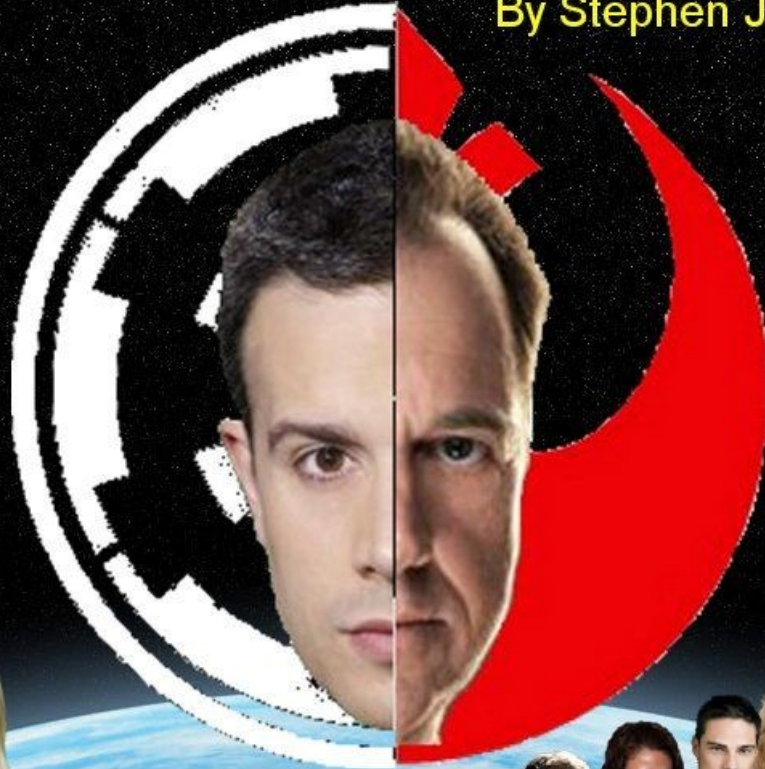


STAR WARS

3-03: Conflict of Interest

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...

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

ORDERED TO ASSIST WITH BRINGING AN INDEPENDENT RESISTANCE GROUP INTO THE ALLIANCE, VORN LARCUS III DISCOVERS A DISTURBING LINK TO THE DEATH OF HIS WIFE MANY YEARS EARLIER. BUT CAN HE CONVINCE HIS SUPERIORS THAT THE RESISTANCE IS NOT ALL IT SEEMS TO BE...?

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

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1.

Lord Vorn Larcus III exhaled heavily as he sat down after a long day of hearing petitions from his constituents. Right now he was alone in his mansion, aside from droids of course. His son Garm was attending a COMPNOR meeting at university, while his daughter Lyssa had been chosen to be part of an organising committee for an upcoming school dance so she was probably explaining to her class mates why her taste was so much better than theirs. Finally there was his wife. Where was she? Vorn looked up at the wall-mounted chronometer and noticed that she would normally have been home long before now. Just then he was interrupted by a knock on the study door.

"Come." He said and the door opened to reveal a heavily polished gold coloured protocol droid, "What is it Jeeves?" he asked.

"I'm sorry to disturb you Lord Larcus," the droid replied, "but there are two members of the Estranian Police Department here to speak with you on a matter of some urgency."

NEWS/ESTRAN NODE – It has been confirmed that Moff Gullian Krest has been killed in a tragic accident today. An automated public transport went out of control and left the highway while crossing a bridge and plummeted down to another highway running beneath it just as the Moff's speeder was passing. The moff is one of more than thirty people believed killed today, amongst them Lady Hallanah Larcus, wife of Estranian Parliamentarian Lord Vorn Larcus...

Fifteen years later...

Tharun Verser, mercenary turned rebel fighter opened his eyes and from the arm draped over him from behind he realised that he had not spent the night alone and he smiled. Then a thought struck him; he had no idea who this woman was. He had drunk heavily the previous evening and had no memory of the events leading up to his coming here. There was a soft moan from behind him as the woman began to stir. There was only one thing for it, he decided and Tharun rolled over to see who it was.

"What the hell was that?" Kara Bilstran asked as she awoke with a start. She, like several others from her rebel unit had spent the night in one of the handful of cantinas that had been set up on the Alliance safe world. Behind the deserted bar Mace Grayle, captain of the freighter *Silver Hawk* was pouring himself a drink.

"I think," Mace said, glancing upwards, "that Tharun is awake."

"Her too?" Kara asked, smiling.

"I did hear two screams." Mace replied.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Lyssa Larcus yelled at Tharun. She as stood to one side of the bed with a blanket wrapped around her while Tharun stood on the opposite side holding a pillow to his waist.

"Ah, well." Was all Tharun could think to say.

"How could you take advantage of me like that?"

"What? I didn't – Ah, that is I don't remember-"

"You don't remember? When my father hears of this he'll-"

"Oh now wait," Tharun said, "how about we just leave the major out of this?"

"Oh you'd like that wouldn't you? Well I intend to tell him everything. Now where are my clothes?" and Lyssa looked around the room.

"Hang on," Tharun added as he too looked around, "where are mine?"

Just then the door opened and a gold-coloured protocol droid entered the room carrying a bundle of folded clothing.

"Good morning Miss Lyssa, Sergeant Verser." The droid said in female tones, "I have cleaned and pressed your clothing just as Miss Lyssa requested."

"I requested Emsee?" Lyssa asked.

"Oh yes miss, while you were removing them from the sergeant. He was somewhat the worse for drink at the time and required considerable assistance from you."

Lyssa's eyes widened.

"You." Tharun said, pointing at Lyssa, "You took advantage of me!"

"I have also submitted the form for processing Miss Lyssa." Emsee went on, "Though I feel I should remind you that as I stated last night, I am not certain that a droid such as myself is authorised to act as such a witness. Especially when it is the property of one of the parties involved."

"A witness?" Lyssa said, "A witness to what?"

"Oh no." Tharun said, "I've got a really bad feeling about this."

When Tharun came down the stairs he found both Kara and Mace staring at him.

"Sleep well?" Kara asked, a wide grin on her face, but Tharun just frowned.

"Now, now Kara." Mace said, "You know a gentleman will never kiss and tell."

"But it's Tharun." Kara said, turning her gaze to Mace, "Not a gentleman."

"So it is." Mace replied, "So Sergeant Verser, how was your night?"

"Look," Tharun said, "is there any way we can just keep this between us?"

"Oh you've nothing to fear from either of us." Kara reassured Tharun and he let out a sigh of relief.

"Indeed," Mace said, "I'm sure Jaysica will tell the major before either of us get the chance."

Tharun looked around.

"Where is she?" he asked, "Look, this is serious, if the major finds out I – well I –"

"You'll what sergeant?" Mace said.

Tharun shook his head.

"Can we just go?"

"Love them and leave them eh?" Kara said.

"Come on." Mace said, "We're wanted back at headquarters anyway. The major's been there all the time we've been here. He sent me a message late last night asking us to return, but since you were busy I put him off."

"So he's not been around then?" Tharun asked.

"No." Kara replied, "So maybe you'll get away with it. Providing neither the klutz or the major's little princess herself tell him."

"Let's just go." Tharun said and he stormed past Kara and Mace and out of the cantina.

"Touchy isn't he?" Kara said.

"Yes. Though you'd think he'd be more relaxed."

Major Vorn Larcus was looking at a holographic display of his home world of Estran when he heard footsteps. Looking over his shoulder he saw a group of five people, Mace and his engineer Tobis as well as the three rebels under Vorn's immediate command.

