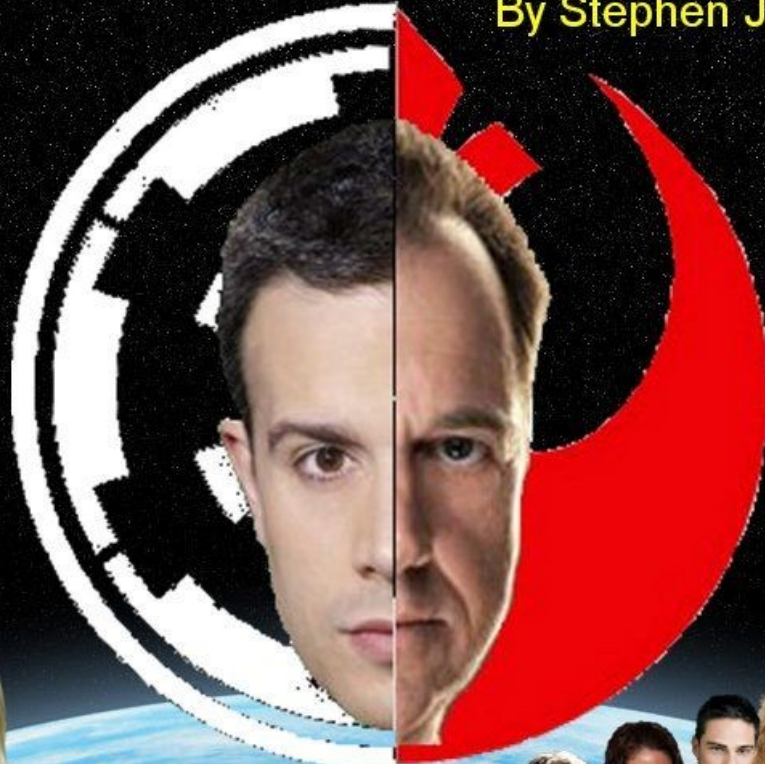


STAR WARS

7-08: Fallout

By Stephen J Dutton



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Civil war turns father against son

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

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

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

FALLOUT

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE DEATH STAR AND DEATH OF BOTH EMPEROR PALPATINE AND DARTH VADER IS A PIVOTAL EVENT IN GALACTIC HISTORY, AN EVENT THAT THERE ARE MANY PEOPLE KEEN TO EXPLOIT...

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

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1.

Asleep in her own bed and all alone Vay Udra suddenly awoke and sat upright, gasping for breath as a tremor through the Force shocked her into consciousness.

"No!" she exclaimed even though there was no-one there to hear her, "He can't be dead."

But despite being alone she still got a reply. But the words spoken to her did not come from any living person, instead they came from within the Force itself and were from the spirit of an ancestor of hers who had been a jedi almost four thousand years earlier named Lara.

Oh yes he can. And now everything's going to change.

Flames erupted from the gaps in the hull of the incomplete battle station in orbit around a lush green moon, followed moments later by a flash as the chain reaction started in its main reactor went critical and destroyed the battle station entirely.

In space around the moon there was panic as the fleet of triangular warships suddenly found itself leaderless and each vessel began trying to look out for its own survival against the much smaller but well disciplined rebel fleet it faced. One by one the Imperial ships were destroyed or turned to leave, accelerating beyond the range of the interdicator cruisers positioned around the battle to prevent the Alliance ships from escaping into hyperspace.

Then the image being broadcast went blank.

"Those are the final images we have from Endor." the reporter Neema Gorord announced, "But affiliate stations around the galaxy are sending us these." and the broadcast changed to show scenes from a multitude of Imperial worlds.

On Coruscant itself mobs numbering in the millions battled with red armoured Coruscant guardsmen who fired at them from airspeeders.

A stretch of highway on some unnamed world showed lamp posts with bodies dressed in Imperial uniforms dangling from them with ropes around their necks.

Riot police held back a jeering crowd as line after line of prisoners was positioned in front of a wall and executed by stormtroopers forming firing squads.

More stormtroopers were then seen dousing the flames enveloping a comrade after an improvised incendiary device had been hurled at their position outside an Imperial barracks.

A crowd waving placards calling for the galactic senate to be reformed scattered as riot suppressing gas was fired into their midst and as they ran there was blaster fire aimed towards them as well.

Then the broadcast was suddenly cut off, replaced by the Imperial emblem.

"There now follows a special announcement." a male voice said and the broadcast was replaced by an image of a podium bearing the Imperial emblem that had a male human standing behind it. Almost everyone in the sector knew who this was, Rodge Larrs, the sector head of the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order or COMPNOR. Part social club and part governmental organisation, COMPNOR's reach was immense and the day to day running of the Empire depended on its billions of members. Normally when he appeared behind this podium to make announcements the room would be filled with journalists from around the sector who on some occasions would be permitted to ask questions. However, on this occasion the announcement had been arranged on such short notice that the room was empty, rows of unoccupied seats visible in the footage.

"By now I am sure you have all seen the footage reporting to show the destruction of the so-called Death Star in the Endor system." Rodge announced, "I am here to reassure all the Empire's loyal citizens that there is no confirmation that His Majesty Emperor Palpatine has been killed and wish to encourage everyone to remain calm in the face of this wave of sedition that we are currently witnessing. I also want to assure everyone that any further information that we receive will be broadcast as soon as possible. Thank you."

When Rodge Larrs approached the doors to Moff Horatian's office they were opened for him without him having to pause. Inside Moff Gregor Horatian sat behind his desk while his chief military officers, Fleet Admiral Praus Vretan and General Julius Dern along with a collection of other senior officers sat on the other side. But the meeting was not limited to military personnel only, also present was the Director Calvin Helieos of the Imperial Security Bureau and Inquisitor Ibram Kellesen who had recently been promoted to head Imperial Intelligence in the sector following his predecessor's fall from grace.

"Impressive broadcast Rodge." Moff Horatian said as Rodge sat down beside Director Helieos.

"Yes, not bad for a speech written in about five minutes." Rodge replied, "Just a pity it's all poodoo. What have you heard?"

"Fleet command has nothing." Fleet Admiral Vretan replied, "The best I can come up with is that someone

high up tried to engineer a trap to force the rebel fleet to battle. They lured them to a location where we had superior numbers and could block their escape into hyperspace with hundreds of interdictor cruisers. But the ships at Endor weren't part of any regular sector group but part of our strategic reserve forces so no-one's certain who gave the orders. Though it is known that the fleet at Endor included the entire Death Squadron." "Then Lord Vader is dead?" Rodge asked.

"No-one knows." Director Helieos answered.

"No-one seems to know anything." General Dern added.

"What about you Mister Kelleesen?" Rodge asked, "Isn't intelligence supposed to know everything?" and Ibram snarled.

"The Emperor is dead." he said and the other men in the room gasped.

"Are you certain inquisitor?" Moff Horatian asked.

"Yes, what is your source?" Director Helieos asked.

"A being as strong in the Force as Emperor Palpatine cannot pass from this life without it being known."

"But if Lord Vader has been lost along with the Death Squadron and the Emperor then who is in charge of the Empire?" Admiral Vretan asked.

"In that case I'm sure that the grand vizier will be able to organise an orderly transfer of power." Rodge said.

"Orderly? Ha!" General Dern exclaimed, "Have you seen it out there Rodge?" and he pointed towards the office's armoured one way windows. Then he picked up his datapad from his lap and began to read from it, "On Tarlen the governor decided to call up the militia to support the local police but more than half are refusing their call up notices and now he wants a brigade of stormtroopers to help him start conscripting people. Right here on Estran I'm putting my troops on high alert just in case the wave of protests and street parties turn violent. Street parties Mister Larrs, do you know what that means? Let me tell you shall I? People aren't panicked by the rumours of Emperor Palpatine's death, they're kriffing well celebrating it."

