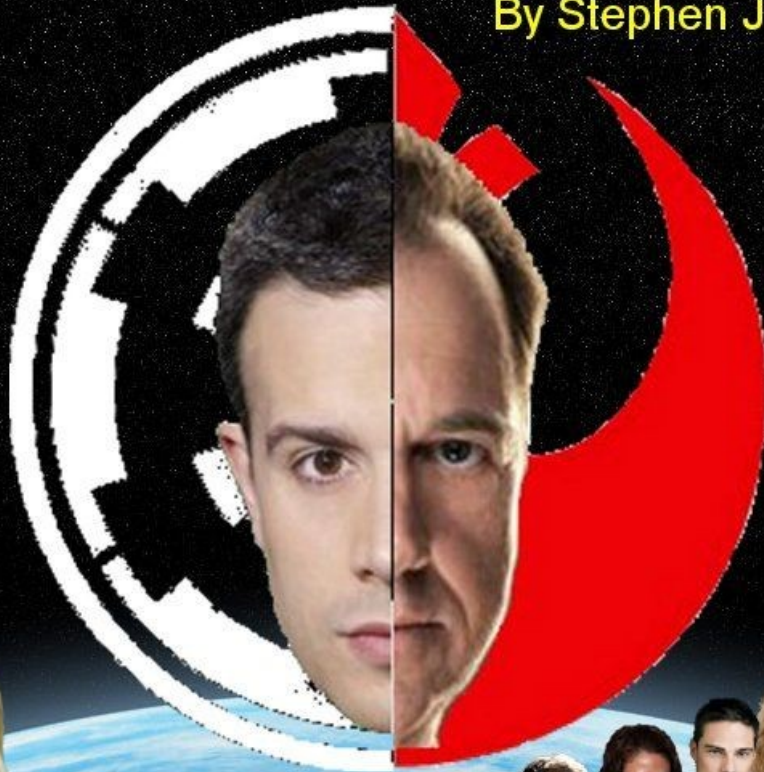


STAR WARS

3-10: Stolen Heart

By Stephen J Dutton



by
by



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...

STOLEN HEART

STILL GRIEVING OVER THE LOSS OF HIS WIFE, ISB AGENT GARM LARCUS IS ASSIGNED TO TRACE A SHIPMENT OF STOLEN EXPLOSIVES THAT COULD KILL MILLIONS. BUT WAS THE THEFT REALLY AN ACT OF THE REBEL ALLIANCE OR WAS THERE A SIMPLER MOTIVE...?

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

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1.

Lorn Kruger, captain of the *Just Cause* observed his target carefully. The vessel was an interplanetary space barge laden with cargo. Lacking hyperdrive the ship was limited to trip within a single star system, meaning it could not hope to outrun the *Just Cause*. His ship could hold only a fraction of what the transport was carrying, but Lorn's men were experienced in picking through a cargo to find the most valuable items and he knew that this particular ship held some very valuable cargo.

The door to the cockpit entered and a woman entered. She walked over to the seat where Lorn sat and leant on the back.

"So that's it then?" she said.

"That's it Carli." He replied, addressing her by name rather than rank "Right where she's supposed to be. Your people came through with the intel."

"That's what we do." Carli replied.

"Contact." The comscan operator suddenly said, "Single vessel just dropped out of hyperspace, now approaching the target at high speed."

"Show me." Lorn ordered and part of the display that had been showing the target vessel was switched to instead show an image of a vessel shaped like a double-pointed fork with its engines flaring.

"A corvette." Lorn said, immediately recognising the familiar shape of an Imperial Customs vessel.

"An escort perhaps?" the comscan operator suggested and Lorn looked at Carli.

The woman shook her head.

"Intel said nothing about an escort." She said, "This shipment was supposed to be covert after all."

"Perhaps they're expecting us." Lorn suggested, looking back at Carli.

"How?" she asked in response, "Headquarters just sends us a list of potential targets in our area. I don't tell them what we're going to hit. Besides, look at that ship. We could make a real mess of a ship like that on our own and since that target's limited to sublight speeds we could bring in more ships if we had to and overwhelm them before they reached their destination."

"So what are they-" Lorn began to ask, but suddenly the image of the corvette showed the familiar flash of weapons fire and the transport was struck, "What the kriff?" Lorn then exclaimed.

"That's not one of ours." Carli said as the transport's engines were disabled and it began to drift helplessly through space.

"Well the Empire's hardly going to be firing on its own shipping is it?" Lorn said, "So that only leaves one other possibility. That's a genuine pirate ship, question is how did they find out about this shipment?"

"Your orders captain?" another crewman asked.

"Let's get out of here." Lorn ordered, "It's not our job to chase pirates."

"Prince Zenzar your highness, welcome and do come in." Edvars Kurrad was the owner of the largest privately owned corporation in the sector and he took pride in being able to offer what people wanted. The reptilian Falleen who was being escorted into his office was here to discuss a major new project that could bring in millions of credits in a relatively short space of time, rising to billions later on. The catch was that it meant negotiating face to face with Prince Zenzar himself. Though rarely seen away from their homeworld, the Falleen species was known to be able to produce powerful pheromones that could cloud decision-making. To counter this Edvars had made sure that there were sensors in place that would detect any attempt by Prince Zenzar to influence him in this way. If they were triggered then Edvars would have the meeting brought to an immediate close.

The Falleen sat down opposite Edvars and smiled at him.

"It is good to finally meet you in person." He said.

"Indeed it is." Edvars agreed, "Can I offer you a drink?"

"Thank you. What do you have?"

"Everything." Edvars said.

There was a sudden knock at the office door and Edvars' assistant came rushing in without waiting for him to respond.

"What's going on?" Edvars demanded, "I told you I wasn't to be disturbed."

"I'm sorry Mister Kurrad." The woman said, "But this is urgent."

"Very well, spit it out."

"Well sir we've just heard from the Drayus system. The *Glorious Conveyor* has been attacked."

Edvars frowned.

"I'm sorry your highness." He said to Prince Zenzar, "But I'm afraid that we're going to have to delay our meeting while I deal with this. But do help yourself to whatever you want from the bar."

The assistant led Edvars from his spacious office and to a room designed to collect data from across the galaxy. Most of this was economic in nature, designed to give Kurrad Industries the maximum warning of any potential investment opportunities or changes in the markets where the company did business. But right now the communications equipment was being used to focus on a report of a different kind. A hologram in the centre of the room showed a bulk freighter that had been heavily damaged. Smaller images that floated in the air around the primary hologram focused on the damaged portions of the ship and showed how its drives had been destroyed and an entry point forced in the main hold.

