeder, Darall waited for the vehicle to move off before activating the built in holographic communicator and the hooded head of Horsa appeared. The rakata always disguised his appearance in any communication that could not be guaranteed to be one hundred percent secure, the knowledge that a rakata was at large would be disastrous.

“Speak.” Horsa's image said.

“I have alerted Foran to the plot against him by his lieutenants while concealing our role in it.” Darall replied,

"He is primed to take action against them and in doing so will be severely weakening his defences."

"Then you intend to move to the next stage?" Horsa asked.

"I do. I will have our team prepare to attack. With the bulk of his forces gone the remainder will be easy to overwhelm."

"But what if this Fallir is killed along with them?" Horsa said.

"I doubt that is likely." Darall answered, "Fallir is a coward. He will gladly send every last one of his followers to their deaths so that he will be the only one left to take credit. I have no doubt that he will avoid combat himself and that he has a personal escape route already prepared. When we attack his instinct will be to flee the moment he senses defeat and when he does he will have nowhere left to go but straight to us."

"Very good Servant Harber." Horsa said, "But remind our troops that anyone who harms Fallir will answer for it in the most severe way possible."

"It shall be done." Darall replied and then he shut off the communicator.

4.

Apart from the fact that the building that Darall's chauffeur now took him to was owned by a member of the Church of Infinity there was nothing else to connect it to the structure of the church itself, an essential feature given that in addition to more mundane goods it was being used to store weapons for use by the church. Many of these were either older weapons or sporting blasters that were commonly available on the black market rather than the more effective weapons that the church was supplying to the PLAE. Again the idea here was to try and deflect attention should the authorities discover the hidden arms cache, these weapons could be written off as having been obtained from local sources rather than raising suspicions of links to groups such as the Rebel Alliance that would in turn bring the attention of the ISB and Imperial Intelligence. But it was not the weapons that Darall was here to inspect, it was the people who had gathered to use them. Each was a trusted member of the Church of Infinity and all of them had some formal training in the use of the weapons they were arming themselves with when Darall arrived. In some cases they were veterans of the Clone Wars but the younger ones counted former mercenaries and past and present members of the Estranian defence and police forces among their number.

"Your eminence." one of the fighters said when he saw Darall enter the building and all of them bowed their heads in respect for him. Having hand picked this force himself, Darall recognised the man as being a non-commissioned officer in the Estranian Defence Force and thus one of the most capable soldiers of the assembled force.

"Rise my loyal children." Darall replied, "Foran Fallir has made a critical error and the time for our attack has come."

"We are ready your eminence." the defence force soldier replied, "All we need is a target."

"Your target is an unconventional one." Darall said as he produced a datapad and held it up to show the gathered troops an image of Foran, "Foran Fallir himself. However, it is essential that he is not harmed." Darall went on, "he has an important part to play in the future plans of the church and must be allowed to escape. He will be protected by a small force of mercenaries, ten according to our intelligence so you will have the advantage in numbers. Unlike the primary target these men are to be killed. Only Mister Fallir is to escape. Fallir is currently sheltering in an old cantina building far outside the capital. Your orders are to surround this and attack, targeting the guards only. Remember to identify your targets carefully. If Fallir is harmed then whoever is responsible will be punished for their failure. Not all of the guards may be visible from the outside of the building so it may be necessary to go inside to finish off the last of them. But again I shall warn you, Foran Fallir must not be harmed. We expect him to have an escape route prepared but cannot guarantee it so when you launch your attack you should give the appearance of there being a gap in your lines. If anyone other than Fallir tries to escape through it then kill them, only allow him through. I am understood?"

"Yes your eminence!" the gathered troops called out and Darall smiled.

"In that case," he said as he handed the datapad to the defence force soldier, "all the details of Foran's safe house are there. Be ready to launch your attack at midnight."

While Darall had been on his way to brief his soldiers, Foran had been able to gather his around him and instruct them about their targets. Having been to the bases that both Gyano and Toker operated out of on many occasions he was able to give his men detailed information about the layouts and security precautions that had been taken before sending them on their way with one simple objective.