"I've given orders for Admiral Trell's heavy squadron to be on standby to deploy to any system reporting major disturbances." Fleet Admiral Vretan added, "Fleet command on Coruscant has warned all sectors that there are no reinforcements being sent to any sectors and we are to make do with our existing resources. Her victory-class ships can react quickly and hit hard."

"So missile barrages from orbit are the Navy's answer to a bit of civil unrest now are they?" Director Helieos asked.

"Then what would you suggest director?" General Dern asked.

"I'd suggest calling up everybody." Director Helieos replied, "Every stormtrooper, army soldier, fleet trooper, customs agent, sector ranger, militiaman, defence force trooper and police officer including reservists and giving them a weapon. If they refuse then order them executed for desertion on the spot. If that's not enough then start militarising other organisations. Park wardens, space rescue corps and every branch of COMPNOR and intelligence if you have to. Every last being standing as part of our lines holding a blaster is one less standing as part of a mob holding an incendiary bomb. Put a squad on every street corner and you'll have peace."

"Gentlemen, if we could have some calm please." Moff Horatian said, holding up his hands, "Now so far we have seen very little in the way of actual violence in our sector related to recent events and hopefully things will remain that way. But just in case they don't I think we ought to start looking into the director's suggestion. What happened on Tarlen could happen elsewhere if things get out of control and I don't want us having to put down any mutinies in addition to riots."

"What about the rebels in the sector?" Rodge Larrs asked, "This is just the sort of chaos that they would want to exploit. In fact, didn't the original footage from Endor supposedly come from a rebel propagandist source?"

"Intelligence indicates that the rebels drew together as many vessels as they could for the battle at Endor."

Ibram responded, "The handful of ships they have left in the sector are too few to challenge the fleet admiral's force."

"And our planets are still shielded." General Dern added, "I don't think we need to worry about any direct attacks just yet."

Before the rise of the Old Republic the Infinite Empire of the rakata had been the dominant power in the galaxy despite controlling only around five hundred worlds at its peak, barely twenty sectors in modern terms. Now though the remnants of the rakata species were scattered across the galaxy, some of them existing as primitive stone age tribes who remembered what they had once been only as legend while others still retained some advanced technology. The technology was not generally their own however, that had always depended on the user having some ability to manipulate the Force to operate and the virus that had been the trigger for the downfall of the Infinite Empire had stripped all the survivors of this once wholly Force sensitive species of that gift. Instead some surviving rakata had adopted the technology of the races that came after them, some of whom had been slaves under the Infinite Empire.

But in the nebula that bordered the sector containing Estran a surviving rakata colony had spent four thousand years recreating their ancient empire's greatest creation. At its peak the Infinite Empire had created

a space station that was a gigantic automated factory that could churn out battle droids and warships by drawing matter from their home system's star and guided by the Force sensitivity of its controllers. Now a new star forge had been built hidden deep within the nebula with a human Force sensitive captive at its core and the rakata were starting to build an army. Not an army of their own long obsolete weapons however, instead they had obtained examples of the weaponry used by the Confederacy of Independent Systems in the Clone Wars. The advantage of these for the numerically small rakata was the Confederacy's dependence on battle droids that mean a single rakata could direct an entire army without risking the deaths of too many of their own number.

Now one of the rakata's leaders sat in his private quarters being waited on by numerous droids as he watched a holographic recording of the destruction of the second death star.

"They have arrived my lord." a droid announced from the door and the rakata leader nodded. Though he was perfectly content to be surrounded by droid bodyguards he preferred the idea of being waited on by organic beings enslaved to the will of his species. Anyone could feel superior to a droid.

"Show them in." he told the droid.

"Yes my lord." the droid replied and it left the room briefly before returning with several other rakata in military uniforms.

"Watch this." the rakata leader announced to the military commanders and he played the hologram again, "That space station was the ultimate weapon of the humans' empire." he said as he saw the death star explode once again, "What's more their leader, Emperor Palpatine was aboard at the time it was destroyed. They are now leaderless and we have been presented with an opportunity."

"They still outnumber us greatly my lord." one of the military commanders pointed out.

"We shall not be starting our crusade just yet." their leader responded, "But we must strike before this empire can reorganise itself and I have the perfect target in mind."

2.

At two thousand two hundred metres in length, the battlecruiser *Pride of the Empire* was the biggest Imperial warship in the sector. When Admiral Lorn Sayer had been given command of the vessel upon his promotion he had been ordered to use it to hunt down and destroy the rebellion in the sector. However, the discovery of what the Empire believed to be a Separatist faction holding out in the nebula had changed all of that and the possibility of invasion by an army of battle droids had persuaded Moff Horatian to order a blockade of all of the known routes into and out of it and the *Pride of the Empire* was the key component of this blockade. "You've found something lieutenant?" Admiral Sayer asked the comscan officer as he entered the bridge of his ship in response to a summons.

"Yes sir." the officer replied, "Probes droids inside the nebula have picked up multiple pulses of cronau radiation indicating a number of vessels exiting hyperspace close to our position."

"How close are our support ships?" Admiral Sayer asked.

"The nearest are the *Shadow Caster's* line seven minutes out." another comscan operator responded.

"Call them in." Admiral Sayer ordered, "Then send to all ships in the squadron to stand by to engage the enemy. Tell them to be ready to redeploy but hold current positions for now. This could be a diversion intended to lure our forces here while they sneak through somewhere else."

"Admiral! We have activity within the nebula!" someone called out.

"Show me." Admiral Sayer said and he hurried to a nearby display to see what was happening.

"Single vulture droid sir." the crewman sat at the console in front of the monitor said and he zoomed in on the single droid fighter that had just emerged from the nebula and was now on a course directly for the *Pride of the Empire*. But then more of the droids appeared behind it, "No wait, make that ten vulture droids. Twelve. Twenty. Sixty. One hundred, sir they just keep coming." and the display was filled with swarms of the unmanned fighters all heading for the Imperial battlecruiser.

"Sound battle stations." Admiral Sayer ordered, "Raise shields and stand by for their capital ships to follow those fighters."

"Enemy fighters entering weapon range admiral." someone called out as Admiral Sayer strode towards the viewports at the front of the bridge and looked out towards the nebula. At this moment the droids were still too far away for him to be able to make them out individually but he could discern the dark shadow they formed against the brightness of the nebula.

"Open fire. All batteries fire." Admiral Sayer ordered.

An allegiance-class battlecruiser like the *Pride of the Empire* carried ninety turbolaser batteries that covered its forward and side arcs so given that the ship was pointed directly towards the droids charging at it only a third of these were able to fire at them. But this still meant that there were thirty turbolasers engaging the fighters and even though they were not intended for engaging targets as small as fighters the cloud of them was so vast that it was inevitable that each blast would hit something, vaporising a dozen or more vulture droids with each shot. But even as the battlecruiser shot down droids by the dozen even more came pouring out of the nebula.

Then a klaxon sounded across the bridge.

"Missile lock! Incoming ordnance."

"Ion cannons." Admiral Sayer ordered, "We can't let any of those hit us. Master at arms tell our marines to prepare to repel buzz droids."

As with the *Pride of the Empire's* turbolasers, its ion cannons were also designed to engage other capital ships rather than fighter or missiles. But the highly charged packets of energy did not need to score direct hits on the missiles to render them harmless, instead a near miss was often enough for the ionized blasts to disrupt or even overload the delicate electronics of the missiles' guidance or even the tiny droids they contained that if able to come into contact with a ship's hull would tear it apart given enough time. This was why Admiral Sayer had put his marines on stand by. If any of the missiles struck his vessel the only way to clear the droids off the hull would be to send stormtroopers out to destroy them one at a time even while the ship was still in combat.

