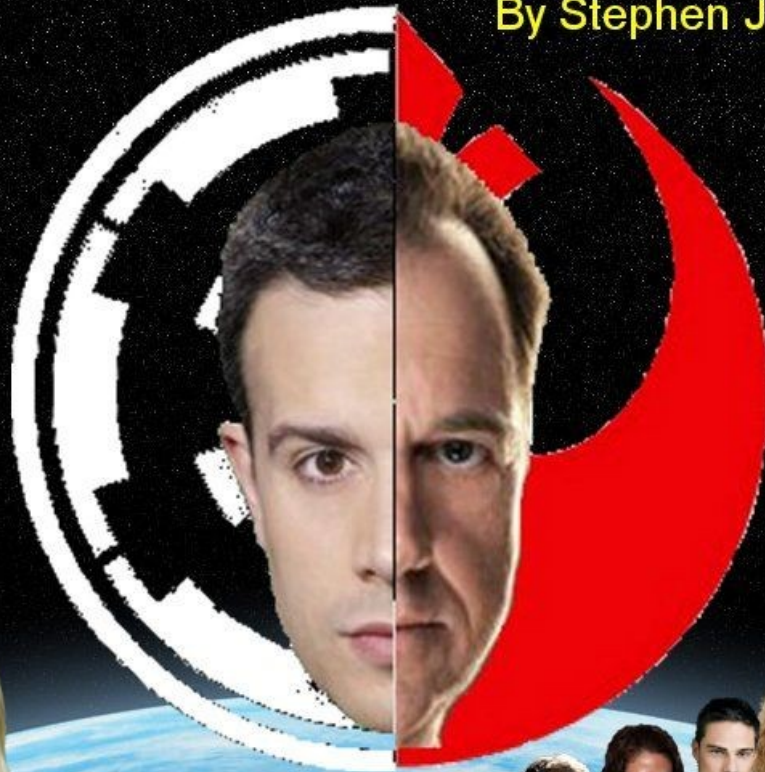


STAR WARS

7-12: A Change in Leadership

By Stephen J Dutton



7-12
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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...

A CHANGE IN LEADERSHIP

THE DISCOVERY OF THE FLIGHT RECORDER FROM THE FREIGHTER USED IN THE ATTEMPT TO SMUGGLE BUZZ DROIDS TO ESTRAN OPENS UP NEW LEADS FOR THE EMPIRE IN DEALING WITH THE THREAT. BUT NOT ALL THREATS ARE AS OBVIOUS...

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

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1.

The sprint-class rescue craft rounded the primary gas giant of the Estran system. Since the destruction of the second death star and the deaths of both Emperor Palpatine and Darth Vader the sector's Imperial authorities had begun to militarise every aspect of Imperial service, including the Space Rescue Corps. This was not to say that the vessel had been outfitted as a combat craft but now most of the missions it flew had some military purpose to them. This included the mission that the rescue craft was now returning from. It had been deployed to the outer edge of the Estran system to participate in a war game that was intended to simulate an attack on the sector capital by the rebellion. The roles of three major rebel vessels had been played by three old venator-class star destroyers while the sprint-class ship had been used as one of their support ships. The war game had not lasted long for the rescue craft though, it had been declared destroyed just a few minutes into the battle and its crew instructed to return to Estran.

"What are we still out here for?" the ship's comscan operator asked as he looked up through the large forwards viewport and saw the gas giant ahead.

"There's something I've been wanting to check out." the commanding officer, Lieutenant Mirri Cordall replied, "Scan for debris in the rings."

"This is it isn't it?" her first officer asked, "This is where you almost got ripped apart by those buzz droids."

"The very place." Mirri said.

"Buzz droids?" the comscan operator exclaimed at the mention of the tiny droids that had been used in massive numbers by the Confederate forces during the Clone Wars. Deployed in swarms, usually from specially designed missiles the droids were designed to tear starships apart, "No-one said anything about hunting buzz droids."

"Don't worry crewman." Mirri said, "They were all destroyed, you have my word. Admiral Hall pounded the entire area with ion cannon blasts to short them all out."

"So what are you looking for?" the first officer asked.

"The freighter that brought the droids here." Mirri said, "It was destroyed but there's a chance that there could still be pieces of it orbiting the planet."

"So you're after a souvenir?" the first officer responded and Mirri smiled.

"Of a sort." she said, "I want the flight recorder."

"You think it survived?" the first officer said.

"Perhaps." Mirri said, "But it can't hurt to take a quick look. No-one will notice if we're a bit late getting back so long as we're at Estran before the navy's done pretending to blow up rebels."

Then there came a bleeping sound from the comscan station.

"Metallic mass ahead." the operator said, "Plus some elevated radioactivity. Nothing dangerous, a suit will keep it all out."

"Can you identify it?" the first officer said as he and Mirri both looked at the comscan operator.

"From the mass I'd say it was a light freighter or similar sized vessel. Could be a scout ship."

"This is it." Mirri said, "It's either the freighter or the shuttle that we followed it here in."

"I've got an image of something." the comscan operator added and he transferred the visual image he had picked up onto the cockpit's main display screen.

"That's it. A Ghtroc seven-twenty." Mirri said excitedly. Then she looked at her first officer, "Take the controls. I'm going out there for a look."

The sector's Imperial capital building on Estran was a hive of activity when Mirri arrived and security was far tighter than normal, meaning that even for an officer of the SRC to get inside there was a considerable delay. This was made even worse by the fact that she was carrying with her a battered starship data recorder that the staff at every checkpoint wanted an explanation of what it was and how it worked. But after almost an hour of standing in line just to answer the same questions from six different people she was finally cleared to enter the section of the building where the Imperial Security Bureau had its offices. However, even here she was stopped just as she was exiting the turbolift.

"Name." the ISB agent said simply while two others stood close by with blasters in their hands.

"Mirri Cordall. Lieutenant, Imperial Space Rescue Corps." she answered.

"Purpose of visit?"

"I'm here to see Agents Garm Larcus and Vay Udra."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but I have important evidence for them relating to an investigation." Mirri said and she held up the flight recorder, "And don't ask what it is. I've already had to explain it to six idiots today."

The agent scowled.

"It's not wise to-" he began.

"Garm works directly with Director Helieos doesn't he?" Mirri interrupted, "I suppose I could always just send a message via the SRC's unencrypted system to Garm that the reason he didn't receive this vital evidence was down to you."

The agent continued to scowl but he waved her on.

"Move along." he told her, stepping out of her way, "Agent Larcus's office is-"

"Thanks, I know the way." Mirri said as she walked past the guards and headed for the office that Garm and Vay shared.

"Come in." Garm called out from inside his office when he heard the intercom by the door sound and Mirri opened the door to enter the office. Garm Larcus sat behind his desk, gazing at the monitor of his computer terminal and repeatedly squeezing a small rubber ball in one hand. Meanwhile his partner both professionally and romantically was sat on the floor with her legs crossed and her eyes closed.

"Is she going to start floating?" Mirri asked as she looked down at the blonde woman on the floor.

"I ask myself that question sometimes." Garm replied, smiling back at Mirri, "But so far no. She hasn't taken off yet."

"Pity. That would be worth watching." Mirri said and she closed the door behind her before walking over to the desk and putting the flight recorder down on it.