"They used weapons fire to disable the ship?" Edvars asked as he studied the images in front of him.

"Yes sir." His assistant replied, "The crew reported that the attacking vessel targeted them from extreme range with turbolasers. It seems that they were aware of the baradium cargo and stayed at a distance until the ship was disabled."

Baradium was a highly unstable material used in the manufacture of powerful explosives such as thermal detonators. Crews transporting the material were generally cautious to the point of paranoia.

"What about the crew?"

"The captain gave the order to abandon ship after the first salvo. What do you want me to do with him?"

"Did all the crew get off safely?" Edvars responded and his assistant nodded, "Then do nothing. Its bad enough that the ship got shot up without worrying about lawsuits from relations of dead crewmen as well. Now what about the cargo itself?"

"The raiders knew what they were after. The recovery team says that they only disturbed what they had to in order to get at the baradium storage containers. All in under thirty eight minutes."

"Thirty eight?"

"The time taken for a naval task force to arrive. The hyperdrive-equipped ships already in the system were all in space dock and couldn't power up in time to respond. The first to arrive were a pair of carrack light cruisers from a neighbouring system while a couple of local fast responding sublight ships arrived about fifteen minutes after that. By that time there was no sign of the raiders."

Edvars sighed.

"Have my speeder prepared." He ordered, "Send someone to apologise to Prince Zenzar and then inform Moff Horatian that I'm on my way to see him." and then he turned away from the woman and strode purposely towards the door.

"But what if the moff can't see you at short notice?" she called out after him.

"He will."

Like Edvars Kurrad, Moff Gregor Horatian had an office fitting to man of status. Every trace of the modular construction materials used had been covered by ornately carved wood panelling and only the finest furnishing had been used.

"Thank you for seeing me on such short notice governor." Edvars said as he entered the office.

"Edvars, how many times must I tell you? Call me Gregor." Moff Horatian replied as he walked around his desk to greet his guest, "Now how may I help you?"

"You can explain why I've just lost a shipment of over four hundred tonnes of baradium."

Moff Horatian was taken aback; the thought of that much baradium falling into the wrong hands terrified him as it would any sane person.

"Please take a seat." He said, pointing out one of the luxurious chairs to Edvars and then making his way back to his own chair. As soon as he sat down Moff Horatian activated the intercom set into his desk, "Could you tell Admiral Vretan to join us?" he said into the device before shutting it off without waiting for a response. Then he turned his attention back to Edvars, "Believe me Edvars, this is the first I'm hearing of this. Tell me what happened."

"One of my ships was making a run in the Drytym system. They were ambushed and the entire shipment of baradium taken while the rest of the cargo was left alone. I thought Drytym was supposed to be secure."

"So did I." Moff Horatian replied before there was a knock at the door, "Come." The moff called out and the door slid open to reveal a man in the uniform of an Imperial admiral standing there. As he entered the room both Moff Horatian and Edvars got to their feet, "Mister Kurrad, I believe you know Fleet Admiral Vretan." The moff said.

"Of course." Edvars replied as he shook hands with the admiral before sitting back down.

"I take it this concerns the Drytym system." Admiral Vretan said, "I've only just heard."

"Mister Kurrad knew somewhat earlier it would seem." Moff Horatian said, noting how the flow of information through the navy's hierarchy seemed to be less efficient than it was in Kurrad Industries.

"So what's being done?" Edvars asked, "I've lost a ship and hundreds of tonnes of baradium and I want to know why. The raiders knew what they were after."

"With respect Mister Kurrad that information could have come from inside your own organisation." Admiral Vretan pointed out.

"And how did they manage to avoid your ships? The ones my taxes buy. My accounts department tells me your own flagship constitutes less than four percent of what I pay each year."

"Mister Kurrad," the admiral replied sternly, "all Imperial citizens are entitled to protection regardless of their wealth."

"Then perhaps you can explain why my ship didn't get any."

"Gentlemen please." Moff Horatian interrupted, raising a hand for quiet, "Now this bickering gets us nowhere." And he paused while he looked back and forth between the other two men, "I suggest that I appoint an agent to oversee the investigation. He will have access to naval resources and the authority to go wherever the trail leads him. Mister Kurrad may send someone along as well if he wishes. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Edvars replied.

"Fleet admiral?" Moff Horatian said when Admiral Vretan failed to reply. Clearly the idea of handing over his ships to an outsider was not one that appealed to him.

"Agreed." He replied reluctantly.

"Good, then it's settled." Moff Horatian said as he pressed a button mounted on the intercom panel, "Now if you two gentlemen will excuse me I must select an agent to undertake this task."

Both Edvars and the admiral nodded as they got up and left the office together. Just as they were leaving a young blonde woman in a tight fitting black body glove walked past them into the moff's office.

"You wanted to see me Gregor?" they heard her say before the door dropped shut between them.

Agent Garm Larcus of the Imperial Security Bureau avoided making eye contact with anyone as he made his way to his office. This was made easier thanks to the reluctance of anyone else to make conversation with him right now. It was not long since he had returned to work after being badly injured in a terrorist attack that had claimed the life of his wife, Jennay. The attack itself had been almost three months earlier, but he had spent much of the time since then in a bacta tank.

"What are you doing here Vay?" he asked when he reached his office and found the young blonde woman sitting in his chair.

"Can't I just drop by to see how you are?" she asked as she stood up to let him take the seat, "We almost died."

"Yes, almost." Garm said and his eyes drifted to the photograph on his desk of himself with his late wife and Vay sensed a single thought.

Jennay.

Vay grabbed hold of the back of Garm's chair and turned it to face her.

"Look." She said, holding up a datapad, "Gregor's finally given us another field assignment."

"Us?" Garm asked, "I thought you were assigned to Intelligence now." He then added, referring to how Vay had been spending much of her time with a newly arrived Imperial agent. From what Garm knew of Vay's ability to manipulate the Force, something that was not common knowledge, it seemed likely that this new arrival had similar powers.

"That's complicated." Vay replied, "Ibram's here to help train me to use my abilities more effectively, but I'm assigned to do whatever Gregor wants and he wants me to look into this. I can't do this alone, I'm not supposed to be a real Imperial agent."

"No, you're supposed to be the moff's mistress." Garm replied and then he frowned as he looked into Vay's eyes.

"What's wrong?" she asked, sensing his unease.

Garm sighed.