Multiple flashes of light from close by the *Pride of the Empire* heralded the arrival of more ships from hyperspace and Admiral Sayer prepared himself for the news that these were launching even more buzz droids. Fortunately this was not the case.

"Admiral the *Shadow Caster's* line has arrived. They're launching fighters now."

"Good." Admiral Sayer said, "We need the cover." Like the smaller tector-class star destroyer an allegiance-class battlecruiser lacked any internal hangars or external racks on which TIE fighters could be carried and this meant that they were dependent on ships such as the escort carriers that had just arrived to provide them with fighter cover when it was needed. Fortunately each escort carrier had sufficient hangar space for a

full wing of TIE fighters and this now meant that there were two hundred and eighty-eight Imperial fighters being launched into space. However, against the thousands of vulture droids that had emerged from the nebula it seemed like a very small number.

"Report on enemy strength." Admiral Sayer said.

"Sir there are currently more than eight thousand vulture droids in sensor range." a comscan operator replied.

"Eight thousand?" Admiral Sayer responded, "That would take at least half a dozen Confederate ships to transport. But only the fighters are attacking so what are those carriers waiting for?" then he paused before issuing his next order, "Signal the squadron. I want all ships here as soon as possible."

"Admiral look!" Admiral Sayer's first officer snapped and he pointed towards the nebula where at last after nothing but wave after wave of vulture droids a single capital ship had finally made an appearance.

A Lucrehulk-class ship was three thousand metres in diameter, almost half as large again as the *Pride of the Empire* and some versions mounted far more weapons than an allegiance-class battlecruiser. However, the ships had originally been designed as cargo transports and their real strength lay in transporting large numbers of battle droids, not engaging in ship to ship combat with other warships of even half their size.

"Tell the other ships to keep those vulture droids away from us." Admiral Sayer ordered, "Then lay in a course for that battleship and take us in. Let's show them what a modern warship is capable of."

The *Pride of the Empire* turned slightly, its prow coming about to point directly at the Lucrehulk-class ship. But the other capital ship did not alter its course to meet the Imperial warship head on. Instead it veered off, its engines running at full power as it moved to avoid contact entirely. However, the ion drives of the smaller allegiance-class ship gave it a much higher thrust to mass ratio and Admiral Sayer was soon told that the enemy vessel was within firing range.

"Open fire." he said calmly and the space between the *Pride of the Empire* and the fleeing Lucrehulk-class ship was swiftly filled with the flashes of turbolaser and ion cannon fire. The ion cannons blasts passed unimpeded through the Lucrehulk-class ship's shields and lightning danced across its hull as systems overloaded from the sudden energy pulse affecting them. The disruption this caused to the power distribution system reduced the strength of the ship's shields and this only served to reduce the amount of time that it took the repeated turbolaser strikes to overwhelm them entirely. As soon as they collapsed the hull of the Lucrehulk-class battleship was lit up by explosions as the turbolaser blasts now struck the ship itself.

Admiral Sayer smiled as he watched the fires from the turbolaser hits start to rage out of control until all of a sudden the damage caused by them became too great for the enemy vessel to endure.

"Enemy ship is breaking up. Main reactor becoming unstable." one of the comscan operators reported.

"Cease fire." Admiral Sayer said, "Pull us away before that thing blows."

Immediately the weapons fire from the *Pride of the Empire* ceased and the battlecruiser started to turn away from its opponent as its crew tried to put as much distance as they could between them before the moment finally came when the Lucrehulk's main reactor finally went critical and the entire ship exploded.

"Damage report." Admiral Sayer called out.

"Checking sir." one of the bridge crew responded, "No damage from the explosion sir, we were too far away to be caught in the danger zone and-" the crewman said before he suddenly stopped.

"And what?" Admiral Sayer demanded, "Come on man, tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing sir." the crewman replied, "No damage suffered at all. The enemy vessel did not return fire at us even once."

Admiral Sayer frowned.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." he said, "Comscan, how many crew were aboard the enemy ship?"

"Checking sir." a comscan operator replied as he reviewed the sensor information that had been gathered during the engagement with the enemy battleship. Then he looked up, "None sir. The ship was fully automated."

"It's a trap!" Admiral Sayer exclaimed, "Comscan search for signs of more enemy capital ships. This one's a decoy to draw us out of position."

"Second Lucrehulk-class ship emerging from the nebula now sir."

"Position?"

"On the far side of the engagement zone admiral, running at full thrust and not attempting to engage our ships. Too far for us to intercept before it gets far enough from the nebula to make the jump into hyperspace cleanly."

"Try." Admiral Sayer ordered, "Helm I want maximum thrust."

The *Pride of the Empire* shuddered slightly as as power as possible was diverted to the ion drives, sacrificing weapon power in the process. But the comscan operator had been correct and the enemy vessel continued to get further away from the nebula until it was clear of the gravitational and electromagnetic interference that prevented it from jumping into hyperspace and there was a sudden flash of light as the vessel engaged its hyperdrive.

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

3.

The ISB offices in the capital building were a hive of activity as Agent Garm Larcus and Vay, his partner both professionally and personally arrived for work. Unusually, most of the ISB agents present wore armoured vests over their uniforms, a clear indication that they expected to be deployed into dangerous situations at a moment's notice.

"Agent Larcus!" someone called out from across the main work area before Garm and Vay could reach their private office and Garm turned to see one of the civilian COMPNOR employees who worked in support of the ISB hurrying towards them clutching a datapad.

"Yes?" Garm asked the woman, "How may I help you?"

"The director wants to see you both as soon as possible." she told him, "He didn't say what it was about but there's a member of the Space Rescue Corps waiting as well."

Garm winced.

"Every time we get involved with the SRC it seems like we end up fighting alien monsters." he said.

"That's because we do." Vay commented. Then she smiled, "But would you have it any other way?"

"Well I suppose it's never dull." Garm replied, "Come on then, let's go see what Director Helieos wants from us today. Then we'll go and see what the biggest can of insect repellent the Empire has to offer is."

When Garm and Vay reached the director's office they found a woman in the red trimmed black uniform of the SRC who smiled when she saw them. Lieutenant Mirri Cordall had worked with Garm and Vay on several investigations that related to crashed or abandoned starships.

"Garm. Vay. I wondered if I'd end up being paired with you again." she said as she stood up, "I don't suppose either of you knows why I've been called in? Everything's gone crazy back at the SRC and we've all been told to carry these around at all times." and she tapped the blaster pistol she had holstered to her waist.

"Sorry but I've no idea why the director wants to see us." Garm replied.

"And everybody's acting like we're in a war zone." Vay added, "You should see the ISB offices. They look like everyone's about to go out on a raid."

Just then the door to Director Helieos's office slid open to reveal the director himself standing just inside.

"Ah, you're all here then." he said, "Come on in and we'll make this as quick as we can."

Inside Director Helieos's office the director activated a holographic display while his guests sat down. The recording that the projector then started to play back was obviously footage taken from a warship that was part of the squadron blockading the nebula. Visible in the hologram was the triangular shape of the *Pride of the Empire* as it raced to try and catch up with the even larger ring-shaped *Lucrehulk-class* battleship that had emerged from the nebula but before the Imperial warship was able to get within firing range there was a flash as the larger ship escaped into hyperspace.

"Quite simply that is the last confirmed sighting we have of that battleship." Director Helieos said, "Its exit vector suggested that it was heading for the Heart but so far the Navy hasn't found a thing."

"We're going hunting for it aren't we?" Vay said.

"Indeed you are Agent Udra." the director replied, "The navy doesn't have the resources to spare right now, every ship is needed to defend our worlds from attack as well as acting to contain civil unrest so as a matter of sector security it instead falls to the ISB to deal with the situation. I want you three to take a shuttle and start hunting for it. If you can find out where it is then you can call in the navy to engage it."