Kill everyone.

There was a pair of sentries patrolling around the factory complex where Gyano's forces operated out of. The factory ran around the clock using droid workers and so the sentries appeared to be nothing more than ordinary night security staff. But even the illegal blasters they had concealed under their coats were insufficient to protect them when two of Foran's mercenaries slipped through a hole they had cut in the fence and struck at the sentries from behind, plunging knives into their backs and twisting them to stop them from crying out. Then they signalled to the rest of the mercenary force and all twenty hurried towards the factory, their blaster rifles held ready to fire.

Making it as far as the main building undetected the mercenaries split up, circling around the building in both directions as far as the loading dock at the rear while more of their number climbed up onto the roof and crept across it. The unit on the roof gathered around a skylight and one of their number peered through, seeing numerous PLAE terrorists inside gathered around a table as Gyano issued orders to them.

Meanwhile another terrorist was ambushed as he stepped out of a door by the loading dock for a smoke, his throat slit before he could alert anyone to the mercenaries gathered outside. One of the mercenaries pushed his hand into the doorway, triggering the door sensor to hold it open while he peered around the door frame

into the loading bay. Here he saw several replusorlift vehicles being loaded with heavy weapons.

"All set at the loading bay." the mercenary whispered into his comlink.

"All set on the roof." came the response, "Move in."

Rather than just charge into the loading bay the mercenary closest to the open door tossed a concussion grenade inside before leaping out of the way. With a very short time delay fuse fitted, the grenade exploded almost right away and before any of the terrorists in the loading bay had chance to notice it. The blast wave from the grenade hurled everyone and everything within range away from the epicentre and thanks to the confined nature of the loading bay the effect was magnified by the walls helping to contain it. It also served as the signal for the mercenaries waiting outside to storm the room, charging through the door before any of the survivors had chance to recover. Wherever they saw a terrorist, no matter whether they appeared alive or dead the mercenaries fired bursts from their rifles. They were all professional soldiers and none were willing to take a chance on a supposedly dead enemy in fact being still alive and able to ambush them as they passed.

But the sound of the explosion and the blaster fire that followed it alerted the terrorists elsewhere in the building to the fact that something was wrong.

"What the hell?" Gyano exclaimed as she drew her blaster from under her coat, "Is it the cops?" but before anyone could answer her question the skylight above them shattered, spraying shards of glass around the room. Two syntherope lines were promptly dropped through the destroyed skylight and while the terrorists below were still reeling from being showered with glass a pair of mercenaries slid down, shooting their rifles from the hip. One landed on the table and the force of his impact smashed through the poorly made object. But although this disrupted his drop the mercenary was protected by his comrade who landed perfectly and began picking off the terrorists around him. Then when the first recovered enough to get to his feet they both moved clear of the area beneath the skylight so that the other two mercenaries waiting on the roof were clear to drop down as well.

It was then that Gyano reacted, emerging from behind the large chair she had been able to dive behind the moment the skylight gave way and she fired upwards, aiming for one of the mercenaries still sliding down a syntherope line. The blast hit the man in the neck, just above his armoured vest and he went limp instantly. No longer able to hold onto the line the dead mercenary then plummeted to the floor and only narrowly missed one of the two to have gone before him. But in firing at the mercenary she had exposed her own position and both the mercenaries already on the floor spun towards her and opened fire. The barrage of blaster bolts ripped apart the furniture between Gyano and the mercenaries before smashing into her as well with predictable results. Gyano let out a single shrill cry of pain before she died and collapsed to the floor. With both the office and the loading bay now clear of opposition and only one casualty suffered in return the mercenaries began to sweep through the rest of the factory, picking off everyone they found. In addition when they reached the manufacturing lines that were the primary reason for the factory's existence they opened fire on the droids as well, making sure that even already disabled ones were finished off with a shot to the head that would ensure the total destruction of their memory cores to prevent the machines from being used by the authorities to piece together what had happened here when the alarm was finally raised. All together it took less than fifteen minutes from the first grenade being thrown into the loading bay for the mercenaries to complete their sweep of the building, at which point they paused just long enough to retrieve the body of their dead comrade before withdrawing to their staging area to await further instructions.