"What's that?" Garm asked.

"The flight recorder from that freighter that was used to smuggle thirty thousand buzz droids to the system." Mirri answered.

"Thirty-three thousand seven hundred and fifty." Vay said, opening her eyes and getting to her feet to take a look at the battered flight recorder, "How did you get this?"

"I had the opportunity to take my ship to where you shot down the freighter. It was still in the rings. If Admiral Hall hadn't been in such a hurry for his ships to leave when we were there then they probably could have found it easily."

"Have you examined it?" Garm asked and Mirri smiled.

"Of course. The SRC has everything we need to pull data even from a unit as badly damaged as this. As well as the explosion that destroyed the freighter, it was caught up in the ion barrage. But I managed to recover more than ninety percent of what was on it."

"So what did you find?" Vay said.

"Oh the usual stuff. Registration details and navigation logs, not that they were very helpful. We already know where the ship's been and the registration turned out to be under a false name. But what I did find was a record of ship to shore communications made while in the system. Starting the moment that the freighter dropped out of hyperspace. Problem is-"

"Problem is that the SRC doesn't have access to the planetary communication records." Garm interrupted.

"Unlike the ISB." Vay added, "Who can access whatever records we want."

"Exactly. Here's the data." Mirri said and she handed a mem-stick to Garm who took it and plugged it into his computer.

"Okay, let's take a look." he said as he studied the list of communications sent by the freighter, "Hmm, that's odd."

"What's wrong?" Vay asked.

"There are multiple transmissions received from the same comm address but routed via different communication nodes on the surface. All of them in and around the capital but definitely different." Garm answered.

"So what does that mean? Are they scrambling their location?" Mirri said.

"I don't think so." Garm replied, "I think that the answer is more mundane than that. We're looking for a mobile communications device. Not handheld though, I think it's vehicle mounted."

"Traffic cameras." Vay said excitedly and she sat down at the second terminal on the opposite side of the desk, "Copy me the times and locations and I'll pull the camera footage from the relevant areas."

"Then run a pattern recognition search for the registration plates." Garm said, "We find the vehicle and we find the person who was planning to bring those buzz droids to Estran."

"What if that's falsely registered as well?" Mirri asked.

"Then hopefully we can still locate the vehicle itself." Garm replied, "Even if we don't find the owner with it there may be other physical evidence for us to examine."

"Okay here it is." Vay said, "One registration plate detected in all those areas at the specified times. Running it through the registration -"

"What's wrong?" Garm asked when Vay suddenly stopped speaking.

"Oh no." she said, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"About what?" Mirri said, "What have you found?"

"This." Vay said and she turned her monitor around so that both Garm and Mirri could see what she had found.

“Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this.” Garm said.

2.

Garm, Vay and Mirri were shown into the office of Director Helieos, the most senior ISB agent in the sector. "Agent Larcus." the director said, looking up from his desk, "You said this was important?"

"Very sir." Garm replied, "Thanks to Lieutenant Cordall we have uncovered the identity of the people who were behind the attempt to attack Estran with buzz droids."

"That's excellent." the director replied.

"You may want to wait until you've heard who's behind it." Vay commented as Garm handed Director Helieos a datapad. He took the device and looked at the screen and as soon as he saw what was shown on it his face fell.

"It all fits sir." Garm said, "We've encountered their members on several occasions but there was never anything to suggest that the organisation itself was behind their actions."

"But Greyan Dassall was a member." Vay said, referring to the former deputy head of the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order or COMPNOR.

"Wait," Mirri said, puzzled, "wasn't he assassinated by the rebellion?"

"Not quite." Director Helieos said, "He was covertly executed for treason." then he looked at Garm, "So you think the Church of Infinity has been acting to undermine the Empire in this sector by working with the Separatist hold outs hiding in the nebula?" he asked.

"I do sir. In fact I think that they may have been plotting something for a very long time." Garm replied.

"Oh and what makes you say that Agent Larcus?" the director asked.

"Their name." Vay replied before Garm could, "The Church of Infinity? As in the Infinite Empire? The church's slavers we encountered in the nebula were working for rakata. We think that the rakata founded the church to start with."

Director Helieos frowned.

"But the Church of Infinity has existed since the sector was first settled more than four thousand years ago." he said.

"Yes sir." Garm agreed, "And I think that they're now acting as agents for the separatists that have been holed up in the nebula since the Clone Wars. I wouldn't be surprised if the reverses that the Republic forces suffered here during the war were down to sabotage by members of the church."

"But now we have an opportunity to take matters into our own hands sir." Garm said, "If the church is working with the separatists then it stands to reason that they know where the separatists are based."

"And with that information the fleet can wipe them out." the director said. Then he looked back at the datapad.

"This needs to be kept quiet sir." Garm said, "There are church members working in this building and we don't know whether they are loyal to us or their own leadership."

"Of course." Director Helieos said and he got to his feet, "Agent Larcus I am ordering you to assemble an assault force. You will take this to the main temple of the Church of Infinity and secure the site. Anyone present is to be treated as a traitor and detained for interrogation. Meanwhile, I will take steps to remove all church members from sensitive positions here."

"And if they resist?" Garm asked.

"Then the use of lethal force is perfectly acceptable." the director said.

To prevent word of the raid getting out Garm decided to make use of COMPNOR's own COMPForce assault troops. Their training program instilled in them a fanatical loyalty to the Empire that was rivalled only by the legions of stormtroopers. However, to use these latter troops would have required going through a bureaucracy that under the current circumstances could not be considered secure whereas since the ISB was also a branch of COMPNOR obtaining the services of COMPForce could be achieved simply by approaching the commanding officer of the company he intended to use.

Garm did not particularly like Major Kramm or his deputy Captain Layne but he had worked with them before and knew that their men were more than capable of undertaking the mission required of them. The force assembled in one of the capital building's internal vehicle hangars, embarking on unmarked repulsortrucks. It was not anticipated that the occupants of the Church of Infinity's headquarters would be prepared for the assault and so the unarmoured but anonymous transports would be used to get the troops to their target without drawing any unnecessary attention to themselves.

This has happened before. It didn't work out very well.

Vay shuddered when she heard the voice in her head. The message originated from within the Force itself and came from the spirit of a long dead ancestor of hers, Lara Udra, who had once been a jedi. Now she was attempting to convince Vay to abandon her loyalty to the Empire and follow the jedi path instead.

"Come on Vay, ours is the last transport." Garm said to her and Vay nodded before climbing aboard the repulsortruck that then shuddered as its driver started its engine.

The transports moved in a single column, heading towards the primary temple of the Church of Infinity. Though outwardly normal looking the vehicles had been modified internally to include devices that would override local traffic signals, ensuring that the column did not become split up if signals changed while only some of them had passed. On their final approach to the temple the transports did split up however, making sure that when they came to a halt to deploy the troops they carried the entire building was surrounded. The transport carrying Garm, Vay and the command staff of the COMPForce company pulled up right in front of the main entrance to the temple and as Garm leapt out and started to climb the steps towards the large front doors he saw the look of surprise on the faces of the two robed church officials standing beside them. "A service is in progress. You may not enter." one of them called out as Garm was joined by Vay and several armoured COMPForce troopers, including Major Kramm and Captain Layne.