"Ah, so that's why I'm here." Mirri said, "My experience with search and rescue operations."

"If I may ask sir," Garm then added, "if this is just a reconnaissance mission then what exactly are Vay and I required for?"

"You're needed because that ship broke through the navy's blockade for a reason Agent Larcus." Director Helieos replied, "And for all we know it's already busy carrying out whatever scheme these Separatists had in mind for it. It's up to you to try and determine what they're up to and make sure that it ends with the destruction of their ship."

"I take it that a ship has been prepared for us?" Mirri asked.

"It's being prepared now in the main hangar." Director Helieos answered, "A *mu-class* shuttle provided by the Imperial Survey Corps. It should have the duration you need along with the sensor capability to find your target. Everything recorded by the navy at the nebula will be uploaded to its computer by the time you leave."

"I'll need access to planetary sensor logs as well." Mirri said and Director Helieos nodded.

"You'll be given the authority to requisition any information you need for this." he told her before looking at Garm, "Or at least he will. Garm you can just use your normal security access code to get what you need. Any problems just contact my office directly. Oh one last thing to mention, some local authorities are being less than eager in their co-operation right now. If anyone tries to obstruct your investigation then you are free to carry out a summary execution if you need to."

"Well that ought to encourage co-operation from anyone else nearby." Vay commented.
"That's the idea." Director Helieos said, "Now are there any more questions."
"Just one." Mirri said and she leant forwards in her chair, "Are the rumours true? Is the Emperor dead?"
"That's two." Garm said but Director Helieos ignored him, instead leaning forwards in his chair and leaning on his desk.
"No-one's quite sure I'm afraid." he said, "But until we hear otherwise the moff's orders are to continue as if Emperor Palpatine is alive and well."
You know he isn't. Why not tell them they're serving an Empire without an Emperor?
Vay frowned briefly, unnoticed by the others but other than that she paid no attention to Lara.

Mu-class shuttles were variants of the standard lambda-class used for transporting Imperial personnel around the galaxy. They traded armament for superior sensors and consumable stores and were easily recognisable from their far more common counterparts by the prominent vertical tail fin having been replaced by assorted sensor and communications antennas.

"She's loaded and ready to go." the hangar's ground crew commander told Garm when he, Mirri and Vay approached the ship.

"Hey." Mirri responded, "I'm the pilot. You tell me what state the ship is in and then I decide if it's good enough."

"You heard the lady. Tell her." Garm added. Neither he nor Mirri were at all surprised that the ground crew commander had decided to address his report to Garm. Chauvinism ran deep within the Empire's organisation and many women missed out on promotion purely because of their gender. In fact Mirri herself had only joined the Space Rescue Corps because as a woman the navy had placed too many obstacles in her path.

"Your ship's ready." the ground crew commander told Mirri grudgingly, "If you want anything else then put in a request." then without waiting for a reply he turned around and walked away as quickly as he could while still making it look natural.

"How rude." Vay commented.

"Never mind that." Garm said, "Let's go see if this ship really is ready to fly shall we?"

In fact the shuttle had been fully prepared for launch, just as the ground crew commander had said and the three Imperial agents were soon strapping themselves into their seats in the cockpit.

"Okay here goes." Mirri said as she brought the shuttle's engines on line and the craft lifted up off the hangar deck and shot out of the hangar, rapidly climbing up through the atmosphere until the sky turned black.

"So where do you suggest we start looking?" Vay asked.

"At the edge of the Heart." Mirri replied, "If that ship was heading that way then we'll head to where it would have first arrived and then start looking through planetary tracking data. The worlds in the Heart have pretty good deep space monitoring, especially Allastra." The Heart was the name given to the volume of space in the geographical centre of the sector. It lay between the millennia old shipping routes called the Trade Corridor on which Estran itself sat and the Shadow Worlds that were so named for being in the 'shadow' of the nearby nebula.

"Allastra's tracking systems are all controlled directly by the Empire as well." Garm commented, "Their own defence force had to be disbanded so we shouldn't have any trouble in getting the data from them."

Garm's statement was accurate and it took only a few minutes after dropping out of hyperspace and contacting Allastra for the tracking data to arrive that allowed them to start their search while waiting for data from other worlds that were not quite as prompt with their responses. The primary drawback to the search was instead one of simple physics. Even long range sensor arrays that were capable of detecting and tracking objects in hyperspace had a detection range of just a few parsecs while even the slowest ships in hyperspace travelled at thousands of times the speed of light. This meant that a ship would appear on sensors for just a few minutes at most before leaving their detection range.

However, the sensor data did indeed show a vessel passing through its field of detection at the right time and coming in from the correct bearing to have jumped directly from the nebula.

"This looks promising." Mirri said, "Allastra lost the track when it went out of range but it was clearly something big and heading through the Heart."

"But where to?" Vay asked.

"Well at that angle it would miss the Trade Corridor entirely." Mirri replied, moving her finger across the display they were all looking at to demonstrate her point, "But if they dropped out of hyperspace say here." and she pointed to a star system close to the edge of the Heart where it bordered the Trade Corridor, "Then it would only be a short jump to several systems nearby, including Estran itself."

"But it hasn't been seen in any of them." Vay pointed out.

"One lucrehulk-class battleship?" Garm commented, "Even the upgraded dreadnought pattern isn't powerful enough to attack a system and overpower it before the navy could respond. But what's in that area that the separatists could be interested in?"

“Nothing much.” Mirri replied, “There are three likely systems where it could have dropped out of hyperspace and they’re all uninhabited. All three are brown dwarf stars without true planets and not enough mass in asteroids to make them worth mining.”

“So the perfect place to sit and wait without worrying about someone happening to stumble across them.” Garm replied, “Mirri I want you to pick the system most likely to have been that ship's destination and take us there.”

4.

The trip to the star system determined as being the one most likely to have been the destination of the Lucrehulk-class ship took only a few minutes for the mu-class shuttle. Dropping back into realspace it appeared almost as if they had missed the system entirely thanks to the limited amount of light that the brown dwarf star at its centre cast out and the lack of any orbiting bodies worthy of being considered planets. "Going dark." Mirri said as soon as the transition back to realspace was complete and she quickly deactivated as many of the shuttle's systems as she could without compromising its life support and passive sensors, "There's nothing in this system to hide us."

"Let's hope that battleship hasn't had the same idea." Vay commented.

"How long will it take us to search the entire system like this?" Garm asked and Mirri shrugged.

"A couple of days maybe." she told him, "Though if whatever they're doing here in this system involves using any major systems then our passive sensors ought to pick them up pretty quickly. Unless of course she can sense anything." and she glanced at Vay. Though Vay's ability to sense and manipulate the Force was a closely guarded secret, Mirri had witnessed her in action with a lightsaber and so knew what she was capable of.

"Nothing." Vay replied, "Though sensing the presence of even a ship full of people across a star system isn't exactly easy."

"Then I guess we need to hope that they make a mistake that gives them away." Mirri said and at that exact moment there was a bleeping from the control console and she frowned, "Huh." she added, "That was convenient."

"What was?" Garm asked.

"The passive sensors just picked up a hyperspace portal forming." Mirri replied.

"They've gone already?" Vay said, "Did they pick us up?"

"Possibly, but I don't think that was a ship entering hyperspace, I think it was one leaving it." Mirri answered.

"Getting crowded in this system." Garm said.

"I'm angling our sensor antenna towards the source of the portal. Maybe we can find out what's there." Mirri added and all three of the shuttle's occupants watched the sensor readout closely.

At first there was nothing to see but after several minutes a trace appeared in the infra red spectrum, suggesting the thermal emissions from an ion drive that had taken that time to cross the vast distance of space to the shuttle at the speed of light.