"So is this what you've been up to while we've been resting major?" Mace called out, "Watching old home movies?"

"Well some of us were resting more than others." Kara muttered and Tharun threw her an icy stare.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Vorn asked.

"Oh!" Jaysica exclaimed, "I think she's talking about Thar-"

"The major doesn't need to know about that little lady." Tharun said as he grabbed her and clamped a hand over her mouth. Then he whispered into her ear, "Ten credits to keep your little mouth shut about that."

"We've been ordered back to Estran." Vorn announced, looking at Tharun and Jaysica with a confused look on his face.

"Again?" Jaysica asked.

"Yeah boss," Kara added, "how come we never get to go to my home planet?"

"It's mine too." Jaysica said as she pulled Tharun's hand from her mouth.

"Please don't remind me of that." Kara said, "Every time I think of how we're from the same place I'm amazed I survived long enough to get off it without you blowing it up by accident."

"I did actually call you all here for a reason." Vorn said.

"Do go on please major." Mace said as he took a seat on one of the benches arranged around the display.

"Well as I'm sure you all know the Alliance is not the only organisation fighting the Empire." Vorn explained as the others also sat down, "Its just that we're the only group with a galaxy-wide organisation."

"Let me guess," Mace said, "we're to check out one of the smaller groups based on Estran."

"Exactly." Vorn replied, "They made contact with us a couple of weeks ago. It seems that was why sector command was wanting us back here."

"You mean while we were gallivanting off through the spire worlds and the nebula after your son?" Kara asked.

Vorn ignored the comment and went on.

"It's a simple mission really-" and at that point the rest of the rebels groaning interrupted him, "What?" he asked.

"Sorry major." Tharun said, "But it's just that 'simple' missions rarely are."

"Especially where Jaysica's involved." Kara added.

"Look," Vorn said, "all we have to do is make contact with these people and try to determine what they need from us and if there's anything they have to offer the Alliance at large. Most of the preliminary work's already been done. We just need to pass a list of their resources on to Shyla for consideration."

"Notice how its just Shyla?" Mace commented, "Not Miss Nerin or Shyla Nerin, head of Support Services Division."

"So how is Shyla boss?" Kara asked, "Seen a lot of her while you've been here?"

"Did you lot suddenly stop being under my command while you were on the safe world?" Vorn said and the others went quiet, "Good. Now get the ship ready for launch because I want to be out of here within the hour."

The *Silver Hawk* was registered perfectly legally with Imperial authorities as an independent trading vessel, so officially it could go wherever it wanted within the boundaries of the Empire, except for restricted security zones. However, given that Mace and his engineer were the only ones not formally listed by the Empire as traitors whenever they visited Estran Mace would set the ship down in one of the more out of the way starports where local officials were too lazy to run proper checks or more easily bought off if they did. Sat alone in the ship's lounge area as Mace brought it in through the atmosphere, Vorn was going over what the Alliance knew about this independent resistance group once again when Kara interrupted him by slamming a sheet of flimsy-plast down in the table.

"Boss I want to go dancing." She said and she slid the sheet towards him.

Vorn looked down and saw that it was an advert for a formal dance to take place in the officers' mess.

"Where did you get that?" Vorn asked, "They're not put up outside of the officers' mess and you're not an officer."

"I sometimes pretend to be looking for you or Mace to get in."

"Does that work?"

"For about long enough to buy a decent drink and steal this."

"But dancing? You?"

Kara slid onto the seat beside Vorn and leant her head on his shoulder.

"Oh please boss. I want to go dancing."

"Dancing?" Tharun said as he emerged from the corridor that led to the crew cabins, "We don't have to dance for this op do we major?"

"No, I'm asking the boss to take me dancing." Kara said, sitting up straight.

Tharun shook his head and sighed.

"My thought's exactly." Vorn said.

Kara then spotted Jaysica coming out of their cabin behind Tharun.

"Hey Jaysical!" she called out, "Come in here and tell the boys how the boss should take me dancing when we get back."

"I don't like dancing." Jaysica replied.

"Fall over a lot little lady?" Tharun asked her.

"Well its really complicated." Jaysica complained.

"Well I can dance and I enjoy it." Kara said, "So I think the boss should take me."

"What about your mysterious boyfriend?" Jaysica asked, referring to man that Kara was dating. So far she had refused to tell Jaysica who it was. All she knew was that they met up when the team got back sector headquarters.

"Oh him? He's not an officer and the dance is at the officer's club. Isn't that so boss?"

"It would appear that way." Vorn said and he set his datapad down on the table, "If I do this will you promise not to embarrass me?"

"No."

"Will you promise to behave yourself?"

"No."

"Will you at least promise not to punch Captain Tarl for a third time if he's there?"

"That's definitely too much to hope for." Tharun said before Kara could reply.

Kara leant her head back on Vorn's shoulder.

"Pretty please boss."

"Oh alright then. Since I'm clearly not going to get any peace until I agree, I will take you to the dance as my guest."

"Thanks boss!" Kara exclaimed and after kissing Vorn on the cheek she got up and ran towards the ship's hold, "I'm off to pick out a dress."

The sound of the *Silver Hawk's* engines changed suddenly and the entire ship shuddered slightly as it touched down.

"Looks like we've arrived." Vorn said as he got up, "Jaysica go get Kara. Remind her we're not at the dance yet and we still have a job to do."

2.

"We're supposed to ask for a ticket to a particular destination." Vorn said as they rebels stood looking at the queues at the public transport centre. From here various monorail trains and repulsorcraft would carry passengers to almost any other settlement on the planet.

"So these guys will be meeting us at the other end then will they major?" Mace asked.

"I don't know." Vorn replied, "All I know is that having these tickets will identify us to the resistance."

"I don't like it major." Tharun said, "They could be dumping us in the middle of nowhere with no way back."

"Why not get a return ticket then?" Jaysica suggested and Kara groaned.

"When you left our home planet the average IQ jumped about thirty points didn't it?" she said.

"I'm still smarter than you. Its in our files." Jaysica replied.

"Wait here while I go get the tickets." Vorn said, ignoring the bickering and he joined the nearest queue.

After a short wait he returned with a ticket for each of them and he handed them around.

"The vendor didn't seem to react at all." He said, "So I'm guessing we need to get on a transport to this place."

"Where is it boss?" Kara asked.

"Vedrick?" Tharun said, "I've heard of it. Its an industrial town about two hundred clicks from here."

"Indeed." Vorn said, "Lots of heavy manufacturing."

"Lord Torr's stomping ground." Tharun added and the rebels all stared at Vorn.

Lord Torr was a rival of his from his days as a member of the Estranian Parliament and had been instrumental in Vorn's expulsion. Since then he had been involved in at least one plot to capture Vorn using a bounty hunter.

"It's in his constituency." Vorn replied, "I don't think there's much danger of him actually turning up here. Now come on, there's a monorail leaving in ten minutes, we may as well be on that."

The monorail cars had been designed with the idea of packing as many seats as possible into the available room and the rebels considered themselves fortunate that unlike many of the other passengers they had not brought along large amounts of luggage, just a few smaller bags containing their more concealable weapons.

"Your tickets?" a conductor asked. Unlike many more upmarket modes of travel, this monorail used a single living being to check tickets rather than using a droid brain with multiple interfaces that could simultaneously handle inquiries from all of the passengers at once.

Individually the rebels held out their tickets, all avoiding eye contact with the conductor and the man took them one at a time, verified that they were valid and then returned them to the rebels. It was as Vorn watched Kara have her ticket returned to her that he noticed something had been subtly applied to the back of it. He looked at his own ticket and flipping it over he saw that it too had a label now stuck to the back. He looked around for the conductor, only to see the man now leaving the car.