"When the bomb went off," he replied, still looking into her eyes, "I remember you being there looking down at me."

"Yes I was."

"Your eyes turned yellow."

"Well they're blue again now. Don't you like them?"

Garm ignored the question and took the datapad.

"So what's your fake sugar daddy got for us to do this time?" he asked.

2.

"Admiral Hall?" Garm asked when he saw the senior naval officer looking through the viewport that filled the wall of the briefing chamber. Outside the space was filled with the scaffolding like structure of the naval dockyard that orbited the world of Estran. The admiral's own vessel, the tector-class star destroyer *Horrific* was docked close by, "Admiral?" Garm repeated.

"I heard you." Admiral Hall replied, turning to face Garm and Vay, "I take it you are fully healed Agent Larcus? And your young friend of course."

"I didn't realise we'd be getting your ship." Vay said as she approached the viewport and stared at the *Horrific*.

"You're not." Admiral Hall replied, "The *Horrific* is designed for fleet engagements, not chasing after criminal scum."

"Then why were we told to report to you?" Garm asked.

"Because you're getting ships from my squadron. Three of them."

"An attack line?" Vay asked.

"Indeed." Admiral Hall replied, "You can see them over there, behind the *Horrific*." And he pointed to where a trio of vessels were at anchor.

"Venator-class?" Vay said, "Those things are as old as I am."

"I think you'll find they are perfectly suited to the task at hand." The admiral said, "Those destroyers are fast enough to keep up with most capital ships and between them they can carry over a thousand fighters."

"Can carry?" Garm asked, "How many do they actually have aboard?"

At that moment the door to the briefing chamber opened once again and three naval officers entered the room. All three wore the insignia of captains and it was clear that these three officers were the commanders of the venator-class ships. What surprised Garm was that all three were women. Officially the navy promoted purely on merit, but in practice there was a distinct gender bias that limited the career prospects of female officers.

"Agent Larcus, meet Line Captain Naje of the *Firebrand*, Captain Celtis of the *Ferocious* and Captain Yay of the *Falchion*. Captains, meet Agent Larcus of the Imperial Security Bureau and Miss Vay Udra." Admiral Hall said, introducing each person in turn.

"We've met." Captain Naje said as she stepped forwards to greet Garm, "Though it was some years ago." Vay felt it as Garm tensed up.

"Well that makes things easier." Admiral Hall said, "Ladies, Agent Larcus has an assignment for you. In the meantime I have other duties to attend to. You may consider the agent to be in charge for the duration of this assignment."

As the admiral left the room Captains Naje and Celtis took seats at the large ring shaped table that dominated the room. Captain Yay just scowled.

Anger.

The woman was making no attempt to hide her feelings and Vay sensed them easily.

"Be seated captain." Captain Naje said to her subordinate and Captain Yay also sat down, "Now would you mind explaining what we're all doing here?" she asked Garm.

"Of course." Garm said and while Vay also sat down he approached the head of the table and loaded a mem-stik into the terminal located there. Immediately a hologram of the *Glorious Conveyor* appeared.

"At approximately oh-seven twenty yesterday this ship was hit by raiders in the Drytym system. They apparently had intelligence regarding not only this ship but also local patrol schedules. The raiders used a rendilli-stardrive corvette and by the time the navy could respond they had fled with several hundred tonnes of baradium."

Surprise.

This caught all three fleet officers off guard.

"Why wasn't there security?" Captain Naje asked.

"The shipment was supposed to be covert." Garm explained, "It was concealed in a routine shipment of machine parts that the raiders left untouched. An armed escort would have drawn attention."

"Let me guess," Captain Yay said, "now the ISB needs the navy to help run down these pirates."

"Well the navy couldn't catch them without us." Vay commented and she grinned at Captain Yay.

Anger.

Once again the woman's feelings were easy to read.

In another room far, far away another figure looked out of a viewport at a shipyard. This was not as grandiose as that orbiting Estran; instead it consisted of a handful of berths capable of building vessels no

more than a few hundred metres in length. Right now several vessels identical to Imperial customs corvettes could be seen in various stages of construction. These were not genuine Imperial ships, but were copies built from plans stolen from one of the many facilities around the galaxy. Such vessels were highly sought after by those who wanted a fast and hard-hitting raiding vessel but were unable to procure one from a legitimate source.

"You still serious about taking one?" a voice asked and the figure looked around.

"I'm a starship captain Kavan." He said, "I'm not suited to waiting here while other go out and have all the fun."

The man called Kavan smiled.

"I've run this place for almost twenty years now Lazarus and you're the first being I've met who turned down the opportunity to become a king amongst us."

Lazarus snorted.

"The problem with being a king is that there's always someone else after your crown. Just ask the Emperor."

"Yes, your old friends are keen to depose him."

Lazarus smiled.

"If they weren't," he said, "then we wouldn't have known about that baradium shipment would we?"

Kavan smiled.

"I knew you'd get around to that eventually and yes, the raid was every bit as successful as you hoped. Your cut works out to about thirty tonnes of the stuff."

Lazarus looked out of the viewport again at one of the ships under construction, one that was almost complete.

"Then she's mine now." He said.

"Yes, she's yours and with money to spare too. Or least she will be when she's finished. What then?"

"Then I get to go and join in the excitement. Don't worry though, I'll still sell you the information I get from the rebels but can't use myself."

As Vay made her way through the corridors of the *Firebrand* she noticed that the captain was not the only woman amongst the crew, in fact a large portion seemed to be female and she guessed that the situation on the other two ships of the line was similar. Venator-class vessels such as the *Firebrand* featured two command and control towers, each with an identical bridge deck near the top. Traditionally one of these would concentrate on controlling the swarms of fighters and other craft carried in the ship's cavernous landing bays while the other would direct the vessel's own operations. Typically the captain would be found on the latter of these and so it was there that Vay headed. Sure enough she found Captain Naje in one of the crew pits leaning over the shoulder of a crewman as he attempted to get a system malfunction under control.

Frustration.

"Is this a bad time?" Vay asked. Technically she was no more subject to the military chain of command than the navy was the ISB or Imperial Intelligence, but in most circumstances a ship's captain enjoyed power over everyone on board their vessel so Vay did not want to annoy Captain Naje unnecessarily any more than she already was.

"No." Captain Naje replied, "In fact its an excellent time." Then she looked back at the crewman, "Get that sorted by the time I'm back." She ordered and then she made her way out of the pit, "So how may I help you Miss Udra?"

"I wanted to talk to you about something you said at the briefing." Vay replied.