"Hang on," Mirri said, "I'm going to see if I can use that heat bloom to get us a picture of their hull."

As well as radiating out into space, the heat from a starship's ion drive would conduct across its hull before that heat too was radiating into space, so by tuning the electromagnetic detectors properly it was possible to use the differences in heat emitted from various parts of the hull to create a visual image of a ship and that was exactly what Mirri then did, turning a blurred dot into a recognisable shape.

"A Ghtroc seven twenty." Garm said as he saw the shape coalesce into the outline of a light freighter.

"Not many cargo terminals around here." Vay said.

"No, but a Lucrehulk-class ship could be carrying millions of tonnes of cargo." Garm replied, "Especially if it's still in its original configuration. After all the ship that escaped the nebula never fired a shot at our ships."

"Well we still need to find that ship before we can determine whether it's been modified." Mirri pointed out and then all of a sudden the thermal signature that they had been tracking just vanished abruptly.

"Stang. Where the hell did they go?" Garm exclaimed.

"Nowhere." Mirri replied, "They're still right there."

"So why can't we see them?" Vay asked, "No ship that small has a cloaking device."

"Don't they teach you anything in secret agent school?" Mirri asked sarcastically, "The reason we can't see the freighter any more is because it just went inside the hangar of a larger vessel."

"The Lucrehulk." Garm said and Mirri nodded.

"The Lucrehulk." she repeated in agreement, "No hold on, I need to do this carefully."

"Do what?" Garm asked.

"Turn us around and accelerate towards that ship without it spotting us." Mirri replied. She then brought the shuttle's engines back on line, but left them at the minimum level of operating power. Next she selectively fired one of the nose mounted thrusters to turn the shuttle towards the suspected position of the Lucrehulk-class ship while keeping the emission hidden from their target. A second thruster firing from the tail halted the rotation while still keeping them undetected, "Now comes the tricky bit." Mirri said, "I need to fire the main drive and that'll be easy for them to spot."

"But I bet you've got a way to prevent them right?" Garm asked.

"No, but I may have a way of making them ignore it." Mirri told him, "You see our current course will take us

between where we think that Lucrehulk is drifting and this system's excuse for a star. Even given the limited energy it outputs it should be enough to mask our engine flare."

"But how long until we get into position?" Vay asked.

"About three hours at this speed." Mirri replied, "Sorry but there's nothing I can do about that."

"It'll just have to do." Garm replied, "In the mean time I suggest we keep an eye out for any more unusual activity."

The trio waited patiently as their shuttle drifted through space, taking turns to watch for any other unusual activity elsewhere in the system. The rota of watches was arranged so that Mirri was on watch when the time came for the shuttle's ion drives to be fired and Garm and Vay hurried into the cockpit when they felt the ship shaking violently as a consequence of the inertial dampeners having been turned down to lower power consumption. They could not be deactivated entirely however, firing the engines after doing this would have crushed the shuttle's occupants against the rear bulkheads.

"How long to intercept?" Garm asked as he and Vay returned to the cockpit.

"About eight minutes." Mirri replied. Then she added, "Look!" and pointed to the sensor display as another heat signature appeared at the location of their target.

"Have they seen us?" Vay asked.

"I don't think so." Mirri said, "That looks like the Ghtroc again. Maybe it's just finished whatever it was doing here and is heading back home."

"But wouldn't it take longer to get the Lucrehulk moving?" Vay asked, "Maybe it's about to run as well."

"That would be preferable." Garm commented, "The other option if they've seen us is that they're about to turn and engage us and without our shields I doubt we'd last long."

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

After just a few minutes of travel a tiny dot appeared on the shuttle's forward optical sensors. Anyone looking at the display for the first time could easily have mistaken it for just another star but given its position it was obvious to those watching the sensor closely what it really was.

"Vessel dead ahead." Mirri said, "Something big if we can see it at this distance."

"Time to intercept?" Garm asked.

"Now three minutes." Mirri replied, "Standing by to bring systems back on line and raise shields if they act like they've seen us."

"I'd offer to take the weapons station." Vay said, "But I don't think our laser cannon would do much against that."

"No." Garm agreed, "If they've seen us we're better off just trying to get out of here as fast as we can."

"Here she comes." Mirri said as they drew closer to the other ship and as it became visible to the unaided eye through the shuttle's forward viewport the magnified image provided by the sensors grew into the unmistakable ring shape of a Lucrehulk-class ship.

"That's it!" Garm exclaimed when he saw this, "Mirri can we angle our transmitter so we don't alert them when we send a signal?"

"Sure." Mirri replied, "But we'll have to send it out towards the Shadow Worlds for a good angle."

"That'll do." Garm said, "Line us up on a garrisoned system and standby to transmit." then he waited for Mirri to nod to indicate that the subspace antenna was properly aligned. Then he activated the transmitter and began his message, "This is ISB Agent Garm Larcus with a message to be relayed urgently to Estran. Target is in system Besh Dorn One-One-Three-Eight. Distance twelve light minutes from centre at angle seventy four galactic. Over and out." and then he shut off the transmitter, "Now we wait." he said.

As it happened they did not have to wait long. In the time it took the mu-class shuttle to drift past the Lucrehulk-class ship without being noticed Garm's signal reached an Imperial garrison in the Shadow Worlds and was promptly relayed back to ISB headquarters on Estran. In turn the co-ordinates were passed on to the navy and an attack line was despatched. Given that the brown dwarf was located so close to Estran it took only a brief amount of time for the attack line to arrive, helped by the fact that the three star destroyers that suddenly dropped out of hyperspace to surround the Lucrehulk-class ship had some of the fastest hyperdrives available.

"Venators." Vay said as she recognised the ships that had just dropped out of hyperspace.

"It's Captain Naje's line." Garm added, knowing that there was only a single line of these Clone Wars vintage ships left in service with the Imperial Navy in the sector. Then he looked at how each of the three star destroyers was acting. Two of them advanced slowly but steadily as the Lucrehulk-class ship started to build up power and opened their massive dorsal hangar doors to disgorge hundreds of TIE fighters. Meanwhile the third star destroyer simply accelerated directly towards the Lucrehulk.

"That one." Garm said, pointing that star destroyer out, "That's Louisa Yay's ship. Take us there."

"How can you tell?" Mirri asked.

"Because she's acting like she wants to ram her ship down the enemy captain's throat." Vay replied, "She doesn't like relying on fighters for attack so we won't need to worry about having to dodge them on our way in."

"Got it." Mirri said, "Powering up engines and activating transponder. I'd hate to get shot down by our own side."

Flashes of turbolaser fire were already crossing the space between the venator-class ships and the lucrehulk that they had surrounded as Mirri veered the shuttle around sharply to fly it towards Captain Yay's ship, the *Falchion*. Just as Yay had said this star destroyer launched no fighters even while it exchanged fire with the lucrehulk-class battleship, now revealed to be one of the armed variants.

"This Imperial shuttle to Falchion requesting permission to dock." Mirri transmitted to the star destroyer and moments later a reply came back.

"Confirmed mu-class shuttle. Approach port side hangar door." and the hangar door on the port side of the star destroyer began to open.

"Hang on." Mirri said, turning the shuttle sharply to match the star destroyer's velocity as she aimed for the open doorway. The shuttle lurched again as it entered the hangar and Mirri brought it to a rapid halt before setting it down on the hangar deck as guided by a crewman waving at her. Then all three of the shuttle's occupants leapt out of their seats and hurried for the access ramp, rushing out into the hangar and up to the crewman who had directed their landing.

"We need to see Captain Yay." Garm said and the crewman nodded.

"She's expecting you on the bridge now sir." he replied, "We'll get your ship shut down and stowed."

"Very good." Garm said, nodding before he, Mirri and Yay rushed towards the nearest turbolift that could take them to the flight control bridge of the *Falchion*.