"Check your tickets." He said softly to the other rebels, hoping that none of the other passengers would become suspicious.

"How come?" Tharun asked, then he turned over his ticket and found that it too had a label applied. As did all of the others.

"What are they?" Jaysica asked, picking at the label with her thumbnail.

"Some kid of validation mark?" Mace suggested.

Kara looked around briefly.

"No." she said, "That guy over there had his ticket checked, but doesn't have one of these labels stuck to it."

"They come off too." Jaysica said as she peeled away the label.

"Put it back." Vorn said, "I'm guessing it's important. I think the people we're here to see have just made contact."

"They're antennae." Tobis said, rubbing his finger over the label on his ticket. The other rebels did the same and within the label they felt a thin coil of metal.

"So we're being tracked?" Tharun asked, but Tobis shook his head.

"They're passive antennae." He explained, "You place them in a magnetic field and the field identifies you from the way the antenna is coded."

"They're for opening doors." Mace said with a smile, looking at the antenna label on his own ticket.

"Great." Kara said, "But where's the damn door?"

The Vedrick transport terminal was almost deserted and was starting to fall into disrepair. Aside from a handful of propaganda posters placed by the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order there were no indications of an Imperial presence at all.

The droid set up to check tickets did not even bother to inspect them closely, the locals apparently having reprogrammed it to simply wave through anyone who had a ticket of any kind.

"No one here to meet us." Tharun said as he looked around the station concourse, where there were only a handful of stores selling items for the few travellers that passed through.

"Makes you kind of feel unwanted doesn't it?" Kara said.

"What about the door?" Jaysica asked, "Could it be around here?" and the rebel team all looked towards Tobis.

"Ah. Err. I suppose so." He said, "There must be places that the general public aren't supposed to go and contactless entry locks make sense. You could just stick one of these to the back of a staff ID card."

"Well then," Vorn said, "We should split up and look for a door that these open. Tobis, you and Jaysica head towards the station entrance Kara and Tharun can look along the platforms."

"What about us?" Mace asked.

Vorn sat down on a nearby bench.

"We'll wait here just in case someone is supposed to be meeting us. Anyone that finds anything should call in via comlink."

The rebels divided up into the pairs listed by Vorn and went off in separate directions. Both of the search pairs rapidly discovered that there were numerous doors set up to restrict entry using contactless cards and they subtly waved their tickets and the attached labels over the readers.

"So Tharun," Kara said as a third lock refused them entry, "what's your plan for dealing with the boss finding out about last night?"

"He's not going to." Tharun replied, "Jaysica's agreed to say nothing and I can't see anyone else raising the issue."

"What about the little princess herself?"

"What Lyssa? We agreed to talk about it next time we meet."

Kara came to a sudden halt.

"Talk about it?" she said, "You're not honestly thinking about seeing her seriously are you? I'm the team medic, I should know if you've suffered massive brain trauma."

"Look," Tharun said, halting beside another reader, "can we just not talk about this? Lyssa and I are going to-" and he suddenly stopped talking when the card reader beeped and the door they were standing beside slid upwards.

Kara grabbed the comlink from her pocket and activated it.

"We've got it!" she exclaimed, "Yellow service door on platform nine." And before any of the others could respond she shut off the comlink and both she and Tharun moved quickly through the door, shutting it behind them to avoid arousing suspicion.

Beyond the door was a narrow passageway that angled downwards, obviously leading to a level beneath the station. Kara and Tharun had to wait for only a few minutes until the door opened again to reveal the rest of their team who swiftly came through the door before it was closed once more.

"Blasters I think." Vorn said, looking down the passageway.

"A bit obvious don't you think?" Mace asked.

"Normally yes." Vorn said, "But since this is somewhere we're clearly not meant to be anyway we may as well be prepared. Just in case."

Each of the rebels took a blaster pistol of some sort from the bags they carried. Jaysica and Vorn had small holdout pistols, while apart from Mace who carried his far more powerful heavy pistol the others had typical military style sidearms.

"I'll take point." Tharun said and in the absence of any instruction to the contrary he began to make his way down the passageway.

The passageway led down to a large room that held the equipment used to create the magnetic fields on which the monorails travelled and the relatively wide passageway gave way to much narrower gaps between the massive pieces of machinery.

"Movement up ahead major." Tharun whispered, halting.

"Behind us too." Mace replied from the rear of the line and he turned to raise his weapon.

"You have no need of those." A voice called out, "We're comrades in arms here." And a tall man stepped into view ahead of the rebels, clearly unarmed and with his hands raised, "Which of you is Larcus?"

"That would be me." Vorn replied, squeezing to the front of the group.

"Well I'm Terrick," the man said, "and you should come with me."

Terrick led the rebels through the machinery filled room to a second passageway on the far side that connected with a cluster of much smaller rooms. Many of these were empty, but some of them contained boxes of supplies or beds.

"This is your base?" Kara asked.

"Yeah," Terrick replied, "it may not look like much, but the authorities don't suspect we're down here." Then he stopped by a doorway, "Go right in." he said.

"Ah, Vorn Larcus." The woman sat at the desk inside the room said, standing up as the rebels entered, "I've heard a great deal about you."

"Well I'm afraid I've heard only a little about you." Vorn replied as he took a seat opposite the woman, "What can you tell me about your little group? How come you're down here?"

"What? Beneath the station you mean? Well many of us started out as transport workers and we still have many sympathisers amongst those workers who weren't forced down here."

"Forced?" Mace said.

"Yes." The woman went on, "My husband was a union leader in the early days of the Empire. When his men started disrupting Imperial transport by going on strike the Empire sent a force of stormtroopers to break up the picket line and he was shot. Knowing the authorities would be coming for me next I hid down here and was joined by others also fleeing persecution. Other transport workers provide us with what support they can. The Empire and its lackies don't bother with how this place works, so they haven't bothered to look for us here."

"I don't see many weapons for a resistance cell." Tharun commented as he watched a pair of men walking past the door.

"No." the woman said, "We had some sporting weapons that we'd been able to obtain over the years, but we recently lost them in a failed attack. Now we're having to use the more unconventional methods we had to use at the start."

"Unconventional?" Vorn asked. The word unnerved him. It could be perfectly innocent, referring to using subtle means of sabotage against a much more powerful foe, but it could also mean methods that would cause bloodshed beyond what was militarily necessary.

"Yes." The woman said, "We've been waiting for you to get here to demonstrate some of our methods. If you go with Terrick he'll show you what I mean."

Vorn nodded and got to his feet.

"Jaysica, Tharun, you're both with me. We'll see what these people can do. Kara and Tobis stay here to see what we can offer them."

"What about me?" Mace asked.

Vorn stepped closer to him, taking out his datapad and typing something into it.

"Head into town." Vorn said, "I want you to take a look for these."

The woman behind the desk watched as the rebels left the room and when she was sure that they were out of earshot she activated the communicator in front of her. When an image of a tall, bald man appeared on the screen she spoke swiftly and clearly.

"Mister Fallir, they've arrived."

3.

"Here they come now." Terrick said as he looked down at the highway.

A trio of armoured vehicles was headed towards them, acting as escort to twice as many unarmoured cargo carriers. They were not part of any planned strike but merely a routine movement of troops and equipment from one base to another along with suitable security.

"I don't get it," Jaysica said, "you've laid no mines and you've no men down there at all. How are you going to attack the convoy?"