"Really? I wasn't aware I said anything relevant to the assignment."

"No." Vay said quietly and she glanced around at the other crewmen all around them, "Is there somewhere private we can talk?"

"My office is this way." Captain Naje replied and she led Vay into a spartan room located off the rear of the main bridge that was guarded by a marine stormtrooper. As she walked past the guard Vay pondered for a second about whether or not the stormtrooper was a woman. Under their armour it was impossible to tell, despite the suggestions of some outsiders as to how their armour designed differed.

"So what can I tell you?" Captain Naje asked as the door closed behind them and she sat down.

"Its about Garm." Vay said, "You said you'd met him and I know it disturbed him. Why is that?"

"Ah." Captain Naje replied and Vay picked up on a thought.

Vorn.

"You knew his father?" Vay asked, "Before he defected to the rebellion."

"I did. We served together during the war and kept in touch afterwards. Right up until he defected. If the navy hadn't already decided to keep me on this old ship I think they'd have moved me here after that anyway."

"So you've had no contact since then?"

"Not with Garm no. In fact I'd not spoken to him since before he got married."

It suddenly occurred to Vay that Captain Naje might have also known Jennay Larcus.

"Did you ever meet his wife?" she asked, but before the captain could answer the intercom sounded.

"Naje." Captain Naje said.

"Captain, we're there." A woman's voice replied and the ship shuddered slightly as it dropped out of hyperspace.

"Well there's work to be done." Captain Naje said as she stood up, "Perhaps you should call Garm."

"Of course." Vay replied and she remained seated as she watched Captain Naje return to the bridge.

Be careful of your feelings Vay.

Vay frowned as the mysterious presence in the Force returned to make itself known.

"What's it got to do with you?" she muttered to herself.

Because your affection for Garm could be your undoing. There is no guarantee he will ever return your affection.

"Nothing's guaranteed in this life." Vay muttered and then she followed Captain Naje out of the office.

As it happened Garm had felt the transition from hyperspace for himself and arrived on the bridge just after Vay. The wide viewports towards the front of the bridge offered an excellent view of not only the forwards section of the ship but also the other two ships in the line that had emerged from hyperspace at the same time as the *Firebrand*.

"Signals from the *Ferocious* and *Falchion* captain." One of the crew in the pits called out.

"Put them through." Captain Naje replied and a pair of life sized holograms materialised around the tactical station where she and the two Imperial agents had gathered. On the other two ships the captains would be looking at identical readouts on their own tactical stations and standing beside holograms of Garm, Vay and Captain Naje. This sort of virtual meeting was almost as good as gathering everyone in the same room without the need to organise shuttle flights between ships.

"Congratulations ladies." Captain Naje said glancing at the two holograms, "We've dropped out of hyperspace right where we should be. The transport is just over four light minutes away. Captain Celtis?"

"Yes captain?" the hologram of the captain of the *Ferocious* replied.

"I want a CAP set up. Use three squadrons from your roster. Captain Yay?"

"Yes captain?"

"Hold your fighters for now. I want the *Falchion* ready to jump on two minutes notice. If those pirates are still about they may try and hit another target in this system. If they do I want your ship ready to respond as soon as we hear about it."

"Yes captain." Captain Yay replied, smiling and Vay did not need to be stood near her to tell how she was relishing the idea of charging her ship into battle, even if it was just with a light corvette.

Then Captain Naje looked at Garm and Vay.

"Unless either of you object we'll head straight for the transport ship so you can take a look aboard her." She said.

"Excellent, thank you captain." Garm replied, just staring at the tactical display laid out between them.

3.

The relatively tiny *Glorious Conveyor* was easily small enough to fit inside the hangar bay of the *Firebrand* and both Garm and Vay watched from behind a shield in one of the individual landing areas that ran along either side of the deck as the venator-class vessel was manoeuvred to bring it in. The deck shook as the transport touched down heavily and at the same time another small vessel flew over it, decelerated sharply and then flew into the adjacent landing zone.

"I guess that's the representative from Kurrad Industries." Vay said, looking at the expensive appearing craft. Then she looked back at Garm who did not reply but instead watched as the dorsal hangar bay doors slowly closed to seal the entire bay. She could sense that he was not functioning at his best, the loss of Jennay still foremost in his mind and she reached out her hand towards him.
Remember my warning. Be mindful of why you are doing this.

The sound of a ramp lowering from the Kurrad Industries shuttle made Vay turn her attention back towards that ship and she saw a tall grey-haired man descending it to where a naval ensign greeted him and then pointed him in the direction of Garm and Vay. The man smiled and then began to walk towards them.

"Garm." Vay said to attract his attention and he looked around.

The man walking towards them exuded confidence and Garm got the feeling that he recognised him from somewhere. Then he realised that he had seen images of the man in various news reports over the years. "Oh stang." Garm muttered, "Edvars Kurrad didn't send someone to keep an eye on us – he came himself." "So I see." Vay responded, remembering Edvars Kurrad from their ever so brief encounter in the doorway of the moff's office.

"Good morning." Edvars said when he reached Garm and Vay, "It is morning isn't it? I get confused with time keeping when it's always dark outside."

"Current ship time is fifteen thirty." Garm said as he shook Edvars' hand, "So its afternoon."

"Ah, of course. Good afternoon then. Agent Larcus isn't it?"

"Yes sir."

"Good. Moff Horatian speaks highly of you and your associate here." And Edvars glanced at Vay and smiled, "Now what is your plan?"

"Well first of all I'd like to go aboard your ship. The *Glorious Conveyor*, not your shuttle."

"Of course. I'll come with you; I have all the access codes you may need. After you."

Apart from the drives and the hole cut to allow the pirates access to the vessel, the *Glorious Conveyor* had suffered very little damage. Clearly the pirates had been alert to the dangers of accidentally triggering the baradium stored in her hold. Edvars presented Garm with a key card as the neared the ship that Garm then swiped through a reader positioned beside the main hatch and he stood back as it opened.

"Scanner teams move in." Garm said without bothering to look around at the five pairs of naval crew waiting with scanning equipment, "I want a full sweep, don't overlook anything. If there are any sealed hatches call them in and Mister Kurrad will release them. And watch out for any traces of baradium remaining. If you find anything raise the alarm and we'll call in a disposal team." And he waited as the scanner crews headed into the ship.

Fear.

Vay noticed that Garm's warning about the potential for baradium to still be present had unsettled them somewhat.

When all of the teams were inside Garm looked at Edvars.

"We should head for the flight deck. Its your ship Mister Kurrad, so after you."