Unlike the factory where Gyano's cell had been based, Toker's cell operated out of a residential area. The estate consisted of several slum apartment blocks with storage units for vehicles located in their basements. Few of the residents could afford even the most basic personal vehicle and those that could knew better than to try and park them in the intended spaces since it was in these basement storage units that Toker's cell stored their weapons. The inhabitants of the apartment blocks were either sympathetic to or sufficiently intimidated by the PLAE that they functioned as an additional line of defence, with residents banging on doors or slamming waste chutes to alert the terrorists to the approach of any law enforcement or military units.

However, the mercenaries advanced in small groups and in plain clothes. Combined with the fact that many of them were not human meant that the locals did not recognise them as the threat they were even as they were picking off isolated members of the local community with blades or garrotes as they closed in on the underground storage units, drawing blasters only when they got below ground themselves.

Just as at the factory the mercenaries arrived as the PLAE terrorists were loading up their transport, ready to launch the attack on Foran they still expected to take place.

"Who the hell are you?" the first terrorist to see the mercenaries called out, not noticing the weapons that they held out of view.

"Mister Fallir sent us." the lead mercenary replied, smiling as he raised his blaster and fired it into the terrorist's chest. This first shot was the signal to begin the assault and all of a sudden Toker's cell found themselves under fire from all directions. The storage units' location was a hindrance to both sides,

preventing them from deploying anything more powerful than basic small arms for fear of bringing down the entire estate on top of them but the combat was no less deadly for this. At close range any delay between target acquisition and firing could be fatal and unfortunately for the PLAE terrorists this was not something they were used to. They conducted their guerilla war by selecting a target significantly weaker than themselves and striking by surprise. But when the tables were turned on them they were found lacking. "Scatter!" Toker yelled, "It's a trap!" and he ran for one of the handful of exits from the underground storage units that appeared on no formal blueprints. Even Foran had been unaware of the passageway's precise location and so the mercenaries had not been able to cut off the terrorists' access to it. "Don't let them escape." one of the mercenary leaders shouted at his men, "Second squad go after him." and five of the mercenaries began to fight their way towards the newly revealed passageway. Two other members of Toker's cell had made it to the passageway with their leader but as the pursuing mercenaries made it to the passageway the first thing they did was fire down it and one of these two was cut down before they had made it even half way to the other end. "Keep going." Toker said as he pointed his blaster behind him and fired several random shots back down the passageway that prevented the mercenaries from following them down it for a short time at least. But the moment that Toker and his surviving companion made it to the other end and left the passageway the mercenaries came rushing after them. Toker had expected this and he paused at the end of the passageway to fire down it after giving his pursuers chance to get far enough down that they could not easily evade his fire and one of them fell to floor as the others dived to it instead. But even in an area that PLAE was able to control as well as it did on this estate, a blaster fight did not go unnoticed or unreported and as he ran through the alleyways between the apartment blocks Toker first heard the sound of banging as sympathetic locals warned of the approach of the authorities followed by the sound of repulsorlifts from overhead and Toker looked up just in time for a powerful spotlight beam to shine down towards him from a police airspeeder. "Citizens!" an amplified voice called out from the hovering speeder, "Remain where you are and raise your hands." Toker's companion made the mistake of aiming his blaster at the police speeder and before he could fire there was a shot from a second vehicle that had been able to remain out of sight by hovering directly above one of the apartment blocks that took him off his feet. Toker himself broke into a run, aware that now he was trying to outrun not only the mercenaries that had attacked his cell but also the police. Knowing that he could not escape the airspeeders out in the open Toker headed back into the nearest apartment block. But Foran's mercenaries were waiting for him in here and as he ran down a hallway a figure appeared at the end and started to aim a blaster at him. Toker reacted quickly however, firing a rapidly aimed shot that blasted a chunk from the wall beside the mercenary that forced him to take cover. But the mercenary was not alone. The four members of the squad that had made it down the tunnel had split into two pairs to surround Toker and while his attention was focused on the mercenary he saw in front of him two others had been able to get behind him and there was a single shot that struck him between his shoulders. The four mercenaries then all emerged from cover and advanced towards Toker's body, keeping their weapons trained on him just in case he was not dead. But when they reached him one crouched down and checked for a pulse. "Dead." he said when he found no signs of life, "Let's get out of here before the cops get brave enough to come in looking for us."