"Take a look in the other direction." Terrick replied and the rebels looked in the opposite direction.

"Just looks like regular civilian traffic to me." Tharun said and he lifted his macrobinoculars to his eyes for a better view, "What do you say major?"

"Let's just wait and see shall we?" Vorn replied.

"Watch the auto-mover." Terrick said, smiling.

Approaching the military convoy head on was a bulky windowless transport vehicle, with large lettering down its side indicating that it was available for hire and providing contact details for the vendor. The vehicle had no living driver, instead the entire thing was a large droid that fully automated the process of loading, moving and then unloading the cargo with which it was laden.

"Ideally," Terrick said, "we'd like to have a dozen or so men down there with blasters. But for the moment we just have to settle for making mischief rather than launching a proper assault."

"What's going to happen?" Jaysica asked.

"Watch." Terrick said, "It'll happen at any moment."

Just as he stopped speaking the auto-mover suddenly swerved out of its own lane and into the oncoming traffic. Right as the military convoy was about to pass. The driver of the lead armoured vehicle attempted to swerve out of the way, but on the busy highway he just managed to slam his vehicle into one of the civilian speeders on the highway and as its speed was suddenly cut to almost nothing the auto-mover slammed into its side and pushed it back into the transport following behind. The transport crumpled as its cab collapsed under the force of the impact and the rear of the vehicle jumped up and tossed the entire thing over the armoured escort, bringing it down on top of the still moving auto-mover.

Behind this the convoy drivers all tried desperately to avoid being caught up in the wreck, but their forward speed was so great and the mass blocking their way so large that only the rearmost armoured vehicle was able to avoid driving straight into the pile of twisted metal and plastic.

The rearmost vehicle that had escaped the pile up pivoted on the spot to block all of the highway lanes flowing in that direction. At the same time a squad of stormtroopers disembarked and began to rush down the sides of the highway, waving at traffic to slow down and pull over before they could get caught up in the growing level of destruction.

Passengers and crewmen from the other convoy vehicles were beginning to drag themselves out of the wreckage now, some of them being dragged out by less seriously injured colleagues. But before the survivors could get clear of the area there was a sudden flash and one of the transports exploded, scattering flames and debris over both sides of the highway.

"See," Terrick said, "if we just had some people down there now we could have finished off the escort platoon and taken their gear."

"Just too bad about all those people down there though hey?" Tharun commented as he studied the 'accident' more closely and saw a handful of surviving stormtroopers desperately trying to pull civilians from burning vehicles.

"We're just doing what we can with what we've got." Terrick replied, snarling, "We don't have a fleet or an army. There are less than a hundred of us in our group."

"How was it achieved?" Vorn asked.

"You were told we've got support from other transport workers right? Well one of them is a service tech for droid-operated transports. He knows what boards to pull and how to modify them so that when they see certain types of vehicle they'll just smash right into them. Kind of like a guided missile."

"With a rather large warhead." Vorn said.

"What works, works." Terrick said, "Though we haven't used this tactic much. We'd rather the Empire didn't suspect our guy even existed. More often we just get transports to stop in the middle of nowhere and steal everything they're carrying."

"And who is this man?" Vorn asked.

"I can't answer that." Terrick responded, "His identity is a secret. Only a handful of people know it and I'm not one of them."

"Well?" Vorn asked Mace.

They had met up in a cantina that was within walking distance of the transport station and after ordering drinks they retreated to one of the booths further away from the bar itself.

"Two of them." Mace said, "They trailed me all the way to the mall but didn't do a very good job of it. They should have had a second pair to swap with."

"Are you sure they weren't just acting as a distraction for a genuine tail?"

"As certain as I can be. If they were a decoy they still should have tried to disappear once or twice."

"So you lost them then?"

"Easy. I sliced the security tag off a jacket in a store and slipped it into the pocket of one of them when I walked past. Then when I left the store and they followed me they triggered the alarm and security stopped them both."

"Risky." Vorn said, "You effectively handed them over to the Empire if they've got anything incriminating on them."

"Oh I watched what was going on from distance. They were only held for a couple of minutes, but it gave me the chance to get out of their way and they left."

"So what did you find then?" Vorn asked.

Mace pulled out a datapad and activated its display.

"There was a major strike just after the Clone Wars."

"Not unusual, there were quite a few as Palpatine began to impose his new order on the galaxy."

"Yeah, well the guys who organised this one had history. They were part of a group that refused to handle any military cargo during the war, seems they were sympathisers with the separatists."

"But not actually aligned with the Confederation?"

"No. They had no interest in being part of any multi-planetary government. Looks like keeping Estran out of galactic politics was their aim."

"This is the sort of thing I was afraid of." Vorn replied, "I think these people are trouble, the sort of trouble we can't afford."

Mace shrugged.

"There are a lot of people in the Alliance that were actual separatists major." He pointed out, "And I doubt all of them will want to be part of a restored Republic. Are you going to force them to join? Some people do say that Mon Mothma's just jealous that Palpatine got where she wanted to be first."

"No. Of course not." Vorn said, "But there are certain ideals we must hold to and I don't think that these people do."

"You got proof?"

"No, just a very bad feeling about all this. Mace, I think we're being manipulated to provide support for a terrorist organisation."

"Terrorist? That's got a familiar ring to it." Mace replied, reminding Vorn that the term 'terrorist' was used by the Empire to describe him.

Vorn shook his head slowly.

"We should get back to the others and find out what they've uncovered." He said, but as they got up to leave Vorn's comlink sounded, "Go ahead." He said as he activated the device.

"Major Larcus sir," Jeeves' voice said, "Harvey has just informed me that headquarters is attempting to make contact with you." Harvey, or R5-HV, was Tobis' astromech droid and when the team was away from the ship it frequently plugged itself into its systems to watch for events such as incoming messages.

"We're on our way back." Vorn replied and he looked at Mace, "We'll just have to get the others to fill us in on the trip there." He said.

"Vorn? Is that you?" the image of Shyla Nerin was heavily distorted as Vorn looked at on the display aboard the *Silver Hawk*. In order to try and avoid the signal being intercepted by the Empire its energy levels were being kept low. Unfortunately this had the affect of lowering signal quality also.

"Yes, its me." Vorn replied, his voice raised.

"Vorn, we need an update. Have you been able to make contact with the resistance yet?"

"Yes I have and my people have determined the sort of things we can provide to one another. But there are a few questions that I still have."

"About what?" another voice asked and a tall dark-skinned human stepped into the picture behind Shyla.

"General Kain, I wasn't expecting to be speaking with you." Vorn said. General Syres Kain was in overall command of all Alliance activity in the sector and it was unusual for him to be troubling himself with matters such as this.

"Manpower has become a major issue major." The general said, "Especially when it comes to trained technical personnel such as those this group seems to be offering us. Colonel Collis can train infantrymen in weeks, but it takes years to train engineers and we need specialist instructors to teach them. Now do they have the trained personnel they claim?"

"Yes sir, they do." Vorn replied, "But I have certain misgivings about their methods."

"That can be handled." General Kain said, "We can provide observers to ensure that equipment is used only for suitable tasks and volunteers transferred to regular Alliance units will come under our direct control."

"I realise this sir," Vorn said, "but I suspect—"

"I'm sorry Vorn," Shyla interrupted, "did you just say 'suspect'?"

"Yes, I suspect there is more to this group than meets the eye."

"But you have no proof?" General Kain asked.

"No." Vorn admitted.

"Then there's nothing more to discuss." The general replied, "Unless you can demonstrate to me that our initial assessment was incorrect and we should not ally with this group then I want to begin transfers of men and equipment by the end of tomorrow." And then the screen went dead.

