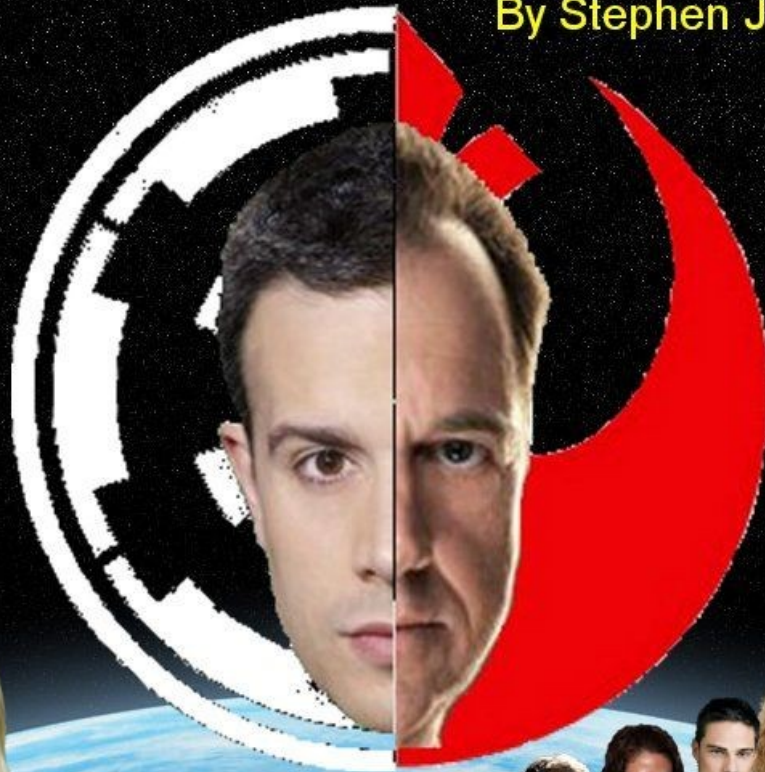


# STAR WARS

## 6-09: Supply Line

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...

## SUPPLY LINE

AFTER SUFFERING ONE SETBACK AFTER ANOTHER FORAN FALLIR AND HIS TERRORIST ORGANISATION, THE PEOPLE'S LIBERATION ARMY OF ESTRAN ACCEPT AN OFFER OF SUPPORT FROM AN UNLIKELY SOURCE. BUT IS THE OFFER ALL IT SEEMS AND WHAT IS THEIR NEW BENEFACTOR'S REAL AIM?

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

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# 1.

Millions of different religions were practised across the galaxy at any one time. Some were offshoots of one another, varying only in a handful of ways while others taught the exact opposite of others. The differences were not just limited to their belief structures either, advancement through the ranks of believers and clergy depended on different criteria for different churches. Some required suitable demonstration of devotion to their teachings, others laid down trials to be completed and there were always some where positions were bought either openly from the churches themselves or discretely from corrupt clergy.

The Church of Infinity accepted no bribes however and laid down no trials of faith for its followers to attempt to complete. Instead what the church looked for in those it recruited to serve was simple usefulness. Created thousands of years earlier when some of the sector's first settlers had stumbled across a hidden colony world of the long vanished Infinite Empire of the rakata, its aim was simple, to restore the Infinite Empire to its former glory. To this end the church watched its congregations closely, always on the look out for someone who possessed some useful skill or had access to materials or information that the church could make use of. Over the thousands of years since the church's creation it had provided the surviving rakata with equipment that was now beyond their ability to produce and with that they had undertaken a great project that rivalled the greatest undertaken by the Infinite Empire that would, if successful, give them the capability they sought to over run the Galactic Empire that had grown out of the Republic that had in turn replaced the Infinite Empire as the dominant galactic power.

They called it the Star Forge.

The first Star Forge was a space station built around the rakata's ancient homeworld of Lehon that had drawn upon the power of the Force and combined it with matter taken from Lehon's sun to create vast fleets of starships and armies of droids. However, like all rakata technology it required some mastery of the Force to operate. This was not a problem at first, but when a virulent plague swept through their empire the surviving rakata found themselves stripped of their sensitivity to the Force, a condition that had persisted until the current day. By equipping themselves with Republic and more recently Imperial technology the rakata had been able to restore themselves to a relatively high level of technology and slowly built their own Star Forge, but they were never able to avoid the need to place a living being at the core of the station to control it and that being had to be sensitive to the Force. Even during the days of the Republic such individuals had been rare and now that the Galactic Empire had spent twenty years hunting them down they were almost unheard of.

Almost, but not totally.

Kay Laren, a young human female with some degree of Force sensitivity had been abducted and forcibly placed in the core of the new Star Forge. But although the rakata had been able to make use of her power to create a fleet of starships and an army of battle droids all derived from designs used by the Separatist Confederacy during the Clone Wars, Kay had been rescued by a small team of rebels and the Star Forge's automated production facilities had come to a halt until a replacement could be located. The rakata were well aware that there were at least two Force sensitive individuals serving the Galactic Empire in the sector but, like Kay Laren was now, both these individuals were too dangerous to try and abduct. However, a relatively new member of the church's congregation now sat before Darall Harber, one of its most senior leaders to present him with information that could result in the Star Forge being reactivated.

"So Martus, how did you come into possession of this information?" Darall asked the man.

"It was sent to my supervisor." Martus replied, "He was instructed to sort out what information should be released to local law enforcement and the Sector Rangers."

"But he asked you to do it instead?" Darall asked.

"Yes Your Eminence. Even though my security clearance isn't high enough for me to see any of it." Martus responded and Darall smiled. As a conduit for information Martus would be ideal. He worked as a low level clerk with the Imperial Security Bureau with only limited access to sensitive information. But as luck would have it his immediate superior was the sort of individual who progressed by claiming the credit for the work of others and so when instructed to compile a report on the activities of a local terrorist organisation he had instead decided to have someone else do the work for him, giving him access to information above his clearance level in the process. Not only did this mean that Martus could now provide the Church of Infinity with classified information but also if the ISB discovered that they had a leak then any attempt to track it to its source would lead to Martus' superior rather than the church member Martus himself.

"Then the church is eternally grateful for you bringing this to our attention." Darall said, "And I think that we will definitely be in touch with you regarding your advancement within our order." then he glanced towards a hooded but obviously inhuman figure sat in the far corner of the room, "Is that not so?" he asked and the figure nodded once slowly.

A wide smile spread across Martus' face.

"I am honoured Eminence." he replied, "I will serve as you-"

"Yes, yes I'm sure you will." Darall interrupted, "Now leave us."

"Yes Eminence." Martus said, bowing his head as he stood up and then left the room.

As soon as the door closed behind Martus, Darall pressed a button under his desk and the door's control panel lit up to indicate that it was now locked. Then he looked around towards the hooded figure just as it too rose to its feet and then lowered its hood to reveal the face of a rakata.

"What has your minion provided us with Darall?" the alien asked, approaching Darall and looking down at him.

"Everything the ISB has on the PLAE Horsa." Darall replied.