5.

With the majority of Foran's mercenary guards gone the group of fighters assembled by the Church of Infinity was able to make its way towards the cantina relatively unopposed and take up positions around it. As ordered they left a section of the perimeter relatively weakened, covered by just two camouflaged snipers who would ensure that only Foran was able to escape in that direction if anyone tried. Meanwhile the rest of the fighters took aim at the cantina building itself. There were two mercenaries visible from the outside as the fighters took up their positions and readied their weapons. Of these one was patrolling the grounds around the building while the second was positioned on the roof, keeping watch with a set of macrobinoculars. However, when he finally noticed one of the approaching fighters he did not have enough time to zoom in for a closer look before a blaster bolt from one of the other fighters struck the side of his head.

This initial shot had been aimed at the lookout on the roof to prevent him from ducking behind the wall that ran all the way around it and using it for cover once the shooting started. Instead now that he was dead the guard patrolling at ground level found himself caught out in the open and a burst of blaster fire from another direction cut him down while he was still searching for a target.

At the same time the rest of the fighters opened fire on the cantina building itself. Though even the out of date and civilian model blasters they were armed with had the power to tear the building apart given long enough the fighters were careful not to hit the same spots repeatedly and risk a stray shot punching right through the structure and accidentally hitting Foran. The volleys they fired were intended to get the attention of those inside and in this they were wholly successful.

"What's going on?" Foran demanded as he burst out of his private quarters, clutching his carbine.

"We're under attack." a nearby mercenary responded.

"I realise that. But who's attacking us?" Foran asked.

"I don't know, but I can tell they're all around us." the mercenary answered.

"Then go and do something about it." Foran said, shoving the man, "I'll see if I can get us some reinforcements." and then he withdrew back into his quarters, locking the door behind him.

The mercenaries moved to the edges of the cantina building, smashing through blacked out windows to shoot through them. Unable to see any of the attackers clearly they instead took advantage of the primary drawback of blaster weaponry, in that each time one was fired it produced a highly visible indication of where the firer was located and the mercenaries aimed short bursts towards the source of each flash of red. But the fighters had taken this into account and when the cantina's defenders started to return fire they changed their tactics. Now most of the gunmen outside lay as flat as they could and held their rifles up above them, shooting just in the general direction of the cantina. This meant that when the mercenaries returned fire they were actually firing about half a metre above their intended targets. The plan was not foolproof however, with one of the attacking fighters screaming in pain as a fluke shot struck his wrist and took his hand clean off, leaving him clutching at a charred stump where his arm suddenly ended.

But while this blaster fire was being exchanged a number of the attacking fighters, those best skilled in the use of their rifles and all equipped with long range hunting blasters fitted with vision enhancing scopes were studying the cantina closely. They too were investigating the source of each burst of fire to see if the shooter matched the description of Foran Fallir. Of course none of the mercenaries did and when the fighters saw this they opened fire, using carefully aimed shots to pick them off rather than spraying bursts of blaster fire at random.

As their numbers continued to dwindle it became obvious to the mercenaries that they would inevitably be overrun and one of them broke, withdrawing back into the cantina and rushing to Foran's quarters before banging on the door.

"We're getting cut to pieces out here!" he yelled as he continued to slam his fist against the door.

Inside his quarters Foran listened but did nothing. As he had said he would he had signalled the two groups of mercenaries he had sent to deal with Gyano and Toker but it was obvious that they would not make it back here in time to do any good and so Foran's mind turned to his main objective – keeping himself alive at any cost.

Slinging his carbine over his shoulder Foran rushed to where a plain holdall was tucked under a table. He opened this just to confirm the contents, more than twenty thousand credits in untraceable cash as well as small bags of gemstones and precious metal coins that he could use to help him disappear if needed. But he was smart enough to know that escape would be easier with a professional solidier to help him and so after slinging the holdall over his shoulder as well he went to the door and opened it.