Vorn sighed and stood up. Leaving the cockpit he made his way through the *Silver Hawk* to the workshop where as he expected he found Tobis hunched over a workbench. After stepping inside the workshop Vorn closed the door behind him and locked it.

Tobis stared at him.

"Ahh. Err. Can I help you sir?" he asked.

"Tobis," Vorn replied slowly, "I need your help with something delicate." Then he paused for a reply from Tobis that did not come, "Were you able to find out anything about the resistance contact that carries out the modifications to the droid-operated vehicles?"

"Ahh." Tobis said again and he just continued to stare at Vorn, "I'm sorry sir. I didn't ask about him. I didn't know I was supposed to."

"That's alright Tobis." Vorn said, unlocking the door, "Don't worry about it."

On his way out of the workshop he ran into Mace.

"What did headquarters want then?"

"Just an update." Vorn said, "And to remind me of how desperately they want this group admitting to the Alliance. I've got a day to stop it."

"Why are you so keen to do that?" Mace asked.

"Easy." Vorn replied, "I think they murdered my wife."

4.

Fifteen years ago...

The area was still sealed off as Lord Vorn Larcus approached.

"Stay back sir!" a voice called out and Vorn turned to see a uniformed Imperial agent walking towards him.

"Its lord," He replied, "and I need to know what happened here."

"Well you can read about in the news same as everyone else sir." The agent said, stressing the word 'sir'.

Vorn reached for his pocket where his Parliamentarian identity card was located. Nervously the agent placed his hand on his sidearm.

"It's just my ID." Vorn said and he held out the card.

The agent took the card and looked at it before handing it back.

"You still can't go any closer." He said, "This area is still sealed."

"Why?" Vorn asked, "The accident was two days ago. But for some reason you haven't removed a single one of those vehicles yet. Why is that agent? In fact why are you even here? The ISB doesn't normally investigate traffic accidents does it?"

"I can't discuss that with you. Now I must insist you move along."

Vorn was about to protest further when another voice sounded behind him.

"Then you can tell me what's going on agent." The man said and Vorn looked around to see an older man walking towards him from a luxury speeder. Still standing beside the speeder were a pair of armed guards, each of which wore an armoured vest marked with the coat of arms of the Estranian parliamentary security force, "If you don't know who I am you can verify my credentials and clearance with Senator Horatian's office if you like."

"Of course not Mister Speaker."

"Couran." Vorn said.

"Vorn." Lord Couran Desh replied, "I was worried I'd find you here when Garm said you weren't home."

"I needed to see for myself." Vorn replied.

"Then let's go take a proper look." Couran said and the two noblemen walked on past the ISB agent, "Don't worry young man," he added, glancing at the agent, "we won't disturb anything important."

"Thank you." Vorn said to Couran quietly, "Getting Senator Horatian involved must have taken some effort."

"Oh I never spoke with old Gregor my boy." Couran replied, "That aide of his, Lynn Sharva kept blocking my calls to him. Honestly, she gets a bit of authority and all of a sudden she's Xim the Despot. May the gods help us if she ever gets into a position of real power."

The twisted remains of Moff Krest's vehicle were still exactly where it had been when the public transport had come off the bridge overhead. The transport itself had however been moved by the rescue workers when they had removed the bodies of the people in the moff's speeder, including Vorn's wife Hallanah. Vorn froze when he saw the blood.

"Are you alright my boy? Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea." Couran said and he rested a hand on Vorn's shoulder.

"No. I'm fine."

There were two more Imperial agents by the wrecked transport and when one of them noticed the two newly arrived men they both stopped their inspection and approached them.

"This is a restricted area. "One of them said, "You can't be -" and then he stopped when he recognised Lord Desh, "I'm sorry Mister Speaker, I didn't recognise you at first. How may we help?"

"Tell us what happened." Vorn blurted out, "Tell us everything."

"The transport came off the bridge right here sir." The same agent said, "Just as the moff's vehicles was passing beneath."

"An unfortunate co-incidence." Couran said and the two agents's looked at one another, "There's more to this isn't there?" Couran went on, "That's why you haven't moved these vehicles and reopened the highway yet. I see that you're studying the control systems of that droid bus over there. Have you ever heard of a vehicle that failing in this way before?"

The agents looked at one another again and the same agent that had spoken earlier then replied, "No. The systems are designed to make it impossible."

Mace looked at Vorn in surprise.

"In all the time I've known you that's the first time I ever heard you mention her." He said.

"She's been dead for years." Vorn replied, "It was ruled an accident, but I'd spoken with some of the investigators on the scene who thought that what happened shouldn't have been able to. I tried to look into it

myself, but got nowhere. Incidents like the one that killed Hallanah had never happened before and I never heard of one happening again. Until today when I saw it at first hand."

"The transport?"

"Exactly. Fifteen years ago my wife was travelling in the same speeder as the sector moff when a droid operated transport crashed into it. Some of the witnesses said that it adjusted both its course and speed to ensure a collision."

"I hate to say it major," Mace said, "but innocents get caught in some of our strikes sometimes too. The Alliance does its best to avoid it, but as soon as the Empire thinks we'll always call off an attack if there are a few civilians about is the day they'll be stationing all their troops in residential areas and next to schools and hospitals."

"More than thirty died in the crash. Four in the moff's car and the rest were the passengers of the droid-controlled vehicle. These people used a passenger transport as their weapon, not a cargo carrier."

"Ah." Mace said, "So these people aren't just happy with collateral casualties, they'll willingly kill non-combatants. So what do you need?"

"I need the man they have altering the vehicles. If I can link him to the attack fifteen years ago then I can link this group to an atrocity and the Alliance will deny them entry."

"Though that will make us another enemy in the process."

"I think they already are." Vorn said, "Besides, what threat are they? We know where they're based. Even if Colonel Collis can't send in a team to neutralise them I'm sure General Kain will find a way to leak their location to the Empire and we can let them deal with the situation."

Mace smiled.

"Turning our enemies against one another. Nice. Done at the right time it could even be used as a distraction for one of our ops."

"Hey boss!" Kara suddenly called out, approaching from the direction of the cockpit, "That woman's on the line for you."

"Shyla?" Vorn said, "But I just—"

"No boss, the one from the resistance. Loryn she said her name was. The signal's being relayed to us from a comm. address the Alliance gave her."

Vorn nodded.

"I'll be right there." He replied and he headed directly to the cockpit.

Once there he found that the communication was audio only. Vorn knew that the Alliance relay was capable of video communications so the lack of a picture had to be a decision of the resistance group.

"Hello Loryn." Vorn said, hiding his anger, "That is your name isn't it? I didn't catch it when we met today."

"Yes that's right." Loryn answered, "Look, I'm sorry to be hurrying you but my people are getting impatient. Some of them are thinking you're just stringing us along."

Vorn did not know how to respond to this. He was stringing the resistance along, but was doing so against the instructions of the Alliance's sector command that wanted the matter settled quickly. But he had been given a day's leeway and he intended to make use of it as best he could.

"I'm sorry it seems that way," Vorn replied, "but I'm afraid these things move more slowly than either of us would like. I'd like to meet again if that's alright with you."

"Of course it is. Just name the time and place and I'll be there."

After breaking the link to Vorn, Loryn turned to the second communication channel that had been running, this one including a video signal. On the screen was the same bald man she had spoken with earlier.

"Did you get all of that?" she asked.

"Yes. He was lying. He's stalling for time."

"How can you be sure?"

"Call it a hunch. His second in command seemed keen to ditch your tail earlier today. He made it to the local library without them following."