"The terrorist organisation that seeks to secede from the Empire?" the rakata, Horsa, asked.

"The very same." Darall replied.

"They are irrelevant. They are too few and too narrow minded to be useful allies." Horsa said, "That is why we have always ignored them before now."

"I know." Darall said, "But if this file is accurate then we may have missed an opportunity."

"Explain."

"The leader of the PLAE is a human named Foran Fallir. By all accounts he's a fanatic with a habit of killing anyone who threatens his position within the organisation."

"He sounds like a dangerous man to have as an ally. He would likely attempt to take over our church."

"If we were planning a permanent alliance then yes, he would undoubtedly attempt to usurp our authority. But Mister Fallir is apparently more than he appears to be. He is sensitive to the Force."

"Let me see." Horsa said reaching out and taking the datapad from Darall. The human priest still found it difficult to read the expressions of his rakata masters even after serving them for many years. But right now Horsa was obviously engrossed in the datafile. Most of it was basic biographical information and a list of the crimes that he had been linked to over the years. But buried amongst all of this was a report from an agent in the ISB that detailed a conversation between Foran and a captive in which he confessed to being Force sensitive.

"Obviously we can't just abduct him." Darall said, "Even if we knew where he was we'd start a war with his organisation that we're not ready for yet. But if we-"

"If we ally with him then we may be able to find a way to abduct him without attracting suspicion." Horsa interrupted.

"Better yet," Darall replied, "we could persuade those who follow him to give him to us willingly."

The alien looked away from the datapad and directly at Darall.

"Explain." he ordered and Darall leant forwards across his desk.

"The PLAE has suffered a number of setbacks over the past couple of years." he began, "Some people are saying that they are on the brink of being wiped out."

"Yes, your Galactic Empire is well practised at counter insurgency warfare." Horsa commented.

"Well supposing we offered our help while at the same time providing the Empire with a few choice pieces of information. Not enough to let them destroy the PLAE, but enough to spoil some operations."

"Making it appear as if this Fallir was at fault?" Horsa asked.

"Exactly." Darall asked, "We make it seem as though he could have avoided failure if he'd listened to our advice. Then we approach those beneath him and suggest that perhaps they should consider new leadership."

"Devious." Horsa said, "Devious yet ingenious. Yes, we chose well when we chose you to serve us Darall. Rest assured that your name will be honoured in our new empire."

"There is just one slight problem." Darall said.

"What?"

"Well we need to locate Foran Fallir first before we can offer him an alliance."

"I assume you already have a plan to accomplish this though?"

"Of course I do. I just need your approval for it since it will require us going outside of the church for help."

"Ah, the female." Horsa said.

"Yes. She's served us well in the past and she may do so again." Darall replied.

"Then go. Take her our blessings and offer her our money. But I want this Foran Fallir. With him we will become unstoppable."

## 2.

Working for the technical support department of a major interstellar corporation was mind numbingly dull for someone as adept at using technology as Emissi Caysa was. Able to manipulate computers quickly and efficiently, she could set up and debug commercial networks in her sleep. This meant that she frequently finished tasks assigned to her at work far faster than her superiors expected her to and rather than then go to them to request more work that she knew she would find just as tedious she would subtly make use of her employer's equipment to indulge in her hobby of computer slicing, that is breaking into supposedly secure computer networks to make unauthorised changes or acquire data that she was not supposed to have. What she did on company time however was just a hobby that served as practice for her real work that began when she got home each evening and began to slice into networks not for fun but for money. A lot of money in fact. Her pay as a technical support consultant was limited, especially since her habit of avoiding being noticed by her superiors as much as possible had resulted in her being passed over for several promotions or increases. But the money she supplemented this with had not only allowed her to purchase more advanced equipment for her own use but also provided her with a sizeable amount of savings, savings that she had placed in accounts far safer than some of those she had sliced into to steal some of it from. As usual when Emissi returned home she was greeted by a series of chirps and bleeps from her droid. To the uninformed the droid looked like a normal R2 astromech droid with its domed head and stubby cylindrical body. But in reality it was an SB-20, a variant of the R2 unit designed to assist with breaking into computer systems. Highly illegal, the droid had cost Emissi a large amount of the credits she had stolen, but since obtaining it the droid had more than earned its keep. Designated SB-20-SNK, Emissi referred to it as 'Sneaky'.

"Hi Sneaky." she said as she kicked off her shoes and then patted the droid on its head, "Any luck with that Imperial code yet?"

Emissi had been attempting to gain access to the Imperial military network for some time, not for any particular client but instead simply because it was the toughest network to crack in the sector and having access to the information it held offered all manner of opportunity. Several times she had thought that she had been successful only to have her work undone by the Empire's own army of vigilant slicing experts. Unfortunately the droid let out a single low tone that indicated it had not had any further success.

"Oh well." Emissi said, sighing as she entered her kitchen and removed a frozen meal from her freezer unit, "I suppose that means we'll just have to-" but then she was interrupted by the intercom telling her that there was someone wanting her to let them into the apartment building, "Really?" she exclaimed, "They can't even let me have dinner before they start bothering me." and she walked over the intercom panel, "What?" she asked angrily, "This better be good because I've only just got home."

"I know Miss Caysa." a figure in a dark hood said, "I have been watching your building. I wish to speak with you regarding-"

"Yeah, I know." Emissi interrupted, recognising the voice of the hooded figure. The man had come to her before for information and although she never insisted that her clients tell her who they were she had run his speeder's licence plate through the local registry and determined that he was the high priest of the Church Of Infinity. Working for the church did not bother Emissi, she only drew the line at working for government or rebel agents unless a client tried to do anything stupid like convert her to their religion which Darall Harber had been smart enough not to try to do. Without saying anything else Emissi pressed the button to open the building's front door and shut off the intercom, "Looks like dinner's going to have to wait." she told Sneaky and the droid whistled in reply.

Darall knocked at Emissi's door a few minutes later and she opened it to him with a piece of fruit in her hand. "Come on in." she said, stepping out of the way, "And go on through. I think you know the way."

"Thank you." Darall replied as he entered the apartment, heading into the lounge where there was an expensive looking computer set up on a desk.

"Miss Caysa," Darall began as he sat down, "you have previously helped us to-"

"You can spare me the pleasantries your reverence." Emissi interrupted, walking across the room to sit down beside the computer, "I know who you are and I know I've done work for you before. So how about you tell me what you want and I'll tell you what it will cost?"

"Of course." Darall replied, lowering his hood, "We want to know where to find this man." he added and he held out his datapad with an image of Foran Fallir on its display. Emissi looked at the datapad and recognised the image instantly.

"You looking to turn him in for the bounty?" she asked.

"No." Darall reassured her, "I am aware that you do not undertake any work that could be used to advance government policy."

"Good." Emissi said, "But finding a guy like that is going to cost extra."

"How much?" Darall asked.

"Ten thousand." Emissi said, "All in advance."

Darall smiled and from under his cloak he slipped a credit stick.

"Untraceable?" Emissi asked.