"Oh yes we can." Garm replied but the two officials moved to block the doorway. This turned out to be a mistake on their part as Major Kramm darted past Garm and swung the butt of his blaster rifle into the face of one of them, knocking him flat. The second official gasped as his colleague collapsed with blood pouring from his face and jumped back as the major turned towards him as well.

"Secure them both." he ordered the nearest of his men before turning toward Garm, "After you Agent Larcus." he said and Garm smiled back at him and proceeded inside the temple. After passing through a small reception chamber he reached the main temple itself. This was not the first time that Garm had been here and he instantly recognised the rows of pews facing the pulpit at the far end as well as the large hologram of the infinity symbol that floated above the seating area and rotated slowly. But this was the first time that he had witnessed a service in progress and he could see the public face of the church, a man called Darall Harber, standing in front of the pulpit speaking with several members of the congregation who had been brought forwards out of their seats. It had been Darall's church registered vehicle that had been the one carrying the communications device that had enabled Garm and Vay to connect the church with the buzz droids and Garm was glad to see that he was going to be caught in the raid.

"Imperial Security Bureau!" Garm yelled at the top of his voice, "This building is surrounded and everyone here is under arrest."

Almost in unison the entire congregation turned towards Garm and there were looks of surprise on many faces when they saw the armed and armoured team that had just burst into the temple.

"This is outrageous!" Darall responded, breaking off from his sermon and striding towards the unexpected new arrivals, "I will have you know that-"

"Stay back!" Garm snapped as he noticed a ceremonial knife under the priest's robes and he aimed his blaster towards Darall's chest. Major Kramm and Captain Layne also raised their weapons, aiming them into the crowd of shocked looking worshippers just in case any of them were considering any surprises. Meanwhile Vay studied the temple chamber closely and she noticed a hooded figure at the far end as it slowly moved towards a side door.

Fear.

Vay could sense the unease from all around her but this individual seemed more afraid than any of the others in the temple.

"Stop right there!" she shouted, drawing her blaster just as the figure was about to reach the door it was heading for and she fired a single shot that hit the wall between the figure and the door, prompting screams from within the congregation. The figure came to an immediate halt and turned towards Vay, raising its hands. Then Vay hurried forwards, pushing past Darall and the members of the congregation who were gathered at the front of the temple until she reached the hooded figure and grabbed hold of it by the arm. But as she did so the figure turned its head away from her.

Now why do you suppose he's so keen to keep his face hidden?

"Good point." Vay said in response to Lara's question and letting go of the figure's arm she reached out and pulled down the hood that hid its features.

This produced another round of gasps and exclamations of alarm from the members of the congregation finally saw the face of the high priest who attended their sermons but never spoke, instead leaving Darall to be his intermediary. What the entirely human congregation of this temple had never suspected was that their high priest was an alien.

"There's the face of your god." Garm called out, "I'm sure some of you must have heard of the rakata before now. Well it turns out your families have been worshipping in one of their temples for thousands of years."

"Impossible!" someone called out.

"Heresy!"

"Blasphemy!"

"Doesn't look much like a god to me." Major Kramm commented, loud enough that those close to him could hear, "I'd say someone's been a very naughty boy."

"Major I want your men to secure everyone here and process them." Garm said, "Now that we've secured

their leaders we don't need to worry about word leaking out. We'll have the police organise a search of everyone's homes while we find out what they've got hidden around here.

While the congregation were being removed by the COMPForce troops, Darall and the rakata were bound and held in the temple while Garm and Vay began to explore beyond the public areas. They soon found their way to a luxuriously decorated office that was obviously used by Darall for the running of the church. A computer terminal sat on the desk and Garm headed straight for it.

"Encrypted." he said when it failed to activate properly, instead presenting him with a security screen requesting authorisation.

"A password?" Vay asked.

"I can't tell." Garm replied, "But I know who can tell us." and he took out his comlink, "Major Kramm, could we have Mister Harber and his alien friend in here please?"

"Right away Agent Larcus." Kramm replied and in under a minute both Darall and the rakata were brought into the office.

"Thank you major." Garm said and then he looked at Darall, "We need to access your computer." he said, "I'm hoping that you'll see sense and tell us how."

"We have friends in high places Agent Larcus." Darall replied, "You'll never get away with this outrage."

"Outrage?" Vay asked, "You mean like harbouring an unregistered alien? I'm guessing that your pet doesn't have the appropriate documents to be resident here."

"Besides which," Garm added, "I wouldn't put any more faith in your friends than in whatever it is your worship here Mister Harber. As we speak Director Helieos is overseeing a purge of all your members from the Imperial government. It doesn't matter how much they know about what you're really up to here, all of them are suspect now and suspicion is all he needs to act."

"You underestimate us human." the rakata said, finally breaking his silence, "Your Empire is meaningless. Ours is infinite."

"Yours is dead." Vay said, "A forgotten relic to all but a handful of historians."

And good riddance too. Their empire was built around the Dark Side. Kind of like yours actually.

Vay frowned briefly.

"Well if that is going to be your attitude Mister Harber then I suppose there is nothing more for us to discuss."

Garm said, "Though I doubt the interrogation branch will see it that way. Now I'm not certain that they have any droids that are programmed to monitor the responses of a rakata well enough to determine whether or not they are telling the truth but I know for a fact that they have plenty that will work on you. So I guess that how long it takes me to gain access to this computer comes down to how long it takes for a mind probe to break down your resistance.

"No!" Darall exclaimed, "No, not the mind probe."

"This isn't my first day Mister Harber." Garm replied sternly, leaning forwards across Darall's own desk, "Tell me or tell a droid."

"The knife." Darall said suddenly, "The knife your thugs took from me."

"Silence human!" the rakata snapped, "Know your place!"

"My place sure as hell isn't being tortured to save you Horsa." Darall replied, glaring at the alien and then he looked back at Garm, "Hold the knife-"

The rakata, Horsa hissed and lunged at Darall. Both prisoners had been bound with their wrists in front of them and this allowed the alien to wrap his hands around Darall's throat and dig his thumbs in as he tried to strangle his formerly loyal follower to death.

But before anyone could react there was a sudden 'snap-hiss' sound and flash of red light as Vay produced the lightsaber she kept hidden in a pouch on her belt. She thrust the weapon forwards, impaling the rakata through his chest and the alien let out a brief shriek as he died and released his grip on Darall. The dead alien collapsed as Vay withdrew the energy blade and Darall stumbled forwards, gasping for breath after the attempt on his life. But before he too could collapse Major Kramm stepped forwards to grab hold of him.

"Now now." he said, "Can't have you falling asleep on us. Not when the lady just saved your life."

"Do you have the knife major?" Garm asked.

"Right here." Major Kramm replied and he produced the ceremonial blade that Garm had seen Darall carrying in the temple chamber itself and tossed it down onto the desk.

"You just need to-" Darall began but Garm interrupted him.

"Yes I think I know." he said, "I know how wireless keys work." and picking up the knife he held it close to the computer screen. Then he smiled as the security screen vanished, taking him to the main menu page, "Very good." he said, "Now let's see what your church has been doing with the contents of your collection boxes." Just then Captain Layne burst into the office.