"How do you know where he went? My men lost him in the mall."

"Because he saw your men. He didn't see me. Nobody does unless I want them to. Your two were idiots.

Now I know where he went, but I don't know exactly what he wanted there. Yet. I'm off to see someone that can give me answers. Just make sure that Larcus isn't able to stop the merger. We need more weapons and the Alliance can provide them. Fallir out."

The modified astromech droid chirped loudly as Emissi ran from the bathroom, a towel wrapped around her.

"I heard it Sneaky!" she exclaimed as she reached the intercom panel linking her apartment to the security door at the front of her building and activated it, "Yes?" she said simply.

"Its me." Foran Fallir replied, "Do you have the data Miss Caysa?"

"Wrong question."

"Then what is the right one? And please remember that I am not a patient man."

"The right question is do you have two thousand credits?"

On the compact screen Emissi saw Foran look around to be sure that he was not being watched and then he opened his jacket and pulled a bundle of banknotes from an inside pocket. Emissi also saw the butt of a blaster pistol concealed beneath his coat.

"I'll buzz you in." Emissi said, "But give me a couple of minutes to get ready." And she pressed the button to allow Foran into the building.

Emissi dressed quickly, picking loose fitting clothes that were easy to put on. Then she went to her desk drawer and took out a holdout blaster and checked that it was loaded. If Foran changed his mind about paying then she had no intention of being the only one in the room without a weapon. She was just tucking the blaster into her pocket when there was a knock at the door.

"Go let him in Sneaky." Emissi said to the droid and as it rolled towards the door she sat by her computer.

"Good evening Miss Caysa." Foran said as he entered. Emissi was not exactly short, but Foran would have towered over her even had she been standing up. Right now she had to lift her head quite a way to look him in the eyes.

"Take a seat," She said, "and let me see the money."

"Its all here." Foran answered, setting the bundle down on the table between them, "Count it if you want."

"Thanks, I will." Emissi reached out with just one hand, the other one remaining in her pocket and on her blaster until both of Foran's hands were clear of the inside of his coat.

"I an impressed with the speed at which you were able to obtain the information I requested." Foran said as Emissi counted the banknotes, a process slowed down by Foran's having used notes of several different denominations.

"Yeah well Edvars Kurrad himself decided to spring a surprise inspection on our department head today and he wasn't happy with what he found. Everyone else was too busy watching him fire our boss to notice me sneaking off to do a little data liberating. Lucky for you that public libraries don't use top notch cyber security."

"So you found the man's browsing history?"

"I did." Emissi replied as she finished counting the money and she tapped a single key on her terminal keyboard. Immediately a sheet of printed flimsiplast emerged from her printer, "Take it." She said to Foran. Foran took the sheet and looked at the list printed on it.

"These are news nodes." He said.

"Yeah, mainly archives from about the time of the Clone Wars. I don't know who this guy is, but he's interested in history."

"Thank you Miss Caysa. I believe that this concludes our business. For now at any rate." And Foran got up and walked to the apartment door. Just before he opened the door he turned back towards her and added, "Oh and no, you wouldn't have been able to out draw me." And then he left, closing the door behind him.

"How the hell did he know I had this Sneaky?" Emissi said, taking the blaster from her pocket and setting it down on the desk.

5.

"Is Loryn here?" Vorn asked the man behind the bar in the restaurant, "I'm Vorn." Rather than travel all the way to Vedrick again, it had been decided that they would meet at a location midway between there and the starport where the *Silver Hawk* was docked. Loryn had suggested meeting aboard the *Silver Hawk*, but Vorn was loath to allow someone he did not trust aboard their ship.

"What about them?" the barman asked, looking at Kara and Tharun who had accompanied Vorn here.

"They're with me." Vorn replied.

"I was only told to admit you." The barman said, snarling.

"Not my problem." Vorn said, "Though if it's too much of one for you then we can all leave and you can explain why to Loryn."

"They stay here." The barman said, "But Loryn was clear, only you get shown through."

Vorn looked at the other two rebels and nodded.

"Lead the way." He said.

The barman escorted Vorn through the kitchen and into a windowless office where Loryn was waiting for him.

"Vorn," she said, "how may I help you?"

Vorn sat down.

"The Alliance needs to know about your technique of reprogramming droid controlled vehicles. Specifically the methods used to override the safety systems and deliberately cause a collision."

Loryn frowned.

"Terrick said you asked about that earlier." She said, "What's so important about him that it's delaying our membership of the Alliance?"

"I'm just trying to build up a proper picture of your organisation." Vorn said, which was perfectly true. From a certain point of view.

"Well I'm afraid that I've promised him that I'd never reveal his identity."

"That seems to be a common answer." Vorn replied, "Could you at least give me more details on occasions you've made use of him. That way we can see what he's capable of doing."

Loryn nodded slowly.

"I'll see what I can do." She said, "Now as I mentioned, my people are becoming impatient. Is there anything else you want?"

"No thank you." Vorn told her, "My people have already determined your needs."

Suddenly Loryn's personal communicator sounded.

"I'm sorry," she said, "I've got to take this. In private."

"Of course." Vorn replied, "If you can just get that information to me I can pass it on to the Alliance."

Loryn smiled as Vorn left the room and as soon as he was gone she answered her communicator.

"Loryn it's me." Foran's voice said.

"Stang," Loryn replied, "Vorn was right in the room when you called. If I hadn't been able to get rid of him—"

"Never mind that now." Foran said, interrupting her, "Vorn's people are looking into our history."

"Well Vorn himself is still asking after your man that can reprogram droids. If he keeps pushing he may figure out that I don't know who he is either."

"Hmmm. That would be a problem. We can't have him figuring out that your group is just a cell of mine."

"So what do you suggest?"

"Give him a name."

"Who's?"

"Anyone you consider expendable."

"So did you get what you wanted boss?" Kara asked as soon as they were clear of the restaurant and in a quieter part of town where they would not be overheard by anyone.

"No." Vorn said, "She's stalling. On the one hand she's anxious to get her group into the Alliance but on the other she doesn't want to reveal anything about how it operates."

"Maybe she just doesn't know the answer to your question." Tharun suggested and Vorn suddenly stopped dead in the street and smiled, "What?" Tharun asked, "What did I say?"

"Yeah boss. Tell us mere mortals what you've figured out using your officer's super powers." Kara said.

"This isn't just some local group of dissidents." Vorn said, "It's part of a bigger organisation that's trying to get into the Alliance. Whoever's overriding droid safety systems isn't part of their cell."

"So who are they boss?" Kara asked.

"I don't know." Vorn replied, taking out his comlink, "Mace are you there?" he asked and he waited for a response.

"Right here major."

"Have you found anything new?"

"No. That Loryn's kept a pretty low profile over the years since the Empire busted up the strike and I've found nothing to link her to the death of Moff Krest or your wife."

"I don't think she had anything to do with it." Vorn told him, "I don't think we're dealing with a complete group here, just one tiny part of it."

"So who are we dealing with?" Mace asked

"I don't know. I need you to look into incidents involving malfunctioning droids and see if any of them can be linked to any insurgent groups. Plus any activity by any group willing to hit civilian targets. I'm on my way back to you now. Vorn out." And with that he shut off the comlink.

"So what are we going to be doing while you're back at the ship major?" Tharun asked.

Vorn looked back towards the restaurant.

"Keep an eye on that place." He said, "Kara, I want you to get pictures of everyone that goes in or out."