"I am sure it will be after you have finished with it." Darall replied with a smile, "Now how long until I can expect results?"

"Guys like him don't want to be found by anyone." Emissi said as she plugged the credit stick into the computer beside her and turned towards it as she transferred the money it held into one of her accounts, "Even most of his own followers won't know where he is."

"Are you now saying that you cannot find him?"

"No, of course I can find him. But I'm just warning you that it may take a couple of weeks." Emissi said.

"Then I shall return then." Darall said and he got to his feet, "It is a pleasure doing business with you." he added as he lifted his hood over his head again and Emissi smiled and held up the now empty credit stick between her thumb and forefinger.

"Pleasure's all mine." she said.

Emissi then waited as Darall left the apartment and she went to the window to make sure that he also left the building. Sure enough she saw a hooded figure walk away from the building and over to a luxury landspeeder with blacked out windows and get into it before the vehicle drove away.

"Ten thousand." she said, grinning as she looked at her droid, "Sparky this could be the easiest money I've ever made." and then she walked over to the apartment's communication unit. Though she had never discussed one client with any other she was now about to break that rule as she entered a comm address of another individual who she had supplied with information in the past.

"Hello?" a voice said as soon as the call was answered, though the screen remained blank to conceal their identity.

"I need to speak to Foran." Emissi said, "Tell him its the girl with the information."

Darall scowled when he saw a figure sat hunched on a pew, his face hidden under the hood of his jacket. In order to maintain its cover as nothing more than a legitimate religion the Church Of Infinity had to undertake charitable acts to help the needy. Sometimes these programs benefited the church, such as the prison visiting program that had gained them a small army of thugs who knew how to handle weapons and were not squeamish about using them. But more often than not they just used up time and precious resources, for example when homeless beings came into the church looking for food or shelter.

"How can I help you brother?" Darall called out as he approached the figure.

"I am an only child." the man seated on the pew responded and Darall frowned.

"It is just a figure of speech. I would like to know what brings you into this temple today." he said.

"Does not your church welcome sinners and offer salvation?"

"If that is what they truly seek." Darall said.

"I have no need of salvation." the man said and Darall decided that talking to him was a waste of his precious time.

"I think you ought to leave." he said, "Before I call the police."

The figure then stood up and Darall suddenly became aware of how tall the man was, not far short of two metres.

"That would not be wise." he said.

"And why not?" Darall asked, his hand subtly moving towards the ceremonial dagger he carried.

"Because they are likely to arrest you for harbouring a fugitive." Foran Fallir said as he lowered his hood.

"Foran Fallir." Darall gasped.

"I believe that you are searching for me." the infamous terrorist responded.

"Yes. That is correct." Darall said.

"Most people know better than to try." Foran said, "Now explain to me why I shouldn't have any of my people simply kill you where you stand." and as Darall looked around Foran grinned and added, "Don't worry, they haven't soiled your precious church with their presence – yet. But I promise you that if I don't like your answers then they'll burn it to the ground with you inside."

"There – there is no need for that I assure you." Darall said, genuinely concerned for his safety. He had planned to contact the PLAE leader under his own terms and protected by a number of his own people.

Unfortunately Foran had had other ideas, "Please come with me to my office and I'll explain everything."

Darall went on and he took a single step towards his office before Foran reached out and took hold of him.

"I think not priest." he hissed, "I think I'd rather stay right here where you didn't expect me to be. Call me paranoid but I get a bad feeling whenever anyone comes looking for me."

"Very well." Darall said as Foran let go of him and he sat down on a nearby pew and waited while Foran did the same, "The Church Of Infinity wishes to offer its support to you Mister Fallir. We believe that a mutually

advantageous relationship can be forged between us.”

“My people aren’t looking for salvation priest.” Foran replied, “We don’t need you praying for us.”

“But you do need supplies.” Darall said, answering Foran far quicker than he liked, “From what I hear your organisation has suffered several – ah, shall we say setbacks when it comes to obtaining weapons and equipment recently. Combined with several high profile failed attacks there are those who are predicting the end of the People’s Liberation Army of Estran.”

Foran snarled.

“Watch your tongue priest.” he hissed.

“Are you saying that my words are false?” Darall asked and Foran’s expression hardened even further.

“And how can you help?” he said.

“The Church Of Infinity has a presence on most of the settled worlds in this sector.” Darall explained, “That means that we can obtain certain items that are difficult to get here on Estran more easily. Face it, we’re your only hope.”

“And more importantly why would you help us? I recall no public sermons from you calling for Estran to become an independent world.”

“And you won’t ever hear one either.” Darall answered, “You and I both know that the first time I deliver such a sermon it will be the last one I ever deliver. When Palpatine first came to power he banned every religion based upon worship of the Force throughout the galaxy and since then the freedom of religious worship has been curtailed whenever it has conflicted with the Empire’s ambitions. For now they have seen fit to leave us alone, but my members have on occasion been unfairly targeted for their beliefs and it can only be a matter of time before the church as a whole comes under attack.”

“So you see the PLAE as a way to keep your followers safe?” Foran asked and Darall nodded.

“Assuming that we will be free to practice our faith on a free Estran.” he replied.

Foran paused for a moment and then shrugged.

“What do I care what gods you bow down to?” he said, “But I cannot afford to take anything you say on faith alone priest, I will need more proof than those who fill this temple to listen to your sermons.”

“What do you want?” Darall asked and Foran smiled.

“Weapons.” he said, “If you want the PLAE to protect you then I want you to supply us with the means to do so.”

“Of course.” Darall said, “I can arrange for a shipment of blaster carbines within a week.”

“Then I think we have a deal.” Foran said, getting to his feet. Then he looked towards the altar at the front of the temple, “Now I suggest you go pray priest.” he added, “Kneel before your gods while I leave and remember one thing. If you lift your head in the next ten minutes then a sniper will take it off.”

“What do you want?” the holographic image of Horsa asked when Darall contacted him from his office.

“Foran Fallir has made contact with me.” Darall answered.

“So soon?” Horsa said.

“Yes, I believe that Miss Caysa already possessed the knowledge of how to contact him when we met but chose not to tell me.”

“And what did he have to say for himself?” Horsa asked.

“He wants proof.” Darall replied.

“Understandable. What did you promise him?”

“Blaster carbines. I promised them within a week.”

Horsa paused.

“We have the weapons.” he said, thinking of the large number of small arms that the Star Forge had been able to produce in the limited time it had been operational, “But getting them past the Imperial squadrons blockading the nebula may prove more difficult.”

“I fear that if we cannot supply the weapons then we will lose our only hope of luring Fallir into our trap.” Darall said.

“Then I shall request them.” Horsa said, “The possibility of losing even several transports is of less importance than getting the Star Forge functional again. With that operational we can replace any number of transports and weapons.”

### 3.

"Comrade Fallir." one of Foran's lieutenants said upon his return to their safe house, "What did they want?" "It would appear that the Church Of Infinity wants to help us my comrades." Foran replied, looking around at the gathering of terrorists.

"Help us? How can they do that?" another of Foran's lieutenants asked.