"Of course, I'm the one that knows the way anyway." Edvars replied and he headed inside, pausing just long enough to turn around and say, "Oh and you two can call me Edvars."

After Edvars had gone through the hatchway Garm extended a hand towards it.

"Ladies first." He said.

"So you have noticed." Vay replied.

"Noticed what?" Garm asked

"I'm a woman." Vay said as she followed Edvars inside.

Inside the cramped interior of the *Glorious Conveyor* it was hard to believe that the ship had been attacked.

The pirates had done even less damage internally than they had from the outside.

"We're right under where the baradium was stored." Edvars said.

"Why here?" Vay asked, "What's so special about this place?"

"Nothing." Edvars replied, "Further back and it would be near the drives. That's just asking for a random power spike to trigger an explosion, while storing it close to the flight deck would mean no one would be willing to crew the ship. So amidships is the only place left."

"And how was it stored?" Garm asked from behind Vay.

"Individual temperature and humidity controlled canisters." Edvars answered, "Each one holding a hundred kilos. Almost four thousand of them."

"You're telling me that there's the best part of four hundred tonnes of baradium out there?" Garm said, his eyes widening, "I've got a bad feeling about this. A very bad feeling."

"Exactly." Edvars said, "You see why I came myself? Ah, here we are, the flight deck."

The flight deck of the *Glorious Conveyor* was every bit as cramped as the rest of the ship. Two seats were positioned in front of a control panel while the living space for the crew was limited to a double bunk and a refresher station just behind it. A sealed door nearby was labelled 'ESCAPE POD – EMERGENCY USE ONLY.'

Edvars sat in one of the seats and studied the instruments.

"Well everything looks intact." He said, "Hopefully we'll be able to transfer all of the logs to the destroyer's computers."

"We'll need Captain Naje's permission for that." Garm replied, "It possible the pirates left some malicious code behind for just that eventuality and I'd hate to take out a capital ship just because the computer's virus filter needs updating."

"Why can't we just access the computer from here?" Vay asked and she sat in the unoccupied seat.

"Well for starters its damned cramped," Edvars replied, "and secondly the instrumentation in this type of ship is kept to a bare minimum to save cost. The sensors pick up far more than can be displayed. If we hook the recordings into a better computer we'll get a much better idea of what happened."

"Yes," Garm added, "and the best computer available to us is the *Firebrand's*."

On the primary operations bridge of the *Firebrand* Edvars, Garm and Vay stood alongside Captain Naje and watched as a naval slicer studied the display of a portable computer. The sensor data from the *Glorious Conveyor* had been downloaded into a removable drive and plugged into this computer so that any potential threat could be identified before it was hooked up to the star destroyer itself.

"Well?" Captain Naje asked the slicer, "Is it safe?"

"I think so." She replied, "The scan hasn't picked up on any of the standard types of malware and all of the file headings make sense so there's not much chance of anything more exotic. I'd still connect via a cable rather than plugging it into a port directly though. That way if anything does go wrong you can at least pull the plug quickly."

"Yes thank you, I had thought of that." Captain Naje said, "Now leave us."

The slicer saluted and walked away from the tactical station, leaving both the external drive and the portable computer.

"Well?" Edvars asked, "Its your ship Captain Naje."

"Do it." She replied, "But at the first sign of trouble I'm pulling that cord myself."

It was Garm that stepped forwards to connect the drive to the tactical station and then Captain Naje began to search for the recorded sensor data.

"Here we go." She said and above the console a three dimensional image appeared as the ship's computer used the data in the drive to build up a picture of what had been recorded. At the centre of the display was a representation of the *Glorious Conveyor* while the only other object was something lurking on the very edge of sensor range.

"What's that?" Edvars asked, frowning.

"Not the raider." Captain Naje replied, "Not from what we know, its far too small. About the same size as the *Glorious Conveyor* in fact."

"Could it be a reflection of the *Glorious Conveyor*?" Vay suggested.

"Its possible." Captain Naje answered.

"Though it could just as easily be another raider, trying to stay unnoticed." Edvars said.

"Perhaps we should just watch and see what happens." Garm said, just staring at the display and Captain Naje set it running.

The contact at the edge of the display moved in and out of sensor range, suggesting that it was indeed another ship attempting to remain undetected. But the raider itself appeared suddenly, dropping from hyperspace well within range of the *Glorious Conveyor's* sensors. There was a rapid burst of weapons fire from the corvette that crippled the transport's drives. It drew in closer and the escape was jettisoned, ignored by the raiding vessel that was more interested in the ship's valuable cargo than fleeing crewmen. It was then that there was an energy flare as the mystery ship on the edge of sensor range jumped away before the corvette clamped onto the hull of the *Glorious Conveyor*.

"Okay skip forwards." Garm said, "Nothing's happening here."

Captain Naje nodded and she moved the simulation forwards to the moment that the pirate vessel broke away from the transport and there was a plume of gas as the atmosphere vented. Then it moved away from the *Glorious Conveyor*, banking around to face the direction it had arrived from. Then it accelerated rapidly before vanishing into hyperspace.

"Thirty-two minutes." Garm said, noting the time elapsed since the pirate ship had first emerged from hyperspace.

"Either they were really lucky," Captain Naje said, "or they knew exactly where all the local naval units were." "How would they know that?" Edvars asked, "That would require a massive intelligence network. Who has that?"

"The Rebel Alliance." Garm commented, "We may not be dealing with regular pirates here. They could be rebel privateers."

"So the rebels have got away with four hundred tonnes of baradium?" Vay said, "I think this situation just got a whole lot worse."

"Or maybe not." Captain Naje said, "The getting away part I mean. Look at this." And she replayed the part of the simulation that showed the corvette dropping out of hyperspace and then skipped directly to its departure. Then she replayed the two clips again, but this time she configured the display to mark the corvette's path, demonstrating that it had arrived and left along the same vector, "A bit of a coincidence don't you think?" she then asked.

"So we have a direction." Garm said as he looked at the lines, "Assuming of course that the pirates didn't just drop back to real space and then make a second jump."

"Then why leave on exactly the same vector as they came in on?" Edvars asked.

"To throw us off the scent." Captain Naje replied, "However it is our only lead for now, so I suggest we follow it."

"So what do you plan to do captain?" Vay asked, "Just jump your ships along that heading and hope we happen to drop out of hyperspace somewhere that we can spot the pirates from?"