Captain Yay stood at the front of the bridge watching as the TIE fighters launched by the other two ships in her line engaged the swarm of vulture droids launched by the lucrehulk-class battleship when Garm and the others entered the room.

"Captain torpedoes are locked on." one of her crew announced from his position in the crew pit.

"Hold torpedoes." Yay replied, "Maintain turbolaser fire only."

"But captain their shields are-" the crewman began before Captain Yay suddenly turned and glared at him.
Anger.

Captain Yay had a notoriously bad temper and Yay sensed her reaction all the way across the bridge.

"If you want to give orders then get yourself promoted to captain!" she yelled, "But in the meantime I give the orders and you follow them. If that's too difficult for you to understand then I can simply have you shot for insubordination and find someone else to do your job."

"Yes captain." the crewman replied nervously.

"Captain." Garm said as he walked up to her.

"Agent Larcus." she replied, "Nice work finding this. Now stand back and watch how the navy deals with it."

Then as the lucrehulk grew through the viewports at the front of the bridge Captain Yay raised her hand, "Stand by. Torpedoes on my command." and then after a pause she suddenly lowered her hand, "Now!" she snapped and four proton torpedoes suddenly shot out of the *Falchion's* launch tubes. Fired from a range too short for the lucrehulk-class ship to be able to react in time by trying to shoot down the guided weapons all four slammed into the enemy vessel's hull, passing through the ray shields that were still absorbing the turbolaser fire from the three star destroyers unimpeded before detonating in unison.

The explosions tore a great hole in one of the arms of the battleship, exposing its massive internal hangar to space and as the atmosphere from inside this was blown out into space it carried with it the unsecured contents of the hangar.

"What the hell are those?" Mirri said as she saw what looked like thousands of small spheres spreading out around the now burning battleship.

"Comscan report." Captain Yay ordered.

"Objects are spherical, one quarter metre in diameter." the comscan operator replied. Then he suddenly looked up and Yay sensed his reaction to what his sensors were telling him.

Fear.

"Captain they're buzz droids!" he exclaimed.

"Full reverse!" Captain Yay ordered, "And warn the *Firebrand* and *Ferocious* to stay clear. Maintain fire on the enemy battleship, if we can get that thing to blow then just maybe we can take out all those buzz droids at the same time."

Reversing the thrust of its ion drives, the *Falchion* backed away from the burning battleship while it and the other two vessels in the line maintained their fire. Beside Captain Yay a translucent figure materialised, a hologram of Captain Sayla Naje, the line's senior captain aboard the *Firebrand*.

"Captain Yay, can you tell what's going on over there?" the hologram asked, "The fire's disrupting our readings close in to the battleship."

"That thing's full of buzz droids." Captain Yay answered, "They don't look active but I'm not taking any chances."

"Then neither am I." Captain Naje responded, "I just got this ship back together." the hologram then faded

and there was a flash from one of the *Firebrand's* torpedo launchers as another proton torpedo was fired towards the already crippled battleship, easily avoiding the paltry anti-missile fire directed at it before slamming into the central globe section of the ship.

The battleship then began to spin slowly as its engine output fluctuated too randomly for it to maintain stable flight. Then came another explosion, this time from within the battleship as the fires now raging out of control spread as far as the fuel reserves intended for the vulture droids it carried, starting a chain reaction that spread to the main reactor and what remained of the battleship vanished in a brilliant flash that caused everyone watching to flinch and shield their eyes even as the viewports automatically darkened to protect them.

"Damn." Captain Yay muttered as she uncovered her eyes and looked at the expanding cloud of debris, "Sayla gets the kill." then she looked towards the comscan station, "What's the situation with those buzz droids?" she demanded.

"I'm not reading any intact captain." a comscan operator replied.

"Well keep backing us away anyway." Captain Yay ordered, "No sense having to clear any of those things off our hull now that this is over."

"It's not over yet captain." Garm then told her and she frowned as she turned to him, pointing an arm out of the viewport.

"It looks pretty done with to me." she said.

"The freighter." Yay said and Garm nodded.

"What freighter?" Captain Yay asked.

"There was a Ghtroc seven twenty that rendezvoused with the *Lucrehulk* before you arrived captain." Mirri explained, "But it jumped into hyperspace and escaped."

"And considering that we saw all those buzz droids come pouring out of that hold it's a fair bet that the freighter had a hold full of them as well."

"How many can one freighter hold?" Captain Yay asked.

"Thousands if they're packed in right." Garm said and at the same time Mirri slipped a datapad from her flight suit and tapped in some numbers.

"A Ghtroc seven-twenty has a cargo capacity of one hundred and thirty-five tonnes in its standard configuration." she said, "So at four kilograms per buzz droid that makes thirty-three thousand seven hundred and fifty in one shipment."

"How many?" Captain Yay exclaimed.

"Thirty-three-" Yay began.

"I know!" Captain Yay snapped.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this captain." Garm said and Captain Yay looked at directly at him.

"No poodoo." she replied.

5.

The captains of the *Firebrand* and *Ferocious* joined Captain Yay and her three guests in holographic form around the tactical planning station at the rear of the *Falchion's* bridge.

"Unfortunately we have only passive scans of the freighter." Mirri explained, Garm having ceded the duty of explaining the situation to the individual out of the three witnesses to the freighter's arrival and departure with the greatest knowledge of starship operations, "These have given us a profile on the ship but position and heading are somewhat vague when compared to an active sensor lock."

"There was no transponder?" Captain Jayan Celtis of the *Ferocious* asked and Mirri shook her head.

"No, none." she replied, "Even out here they were worried about that."

"Probably worried about pirates lurking in the system." Captain Celtis commented.

"You must still have a general idea of where it was heading though, lieutenant." Captain Naje added.

"I've been able to put together a list of possible destinations based off the tolerance of the scans." Mirri replied, nodding and she brought up a partial star map of the sector, "We're here." she said, pointing to the brown dwarf system at the edge of the Heart, "And even just based on passive thermal imaging it was easy to see that the freighter headed off in this direction." and then she moved her hand across the display towards the Trade Corridor, "Now if they carried on going right the way across the Trade Corridor then they'd enter the Mining Belt here and that would put them within reach of Drayus, Fort Verran, Hayatan and THX-One-One-Three-Eight."

"And if they stop in the Trade Corridor instead?" Captain Yay asked and Mirri sighed.

"Then unless they perform a secondary jump there are only two possible destinations." she said, "One is Lusorn right here."

"And the other?" Garm asked.

"You know what she's going to say Garm." Vay commented.

"Estran." Mirri said.

"There, I knew it." Vay added.

"Well how much of a head start do they have on us?" Captain Naje's hologram asked.

"They left several minutes before we were able to send for you." Garm answered, "So given the top speed of a Ghtroc they're probably already in the Estran system somewhere."

"Possibly already on the surface." Mirri added.

"Stang." Captain Naje hissed, "Okay we call this in. Maybe Fleet Admiral Vretan can get the planetary shield raised in time to stop that ship from landing."

"More than thirty thousand buzz droids could still make a mess of whatever ships get caught outside the shield." Captain Celtis commented.

"I know. But the damage will be orders of magnitude worse if they get to the surface. We'll scramble everything we've got as soon as we get back to Estran and check out every last ship there if we have to. Now have your navigators set course for Estran and standby to jump to hyperspace."

When the three star destroyers dropped back out of hyperspace in the Estran system they found it crowded with ships and it appeared that everyone of them was broadcasting their anger to anyone who listen.

"Captain Yay, there's a transmission coming in from the *Horrific*." one of the comscan operators told the captain, "Admiral Hall demands that you speak with him now."

The *Horrific* was a tector-class star destroyer, similar to the more common Imperial-class but lacking any hangar bays and it served as the command ship of the squadron that Captain Naje's line was part of.