"Believe it or not, apparently the church has access to weapons." Foran said and he heard someone snort, "I thought the same comrade." he said, "But their leader has promised me a shipment of blasters within a week."

"Then the planned attack can go ahead." a lieutenant said.

"Assuming that the church delivers what it has offered us." another added, "We have no reason to trust them."

"They will deliver comrades." Foran said, "After all, if they don't then the next bomb we plant will be under that priest's pulpit."

At more than two kilometres long the Allegiance-class battlecruiser *Pride of the Empire* was the largest Imperial Navy warship in the sector. Serving as the flagship for Admiral Lorn Sayer's squadron it was the cornerstone of the blockade of the nebula that bordered the sector. When the vessel had been presented to the admiral he had been given orders to hunt down the rebel fleet and destroy it, but when the presence of a suspected Separatist holdout had been revealed the squadron had been redeployed to head off a full scale invasion of the sector. The navy's high command believing that the massive vessel was their best chance to deal with their three kilometre wide lucrehulk-class battleships.

But one ship, even a ship as powerful as the *Pride of the Empire* could not maintain an interstellar blockade all by itself and a further three lines of smaller warships was spread around the region of space known as the Spire Worlds watching for any signs of incursions. And in the last few hours they had seen several.

Admiral Sayer waited for the communication link with Estran to be established, clutching the datapad which held the reports from his subordinate ships' captains. The link was established and four holographic humans materialised in front of the admiral on his bridge. All four wore standard Imperial uniforms but represented different organisations. First amongst them was Admiral Sayer's superior Fleet Admiral Vretan who was the commander of the navy's sector group. Beside him was General Dern who commanded Estran's army units and acted as a military advisor to the next figure, Moff Horatian, the governor of the sector. Finally came Director Helieos, the most senior agent of the ISB in the sector. Between them the four men controlled the military, political and internal security apparatus for the entire sector.

"You have something to report admiral?" General Dern asked.

"Yes I do." Admiral Sayer replied, "My ships have intercepted several vessels leaving the nebula."

"What kind of ships?" Admiral Vretan asked him.

"Transports." Admiral Sayer answered, "All of them sheathipede-class ships piloted by droids. We shot most of them down, but my interditors were able to board some of them."

"Separatists." Moff Horatian hissed, scowling, "How many battle droids were they carrying?"

"That's the thing sir," Admiral Sayer said, "They weren't carrying any troops at all. Just a pilot droid aboard each."

"What was their cargo?" Admiral Vretan asked.

"Blaster carbines sir. Each ship we boarded was carrying more than a hundred that looked to be fresh off a production line. Not the usual war surplus junk that keeps turning up. There was also some personal communications equipment, but the blasters made up the bulk of the cargo."

The hologram of Director Helieos appeared to turn towards Moff Horatian.

"Sir I think it obvious that the Separatists are trying to arm someone in the sector. Most likely the rebel alliance."

"I disagree." General Dern responded.

"Really?" Moff Horatian asked, "Why?"

"Because we've already seen the separatists engaging the rebel fleet." Fleet Admiral Vretan answered before the general could, "The rebels used my ships as cover to retreat."

"How many ships are we talking about exactly admiral?" the moff asked.

"Seventeen." Admiral Sayer said and then he noticed a pair of fleet troopers entering the bridge of the *Pride of the Empire* carrying a packing case between them, "Ah, here we are," he added, "I had these transferred from the *Wrath of Eternity*." and as the case was set down at his feet the admiral crouched down, opened it and took out one of the five carbines it held, "As you can see this shows no signs of having been used beyond proof firing." he said as he held up the weapon.



"And the separatists tried to smuggle more than a thousand of these through your blockade?" Director Helieos said.

"Yes director." Admiral Sayer said, "But three of my ships also reported the energy spikes of small craft jumping to hyperspace before they could intercept them and I suspect-

"You suspect that three hundred military grade weapons have just been smuggled into the sector." Moff Horatian said before the admiral could finish.

"Yes sir."

Moff Horatian's hologram looked at that of Director Helieos.

"Find them." he said, "I don't care what you have to do, I want those weapons out of circulation before someone can use them."

"Yes sir." Director Helieos replied, "Though I think that we ought to warn the Sector Rangers as well. Sending so many ships at once suggests that whoever sent them was desperate for at least some of them to get through and that suggests to me that an attack is imminent."

General Dern nodded.

"He's right sir." he said in agreement, "We should definitely raise the terror alert."

"The problem," Fleet Admiral Vretan began, "is that those weapons could be anywhere in the sector by now. I've got a bad feeling that the first time we'll see them is when they're used against us."

Rather than landing the sheathipede-class transports on Estran and risk having them recognised, the Church Of Infinity had the blasters transferred to a more anonymous freighter that then brought them to the sector's capital world. There was still the matter of getting the weapons past customs, but the church had centuries of experience in avoiding such checks and by carefully plotting the freighter's approach it was possible to drop the weapons from the air into the ocean in cases fitted with floatation bags where they were then retrieved by trusted church members on repulsorlift vehicles.

Now Darall waited with just a handful of guards in a forest clearing for Foran and some of his men to arrive and collect them. There was still the possibility that Foran and his men would attack Darall and his men so the engines of their speeders were left running ready for a quick getaway, but Darall hoped that the PLAE would be too eager to establish a consistent supply line to kill those who were offering to set it up.

A sudden 'Snap!' heralded the arrival of Foran and his men as one of them accidentally stood on a fallen stick and Darall and his men all turned to face the direction of the sound, those with weapons raising them.

"You seem jittery priest." Foran said as he stepped into the clearing from the opposite direction, "Now if you don't mind I'd like your men to lower their weapons while I inspect what you have brought to us."

"Of course." Darall replied, signalling to his guards to lower their weapons. Foran and more of his men then entered the clearing and approached the stack of crates that had been offloaded from the speeders. Picking one at random Foran opened a crate and took out both a blaster and a power cell that he promptly loaded into the weapon.

"This is brand new." he said as he lifted the carbine to his shoulder and stared down the sight, pointing the carbine at Darall, "Yet it is of a type not manufactured since the end of the Clone Wars." and he held the weapon trained on Darall as he waited for a reply.

"As I understand it," Darall replied, trying to appear unconcerned about having a blaster aimed directly at his chest, "these were recovered by clone forces at the end of the war before they could reach the front line. They've been in storage on Allastra since then and-

"And given the corruption that is rife on that world it was easy to put a few credits into the right hands for you to have them officially misplaced. Am I right?" Foran interrupted and Darall smiled.

"We have members with many different occupations." he replied, "They simply moved a few numbers about and now you have enough blasters to equip a brigade of troops."

"So long as they like carbines." one of Foran's men commented as he inspected a weapon.

"Come now Tristus," Foran said, lowering the carbine he held and turning away from Darall, "You know as well as I do that this is the largest single weapons shipment that we've had since the end of the Clone Wars. You should also know that this is just a beginning. Isn't it Mister Harber?" he added and he glanced back towards Darall who smiled in return.