"Major!" he said excitedly, "You better come and see this. I think we're going to need an ordnance disposal team in the basement."

3.

Moff Gregor Horatian sat at the head of the circular table in the briefing room. As soon as Garm contacted Director Helieos to tell him what had been found at the Church of Infinity's headquarters it had been decided that not only the moff, but also all of the other senior Imperial officials around the table needed to be informed.

Sat next to the moff was the head of COMPNOR in the sector, Rodge Larrs and then next to him Director Helieos with Garm filling the last seat on that side of the table. Then on the other side of the moff were Fleet Admiral Praus Vretan of the Imperial Navy and General Julius Dern of the Imperial Army. Finally finishing off those present for the meeting was a man that Garm knew never to turn his back on. Two years earlier the man named Ibram Kellesen had been an Imperial inquisitor and as part of Imperial Intelligence he had uncovered information regarding a terrorist plot to assassinate Garm using a bomb under his speeder. Thanks to the intervention of Vay at the last moment Garm had barely survived. But his late wife had not been as lucky and Garm was always on the look out for an opportunity to take revenge. This was difficult enough given that the man was a former jedi knight who was even stronger with the Force than Vay but since he had been promoted to lead Imperial Intelligence in the sector he was all but untouchable. Garm stood up and looked around, taking a deep breath before starting to speak.

"There are no Separatists in the nebula." he announced and the two military officers opposite both stared at him in disbelief.

"I'm sorry to contradict you Agent Larcus," Fleet Admiral Vretan replied, leaning forwards, "but my ships have seen them and we've engaged them."

"Plus didn't you have a run in with them yourself just a few weeks ago?" Rodge Larrs added.

"We've seen forces using Confederate weaponry yes, but no actual living separatists themselves." Garm pointed out, "And that is because the forces we have encountered up until now have been fully automated."

"But the droid armies were shut down at the end of the Clone Wars." General Dern said, "Only those with living masters who were able to reverse the order continued to fight."

"Quite so general, but what we have been encountering recently are not a few stray machines left over from the Clone Wars. All of them are newly manufactured."

Fleet Admiral Vretan snorted.

"This is ridiculous." he said.

"Now now admiral." the moff responded, "Let Agent Larcus continue." then he looked at Garm, "Go on." he added.

"When we were hunting for spare parts for the naval sector group's three venator-class star destroyers we were fortunate in that a number of vessels that were supposed to have been scuttled at the end of the Clone Wars had in fact been sent into deep space by a corrupt official who had been selling parts from them ever since. But in addition to the ships we needed there were also a number of old Confederate vessels and it appears that we were not in time to prevent some of these being stolen by individuals serving the rakata."

"The rakata?" Ibram said, "So you would have us believe that a handful of survivors of that fallen civilisation have been able to steal an armada of starships?"

"No." Garm said, "As I said the ships we have faced in battle have been new. The rakata have been infiltrating our society for thousands of years, since the sector was first settled in fact and all that time they've been working to recreate something from their ancient empire." and then he activated a holographic display positioned in the centre of the room.

"A space station?" Moff Horatian said when he saw it.

"A rather large space station." Fleet Admiral Vretan added.

"It's called the Star Forge apparently." Garm said, "And it is potentially the most powerful weapon ever constructed. More powerful even than the death stars."

"What does it do?" Rodge Larrs asked.

"It is an advanced automated factory." Garm answered, "Capable of manufacturing anything from a blaster to a star destroyer without the need for any living workers or labour droids. Everything is self contained. Apparently it houses a Force-sensitive individual at its heart and they direct the construction."

"Even the Force cannot create something out of nothing Agent Larcus." Ibram said, "What does it do for the raw materials it needs?"

"The original Star Forge drew material out of the rakata's home sun. But this one-" Garm began.

"Has access to every particle of matter that makes up the nebula." Fleet Admiral Vretan interrupted,

"Basically a massive stellar nursery."

"Meaning that its resources are effectively unlimited." General Dern added.

"And it is capable of reproducing the Confederate weapons that the rakata recovered in a remarkably short

space of time." Garm said, "Every ship of theirs that our forces have destroyed will already have been replaced tenfold."

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

"Sir this represents the greatest threat to the galaxy ever." Director Helieos said to Moff Horatian, "More so than the rebellion. We must focus our efforts on destroying it."

"No." Ibram said and everyone looked at him.

"You would have us leave this monstrosity in the hands of hostile aliens inquisitor?" Moff Horatian asked.

"No I would not." Ibram answered, "But if we can take control of this facility and turn it to our own use then we will have no need to worry about the rebellion ever again."

"But would we not require someone Force sensitive to control the facility?" Rodge asked, "Unless I'm mistaken only you meet that criteria inquisitor."

"No. There is another." Ibram replied and Garm and Moff Horatian briefly looked at one another.

"Who?" General Dern asked.

"Agent Udra of the Imperial Security Bureau." Ibram said, "Agent Larcus's own partner."

"What?" Director Helieos exclaimed, "Larcus were you aware of this?"

"I-" Garm began, unprepared for this line of questioning.

"He did know." General Dern interrupted, "How can a Force sensitive agent have been kept a secret from the rest of us?"

"An asset like that ought to have been made more widely available." Fleet Admiral Vretan added in agreement with his army counterpart.

"I agree. It is not for a mere field agent to conceal such information." Rodge said.

"Gentlemen please." Moff Horatian said, holding up his hands, "Agent Larcus was acting under my instructions not to reveal Miss Udra's abilities to anyone. Including you director."

"You knew as well but you never told us?" Fleet Admiral Vretan asked, looking at the moff. Normally it was the job of Rodge to deflect awkward questions but on this occasion he was as in the dark as the military officers and Director Helieos.

"Of course I knew." Moff Horatian replied, "Or did you honestly believe all those stupid stories about how she was just an intern and that I was sleeping with her? She was sent to me so that I could help train her in investigative skill and she could help us fight the rebellion. My orders were to keep her existence as secret as possible – hence the rumours about our relationship. Technically she was assigned to intelligence but she picked out Agent Larcus as the individual she wanted to work with and I allowed it. Frankly I think that the results they have achieved speak for themselves."

"Moff Horatian, General Dern and I are ultimately responsible for the defence of the sector. We should have been told." Fleet Admiral Vretan said.

"As should I when you asked me to accept her into the ISB." Director Helieos added, "I'm not surprised intelligence was so keen to keep her."

"Vay would not be suitable for controlling the Star Forge in any case." Garm said, trying to drag the meeting back onto the intended topic, "According to Darall Harber, a former collaborator with the rakata who is now being most co-operative-

"To try and avoid a rope around his neck no doubt." Rodge commented.

"Indeed." Garm responded before continuing, "According to him the Force sensitive individual is being held captive within the workings of the Star Forge."

"Do we know the identity of this individual?" Ibram asked.

"Worried that a jedi's got by you?" Director Helieos asked in response and Ibram glared back at him.

"Yes we do." Garm answered, smiling, "I take it you are all aware of the People's Liberation Army of Estran?"

"Just another rebel splinter group." Rodge replied.

"One that's suddenly gone rather quiet." Director Helieos added.