"Young lady," Captain Naje replied, "I don't know who you are or why you're involved in this investigation but I actually know how to undertake a search and destroy mission. This line shows us the direction the pirates fled in. Now watch." And Captain Naje adjusted the tactical display to show an volume of space covering several star systems with Drytym at one edge and the travel vector of the pirate ship extended across it, "Now we can guess that the pirates won't have gone too far. No one in their right mind wants to travel more than a dozen parsecs or so with a hold full of unprocessed baradium. Not unless they want to leave hyperspace as a cloud of individual subatomic particles anyway. Therefore, we can assume they're still in the sector. We have listening posts and patrols all throughout the mining belt where the pirate course leads us. Now they're unlikely to pick up a corvette in hyperspace, its mass shadow is just too small, but they would notice if it entered or exited hyperspace anywhere nearby. We know the speed of the corvette so we can check against observations from those units taken at the time the pirates would have reached them."

"What if there's nothing?" Edvars asked.

"Then we still will have eliminated a large volume of space from our search Mister Kurrad and we can fill what remains with every scout ship and probe droid we have at our disposal. Recovering that baradium outweighs the costs of losing every probe droid we have." Captain Naje then adjusted the display once more so that it showed an image of her attack line, "Plus," she went on, "I just so happen to have one of the finest pirate hunters in the navy under my command." And she zoomed the image in on Captain Yay's ship, the *Falchion*.

"Just one thing captain." Garm commented.

"Go ahead Agent Larcus." She replied.

"When we find these pirates I don't want their ship destroyed out of hand." He told her.

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because if they are privateers operating on behalf of the Alliance then they will likely be equipped with rebel communications equipment and there may be rebel personnel aboard. They're worth a lot to me alive."

"I'll assemble a marine strike force then and issue orders that they are not permanently damaged." Captain Naje said.

"Another point." Edvars said, "What if this turns out to be more than just a pirate bolt hole? What if we stumble across the rebel headquarters for the sector?"

"He's right." Vay said, "Our intelligence suggests that the rebels could have a significant naval presence in the sector. Certainly enough to defeat your force."

"Yes young lady, I have read those reports too." The captain replied, "Fleet Admiral Vretan actually thinks its useful for his officers to know what they're up against. Don't worry, this line can hold out against the rebel force long enough for the admiral himself to arrive and bring them to battle. Assuming they don't just flee when they realise they've been discovered that is."

The crew of the *Falchion* eyed their captain curiously. It was well known that Captain Louisa Yay resented her posting to such an out of date vessel and she generally took this out on her crew. Now however, she appeared to be in a good mood as she stood at the tactical station and repeatedly turned her attention from the circular console to the vertical plotting chart nearby. Though there were no other crewmen nearby there was the familiar bluish glow cast by the holograms of Captains Celtis and Naje as she explained the strategy Captain Naje had commanded her to come up with.

"We know none of our ships or tracking stations reporting seeing anything," she said, "so we can immediately eliminate the regions covered by them. But we can also eliminate this region along here, extending from about two parsecs out."

"Why?" Captain Celtis asked.

"I spent eight years patrolling the mining belt," Captain Yay explained, "and in that time I plotted every rogue mass I came across. There's a cloud of comets moving through here so the route won't be clear for another twelve years or so. If the pirates dropped out of hyperspace too close to them they'd risk disrupting their path and leaving a sign that they'd been there. That leaves us with a route that runs along here," and she ran her finger across the holographic star chart, "and there's only one star system along this path. It's a pretty useless star system without so much as a single planet, just a few scattered asteroid fields. It doesn't even have a name, just a reference in our catalogue. Trill herf xesh one one three eight."

"Very well then." Captain Naje said as she studied Captain Yay's report, "Well done Captain Yay. Now launch the probe droids."

4.

From all three ships swarms of tiny egg-shaped objects emerged, more than a hundred in all. The rear of each one flared as its drive activated to propel it away from its mothership. The flares then became brief, brilliant flashes as the pods carried their probe droid cargo into hyperspace and towards system THX-1338.

Though his new ship was not quite finished yet Captain Lazaras Shallak had decided to start moving in. He was impressed at how the black market shipyard had been able to recreate the design so accurately; if he hadn't watched the ship being built then he would have thought that it was a genuine customs ship that had been stolen. His cabin featured a small viewport that looked out into space away from the shipyard and he paused for a few moments to take a look outside. There he could see a transport ship that was slightly larger than his new vessel. It was a xiyitar-class freighter, an old design known for its durability. This particular ship belonged to the customer who had paid handsomely for the baradium stolen thanks to the information Lazaras had intercepted. It was not surprising that the client had sent such a vessel; a xiyitar-class ship was well armoured and shielded so the odds of anything untoward happening to baradium en route were much reduced. As he watched the ship moved slowly away from the shipyard, taking its deadly cargo to wherever the client was from. Lazaras neither knew nor cared now that he had his money.

A sound from across the room caught Lazaras' attention. It was coming from the suitcase-sized device that was marked with the symbol of the Alliance to Restore the Republic. When Lazaras had been a privateer operating on behalf of the rebellion his liaison officer had used it to keep in contact with his superiors and receive intelligence reports from them. Now that he was operating independently Lazaras himself was using it to intercept Alliance intelligence reports and selling the information on to those who would pay. Now that he had a ship of his own again he would be able to make use of the information for himself of course and not merely take a small percentage of what was stolen.

Lazaras had not realised that he had left the device switched on and he went over to it and opened up the case, looking at the communications device inside. Typically the device would automatically decrypt any Alliance signals it received and he would be able to read the message off the display. However, on this occasion the unit was merely producing an audible version of the broadcast it was picking up. It was not in any language normally spoken out loud, but rather was a series of distinct chirps of various tones and durations. Lazaras had no idea what the signal was saying, but from his time in the Imperial Customs Service he precisely knew what it was and he knew it had to be coming from close by.

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." He said to himself and then he pulled his comlink from his pocket, "Kavan!" he exclaimed, "Kavan, it's Lazaras. We've got a problem, there's an Imperial probe droid nearby."

The hologram clearly showed the pirate base. It was built from a pair of asteroids tethered together by the framework structure of the construction berths. Both asteroids had various structures dotted across their surfaces, while openings suggested that there also structures running beneath the surfaces. Two corvette type ships could be seen docked with the base, while another such vessel along with a handful of other small ships flitted about nearby.

The crowd surrounding the hologram on the bridge of the *Firebrand* was a mix of real people and holograms of those on other ships.