"Of course it is." he said, "My contacts inform me that there are warehouses full of this stuff on Allastra. Not just obsolete carbines either. Most of the weapons that were owned by the Allastran Defence Forces before the Empire disbanded them have yet to be redistributed to Imperial units and that includes their support weapons and artillery."

"Artillery?" one of Foran's men said, snorting, "We've no use for artillery."

"Not yet no." Foran said, "But sooner or later we will have to engage our occupiers in open battle and we will need it then. In the meantime the ammunition for such weapons can be dismantled for use in IEDs."

"I have something more for you as well." Darall said and he reached into his speeder and removed another case of similar design to the ones holding the blasters and then opened it.

"Comlinks?" one of Foran's men asked when he saw the headsets.

"Indeed." Darall replied, "I am told by those who know more about these than I do that they are military issue digital communicators with built in frequency hopping and eight kilobit encryption."

"The Separatists never used that sort of kit." the same man commented.

"No." Darall agreed, "These came from an ADF stockpile instead. I thought that having reliable battlefield communications would help you co-ordinate your attacks."

"Yes it will." Foran said. Then he looked at his men, "Okay get this all loaded aboard the transports. We'll do a full inventory when we get back to the warehouse."

## 4.

The weapons were closely examined as the PLAE terrorists unpacked them. This was the largest single hoard of weaponry to have come into the organisation's possession in living memory and its members were used to having to weed out faulty examples from batches obtained from one unreliable source or another. However, the three hundred carbines were all flawless with none requiring even any basic maintenance let alone scrapping completely owing to their being as dangerous to anyone attempting to use them as to the intended target.

"Perhaps we should have looked for off world sources sooner." one of Foran's lieutenants hissed, glancing at his leader and Foran spun around to face him.

"Let others deal with outsiders comrade." he replied, "Our future should not rely on making ourselves dependent on them." then, with one of the carbines still in his hand he strode towards a large table on which a map had been rolled out and been marked to show information obtained about the area shown that was not included on the map itself, "For example, our first target will be the barracks at Mollo Ridge where these three hundred weapons will net us more than a thousand more including the heavy weapons that some of you are so concerned we are missing."

"Mollo Ridge has always been considered too strong for us to stand a reasonable chance of gaining entry long enough to secure its armoury." another of Foran's lieutenants said.

"Maybe in the past Comrade Toker." Foran replied, "But with these new weapons we can arm a large enough number of our people to launch an assault with reasonable expectation of success."

"The Empire will react." the only woman among Foran's lieutenants commented.

"Of course they will." Foran said, "And they will trumpet their successful defence of the installation to everyone via their media lapdogs. But in truth Mollo Ridge is too remote for them to get help there before we can penetrate its defences. The Empire can have all the reporters walk around the perimeter and confirm that they still control the base after the attack when in fact we will have already taken whatever we want from its armoury."

"I've still got a bad feeling about it." the woman said, "Comrade Fallir, I feel that we should be more patient. Spread these weapons around our cells so that they can attack the enemy in dozens of places rather than just one. That way-

"That way we inflict nothing but pinpricks on the Empire!" Foran yelled and he lashing out, grabbing the woman by her throat and gripping it tightly, "We need to inflict serious defeats on them and only the weapons at Mollo Ridge will allow us to do that. Or are you content to wage this war from the shadows forever Comrade Gyano?"

"No Comrade Fallir." Gyano croaked as she tried to pry Foran's fingers free of her throat. Then Foran pushed her and let go, sending her falling backwards.

"I need a list of the troops best suited to an attack like this." Foran said, looking at each of his lieutenants in turn, "Give me only our most loyal comrades. I will take personal command of this mission and when I am done we will have all the weapons we could possibly need. The weapons being offered by those religious fools from the Church Of Infinity will be nothing compared to what we will have by this time next week." and he grinned.

Meanwhile across the interior of the warehouse the storage cases holding the blasters went unwatched, as did the single case containing the comlinks that were able to pick up every word spoken and secretly transmit it back to the individual who had rigged them to operate as covert bugs.

"So, the PLAE is going to attack Mollo Ridge." Darall said as he leant back in his chair and listened to the recordings of what the comlinks had picked up.

"Where is Mollo Ridge?" Horsa asked.

"On the other side of the planet." Darall replied, "I'm not terribly familiar with it though, I've never been anywhere close to it."

"You will see to it that the attack fails?" Horsa said.

"Easily." Darall answered, "Thanks to the listening devices we supplied we now know Fallir's entire plan of attack."

"Yes, but he indicated that he would be leading the attack himself Darall. He must not be harmed. How will you ensure this?"

"I don't think I'll need to." Darall replied, "Look, Fallir is not a soldier. He's a thug and a bully. He may be leading the attack but mark my words he'll be leading this attack from the rear, probably making sure that he gets to move forwards just as the fighting is over so that all his men will see him near the front and let him claim to have been heavily involved in the fighting. But when things start to go wrong he'll make sure that

he's got a way out. Probably one that will get most of his minions killed to save him. The last thing he needs is witnesses to tell how he ran away when the going got tough."

"So how do you intend to counter the attack?" Horsa asked.

"We already know that the authorities are expecting an attack somewhere. So that means they'll be listening for chatter relating to any potential target. All we need to do is seed various communications networks with messages relating to Mollo Ridge. Then we'll call in an anonymous tip to the Sector Rangers who given the raised state of alert will have to act. They normally wouldn't do much on the basis of just one call they can't verify but given the heightened state of alert they'll pass it on to the ISB so when the tip turns out to be accurate they'll be able to claim that they warned the Imperial authorities like they were supposed to."

Horsa bowed his head.

"Continue," he said, "But remember, we need Fallir alive and still at large."

"Ah, Corvin." Moff Horatian said as Director Helieos entered his office, "What can I do for you?"

"I'm sorry to be disturbing you at such short notice sir," the director replied, "But I think we could have identified the target of the terrorist attack we've been expecting," and he held out a datapad for the moff to see.

"Mollo Ridge?" Moff Horatian said as he studied the report.

"Yes sir," Director Helieos said as he sat down, "The barracks there isn't an Imperial facility, it belongs to the Estranian Defence Forces."

"Yes, I know the name," Moff Horatian said, "It's one of those bases that was supposedly attacked by the rebels about five or six years ago."

"Ah yes, the false flag operations our allies in the Estranian government carried out to boost support for our counter terrorism operations," Director Helieos added, nodding, "Well now it seems that the Estranian government uses the barracks at Mollo Ridge to store a lot of the heavy weaponry that they mothballed after the Clone Wars. Stuff too old for us to be interested in but too valuable for them to scrap and too dangerous to be sold as surplus."

"I think we ought to bring General Dern in on this," Moff Horatian said and when he activated his intercom a small holographic image of the general appeared above his desk.

"Ah, moff Horatian," the general said.

"Julius I need to see you in my office immediately," Moff Horatian told him, "Director Helieos has uncovered more information regarding an imminent terrorist attack."

"I'll be right there sir," the general replied and the hologram vanished.

Shortly after the door to Moff Horatian's office opened and the general entered in person.