"Perhaps because its members are too busy fighting one another." Garm said, "The Church of Infinity has been supplying them with weapons. We found a large shipment in their headquarters that hadn't been delivered yet. Harber says that they used the influence this got them to trigger a coup of sorts against their leader Foran Fallir. He is Force sensitive himself and when he was sufficiently weakened the church abducted him and handed him over to the rakata to stick inside their machines. With him in there all we need to do is take control of the station and then our engineers can figure out how to make it work for us."

For a moment there was quiet as the gathered Imperial leaders studied the holographic image of the Star Forge more closely.

"Attacking that is going to take a considerable number of ships." Fleet Admiral Vretan said.

"And the longer we delay the more it will require admiral." Ibram replied, "Remember that it is building its own defensive fleet."

Fleet Admiral Vretan sighed.

"An attack on this scale is going to require the bulk of our ships." he said, "We'd be leaving our planets wide open to attack."

"But the window of vulnerability would be very small." Ibram said, "And besides our planets are shielded. Even if the rebels or these rakata did try and attack them they could not do much damage before you could get back here to deal with them."

"So you agree with the attack then inquisitor?" Director Helieos asked.

"I do." Ibram answered, "If the rakata are allowed to continue operating as they are then the entire Empire is at risk."

"Put like that I don't see that we have any choice." General Dern said.

"But there is more than just this Star Forge to be dealt with." Ibram said, "The rakata must have a colony somewhere in the nebula and that must be dealt with as well. I suggest that General Dern takes his army units to handle this."

"Why not just perform a Base Delta Zero?" Director Helieos asked, referring to the process of eradicating all life from a world using a mass orbital bombardment.

"Because we do not know what safeguards the rakata have put into their Star Forge." Ibram said, "It may be necessary for us to obtain information from the rakata and even I cannot get answers from a corpse."

"I can have two full army corps loaded and ready to go in twenty four hours." General Dern said.

"And I can pull every ship of cruiser rating and above from their regular duties." Fleet Admiral Vretan added, "That still gives us the smaller ships to protect our planets if the rebels do try anything but should provide us with enough firepower to defeat whatever the rakata have protecting that thing as well as supporting the generals men when it comes to attacking their colony."

"Which we still need to locate." Garm pointed out, "We have the co-ordinates of the Star Forge thanks to Harber, but if he knows where the rakata colony is he hasn't told us yet."

"Then that information needs to be found." Moff Horatian said.

"We may be able to find it for ourselves." Fleet Admiral Vretan said, "I doubt it'll be far from this Star Forge and I'll have plenty of ships and probe droids to find it even if the co-ordinates are not available there."

"I do not believe that this should be considered a purely military operation." Ibram said.

"Ah here it is." Director Helieos said, "Along comes Intelligence to try and steal the glory. Upset that it was the ISB that found this?"

"Professional pride means that I would lying if I said that I would not rather it had been my own department that had uncovered the existence of this threat director. But I was thinking more of the ISB."

Surprise.

Ibram smiled at the reaction that came from everyone else in the room, all of whom knew of the intense rivalry between the ISB and Imperial Intelligence.

"The ISB?" Rodge said.

"Of course I would want to send some agents of Imperial Intelligence along as well." Ibram replied, "But given that we know the rakata have been making use of traitors within our own society we should have ISB agents on hand to interrogate them. Perhaps Agent Larcus himself, along with his partner of course."

"I certainly wouldn't say no to having a Force sensitive agent on my bridge with me." Fleet Admiral Vretan commented.

"Added to which, Agent Udra should be able to locate the core of this station where Foran Fallir is connected to it."

"All good points." Moff Horatian said and he looked at Garm, "Agent Larcus, you and Agent Udra are to be ready to leave on the *Iron Warrior* with Admiral Vretan in twenty fours hours."

"Of course sir." Garm replied.

"Well gentlemen," the moff continued, "we all have work to do and not much time to do it in. So I suggest that we draw this meeting to a close and get on with it."

As those present at the meeting then got to their feet Director Helieos walked up to Garm and whispered to him.

"I'm not sure whether I should congratulate you or not." he said and he glanced at Ibram.

"I wouldn't." Garm replied as he also looked at the inquisitor, wondering whether the man was reading their thoughts as they spoke, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

4.

Ibram left the capital building alone, getting into his speeder and driving it across the capital city until he reached an apartment building in a well to do area that required permits for vehicles to park outside. There were numerous surveillance cameras in this area of the city but Ibram knew that overrides placed in the system that controlled these would cause them to ignore his vehicle and he could sit here as long as he liked without the police coming to investigate. As he had expected the apartment building that interested him was protected by a security door that could only be opened from the outside by someone with an appropriate access key that Ibram lacked. He could of course have just drawn his lightsaber and used it to slice through the door but this visit was something he wanted to keep secret. So he waited until he saw someone else approaching the main doorway to the building and presented their key to it and watched as it slid open. Lifting the hood of his robes over his head, Ibram got out of the speeder and hurried towards the door. With a subtle wave of his hand he applied a telekinetic push against the door's proximity sensor, making its control system believe that there was someone standing in the doorway and blocking the door from closing again. The man who had just entered the building paused, wondering why the door had not slid shut behind him as Ibram dashed through before releasing the pressure he was applying to the door so that it closed immediately.

"Who are you?" the man asked, frowning.

"You saw no-one." Ibram replied, using the Force to push the statement into the man's mind. The man then shrugged and turned away. Ibram waited for him to leave before he too headed for the nearby turbolift cluster and stepped into one of them. Ibram knew the floor he wanted and he pressed the button to take him there before stepping out into the hallway and heading towards a specific apartment. Given that there was a security door at the entrance to the building there was no intercom beside the door for a guest to announce their presence but there was a doorbell to alert the apartment's occupant and Ibram pressed this briefly and waited, sensing the presence of someone approaching the door from the other side.

Surprise.

Anger.

"You." the woman who lived in the apartment said, scowling when she saw Ibram standing in the hallway outside, "What are you doing here?"

"I came to visit you Miss Tharr." Ibram replied, "Or would you prefer Gayal?"

Until a few months previously Gayal Tharr had been the sector's head of Imperial Intelligence. But when she had followed a suggestion from Ibram that she withhold information from the navy that had resulted in the loss of a venator-class star destroyer and the escape of a team of rebels she had been forced to resign and Ibram had taken her place.

"Gayal will do." she replied, stepping back so that Ibram could enter, "Well, I'll dispense with the pleasantries. Since you're here you may as well come in. After all even if I said 'no' you could still make me change my mind couldn't you?" and Ibram just smiled as he entered the apartment, heading directly for a couch where he sat down, "So how is life occupying my office treating you then Ibram?" Gayal asked as she took a seat as far from him as she could manage while still being in the same seating area.

"I shall not be chief of Imperial Intelligence in the sector for much longer." he replied.

Surprise.

Satisfaction.

"Oh really? Not cut out for the job?"

"I am more than capable of running the department but the simple fact is that my skills are wasted in the position." Ibram answered and Gayal grinned.

"So it's beneath you? Is that what you are saying?" she replied.

"The Emperor did not intend for his Empire to be run as it has been." Ibram said, ignoring Gayal's comment. "Well from what the news is saying he's not going to have the opportunity to try and do anything about that is he? Unless you believe any of those body doubles some of those feeds from Coruscant are showing really are him."