"Inside quick." he said and he pulled the mercenary inside.

"What the kriff are you doing?" the mercenary demanded.

"Saving us both." Foran replied, "The others aren't going to make it back in time. We need to get out of here

and lie low for a while.” and then he crossed the room to a seemingly blank wall panel and taking a knife from his belt he prised one corner loose before ripping the entire panel free to expose a secret passageway behind it.

“Where does that lead?” the mercenary asked.

“Into a service duct that emerges about fifty metres from the building.” Foran replied, “It’s one of several I had prepared for me before I came here. This particular one has the advantage that it comes out in an area that our enemies appear to be ignoring.”

“It could be a trap.” the mercenary pointed out.

“Which is why I need your help.” Foran told him, “An extra set of eyes to search for traps will make it less likely I’ll be caught in it. Unless you’d rather stay here and wait for them to break in?”

“No.” the mercenary replied, shaking his head and he darted past Foran into the passageway.

Movement at ground level attracted the attention of the two hidden sharpshooters and both aimed their weapons in its direction. There they saw a man crawling out from under a carefully concealed hatchway in the ground. The man looked around as he pulled a rifle up after him before darting from the hatchway to the cover of a bush. But the sharpshooters held their fire for now, waiting to see what would happen next and their patience was rewarded when they saw the mercenary beckon towards the hatchway and another man appeared from underground. Taller, slender and bald there was only one man that this could be.

Foran Fallir had finally revealed himself.

“Eyes on Target Aurek.” one of the sharpshooters broadcast to the rest of the force, “One secondary.”

Foran and his final mercenary guard then both started to creep away from the cantina, watched closely by the sharpshooters. Then when one decided that he had the perfect shot he squeezed his rifle’s trigger.

The single blaster bolt struck the mercenary in his back and he fell forwards. Then to make sure that Foran did not do anything to upset the church’s plan both sharpshooters took aim at the ground behind the terrorist leader and opened fire, sending blasts into the ground itself that kicked up clumps of mud and grass.

This drove Foran onwards, breaking into a run as he headed for the nearest cover. This was a low hill about fifty metres ahead of him and in order to try and avoid what he believed were snipers trying to kill him Foran dodged and weaved before diving and rolling out of sight.

Crouching on the other side of the hill Foran could still here the sounds of firing as the attacking fighters finished off the remaining mercenaries, no longer constrained by having to avoid harming him. To Foran it seemed that while most of his mercenaries had been dealing with the rebellious cells commanded by Gyano and Toker a third had been plotting to attack him as well. With no way of knowing which cell was responsible for this Foran was left with only one place left to go.

6.

"On your feet priest." Foran said as he walked up behind Darall. The Church of Infinity's leader was knelt in prayer under a floating hologram of the infinity symbol.

"Mister Fallir." Darall said, looking around to see Foran moving towards him holding his carbine at his waist and aiming it towards Darall. Foran appeared somewhat bedraggled, having obviously been outside in the rain and having crawled through mud at some point, "What happened?"

"You failed to warn me about a third traitor." Foran answered, "While my personal guards were dealing with Gyano and Toker someone else sent their people to kill me."

"I swear I had no idea." Darall said.

"I know. If I even suspected that you were a part of this I would have killed you already. But right now you are the only one I can trust."

"Trust to do what?"

"Help me disappear. There is no People's Liberation Army for me now. Let them fight among themselves and kill one another, I don't care. I just need to get away from them."

"It should be possible." Darall replied, "The same ships we use to bring in your weapons can be used to get you somewhere safer." then he paused and looked around, "Go through there and wait for me." he added, pointing to a doorway that led to a set of private prayer rooms, "I'll go and see to your transport."

The maxillipede-class shuttle was a larger version of the sheathipede-class shuttles that had been the standard ship to surface transport for the Trade Federation until the organisation's dissolution. The primary difference apart from its size was that the larger vessel was equipped with a hyperdrive, allowing it to function as a fully independent starship rather than relying on a larger mother ship to move between systems.