"Take a seat general," Moff Horatian said, "I'll let the director explain what he's found."

"Yes sir," General Dern replied, heading for the chair beside Director Helieos'.

"We've been listening to the usual sources of course," the director said as soon as the general had sat down,

"There was the usual nonsense, but we picked up rather a lot of odd references to a location named only as 'the ridge.' Then this morning the Sector Rangers received an anonymous tip about an attack on the EDF barracks at Mollo Ridge. The informant claimed that the terrorists were massing an army."

"Did the Sector Rangers consider the informant credible then?" General Dern asked.

"Normally they wouldn't have put much faith in it," Director Helieos replied, "But right now they're passing along every bit of poodoo they get just in case some of it turns out to be relevant and they get accused of missing it."

"So they're covering themselves," Moff Horatian commented.

"Exactly," Director Helieos said, "Fortunately we had the communications intercepts that tied in nicely with the tip off."

"So how do we handle this?" Moff Horatian asked, turning to General Dern.

"That depends very much on what we want to achieve," he answered, "If all we're interested in is defending the base then we can reinforce the EDF troops there with a brigade of stormtroopers."

"That will likely scare off the terrorists," Director Helieos pointed out, "The thing about terrorists is that they don't like stand up fights."

"But the base would be protected," General Dern replied, "Now if we want to actually eliminate the terrorists then we need to be far more cautious. We'll need to either build up the base defences more subtly, though that will take time. Or we position reinforcements close by ready to respond."

"On the other hand we could ignore caution and be more callous," Director Helieos said, "We know that the PLAE intend to over run that base and probably loot its stores, which I might add consist of some hardware dangerous even to your AT-ATs general. So we let them."

"Surely you're not suggesting we let them have the weapons director?" Moff Horatian asked.

"Of course not sir," Director Helieos replied, "I'm suggesting that we have Fleet Admiral Vretan position a ship in high orbit and when the time is right have it conduct a missile bombardment of the base, taking out the terrorists and the weapons stockpile that frankly the Estranian government doesn't need."

"It would also kill any of the EDF troops not already murdered by the terrorists." General Dern added.

"That is unacceptable." Moff Horatian said, "I want the terrorists prevented from seizing those weapons without resorting to an orbital bombardment that could turn into a public relations nightmare. Especially if it turns out that EDF troops were killed by it."

"Then we provide reinforcements ready to react to any attack on the Mollo Ridge facility." General Dern said, "I can have a stormtrooper brigade ready."

"No." Director Helieos interrupted, "Moff, I believe that it may be possible to insert additional troops into the base covertly but we have to do it very carefully. If we start loading stormtroopers onto transports then their support staff are going to start talking and the PLAE may get wind of the operation. But if we select forces that are supported by a more reliable system and move them under cover of normal base operations then we ought to be able to foil any surveillance that the PLAE is conducting."

"Let me guess," General Dern said, "COMPForce."

COMPForce was the military wing of the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order or COMPNOR, a massive galaxy spanning organisation that had its origins as a social organisation for politically motivated supporters of the Emperor but that was now intertwined with the Imperial government itself. The ISB was a division of COMPNOR and so could easily be called upon COMPForce when necessary.

"That's right. Let's face it they're perfectly suited to this sort of operation." Director Helieos replied, "any movement of their forces can easily be disguised as any number of normal operations."

General Dern considered this for a moment.

"Tell me what you're thinking of exactly." he said.

"Hello?" Darall asked as he rushed to answer the communicator set into his desk.

"Your Eminence." Martus' voice said, "I have news for you."

"Go ahead." Darall told him.

"I thought you may be interested to know that a company of COMPForce assault troopers has just been mobilised for deployment to the area around Mollo Ridge. No regular army or stormtrooper units are being involved."

Darall smiled. A deployment of that size meant that the Empire was planning on tricking the PLAE into attacking a base that was more heavily defended than they were expecting. Foran Fallir was walking into a trap.

"Excellent." Darall said to Martus, "Keep me informed."

"Yes Eminence." Martus replied and then the channel went silent.

## 5.

The EDF barracks at Mollo Ridge were typical of modern military architecture. The entire base was surrounded not only by tall electrified fences but also trenches to confound attacks by walkers, and reinforced obstacles to defeat wheeled or tracked vehicles as well as low altitude repulsorlifts. All of these inert defences were backed up by shielded watchtowers and strong points that the defending troops could occupy while they opened fire on any attackers from relative safety. To make the job of the defenders easier the area beyond the fence, trenches and obstacles had been cleared of all natural cover to create a kill zone that was fully covered by the defensive positions.

But there was one glaring weakness with the barracks. For all the formidable defences it did possess it did not have enough men stationed there to man them all and Foran's plan was simply to launch attacks at several points around the perimeter using around a hundred of his troops before sending the remaining two hundred towards wherever the EDF troops were weakest. Once inside the perimeter the PLAE would occupy the strong points themselves and make for the armoury. No prisoners would be taken and PLAE literature would be left spread all over the base. Foran wanted the Empire and the planetary government to know just who it was that had beaten them.

For more than two days Foran's scouts had been keeping watch on all comings and goings at the barracks but there had been no signs of any unusual activity. The only vehicles to have arrived were the expected supply trucks and also three more large containers of munitions that had been transferred directly to the armoury. This had made Foran smile. The Empire was literally handing him even more weaponry it seemed, even though it had meant that the PLAE had had to acquire several extra transports to carry it all in. These transports were simple civilian repulsorlift vehicles that would be kept back from the fighting until the main gate to the barracks had been secured.

"Comrade Fallir." a voice hissed and Foran looked around to see one of his scouts approaching, keeping low even though they were more than a kilometre from the barracks.

"Yes comrade? What is it?" Foran asked.

"My men have all reported in. They are in position."

"Then we shall begin." Foran replied and he pressed a hand to the headset comlink he wore, one of those provided by the Church Of Infinity, "Commence." he said simply.

The sound of a repulsorlift engine made the two sentries on duty at the gate turn to face up the single road that crossed the kill zone outside the barracks perimeter and led to their position.

"Single speeder approaching." one said into his comlink, "Stand by." then the sentries unslung their weapons as they prepared to challenge the driver.

The approaching landspeeder began to decelerate as it drew closer to the guard post at the gate, reassuring the two sentries that it was not hostile. According to their training an attacker was more likely to want to clear the kill zone as quickly as possible. The speeder continued to slow down and as it drew close to the guard post the two sentries got a look at the sole occupant of the vehicle. The figure sat hunched over the controls wearing a coat and hat that concealed his or her features. But since the vehicle was not making any overtly aggressive moves the guards remained unconcerned.

"I need your ID." the first guard said as the speeder came to a complete stop just a few metres from the gate and both sentries walked towards it. But the driver did not reply, "I said I need ID." the guard repeated, "And your reason for being here." but still there was no reply. Frustrated the guard reached out his arm as he reached the landspeeder and ripped the hat away from the driver to reveal a droid underneath.