Upon hearing the admiral's name Mirri leant closer to Garm and Vay so she could whisper without being overheard by the nearby Captain Yay.

"Isn't he the one she wound up in bed with?" she asked, referring to an incident where a rebel team that included Garm's own father had drugged not only the admiral but also Captains Naje, Celtis and Yay as a means of infiltrating fleet headquarters. To add to this insult when they had dumped their helpless victims in their quarters they had chosen to leave Captain Yay in the admiral's bed with him.

Anger.

Unfortunately Captain Yay had been close enough to hear the comment as she headed towards the tactical station at the rear of the bridge and Vay sensed her reaction as she glared at Mirri.

"Agent Larcus, Agent Udra," Captain Yay said, "I think you should come and speak to the admiral as well. We won't need the lieutenant though. She can stay here or leave the bridge as she wishes."

"After you captain." Garm replied, allowing Captain Yay to lead the way to the tactical station. Once here they were joined by the holographic forms of Captains Naje and Celtis once more along with that of a human male who stood stiffly as his image looked at the others present.

"Well thanks to you failing to deal with those Separatists properly we're in a right mess now." Admiral Hall announced. A traditional Imperial officer and COMPNOR member, Admiral Hall was well known for his belief that the military was no place for women and at best tolerated the three female captains who served in his squadron.

"To be fair admiral my ship's didn't-" Captain Naje began.

"I don't care about excuses captain." the admiral interrupted, "The *Horrific* was outside the shield when Moff Horatian ordered it raised and now I'm responsible for organising the search for this Ghtroc of yours. Now since my ship has no hangars I'm going to need you to deploy your fighter wings to sort through all of these ships for our target."

Captain Celtis's hologram smiled. As a former fighter pilot who had been forced to accept a position aboard a capital ship instead because of injury, she still retained her preference for fighter operations even it meant directing them from her bridge.

"I've already got customs ships going through them," Admiral Hall went on, "but frankly they're no good to anyone. I need professional military pilots."

Anger.

Vay sensed another flash of emotion at that point. Not only from Captain Yay but also from the other two female captains who both recognised the subtle insult from the admiral. His reference to 'professional pilots' specifically referred to the pilots of the fighters carried by the star destroyers rather than their captains who he did not consider to professional because of their gender.

"Now get your pilots to their ships and I'll have my comscan personnel transmit the search pattern they are to follow." Admiral Hall said and Captain Celtis scowled as she realised that although her fighters would be taking part in the search she and the other captains would be reduced to nothing but spectators while the admiral took the credit for finding the freighter.

"You've replaced you comscan officer then?" Captain Celtis asked and Admiral Hall snarled. The senior comscan officer aboard his ship for several years had recently been revealed as a rebel spy who helped the rebels that had drugged the admiral and the three captains to escape. The two incidents coming so soon after one another had reflected very poorly on the admiral and rival officers had raised questions about his competence.

"Just get those fighters launched." he replied before his hologram faded away.

Captain Naje sighed.

"You heard the admiral." she told her subordinate captains, "Launch all ships and tell them to prepare to receive orders from the *Horrific*."

Even given that some of the fighters wings carried by the *Ferocious* and *Firebrand* had sustained losses against the vulture droids the three star destroyers could still muster almost a thousand fighters and bombers from the wings that they carried and Vay watched as these swarmed out of the three star destroyers' hangars before heading towards Estran where the thousands of ships of various types and sizes that had been caught outside the planetary shield were still waiting. They were also growing in number as even more vessels arrived only to find that the sector capital was cut off.

Think Vay. What's wrong with this?

Lara's sudden intervention surprised Vay. The spirit had remained quiet since Vay had left Director Helieos's office and she had been hoping that this situation would continue.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Vay muttered.

Come on think. You're flying a shipload of dangerous droids somewhere and your way is suddenly blocked by a planetary shield. Do you hang around and wait for the warships searching for you to find you?

"Of course not." Vay said.

So what do you do?

"Find somewhere to hide my cargo and dump it." Vay replied.

Exactly.

"What are you doing?" Captain Yay said and Vay turned to see the captain staring at her.

"What?" Vay replied.

"You're talking to yourself." Captain Yay said, "If you're bringing imaginary friends onto my ship you can damn well keep them off my bridge."

"Garm!" Vay called out across the bridge and she hurried to where he and Mirri were stood observing the search on a large monitor towards the rear of the bridge.

"What's wrong?" Garm asked as Captain Yay followed Vay, curious to discover what was the matter with her.

"Admiral Hall is searching in the wrong place." Vay exclaimed and she pointed at the display, "Look, all of the fighters are sweeping the orbital control zone of Estran itself. But the pilot of the Ghtroc must have realised pretty quickly that he was being hunted and he would have moved out of the obvious search zone."

"But that's only a temporary solution." Mirri pointed out, "Sooner or later the search zone will be expanded and he'll be found."

"By which time he'll have dumped his cargo somewhere we can't see it and he'll let himself be found so that his ship will be cleared." Vay said.

"Stang." Garm said, "She's right. Unless the Separatists are in a big hurry then they can wait for the fuss to die down and go and retrieve their cargo whenever they want."

"So where would they go?" Captain Yay asked.

"Show me the system." Vay told a nearby crewman and as she walked over to the tactical station he activated a holographic map of the system that showed all of the planets in their current relative positions and highlighted Estran itself. Vay began to study this, focusing on the outer gas giants and frozen worlds rather than the rocky inner planets, "Show me the position of the *Horrific* when the shield first went up." she added.

"I'll just have to check that with the *Horrific*." the crewman replied and there was a short delay before a triangle representing the admiral's star destroyer appeared within the hologram.

"There." Vay exclaimed, pointing to the only gas giant that could be reached from Estran without flying past the *Horrific*, "The Separatist ship is there."

"The admiral will never send fighters there until he's finished his search." Captain Yay said, "And I doubt that he'll just sit idly by while I take the *Falchion* there either."

"But our shuttle is still in your hangar." Mirri pointed out, "It's sensors are good enough to sweep the region around that planet and we can call for help if we run into trouble."

"She's right captain." Garm added, "We're not part of your crew."

"Go." Captain Yay replied.

6.

The mu-class shuttle performed a micro-jump through hyperspace as soon as it was far enough away from the *Falchion* for its hyperdrive to function without interference from the star destroyer's own considerable mass. This time the trio of Imperial agents were unconcerned about being seen by the Ghtroc freighter and Mirri immediately began to perform active sensor sweeps of the gas giant ahead of them.

"I'm picking something up in the rings," she said, "Looks like a metallic mass."

"There aren't any prospectors out here that I know of," Garm said.

"No, there's nothing here worth mining," Mirri agreed, "It could be our Ghtroc."

"Then take us in," Garm said and he looked at Vay, "Perhaps you should stand by on the laser cannons," he suggested and she nodded, reaching out to the console in front of her to activate the shuttle's twin laser cannons as Mirri steered the ship towards one of the rings surrounding the planet.

All of a sudden there was a flash of light from within the ring of ice and a Ghtroc-720 burst out of the ring, angling towards the shuttle. Vay's Force-enhanced reflexes allowed her to react quickly and without waiting for an order from Garm she opened fire, sending a stream of energy blasts towards the light freighter that tore through its hull. The damage was confined to the freighter's cargo hold, however and it continued on its course towards the shuttle and returned fire.

"Look out!" Garm snapped.

"I'm on it," Mirri responded, banking sharply to avoid the enemy fire and the freighter itself shot past them, "Vay get ready, I'm going to bring us around," and then she performed another tight turn with the shuttle that left them in the freighter's rear arc, "Now!" Mirri exclaimed and Vay fired again. This time her strike hit the freighter's ion drive directly and the entire ship was thrown into an uncontrolled spin as its sublight engines exploded, tearing apart the rear section. But Vay was not done yet and she fired again, hitting the cockpit module at the front of the freighter and blowing it clean off.