"By all appearances we're dealing with a mid-sized shipyard." Captain Naje explained as everyone looked at the feed from the probe droid that had first discovered the target, "There are no capital ships about, but we can't be certain that they can't summon help from any if needed."

"Those berths don't look big enough for anything larger than five hundred metres." Captain Yay's hologram interrupted.

"They aren't." Captain Naje replied, "But if this is a rebel base then there's not reason to believe they won't call in any bigger ships so we need to be alert. Normally I'd be ordering the target bombarded from long range, our turbolasers should be enough to reduce it to rubble in a few salvos. But I've received a request to take the facility intact. Agent Larcus will explain."

"Thank you captain." Garm said as she stepped forwards and the crowd shifted their attention to him, "Given the possibility that this is an Alliance facility we need to secure it for intelligence gathering purposes. We're looking for communications and command and control resources. While our capital ships will establish a perimeter and watch for reinforcements our fighters will engage the base itself, picking off the defensive batteries and clearing a path for the assault shuttles. I will be leading one of the marine detachments personally to seize control of the facility. One last thing. It is possible that there are up to four hundred tonnes of baradium aboard the base, so be careful of any accidental weapon discharges. One shot in the wrong place and the whole thing could go up and take us with it."

"I'm telling you Kavan the Empire knows we're here. You should start the evacuation while you still can." Lazaras said.

"Nonsense." Kavan replied, "We're not picking up any signals and the fighters haven't found anything either. If there was a probe droid out there it's gone now. I've got far too much invested in this place to just leave it all behind. Besides, given the amount of firepower we've got we can handle a navy patrol."

It was Lazaras that cut the link. Kavan had been good to him, but now it looked like the Imperial navy was about to put an end to the outlaw tech's operation here and Lazaras needed to make sure that he was as far away as possible.

The navy had provided Garm with an armoured vest to wear over his ISB uniform and as he put it on he caught sight of himself in a mirror mounted on the wall of the locker room. The reflection brought back a sudden memory. It was leading a raid when he could just as easily have stayed behind that prompted the terrorist attack that claimed Jennay's life and for a moment he wondered what this raid may cost him.

"Are you decent?" Vay's voice called out as she walked in, also wearing an armoured vest over her black bodyglove, despite it having protective properties of its own, "Oh you are." She said, "That's a pity."

"What do you want Vay?" Garm asked, turning away from the mirror.

Sadness.

Vay could not help but sense Garm's grief, but rather than ask him about it she instead delivered the message she had come here with.

"The marines are ready." She told him, "They're just waiting for you now."

"Thank you. Has Captain Naje said when she expects us to drop out of hyperspace?"

Vay looked at her chronometer.

"It could be any minute now." She said.

The exit of the three star destroyers from hyperspace had been timed to the second. The *Falchion* was the first to appear and it headed directly towards the pirate base, its engines blazing brightly.

"Raise shields!" Kavan yelled when he saw the kilometre long dart-shaped vessel bearing down on his shipyard, "And open fire! Everybody open fire!"

Turbolaser blasts streaked towards the *Falchion* from not only the base itself, but also the ships nearby. But though the venator-class vessel was no longer state of the art it still possessed shielding more than adequate to deflect the bombardment, only when it raced past the twin asteroids of the base and had to spread it shielding around its entire hull instead of concentrating them forwards did any of the shots reach its heavily armoured hull.

The active pirate vessels flew after the *Falchion*, attempting to target its engines while staying out of the way of its own weapons that for some reason had remained silent since the ship had emerged from hyperspace. They were joined by fighters that shot from the launch bays of the pirate base, just a few at first but as more pilots reached their fighters the pirates launched every ship they had.

That was when the *Ferocious* arrived.

Unlike the *Falchion*, the *Ferocious* slowed to a complete halt almost as soon as it dropped out of hyperspace. From her position on the bridge Captain Celtis looked ahead and watched as the massive hangar bay doors opened.

"All attack craft scramble!" she barked, "Fighters to target enemy craft, bombers to suppress base defences. And good hunting."

"All stop!" Captain Yay snapped, "Bring us about and engage those corvettes. Scramble our fighters to support the *Ferocious*' squadrons. Come on people! Move!"

The deck beneath her feet then shifted slightly as the helmsman steered the ship as sharply as possible and there was a flash of weapons fire as the batteries mounted forward of the bridge began to open fire on the pirates flying straight towards them.

The pirate base was now caught between two venator-class ships and their attack craft. But the Imperial Navy was not done yet and with another flash of light the *Firebrand* made its appearance right on schedule. The *Firebrand*'s turbolasers delivered a devastating blast to the nearest corvette, striking the pirate craft amidships and sending the front and rear sections tumbling in separate directions as burning gases spread out across the space in between.

5.

Lazaras steadied himself on the back of a chair as the ship rocked. He had made his way to the flight deck and outside he could see the Imperial bombers swarming over the base. From what he could tell the base defences were responding, but the crews of most of the lighter anti-fighter weapons had made the mistake of targeting the initial wave of fighters launched by the *Ferocious* as they swept past to engage the pirates own fighters, thus leaving the way open for the wave of bombers that followed them to attack the base directly. The base's heavier guns had of course targeted the star destroyers themselves, but they were too few to inflict significant damage to even one, let alone three of the massive capital ships.

Fortunately the construction crew aboard his ship had been more willing to listen to him than Kavan had been, especially when the second and third star destroyers made an appearance.

"What's our status?" Lazaras yelled as another bomb struck the framework connecting the two asteroids and the ship shuddered.

"Three more minutes." Came the reply, "We could do it faster, but the Empire would definitely notice."

"It'll have to do." Lazaras replied and he made his way towards the navigational computer. His plan was simple; the ship was being powered up slowly while as little equipment as possible was being activated. With the massive energy bursts of the weapons fire outside Lazaras hoped that the navy would assume the ship was inactive until he was ready to fire up the drives and cut loose from the shipyard. Just a few seconds at full burn from the engines would take the ship far enough away from the base that it could then be jumped into hyperspace and escape the battle that was undoubtedly going the Empire's way. Lazaras did not really care where the ship ended up just so long as it was away from here so he began to program a simple jump of one light year. When they dropped back into real space between systems he would then plot a second jump to take them somewhere safer.

Of course, Lazaras thought as yet another bomb struck the shipyard, that depended on the ship not being destroyed in the cross fire first.

Garm checked his harness again even though he had already checked it twice. If the *Firebrand* had been an imperial-class star destroyer then it would have had a platoon of spacetroopers assigned to it. Equipped with massively armoured and heavily armed power suits, spacetroopers were ideally suited to operations such as this. However, the *Firebrand* was not considered important enough to have such troops stationed aboard it and so the assault shuttle was instead filled with marines in regular stormtrooper armour.