"I am here to deliver a message from my master." the droid said flatly, turning its head towards the sentry, "Estran will be free." and at that point the home made explosive with which the landspeeder had been loaded were detonated by wireless signal.

Klaxons sounded as the explosion alerted the base personnel to the fact that they were under attack. A squad of soldiers rushed to the main gate not only to reinforce the section that appeared to be under attack but also to check for any survivors amongst the sentries. Both of the men to have approached the speeder were dead however, their bodies flung far from the now burning remains of the landspeeder by the force of the blast. The explosion had also heavily damaged both the guard post beside the main gate and also the mechanism that would raise a heavily armoured barrier from under the road to block the gate entirely.

"Squad Besh to control." the sergeant signalled, "Main gate compromised. Two dead, no signs of further attackers."

"Copy that Besh leader." the base control centre responded, "Hold position and stand by." then as the sergeant began to deploy his men there was the sound of blaster fire from the far side of the perimeter.

A group of around twenty PLAE gunmen came running across the kill zone, firing their carbines on fully automatic as they ran. The kill zone was large enough that their weapons lacked the range for them to be able to pick out any meaningful targets, but it did concentrate the minds of the base's defenders on their position. However, before any of the watchtowers could return fire the gunmen also hurled smoke grenades that limited the ability of the defending troops to shoot back. The gunmen ran as far as the obstacles and trenches that formed part of the base defences and took up positions behind them, turning the base fortifications into their own defensive positions. From here they could also hit the perimeter more accurately and they continued to fire their weapons on automatic as more troops were rushed to take up positions in the strong points facing them to attack.

The wind carried the smoke around the base and as it crossed in front of another of the PLAE groups they made use of it to conceal themselves as they slowly crawled towards the perimeter, holding their fire to keep their presence a secret. Picking their way through the defensive obstacles this team was able to cross the anti-walker trench undetected and while most of them lay prone a pair of them lit the fuse of an explosive that had been strapped to a worn out tyre taken from a ground vehicle and then pushed it towards the perimeter fence.

"Over there!" a guard yelled from his watchtower as he spotted the crude weapon rolling towards the fence and he aimed his rifle towards it, guessing what it was designed to do and hoping to cause it to detonate too early to inflict any damage. But his shouted warning also alerted the gunmen hiding beyond the perimeter to his presence and they opened fire before he could. The structure of the watchtower was designed to resist small arms fire and given that none of the shot struck the guard directly he was unharmed, but taken by surprise by this sudden barrage of fire against him he ducked back rather than fire at the explosive rolling closer and just seconds later there was another explosion as a hole was blasted in the perimeter fence.

COMPForce Major Kramm looked up as his second in command Captain Layne strode up to him with his helmet in his hand.

"What's going on?" the major asked.

"The local boys are reporting that they're being attacked from five different points on the perimeter now." the captain replied, "Their commander is asking when we're going to deploy to help them."

Kramm snorted.

"Tell him we'll act when we're good and ready. We were sent here to eliminate those terrorists, not babysit his men." then he looked around at his men amongst the stacks of packing cases, "Stand by!" he yelled, "And make sure your helmet seals are secure."

## 6.

“Comrade Fallir, the enemy appear to be falling back on their western front.” the leader of the gunmen attacking the barracks to the west transmitted, “My troops have reached the fence and are in the process of cutting through.”

“Hold your position.” Foran ordered, “Do not give the enemy the impression that you are trying to break through just yet. I'm moving the assault force around to you now.”

Then before Foran could signal the large force he had held in reserve for just this situation he saw the group of terrorists he had picked to fight alongside him personally picking up their weapons.

“Don't be in such a hurry.” he told them, “We must make sure that our forces can breach the perimeter before we join them.”

More smoke was released by the attacking forces all around the perimeter to cover the build up to the west and when the fence was finally blown wide open there were enough PALE gunmen right outside to rush through and overwhelm the handful of EDF defenders still positioned there. The first of the attacking PLAE forces to gain access to the base headed directly for the nearby strong points and took up positions inside them. Though they had been designed primarily to defend against external attack, they also allowed the occupants to fight off either infiltrators who may have been able to penetrate the outer perimeter or mutineers who would be attacking from within. This meant that the strong points were as much use to the PLAE as to the EDF troops.

The retreating defenders took up positions in buildings further inside the perimeter. But though well built these lacked the same level of armour protection as the strong points and had not been built with any thought to the fields of fire available from their various doors and windows. Exploiting the gaps in defensive fire that these flaws produced the PLAE gunmen proceeded towards the entrance to the underground armoury building.

“This is it.” Foran told his men, “We're going in. Have the transports move to the main gate and make sure that someone's available to secure it.”

There was only sporadic weapons fire as the first group of PLAE gunmen approached the large heavily armoured blast doors that gave access to the underground armoury. The defending EDF troops had not stationed any guards here to try and protect the armoury. Why that was remained a mystery to the leader of the PLAE gunmen who were the first to make it there but despite there being no guards anywhere to be seen the blast door itself was still a formidable obstacle to them. Too tough to be damaged by any of the weapons that they had brought with them the PLAE had to rely on their ability to override the locking mechanism to gain entry.

Foran picked his way carefully through the breach in the perimeter fence. The bodies here were all of PLAE members and he was in no hurry to be among them when the mission was complete. According to the messages he had been receiving the EDF defenders had pulled back to their command centre and were now surrounded, but there was always the chance that a small number of them had remained behind to ambush the PLAE from behind their positions. Then Foran noticed a corpse that was not one of his own men and he stopped to examine it. The soldier was clothed in the standard combat fatigues of the Estranian Defence Forces and his weaponry was also standard issue. But there was something that looked out of place to Foran and it was only when he checked the equipment on the dead soldier's belt that he realised what it was. The soldier carried a bulky pouch that contained a breath mask that would cover the wearer's entire face and slipped into a side pocket of this pouch was an auto-injector unit loaded with a stimulant cocktail that would negate the effects of certain chemical agents. Neither of these was standard equipment for someone assigned to guard a relatively minor and out of the way outpost.

“I've got a bad feeling about this.” Foran said to himself.

“What's wrong Comrade Fallir?” one of his men asked.

“There may be more here than we expected.” Foran replied as he removed the pouch from the dead soldier and slung it over his shoulder while tucking the auto-injector into his pocket, “Come on, we need to get to the armoury. I want to be there when it is opened.”

The blast door rumbled as the lock was overridden and the motors came to life, moving the two halves apart. “Got it!” the PALE member stood beside the exposed circuitry beside the door exclaimed and as he stepped to the side to look through the widening gap between the doors he produced a glow rod that he shone inside



so that he could see what the armoury contained. When he saw what was waiting for him and his comrades his jaw dropped, "Oh kriff." he said.