"They are not. But just because Emperor Palpatine is gone does not mean that I cannot continue his work." Ibram said and Gayal stared at him.

"What do you mean?" she asked, "And what does this have to do with me? I'm still unemployed thanks to you. I don't see Moff Horatian giving me my old job back even if you do resign."

"He would not. You are right about that. But I would."

"You're planning to replace Moff Horatian?" Gayal said in amazement.

"Yes and soon. The moff has made a critical error and the time to strike is at hand." Ibram said.

"But the military would never accept you as moff. Nor would COMPNOR." Gayal pointed out.

"Which is why I shall not be asking them to remove Moff Horatian. Instead I shall do it myself."

"But how?"

"A new threat has arisen within the nebula." Ibram answered, "The supposed Separatist hold outs are in fact a colony of rakata who have recreated some ancient machinery that allows them to create fleets of starships and legions of battle droids with the push of a button. Naturally enough when they saw something so large the reaction of both COMPNOR and the military was to propose a massed assault and Moff Horatian went along with this when what he should have done was to reject their suggestion in favour of forming an elite strike team to infiltrate it to attack from within."

"And I take it that you had nothing at all to do with this?" Gayal commented.

"I may have been supportive of it and may have made some suggestions to make the operation run more efficiently but the idea came from the military I can assure you." Ibram told her, "But regardless of where the idea came from the result is the same. Fleet Admiral Vretan is going to take the bulk of our sector group into the nebula to attack this Star Forge while General Dern will accompany him with a large portion of the forces available here on Estran. Added to which a few other individuals who could stand in our way will be going with them as well. And when they are gone Moff Horatian will be alone and vulnerable."

"Are you planning to kill him?" Gayal asked.

"No. Not yet at least. But I will remove him from office using my authority as head of Imperial Intelligence to arrest him for dereliction of duty."

"But you can't just march into his office and arrest him." Gayal exclaimed, "He'd have you shot."

"You forget who I am Gayal. I am not only the head of Imperial Intelligence in this sector but I am also an Imperial Inquisitor. And thanks to me the bulk of the troops remaining on Estran are stormtroopers."

"Who will obey you above the moff." Gayal said as she realised Ibram's plan, "Even his personal guards."

"Indeed. There are some stormtrooper units attached to the ISB but they will not interfere. Only Fleet Admiral Vretan or General Dern could have threatened me but they will be gone, out of contact within the nebula. By the time they return Coruscant will have already confirmed my position and the sector will be mine."

"So you'll replace the moff and then what?" Gayal asked.

"Remove those who I see as disloyal - Rodge Larrs, Director Helieos and so forth. Then promote those who I see as loyal. Such as you."

"How nice." Gayal replied, "But how do I know that you won't just stab me in the back again? Metaphorically or literally?"

"You won't." Ibram said.

"And how do you know that I won't just call up Moff Horatian the moment you leave to warn him? He'd give me my job back if I saved him I'm certain."

Ibram smiled.

"My dear Gayal, if I even suspected that you were planning on such a thing then I would not wait for you to turn your back."

5.

The fleet mustered in the Spire Worlds where the nebula bordered the remote fringes of the sector. To counter the perceived threat of a Separatist invasion force lurking within the nebula the region was heavily patrolled by a squadron commanded by Admiral Lorn Sayer aboard the allegiance-class battlecruiser *Pride of the Empire*. At two thousand two hundred metres long this ship was the largest in the sector group and many had been surprised when Fleet Admiral Vretan had chosen not to take command of the vessel itself instead of continuing to command the sector group from the Imperial-class *Iron Warrior*, one of twenty one such ships now gathered for the assault against the Star Forge. In addition to these there were two tector-class star destroyers as well. Outwardly similar to the Imperial-class they differed in their lack of hangar space and improved armour protection.

There were many more ships than just these twenty-four star destroyers and battlecruisers though, including twelve victory-class ships, three venator-class and another dozen procursator-class ships. All of these were commonly referred to as star destroyers, mainly owing to the triangular design of their hulls. But at lengths of between nine hundred metres and one thousand two hundred metres rather than the one thousand six hundred of the Imperial and tector-classes they were treated as heavy cruisers in the Imperial navy's order of battle. Further adding to the numbers of ships massing near the nebula were interdicator and gladiator-class heavy cruisers along with arkitens and broadside-class light cruisers and numerous escort carriers filled with wings of TIE fighters that brought the total number of capital ships in the task force to more than three hundred. The TIE fighters carried not only aboard the escort carriers but also aboard more than half of the other warships would be essential to this mission. Given that Fleet Admiral Vretan had left the sector group's frigate, corvette and blastboat lines behind to act as a defence against rebel attack the nimble TIE fighters and interceptors would be used to keep enemy fighter craft away from the capital ships while TIE bombers would carry out precision strikes against the rakata capital ships. Given the hundreds of hangar equipped vessels making up the fleet it meant that there were almost ten thousand TIEs ready to scramble as soon as they reached the Star Forge.

"Impressive isn't it?" Fleet Admiral Vretan said to General Dern as they looked out of the main bridge viewports of the *Iron Warrior*.

"I just hope that the rakata think so admiral." Garm's voice said as he and Vay approached the two military officers.

"Ah Agent Larcus." Fleet Admiral Vretan said, "Welcome to the *Iron Warrior*. And Agent Udra of course. We have heard so much about you young lady."

"We were expecting to join you in orbit around Estran admiral." Garm said.

"Yes, my ship was ready to depart ahead of schedule so I decided to leave early." Fleet Admiral Vretan replied, "It's given me the opportunity to oversee the deployment of probe droids."

"You're sending probe droids into the nebula ahead of us?" Aren't you worried about the possibility that the rakata will detect them?" Vay asked.

"We've already sent thousands of probe droids into the nebula Agent Udra. In the absence of the mystic abilities you can wield they are our best method of gathering data." Fleet Admiral Vretan told her and she frowned briefly. Garm had warned her that the secret of her abilities was no longer quite so secret but she was no happier about the casual way in which they were being discussed because of it.

"The problem of course is getting the information out again." General Dern added, "That cloud of gas may be pretty to look at but it's full of radioactive flares and refractive dust that scatters subspace transmissions over long distances."

"Yes, fortunately we've sent enough probe droids in there that they can relay signals from one to another." Fleet Admiral Vretan said.

"And what have you found so far admiral?" Garm asked.

"Not much I'm afraid to say. Nothing to contradict the information that you have provided us with but we haven't been able to confirm the location of the target yet. Let alone its defences." Fleet Admiral Vretan answered.

"Admiral!" one of the *Iron Warrior's* junior officers called out from the rear of the bridge, "We are receiving data on the target from one of our probe droids within the nebula."

"Show me." Fleet Admiral Vretan called out as he, General Dern, Garm and Vay rushed to see. When they reached the station that the junior officer was stood next to they saw on the large monitor an image that was split into two. On one side was the limited schematic that had been recovered from the Church of Infinity while the other half of the display showed the feed from the probe droid that had been relayed several times before reaching the star destroyer and it clearly showed a space station that was identical in design to the schematic. But that was not all that it showed.