Two other men accompanied Foran as they dove through one of Vedrick's more run down areas. This sort of area was prime recruiting ground for the People's Liberation Army of Estran, where the poor and downtrodden could be made to think that all of their problems were the fault of someone else.

Right now they were on their way to visit one of those who had answered Foran's call to arms and joined up to create an independent Estran run according to the philosophy of the PLAE. Foran himself had no idea who the man was. There was nothing unusual about that though. He often met people for the first time just as he was sending them out to die for his cause. Today this man was going to die for his cause also, though not in the normal manner.

The driver parked the speeder outside the apartment building where the man lived and all three occupants got out, constantly looking out for any signs that someone was taking too much interest in them. Foran Fallir was one of the most wanted men on the planet, perhaps even more so than Vorn Larcus III.

The front door to the apartment building was not locked; whatever security system had once been fitted had long since ceased to function and Foran led his men inside. From there they went up the stairs, the turbolift being out of order and directly to the apartment they had been given the number of.

"Mister Jarve." Foran said as he knocked gently on the door.

"What is it?" a voice called out from behind the door.

"Many are called." Foran said.

"And many should answer." The man called Jarve replied and his door opened to reveal a somewhat stocky middle-aged man who looked up at Foran in awe, "Do come in." he said, "make yourselves at home."

"You know who I am?" Foran asked as the door shut behind them.

"Of course comrade Fallir." Jarve answered, "It is an honour to meet you."

"Yes and well it should be." Foran said, "Today you will be advancing our cause greatly."

"Me? How?"

Foran smiled back and pulled out the blaster pistol from beneath his long coat.

"This is for you." He said.

"You want me to shoot someone?" Jarve asked, "But I've never even fired a blaster before." And he reached out for the weapon, but before he could take it Foran pulled it away.

"I think you misunderstand me." He said and he flipped the weapon's selector switch to 'Stun' and shot Jarve from point blank range as the other two men looked on dispassionately.

Jarve collapsed in a heap on the floor and Foran crouched down beside him. Calmly he reached out a hand and pressed it down over Jarve's face, covering his nose and mouth.

"This won't take long." He said to the men who had accompanied him here, "Set the charge and rig the door."

The men just nodded and headed back to the apartment door while Foran turned his attention back to Jarve. For most individuals, determining whether or not he was dead would require them to check a pulse. But Foran had no need of such crude techniques that would tell him so little. Concentrating, he could feel the very essence of Jarve as it became steadily weaker and then finally he felt the very moment of his death and Foran smiled. There was not a mark on Jarve's body as Foran removed his hand from the deceased man's face. That had been his plan, the stun blast left no energy burns and by rendering him unconscious first Foran ensured that that there would be no struggle in which Jarve could suffer any other tell tale injuries. The only marks that anyone would ever find on Jarve's body, assuming that anything was ever found would be those that the bomb would cause. The bomb that everyone would believe Jarve had made himself.

Foran then went to the door where his subordinates were working.

"Are you nearly done?" he asked.

"Yes sir." One of the men replied, "Once armed, the charge will go off the next time the door is opened. It's big enough to take out everything in the apartment as well as damage those either side as well as above and below too."

"And I've got the door almost rigged." The other man added, "I've hooked the apartment communicator into the motor so we can operate it by remote just by dialling in and sending the right signal. In addition we can use it to make it appear that there's someone stood behind the door talking to whoever's outside. Plus of course can find out who's outside when we open the door."

"Kind of essential that." The first man said, "The last thing we want is for the wrong person to come along and trigger the bomb. This is kind of a one shot deal."

"Excellent." Foran said and he turned to look out of the apartment window, "We'll set up in that apartment block over there." He said, pointing to a building across the street, "Assuming its far enough away to avoid us getting caught in the blast."

"It should be." The man who had planted the bomb said, "Though we should bear in mind that debris could be thrown quite some way."

As his men dragged the body of the unfortunate owner of the apartment opposite to Jarve's from the room Foran made use of her communicator to contact Loryn.

"Everything's set." He said, "We're in an apartment across the way. You can tell Vorn to come as soon as he wants. I get the feeling that we won't have to wait very long for him."

"Of course Mister Fallir." Loryn replied, "I'll get right on it."

This time Loryn had decided to allow the communication to include a video feed.

"His name's Kreydo Jarve." She said, "He's a low level technician with a knack for getting machines to do what he wants them to do. Whether the original developers had that in mind or not. He's also been the man we've had looking into making our explosives."

"And I can find him at this address?" Vorn asked as he looked at the data stream that accompanied the transmission.

"Yes. He works night shifts, so you should be able to find him there now. I've already spoken to him about you paying him a visit. I felt I had to given my previous promise not to reveal his identity. If you have any more questions I'm sure he can answer them." And then the screen went blank.

"Well I for one am glad that transmission was rerouted by an Alliance forwarding node." Mace said as he looked at Vorn from where he had been sat during the conversation.

"Indeed." Vorn replied and he nodded in agreement, "Mentioning bomb-making on a channel that may not be one hundred percent secure isn't exactly compatible with running a successful underground unit."

"Which means they don't plan on using that communications address again." Mace said and then he paused before asking, "So do you think any of that was true?"

"Not a word." Vorn replied, "Just this morning that man's identity was a closely guarded secret and yet now I'm being invited round for a glass of blue milk and some cookies. On the other hand this could be my one chance to stop the Alliance making what I think would be a big mistake so I've got to go."

"You want to wait for Kara and Tharun to get back?" Mace asked, "Or will it just be the four of us?"

"Two." Vorn replied, "I'll just take Jaysica. She knows explosives and has a passing knowledge of droid mechanics. Who knows, if anything goes wrong we may need the rest of you come and rescue us."

"Okay then." Mace said, "I'll look into this Jarve guy while you're gone. If I find anything I'll let you know."

6.

"They're here." One of Foran's men called out. They had worked in shifts of half an hour, keeping an eye on the building of the late Kreydo Jarve for any signs of visitors. So when Jaysica and Vorn went walking up to the front door they were spotted immediately.

"How many?" Foran asked, emerging from the kitchen with a drink in his hand.

"Two of them. I think one's Larcus."

Foran smiled.

"Ah, Mister Larcus." He said out loud but to no one in particular, "I've a score or two to settle with your family. Though I doubt your death will trouble your son too much. However, you may just be the bait I need." Then he looked around to the other man with him and said, "Make the call."

Agent Garm Larcus of the Imperial Security Bureau was just getting ready to leave for the day when his desktop communicator sounded.

"Larcus." He said simply as he answered the call.

"Ah Garm, " his superior, Director Helios said, "looks like I've caught you just in time."

"Yes, I was just leaving. After being stuck on an alien planet for several weeks Jennay is keen to have me home on time."

"Well I'm sorry to be the bearer of bad news, but I think you may want to work late tonight. Apparently your father's been spotted in Vedrick and I thought you may want to head off to try and grab him."

"I'll need a team to meet me there." Garm replied.

"This place is disgusting." Jaysica said, picking her way through the trash piled up in the building's lobby, "How can people live like this?"

"They can't afford to go anywhere else." Vorn replied and he winced as he heard a 'squelch' as he put his foot down on something, "Do you have your blaster handy?"

"Of course." Jaysica replied and she took the compact holdout weapon from her pocket and accidentally ejected the power cell, "Oops." She added, "So do you think that this is an ambush?"

"I doubt it. That would be a little obvious."

"Then why do we need blasters?"

"Oh, just in case there are any dianogas living in amongst this lot."

In the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk* Mace and Tobis both looked at the screen in front of them.