"Now!" Major Kramm yelled, the comlink built into his helmet broadcasting his words not only to the COMPForce assault company that had been smuggled into the armoury in shipping containers but also to the barracks' command and control centre. At the same time he fired a single shot from his rifle that struck the PLAE man with the glow rod in his chest and sent him toppling backwards. Then before any of the other gunmen could react a group of COMPForce assault troopers raised their bulky weapons, aimed them out of the armoury and opened fire. The noise produced was not the explosion of blaster fire or even the sharp 'crack' of a firearm. Instead each pull of the trigger produced a sudden 'Pop!' as a canister was propelled out into the open. The first of the canisters landed right at the feet of the PLAE gunmen before it burst open, releasing a cloud that expanded rapidly.

The effect of the cloud on those who came into contact with it was rapid and dramatic, it was not even necessary to inhale the gas, just having it come into contact with exposed skin was enough to trigger a reaction. A stinging sensation swiftly became a painful burning one and the affected body parts began to blister. The victims fell to the ground, coughing and screaming as they vomited and blood began to seep from their orifices. The screams ceased shortly after as they began to convulse wildly when all voluntary muscle control was lost. The convulsions stopped only when the loss of muscle control also affected the involuntary and the victims hearts stopped. From initial exposure to death took less than thirty seconds. Meanwhile Major Kramm waved his troops forwards and as they advanced they fired more of the deadly nerve gas canisters. The canisters were fired in pairs, with the first round being aimed high so that it flew over the heads of the PLAE gunmen and hit the ground on the far side of them. When these burst open the gas they released created a screen that the gunmen could not retreat through. Then the second canister out of the pair was aimed level, directly into the gunmen and fired to go off amongst them. Each squad of COMPForce assault troopers was equipped with two of the projectile launchers and the remaining troops used their rifles both to cover the gunners while they reloaded their weapon's four round magazines and also to pick off any of the terrorists who managed to evade the cloud of deadly gas.

Word that the barracks' defenders had resorted to the use of nerve gas spread quickly and some of the PLAE members located further away from the armoury considered withdrawing before they too could be gassed. But most of these gunmen were located in the barracks' own strong points and there was another unpleasant surprise in store for them. Before they could leave the armoured strong points any open hatches suddenly slid shut and all of the locking mechanisms activated to seal them inside. Then they heard a soft hissing sound and began to panic as they realised what was happening.

Each strong point was designed to resist chemical and biological attack despite featuring narrow openings through which personal weapons could be fired outside. To prevent toxins seeping in through these opening the strong points were all equipped with overpressure systems that pumped extra air into them that would force air out through the openings rather than allowing toxins in. This system made use of a central reservoir of air that could be pumped to the strong points but could just as easily be used to pump more nerve gas into them simply by altering the central source.

Darall smiled to himself as he listened to the transmissions coming from the PLAE terrorists attacking the barracks. They had launched an attack that had been well co-ordinated for a terrorist force, but the sudden intervention of a previously unknown to them force of COMPForce assault troopers making use of Fex/M3 nerve gas had thrown their entire strategy into disarray. Now they were being routed, but with the Empire's widespread use of gas their escape routes were being cut off before they could use them. But what made Darall smile was the news spreading amongst the terrorists who had yet to succumb to the gas that their leader had abandoned them. Just as Darall had predicted. Leaning forwards Darall switched the communicator on his desk to the intercom setting.

"Clear all my appointments for the rest of the day." he said, "I'm expecting to hear from our new friend soon and I don't want to keep him waiting."

"Comrade Fallir! What's happening?" one of Foran's men exclaimed as he looked around. In every direction clouds of gas were growing and cutting the PLAE force off from any avenue of retreat.

"It's a trap!" another man yelled, "We need to get out of here!" and then he dropped his weapon and began to run back towards the opening in the fence that they had come through. However he soon came into contact with one of the expanding and drifting clouds of gas and he collapsed into a heap, vomiting and convulsing. Foran pulled the breath mask from its pouch and pulled it over his head before the gas could reach him. Then grabbing the auto-injector he pressed it against his leg and triggered it, wincing as the device forced the counter agent through the fabric of his clothing, his skin and into his bloodstream in the fastest way possible.

"What are you doing?" one of his men asked.

"Getting out of here." Foran replied but as he took a step in the direction of the breach in the fence one of his

men stepped in front of him.

"But what about us?" he asked.

"You're welcome to follow me if you want." Foran said, "But from the look of that cloud I think you'd be better off looking for a different way out." and then he pushed the man out of his way and broke into a run.

The wings of the lambda-class shuttle folded up either side of the large tail fin as the craft came in to land at the barracks. There was a hiss as the access ramp lowered and then General Dern came striding down it. Though the area was reported to be secure he still wore an armoured vest and was flanked by a pair of stormtrooper bodyguards.

"Report major." he said to Major Kramm who waited for him at the bottom of the ramp. With the gas now cleared he had removed his helmet and it dangled from where he had hung it on his belt.

"The mission was a success general." the major replied, "Our victory was total. Best guess has fewer than ten of the terrorists escaping."

"What about our losses?" the general asked in response.

"Light." Major Kramm answered, "Only four of my men were killed. The EDF guys lost more though, even a controlled retreat can't be done without loss. The base commander indicates that he's got just over a dozen dead."

"So fewer than twenty casualties." General Dern said, "What about the terrorists?" and Major Kramm grinned.

"We haven't bothered counting sir. There are too many." he said.

"Well find someone that can be bothered." the general said sternly, "I want to know the figure."

"Of course sir." Major Kramm said, "But I can guarantee that they lost at least ten for every one of us that got vaped. That Fex em-three gas does that when you've not got the benefit of sealed armour or the counter agent. If you ask me we should use more of it."

General Dern frowned, guessing that the major was the sort of person who would happily turn the lethal nerve gas on crowds of unarmed protesters.

"Just get on with your work major. I'm not interested in your opinion." he replied.

"Yes." Major Kramm said saluting and after a brief pause finally adding the word, "Sir."

"A unfortunate result." Darall said, looking out of his window into the rainy night, "Most unfortunate indeed. So almost every one of the weapons that we were able to provide you with was lost then? A pity. We should be able to obtain more of course. That shipment was only ever intended to be an initial drop. There will be a delay though, I'm sure that you can understand that even with contacts on most of the settled worlds in this sector there are still limits to my influence. Particularly when it comes to diverting military supplies from secure storage areas." then Darall sighed, turned around and returned to his chair, "But I feel that I ought to raise the issue of leadership with you." he went on, "Frankly I feel that the assault on the Mollo Ridge barracks was poorly planned. Now I accept that it was poor fortune that allowed the Empire to guess that you would attack that base but with just a little more patience it should have been possible to predict the presence of reinforcements hidden inside the armoury. After all you can't keep more than a hundred men cooped up in an underground bunker for a prolonged length of time can you?" Darall then paused again, "But I don't think that we should lose sight of the opportunity that we have here. After all now that the Church Of Infinity has agreed to supply the People's Liberation Army of Estran with weapons I think that it would be a mistake for us not to also offer our assessment of your operations. After all we do have members in many branches of both the local and Imperial sector governments and they should be able to provide you with a decided advantage if you want to try and seize control. I'm sure either of you would have handled this whole situation better than Mister Fallir has done." and then he stared very hard into the eyes of the PLAE lieutenants Gyano and Toker who were sat opposite him.