The ship descended out of the clouds to land in a clearing in a forest not far outside of Estran's capital watched by both Darall and Foran. The terrorist leader still clutched his holdall filled with money but was no longer armed, having been told that the ship's captain was trustworthy but would not tolerate any armed passengers on his ship. But as the ship came closer Foran realised that something was amiss. Through the Force he could sense that there was no-one aboard the shuttle.

"What's going on here?" he asked turning towards Darall as the shuttle touched down.

"This ship will take you where no-one can reach you." Darall replied, "Just as I promised you." and then the shuttle's access ramp extended and a pair of super battle droids marched from inside, raising their arms and the blaster cannons built into them and pointing them at Foran.

Foran turned to run but Darall produced a lightweight sporting blaster pistol from under his robes and pressed the muzzle to the larger man's chest.

"The only place you are going is with them." he said, nodding towards the two droids.

"You betrayed me!" Foran yelled, lashing out to knock the blaster aside. But before he could do any harm to Darall the two droids grabbed his arms and dragged him back. Then they tore through the strap of the holdall and let it fall to the ground as they began dragging him back towards the shuttle, "I can pay you!" Foran called out to Darall and the priest smiled as he bent down to pick up the holdall and opened.

"Yes, your kind donation to our church will help with our good works." he said as he pulled out a bundle of banknotes before putting them away again, "But there is something far more important you can offer us."

The hatch to the shuttle then slid shut, cutting off Foran's protests and Darall waited just long enough to watch the vessel lift off and fly up into the clouds, disappearing from view.

The droids held Foran tightly for the entire duration of the journey. The pilot of the shuttle was also a droid and none of them spoke to him as it travelled to its final destination. Held in the rear compartment of the shuttle Foran could not tell where it was travelling to but he did notice that it made several short hops through hyperspace rather than travelling directly to its destination and only a change in the pitch of the engine noise told him that it had at last arrived.

"I demand you release me!" Foran shouted as the two battle droids dragged him down the access ramp into what was obviously a hangar aboard a large vessel or space station. But he ceased his protests when he saw the group of figures approaching him. Foran had never seen a member of this species before but he had seen enough images to recognise the legendary rakata when he saw them and he gasped.

Without addressing Foran himself one of the rakata said something to the droids in their own language before all of the aliens turned around and started to walk away. Immediately the droids followed their masters, taking Foran along with them.

They took him as far as a turbolift and dragged him inside before the turbolift was set into motion. The time

elapsed told Foran that whatever sort of vessel or space station he was aboard was far larger than anything he had seen before but nothing else. At the same time his continued demands for release, backed up by empty threats, drew no response from either the aliens or the droids.

When the turbolift doors opened again the room revealed beyond them was obviously some sort of command centre and Foran was dragged towards the centre of this. Here there was something that looked vaguely reminiscent of a cryogenic storage capsule but that featured restraints to hold an occupant in place. Around this worked more of the alien rakata, these dressed in clean white clothing that suggested to Foran they performed some sort of medical or scientific role and when the droids came to a stop one of them began to scan Foran with a handheld device while another produced a knife and began to cut his clothing from him. The rakata replaced Foran's clothing with a form of bodyglove that was covered in connections for tubes and wires but before they connected anything to these the droids lifted him into the mysterious capsule and secured him in place.

"I swear I will kill you all!" Foran bellowed as the rakata began to connect the various tubes and wires that the bodyglove was designed to interface with. But this was to be his final protest as a larger tube was suddenly forced down his throat and secured with a muzzle that sealed around his head before the rakata retreated away from him. Foran struggled, tugging desperately at his restraints as the top of the capsule slid shut and sealed him inside. Then he heard the sound of flowing liquid and he realised that the capsule was now being flooded with something.

In the command centre outside the capsule the rakata gathered around a nearby console and waited for the operator to report.

"The core has been successfully installed." the alien said, "Programming may commence."

"Excellent." the high elder of the rakata said, "Begin programming. I want full operation to begin within two days. Unlimited power is now within our reach."