"So this is everything you've found on Kreydo Jarve then is it Jeeves?" Mace asked the protocol droid. On the screen was a file taken from the records of Vedrick's welfare offices. Tobis had been able to steal the profiles of everyone with the surname Jarve and Jeeves had been assigned to search through it while Mace and Tobis looked elsewhere for more information.

"It most certainly is Captain Grayle." Jeeves answered, "And as you can see there are certain contradictions between his data and the way that he has been portrayed to us."

Mace looked at Tobis.

"What do you think? Could the resistance have altered any of this to hide him?"

"Ahh." Tobis said, frowning as he studied the screenful of data closely, "I don't think so captain. See here, he's described as unemployed. What's the point in changing that? Plus there's no mention his having been educated or worked for any company where he could have learnt to reprogram droids."

"So he's a decoy then." Mace said, "Or worse yet, bait. I've got a bad feeling about this."

"This way." Vorn said, looking both ways down the corridor when he and Jaysica emerged from the stairs.

"Hang on a moment." Jaysica replied, "I'm snagged on something." And she steadied herself on a wall before lifting one foot of the floor and beginning to tug at the knotted clump of fibres that had become caught in her boot.

"You can deal with that later." Vorn said, "Now come on."

Jaysica sighed and began to follow Vorn down the corridor. As soon as Vorn reached the door marked with the number given to him by Loryn he stopped and looked back at Jaysica.

"This is it." He said and he knocked on the door.

Through the communications link they were maintaining Foran and his men heard the sound of Vorn's knock. "Who's there?" Foran said loudly, his voice transmitted to the other communicator and reproduced loud enough that Vorn was able to hear it through the door.

"My name's Larcus, Vorn Larcus. Loryn sent me."

Foran smiled.

"Wait right there." He said, "I'll be with you in a moment." and he nodded to the man sat beside him."

"Well so far this is easy enough." Vorn said, looking back at Jaysica as she caught up with him.

Jaysica suddenly cried out in alarm. The fibres caught on her boot had become entangled with the other one also and when she tried to take another step she found that her feet were stuck together and she fell forwards. Straight into Vorn.

Despite Jaysica being much smaller and lighter than Vorn, the sudden and unexpected sideways impact of the young woman knocked him off his feet also and the pair of rebels collapsed in a heap and rolled across the floor just as the door to Kreydo Jarve's apartment slid open.

From his vantage point Foran saw the fireball erupt from the apartment opposite, blowing out its windows and sending shards of glass flying in all directions. Screams could be heard as the blast shook the building and startled residents began to panic.

"Goodbye Lord Larcus." Foran muttered and he grinned.

Vorn blinked, the sudden flash had blurred his vision while the shockwave from the explosion had started his ears ringing and the sounds he could hear seemed muffled. In the background he could just about make out the sound of an alarm, the building's fire alarm apparently being in working order even if the sprinklers were not.

"Jaysica?" he asked, his voice raised because of his difficulty hearing, "Are you okay?"

Jaysica groaned and lifted her head to look Vorn in the face.

"I didn't do that." She said. Then, when she realised that her hearing was also impaired and touched a hand to one of her ears and her eyes widened as she saw that it came away with blood on her fingers, "My ears." She added.

"Never mind that right now." Vorn said, "Get up and let's get out of here."

Both he and Jaysica tugged at the fibres wrapped around Jaysica's ankles until she was once again able to stand and walk without risk. Then the pair began to rush towards the stairs with Vorn leading Jaysica by the hand.

In the stairwell they found themselves caught up in the rush of building residents desperate to escape the burning structure and the two rebels just went along with the flow.

"They're alive!" Foran yelled furiously as she spotted Jaysica and Vorn emerge from the building amongst the other residents evacuating it and he slammed his fist against the window. As he watched he saw the two rebels push through the crowd and rush down the street to where they had left their speeder, "We're leaving." Foran said suddenly.

"But I thought we were waiting for the chance to take a shot at Garm Larcus." One of his subordinates replied.

"Idiot!" Foran snapped, "Someone down there is bound to tell the local police that Vorn Larcus is gone and they will pass that on to the ISB. Garm Larcus isn't coming any more. Revenge will have to wait until another day."

Tharun opened up his locker and put his blaster pistol back inside. Then he looked down and noticed that something was missing. Leant in the corner was his heavy BlasTech A-280 rifle, but the more compact E-11 that he had used before obtaining the more powerful weapon was gone.

"Hey!" he called out as he walked from the cabin, "Has anyone seen my E-eleven?"

The *Silver Hawk's* lounge was empty so Tharun headed towards the cockpit in search of Mace and Vorn. As it happened only Mace was there, piloting the ship out of Estran's atmosphere.

"My E-eleven's gone." Tharun said, "Have you seen it?"

Mace shook his head.

"Try asking the major."

"Where is he?"

"I don't know. He stormed out of here when the general told him that the Alliance would be accepting Loryn's group as members. It seems that news reports of a rebel bomb factory being accidentally destroyed in a housing block didn't put them off. If anything it just made them more convinced of the group's credentials."

Tharun nodded and left the cockpit. Satisfied that the ship was safely out of the atmosphere and its course to the programmed jump point locked into the nav computer Mace got up and followed him.

"Major!" he called out, "Major where are you?"

"What's going on?" Jaysica called out as she emerged from her cabin, her ears packed with bacta-impregnated cotton wool, "Are you shouting for me?"

"No." Tharun replied, raising his voice and shaking his head so she could tell what he was saying.

A moment later Tobis appeared from the workshop.

"Hey Tobis," Tharun said, "do you where the major is?"

Tobis shook his head.

"Isn't he in your cabin?"

"No," Tharun replied, "in fact I've not seen him since we lifted off." Then his eyes widened as a thought struck him, "Oh stang!" he exclaimed and he pushed past Jaysica and ran into his cabin.

"Hey!" Jaysica exclaimed as he went past her.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Mace said and he went into the cabin after Tharun, beckoning for Jaysica and Tobis to follow him.

"I thought so." Tharun said as he stepped aside from the locker that Vorn typically used, "The major kept his blasters in here. They're both gone too."

"Hey boss!" Kara's voice sounded from just outside the cabin and those inside looked around to see her standing in the doorway holding address, "I picked out a dress," she went on without looking at any of them. Look, it looks like its too tight to dance in, but there are these zippers down the sides of the legs." And then she noticed that Vorn was the only one of the rebels not among them," Where's the boss?" she asked, "He has to see this."

Mace and Tharun looked at one another before Mace turned back to face Kara.

"He's gone Kara. I don't think he's coming back."

Kyle Varner received hundreds of different forms every day from almost every outpost of the Alliance in the sector; requests for transfers and promotions were the most common ones that he saw. He had even been able to improve his own lifestyle because of his ability to influence the processing of such applications. But every so often other types of forms would reach him and normally he would pay them no more attention than he had to - there was less profit to be had in commendations and reprimands.

But today one of these forms caught his attention. The computer had flagged it for review because where it was supposed to have had a living witness; it had instead been marked by a droid. But what really interested him were the two names listed at the top, Lyssa Larcus and Tharun Verser.

He activated his communicator and waited for a response.

"Captain Tarl." A voice said.

"Captain, it's Kyle." He said, still staring at the form, "I've got something here you may want to see."

"Don't waste my time, just tell me what it is."

"It's an application to register a marriage."

"I've never made any secret of my dislike for you." Vorn said as he sipped at the drink Jeeves had handed him, "But right now I feel that you're the only person I can come to. So how about it?"

Odras Balve, loan shark and underworld kingpin leant forwards, smiling.

"Oh I think we can come to some arrangement." He replied.