"Stang that's a lot of ships." General Dern commented as he tried to count the capital ships surrounding the Star Forge. All of them matched classes fielded by the Confederacy during the Clone Wars, suggesting that they had been manufactured from patterns copied from the ships that the rakata had been able to recover.

"Can we get a count?" Fleet Admiral Vretan asked.

"Looks like upwards of one hundred sir." a crewman sat in front of the display responded, "About forty lucrehulk-class ships and twice that many of smaller ships."

"Smaller being how big?" Garm asked.

"Between eight hundred and one thousand two hundred metres long." the crewman answered.

"And all of them filled to the brim with vulture droids no doubt." Fleet Admiral Vretan said and he took a deep breath, "Oh well, this isn't going to get any easier by waiting. Crewman make sure that data is sent to every ship in the fleet. Then tell them to be ready to jump to hyperspace within ten minutes. It's time to get this attack under way."

All of the Imperial warships from the smallest cruiser up to the *Pride of the Empire* all turned to face towards the nebula as the hyperspace jump co-ordinates were distributed and programmed into navigation computers. There would not be just one direct jump to the Star Forge, instead a series of smaller jumps plotted to avoid the many navigational hazards that were common within nebulas would be followed by the massed fleet.

The *Iron Warrior* was the first ship to jump, followed by its escorting cruisers almost immediately. Then there were more brilliant flashes as the rest of the fleet followed suit, the more than three hundred warships making the jump to hyperspace within a few seconds of each other.

Ibram had asked for details of the attack to be fed directly to his office and the unsuspecting naval command had agreed to this. What they had inadvertently done was provide the inquisitor with the means to determine exactly when the military forces that threatened his grab for power would be out of reach.

"The fleet has jumped to hyperspace. Repeat, the fleet has jumped to hyperspace. The attack is underway." Ibram smiled when he heard this. But he did not act immediately, instead he got out of his chair and walked to the window, looking out over the capital city and waiting as the sun began to set. There was still time for something to go wrong and the fleet could yet turn back so Ibram gave them half an hour before he picked up a datapad from his desk and left the room.

His first port of call was the office belonging to the stormtrooper garrison duty officer and the man leapt to his feet and snapped to attention when he saw the inquisitor enter his office.

"At ease major." Ibram said.

"Yes sir." the officer replied, "How may I help you?"

"I have orders for you." Ibram replied and he handed over the datapad. The advantage of being an inquisitor, Ibram thought, was that he just give orders to almost anyone without worrying about the bureaucracy involved in cross departmental action.

The major frowned as he read the orders and looked back up at Ibram.

"Is there something wrong major?" Ibram asked.

"Sir these orders-" the officer began.

"Are to be followed to the letter major." Ibram said, "You know who I am and you know where my authority comes from."

"Yes sir." the officer replied, even though an inquisitor was supposed to act as a direct representative of the Emperor and there were strong doubts about whether former Grand Vizier Sate Pestage would be able to hold on to power on Coruscant.

"Good. Then you will alert your men to be ready to take my orders and await my command to carry out the ones I have given you. Do you understand major?" Ibram asked.

"Yes sir. I will inform the men."

"Very well then. Carry on major." Ibram said and he turned around and walked back out of the office again leaving the stormtroopers' commanding officer staring at the datapad screen.

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

Again, Ibram did not proceed directly to the next stage of his plan. He needed to allow time for the orders to be given to the stormtrooper garrison before he started trying to have people arrested. It would not be a good start to his rule for his first orders to be disobeyed. But he knew that he could not delay too long. Like him Moff Horatian would have been waiting for news of the attack on the Star Forge, but now that the fleet was cut off from communication he would most likely not remain in his office for much longer and attempting to arrest him at home would be far more difficult than in a building filled with stormtroopers who would act on Ibram's orders.

But this time he waited only a few minutes for his instructions to be distributed, knowing that the comlinks built into stormtrooper armour would allow the garrison's commander to broadcast orders to the entire force under his command without anyone else being able to overhear them. Ibram proceeded to the moff's office,

striding past his secretary without responding to her calls for him to stop so that she could tell Moff Horatian that he was here and with a wave of his hand he opened the large ornate wooden doors to the moff's office. *Surprise.*

"Inquisitor." Moff Horatian said as he looked up, not having expected a visitor, "What's wrong."

"You are." Ibram replied.

"I don't understand." Moff Horatian said as Ibram walked up to his desk and stared down at him.

"Gregor Horatian, I Inquisitor Ibram Kellesen do hereby inform you that you are being removed from office for dereliction of your duty. As a direct representative of the throne I shall be taking your place as governor of the sector." Ibram said while Moff Horatian stared at him dumbfounded.

"Now look here!" the moff finally exclaimed, leaping to his feet, "You can't just march in here and tell me I'm under arrest. You have no grounds." and he waved the two stormtroopers standing guard just inside his office door to come closer, "I want you to remove Mister Kellesen from my office." he told them, "See that he is escorted from-"

"I'm sorry sir it's time for you to leave." one of the stormtroopers said as both raised their blaster rifles. But their weapons were not aimed at Ibram, they were aimed at Moff Horatian.

"What is this?" Moff Horatian demanded.

"Forward planning Gregor." Ibram responded, "Something I appear better at than you." then he looked at one of the stormtroopers, "Take Mister Horatian away and hold him in the detention section. But tell the guards he is not to be harmed."

"Yes sir." the stormtrooper replied and then both armoured soldiers walked around the desk, took hold of Moff Horatian by his arms and led him towards the door.

"You'll never get away with this Ibram! You hear me? You'll pay for this outrage I swear!" the moff yelled but Ibram ignored him, instead making his way to the moff's seat and sitting down in it, smiling as its former occupant was taken from the office and the doors closed behind him.

The Ibram leant forwards to activate the communicator set into the desk and a hologram of the stormtrooper garrison commander appeared above the desk.

"Yes inquisitor, what are your orders?" the major asked.

"The time has come major." Ibram told him, "Execute special order number one." and then he shut off the communicator.

The final jump that brought the fleet of Imperial warships was timed so that as many as possible dropped out of hyperspace together. The heavy squadron of Admiral Lydia Trell was the first to engage the enemy. Her victory-class star destroyers were generally considered an out of date design but they benefited from an array of concussion missile tubes that gave them incredible hitting power at long range.

"Admiral, enemy fleet appears to be at anchor." one of her officers called out just seconds after her flagship had dropped out of hyperspace.

"Acquire targets." she ordered, "Lock missiles onto their lucrehulks. If we're lucky we'll take a few out before they can get their vulture droids into space. If not then at least those things won't have anywhere to land to refuel and rearm. Weapons free gentlemen. Scramble all fighter squadrons and fire at will."

"Admiral Trell's squadron is firing missiles sir." one of the *Iron Warrior's* bridge officers reported as the first flashes of weapons fire became visible through the forward viewports, "Admiral's Sayer and Hall are advancing directly towards the primary target and Admiral Hadwell is taking his squadron around the enemy to engage from the rear."

"Can you isolate an enemy command and control ship yet?" Fleet Admiral Vretan asked.

"There appears to be a lot of comm traffic centred on a lucrehulk-class vessel in sector fourteen sir."