"I think I got him," she said, smiling as she looked at Garm.

"Don't get cocky," he replied, "Didn't you notice anything about that first hit you scored?"

"No. Should I?" Vay asked.

"You hit the cargo hold," Garm pointed out, "So why didn't buzz droids come spilling out like when the *Lucrehulk* was hit?"

"Err, I'm still reading metallic mass in the rings below us," Mirri added. The combat manoeuvres had taken the shuttle closer to the rings than it had been before and now the lumps of ice orbiting the gas giant were less than fifty metres away.

"Where?" Garm asked.

"All around us," Mirri replied and then through the cockpit viewport the three agents saw hundreds of small metal spheres start to rise up out of the ring.

"Get us out of here!" Garm exclaimed but it was too late and there were numerous bangs as buzz droids clamped themselves to the shuttle. This was followed by the tapping of metal feet as they started to spread out in search of systems to sabotage.

"*Falchion* this is shuttle *Tyrell*," Mirri transmitted urgently, "our ship is-" but before she could continue there was a sudden flash from the console as one of the buzz droids severed the communications antenna and sent a power surge into the system. This was then followed shortly after by an alarm and the sound of escaping air.

"The hull's breached!" Vay exclaimed.

"Vacuum suits," Mirri responded, "It's our only hope."

The three Imperial agents then rushed to the lockers where the shuttle's supply of vacuum suits was kept and began hurriedly stripping off their uniforms. Fortunately the suits stored in the lockers maintained internal pressure by gripping the wearer tightly rather than simply acting as a pressurised bag of air. Though this second type was generally more comfortable for longer use they could only be pressurised to a fraction of normal air pressure to prevent the suits from over inflating in the vacuum of space and immobilising the wearer. Such low pressure required significant preparation by pre-breathing pure oxygen and this sort of time was not available.

Danger.

Vay sensed a tremor in the Force and whirled around just as she pulled up the zipper on the front of her suit and saw a buzz droid scuttling across the floor.

"Look out!" she yelled and she reached out through the Force to where she had set down the equipment belt that included her lightsaber and summoned the weapon to her grip. There was a 'snap-hiss' as the blade ignited and she lunged forwards to impale the droid, causing it to explode in a shower of sparks.

"Vay get your helmet on," Garm told her as he and Mirri were sealing theirs over their head, "We'll cover

you.”

Deactivating her lightsaber, Vay hurried to the locker and grabbed hold of the helmet and life support pack for her suit while Garm and Mirri both recovered their blasters. This was just in time for there to be the brief sound of breaking transparisteel as more buzz droids attacked the cockpit canopy and it exploded under the pressure of the remaining internal atmosphere. As what air remained rushed out of the shuttle Vay exhaled to prevent her lungs from bursting before she could get her helmet in place. Only then did she gasp for breath once more.

“They’re coming in.” Garm said as he turned towards the cockpit and saw the buzz droids now starting to gather around its ruined canopy and crawl inside. He fired his blaster repeatedly, firing once at each buzz droid he saw in the hope that as they saw their comrades being destroyed the self-preservation routines of the others would kick in and they would back off in search of an alternate way in.

“This way as well.” Mirri added as more buzz droids started advancing from the rear of the shuttle where they had made their first breach and she too began to fire at anything that moved.

At the same time Vay completed putting on her suit and she reactivated her lightsaber.

“Get close to me.” she said, “I’ll deal with any that get too close.”

“if they get that close it’s going to take more than just one laser sword to deal with them.” Mirri replied, “We need a way off this ship fast.”

“Outside.” Garm said as he shot another buzz droid, “It’ll buy us more time and we’ll be better able to see them coming.”

“But we’re cut off from the hatch.” Mirri pointed out.

“You don’t need a hatch.” Vay responded, “You’ve got me.” and then she pointed her lightsaber straight down and plunged it into the deck. Almost without effort she moved her lightsaber in a circle, cutting a hole large enough for all of them to climb through into space outside.

But there were even more buzz droids out here than there were in the shuttle and Garm and Mirri began firing as fast as they could, hitting buzz droids with each shot without seeming to make a dent in their numbers.

“I’ve got a very bad feeling about this.” Mirri said.

“Perhaps you’d prefer it back in the shuttle.” Garm responded but Mirri ignored him, instead ejecting the spent power cell from her blaster and slamming in another.

“My only spare.” she said.

Just then there was a brilliant flash of light that illuminated a large part of the sky and away from the nearby gas giant the three venator-class star destroyers of Captain Naje’s line suddenly dropped out of hyperspace.

“Agent Larcus do you read me?” Captain Naje’s voice asked over his suit’s built in comlink and Garm smiled.

“Right here Captain.” he replied, “I don’t suppose you could send someone to pick us up could you?”

“Quickly.” Vay added.

“Sorry but no.” Captain Naje replied, “I can’t risk exposing any of my ships to those buzz droids crawling all over what’s left of your shuttle.”

“Then what are we supposed to do?” Mirri asked.

“Turn everything off.” Captain Naje answered, “And I mean absolutely everything. Get rid on anything electronic you have on you now.”

“But-” Mirri began.

“Do it.” Garm interrupted, “I know what she’s got planned.” and he let go of his blaster, allowing it to drift away before reaching for his suit controls and shutting down all of its electronic systems.

Mirri and Vay copied him and were just in time as there was another massive flash of light in space just in front of the three venator-class ships as the *Horrific* itself arrived. Seeing this, Garm reached out and grabbed hold of Vay’s hand, squeezing it tightly as the massive star destroyer opened fire towards them. But the flashes of weapons fire were not the green of modern Imperial turbolasers but the brilliant white of ion cannons as Admiral Hall directed his gunners to saturate the volume of space around the ruined shuttle with the technology disrupting energy blasts. All around the three Imperial agents standing on the hull of the shuttle they saw lightning arcing across it with each hit and where this struck the buzz droids they shuddered violently as if having a fit before bursting briefly into flames and exploding. Even with all of their suits’ systems deactivated, the ion blasts themselves had sufficient energy to pierce the insulating material and supply a charge to the circuitry that burned out numerous components and filled the inside of the suits with the acrid smell of burned electronics.

But the barrage did not end with the shuttle and once it had been cleared of buzz droids the *Horrific* began firing on the rings around the gas giant, clearing them of the remaining droids still lurking there and only once every last one was destroyed did the barrage stop.

A shuttle from the *Ferocious* took the three agents back to Captain Celtis’s vessel where she met them in the hangar bay.

“I take it you picked up our signal captain.” Garm said, smiling and Captain Celtis smiled back.

"Louisa told us what you'd done as soon as we picked up your shuttle leaving her ship." she replied, "Then when we picked up what sounded like half a distress signal even Admiral Hall agreed that we ought to come and rescue you. I take it that the freighter has been dealt with?"

"Destroyed." Vay told her and she smiled too.

"Unfortunately." Garm added, "With that freighter gone I don't see how we're going to find out who on Estran sent it to rendezvous with the lucrehulk."

The rakata emerged from behind a hidden door into a luxuriously decorated office where a lone human male sat.

"Mister Harbour, the battleship does not respond to efforts to communicate with it." Horsa, high priest of the Church of Infinity said.

"And neither does the freighter I sent to collect the first shipment of buzz droids." Darall Harber replied and he leant back in his chair, "And since the planetary shield has been dropped I can only assume that it has been destroyed. I'm guessing that the battleship was as well. Perhaps the Empire isn't in quite such disarray after all."

"Perhaps not." Horsa said, "But we have proven that it is possible for our warships to break through their blockade and thanks to the star forge we can produce as many of them as we require."