"Excellent." Fleet Admiral Vretan said, smiling, "Helm lay on a course and take us in. All unengaged ships are to follow. Fire on targets as they come to bear. Launch a probe droid back to Estran, tell them we have taken the enemy by surprise and are commencing our attack." then he looked at Garm and Vay, "Now watch this." he said to them, "This is why our enemies fear star destroyers."

6.

Director Helieos was just leaving his office for the night when he found himself confronted by the duty commander of the capital building' stormtrooper garrison and a squad of his men.

"Major? Is there a problem?" he asked.

"Director Helieos," the garrison commander replied with his hand resting on the butt of his sidearm, "I must ask you to surrender your sidearm and also all of your code cylinders."

"Is this some sort of joke major?" the director said, clearly unimpressed.

"No sir. Now if you do not co-operate then you will be taken by force."

"Taken? Taken where?"

"To the detention section sir."

"Are you out of your mind? I'm calling the moff now." Director Helieos said and he reached for his pocket.

"Don't move!" the garrison commander yelled, drawing his weapon and aiming at Director Helieos as the stormtroopers all raised their weapons ready to use as well and the director stopped. Then he slowly raised his hands.

"The moff will hear of this major. You can kiss your career goodbye. I'll see you in a labour camp for this." he said as a pair of stormtroopers darted towards him, taking his blaster from its holster and removing the code cylinders from his breast pocket before locking binders around his wrists.

"The moff has already been detained." the garrison commander told him.

"Under whose orders?" Director Helieos demanded.

"Inquisitor Kelleesen's sir. He is in command now."

Rodge Larrs was at home entertaining guests. Lord Maxamillion Torr and Lady Lynn Sharva were serving members of the Estranian Parliament while Lord Couran Desh was retired now, but had once been its speaker and Edvars Kurrad was the CEO of the largest interstellar corporation in the sector. Between them these four individuals wielded considerable political influence and it made sense to Rodge to maintain a good relationship with them all. They, along with the wives of Rodge, Lord Torr and Edvars had just sat down to dinner when there was the sound of powerful repulsorlifts from outside, followed shortly after by bright searchlight beams shining down from the sky.

"What's happening?" Rodge's wife asked as the dinner guests saw a gunship descending from the sky to settle on the Larrs family's private landing.

"I think I'd better go and find out." Rodge replied as he got up from the table and accompanied by his protocol droid he went out side to see what the reason for the gunship's arrival was.

"You there!" he called out as he walked down the steps outside his front door, "Just what do you think you're doing? I'm entertaining-"

"Rodge Larrs!" the commander of the stormtrooper squad that had disembarked from the gunship shouted back at him without giving him chance to finish, "You are under arrest."

"Arrest? Me? There must be some mistake." Rodge replied while the stormtroopers surrounded him and one of their number stepped forwards with binders.

"Rodge? What's wrong?" Rodge's wife called out from the house and he looked around to see her and their dinner guests all now standing on the steps in front of the main door.

"There seems to be something of a misunderstanding." he replied.

"No misunderstanding sir," the stormtroopers' officer said, "our orders are clear."

"Now look here!" Lord Torr called out as he walked down the steps until a stormtrooper blocked his path,

"Don't you know who I am?" he shouted at the faceplate of the armoured soldier.

"You are Lord Torr. Please step back or you will be arrested for obstruction of justice." the stormtrooper answered and Lord Torr's eyes widened with rage.

"I say Max my boy." Lord Desh said as he laid a hand on Lord Torr's shoulder to pull him back from the stormtrooper, "Perhaps if you can control your temper we can get to the bottom of this." then he looked at the stormtrooper himself, "Does old Gregor know of this?" he asked.

"The moff has been removed from office as well." the stormtrooper answered and Lady Sharva and Edvars exchanged nervous glances.

"What on Coruscant for?" Lady Sharva exclaimed.

"Yes, what I happening?" Edvars added as Rodge's wife just watched him being led back towards the gunship.

"I am not at liberty to say." the stormtrooper said, "Now if you don;t all go back inside we will open fire." and the stormtroopers raised their rifles.

"Perhaps we should do as they say." Lord Desh said, "We can contact legal counsel from inside." and then

he joined the others in returning to the house.

"This is an outrage!" Lord Torr snapped, "Never have I been treated with such disrespect."

"Oh really?" Lord Desh commented, "You do surprise me my boy." and then as they went back into the house the stormtroopers remaining on the lawn turned around and hurried back to the waiting gunship. As soon as they were all aboard the craft it rose up into the air and flew off carrying Rodge away with it.

Ibram watched across the desk of what had until just a few hours earlier belonged to Moff Horatian but was now his own as the holorecorder was set up.

"Okay that should do it." the technician said, "You're set to go sir."

"And this will break into every channel in the sector?" Ibram asked.

"Yes sir." the technician answered, "Every audio, video and holographic broadcast system will be affected. Even private on demand services will replace whatever someone has ordered with your message."

"Good." Ibram said, "Then let us begin."

A light began to flash on the top of the recorder as its operator directed it towards Ibram's face, letting the inquisitor know that the broadcast would begin in just a few seconds. Then when the light went solid he knew that it had started and all across the sector broadcasts were being interrupted by the appearance of the circular Imperial crest and a message that all viewers should stand by for an important announcement.

"Citizens." Ibram said simply as his face appeared on billions of display screens on dozens of worlds, "My name is Ibram Kellesen and I am an inquisitor, an agent appointed to act with the authority of the Emperor himself. It is a difficult time for both our sector and the Empire. Across the galaxy we are seeing outbreaks of sedition, treason and uprisings by those who would replace our New Order with the chaos of the old Republic that was swept away by Emperor Palpatine with the defeat of the Confederacy and the Jedi at the end of the Clone Wars. I had hoped that the overwhelmingly loyal citizens of this sector would be spared from the worst of this but alas I was wrong and it is my sad duty to inform you all that I have uncovered evidence of gross dereliction of duty at the highest level of the Imperial administration in this sector. Moff Gregor Horatian has ignored a threat to our security for so long that it is now only being dealt with by criminally weakening the defences of our worlds. Other senior members of his administration have also been complicit in this dereliction of duty and therefore, I have been left with no alternative but to remove not only Moff Horatian but also several other high ranking members of the Imperial sector authorities from their posts. News of this transition of power has been communicated directly to the Imperial capital on Coruscant and until they determine an alternative individual to take over the position I will personally be acting as Imperial governor for this sector.

"But the task of routing out this malignancy at the heart of our own sector is not yet complete and I must warn you to expect further actions to be taken over the coming few days to guarantee the efficient running of the sector. Be assured that the actions I am ordering are being done on your behalf and for your own good to guarantee the safe and secure society that Emperor Palpatine promised us all at the beginning of his New Order. Thank you and goodbye."

The light above the holorecorder then went out as the broadcast ended and the normally programming that people had been watching resumed.

"You may leave now." Ibram said to the technical crew that immediately packed up the holorecorder and left the office. Now alone Ibram activated the holographic projectors built into his desk and one by one three images appeared in mid air in front of him showing Moff Horatian, Director Helieos and Rodge Larrs all sitting alone in their cells. Ibram watched these for a short time before shutting of the projectors and smiling to himself.