Despite this Garm was confident that he had the men he needed to seize the pirate base and the intelligence he hoped it contained.

"Launch in five." The pilot's voice called out over the intercom, "Four. Three. Two. One."

Even with the acceleration dampening active, Garm still felt himself being pressed into his seat as the assault shuttle was launched and sped towards the pirate base.

The bombers had done their job well, and a corridor had been opened where the base defences could not be turned to face the assault shuttle as it made its rapid dash from the *Firebrand's* hangar.

The shuttle lurched violently as it slammed into the side of one of the structures on the pirate asteroid.

Immediately one of the navy crewmen released his harness and got his feet, rushing to the nearby hatch that Garm knew was equipped with a cutting torch on the outside. Then as the crewman began to operate the breaching device the stormtroopers all released their own harnesses and began to form up near the hatchway.

"Here we go." Vay said, looking at Garm from the seat beside him, "Ready?"

Without speaking Garm released his harness and drew his blaster as he got to his feet.

Inside the base a group of pirates had hastily improvised a defensive position near the spot on the hull where the assault shuttle had made contact. The pilot had aimed for an airlock so that he could guarantee that when the boarding party stormed the base they would not find themselves rushing through a breach that was half way up a wall. Concealing themselves behind piles of crates or parts of the bulkheads that jutted out enough to offer even the most basic protection from ranged fire, the pirates listened as the cutting torch broke through the airlock's outer door and waited nervously for the marines to break through the inner one. Flames erupted around the edge of the hatchway as the boarding party made use of a shaped charge to complete their entry. The shock of the blast forced the pirates to duck backwards and as the first looked back towards the airlock they saw the first stormtrooper appear.

A blaster shot from one of the pirates knocked the stormtrooper from his feet, but before the pirate could celebrate his minor victory the next stormtrooper through the hatch opened fire and sent him sprawling

across the deck instead. The stormtrooper advanced from the hatchway and moved sideways to clear the door for the next man through.

Given the size of the base and its unknown internal configuration, more than one assault shuttle had been launched. A total of four, each carrying fifty stormtroopers had been deployed by the *Firebrand*, including the one that carried Garm and Vay.

Two of the others headed for docking bays, one in each of the two asteroids that made up the bulk of the base. These passed effortlessly through the weak shields designed only to prevent the bays from losing pressure before their passengers spilled out, gunning down all opposition without mercy.

Meanwhile the final assault shuttle copied the manoeuvre made by the one Garm and Vay rode in, attaching itself to a hatchway and cutting a way in. The only difference was that this shuttle was deployed to the other asteroid. Thus the assault force covered both halves of the base, secured the docking bays that could be used by the pirates to escape and forced them to defend multiple approaches at once.

One of the base's gunners got lucky and hit one of the TIE bombers as it made a high speed run across the framework connecting the two asteroids together. The blast caught the bomber only a glancing blow, but it was enough to disrupt the flight systems of the ship and its pilot struggled to regain control as the tiny vessel spun out of control. The bomber ploughed into the framework, smashing through some of the pipe work mounted on the outer edge before exploding. Moments later the blast triggered the secondary detonation of not only the munitions carried by the bomber but also several tanks of volatile chemicals within the framework itself. The resulting explosion was brief but severe and the framework structure split apart, separating the asteroids from one another.

"What the kriff was that?" Lazaras demanded as the ship shook.

"We've been thrown loose!" one of the dockyard workers replied.

"And what's our status?" Lazaras then added, looking at another of the workers.

"Engine's powered."

"Then let's get out of here."

"Captain!" the comscan operator called out to Captain Naje, "Additional enemy ship powered up!"

"What? How did that happen?" Captain Naje replied.

"I don't know, they must have built up power slowly."

Captain Naje looked out of the bridge viewport just in time to see the engines of another customs corvette type ship flare as it pulled away from the ruined dockyard structure.

"Where the hell is she going?" she said as she saw that it was not heading towards any of the star destroyers.

"Looks like empty space captain." The comscan operator said.

"Well we can't take the chance on her swinging back around. All batteries-" but before Captain Naje could finish the order there was a flash as the corvette jumped into hyperspace.

Knowledge of Vay's abilities with the force was highly restricted, technically Garm was not cleared to know, but Moff Horatian himself had seen fit to let him in on the secret and given that the discretion of the marine boarding party could be relied on absolutely she was left free to use her powers as she saw fit. As such she had chosen to leave her compact holdout blaster holstered and instead carried her red-bladed lightsaber as she advanced beside Garm. The more heavily armoured stormtroopers were moving ahead of Garm and Vay so most of the pirates either of them saw were already dead. Only here and there was one of the base defenders able to get past the elite troops and close enough for either Garm or Vay to strike them down.

"Terminal!" Garm exclaimed as he caught sight of an intact computer, "Sergeant have your men hold here."

He then added to the leader of the squad of stormtroopers they accompanied and Garm holstered his blaster before pulling out his datapad from beneath his armoured vest, "Let's see if we can get a deck plan of this place." He said, glancing at Vay.

Had this been an Imperial or Alliance facility the computer network would have been protected by a mix of both software barriers and physical blocks to anyone attempting to interface an unauthorised device.

However, the pirates who ran this place saw no need for such security and so Garm was able to interface with it just as easily as if it had been a civilian data network on any modern planet of the Empire.

"Got it." He said after just a few moments, "We're four levels down from the main command centre."

"What about the baradium?" Vay asked, but Garm shook his head.

"No sign of it." He replied, "There are several storage areas, but there's no manifest that I can find." Then

Garm tapped at his datapad and brought up a large-scale image of the entire base on the terminal's display, "Look," he said to Vay as he pointed at various places on the image, "these are the critical areas. C and C, reactors, life support and docking bays. I'll transmit this back to the *Firebrand* and Captain Naje can relay it

to the other units. We can seize them all and force the remaining pirates to surrender.” Then he disconnected from the terminal and took out his comlink, “Captain Naje, can you read me?” he said into the device.

There was a brief burst of static before the captain’s voice responded.

“Yes Agent Larcus. Go ahead.”

“I’m about to send you a data file.” Garm told her, “It’s a detailed schematic of the base taken from their own network. Relay it to the other unit commanders and have them proceed to the critical areas. I’m going to head up to the command centre with my squad. Do you understand?”

“Yes Agent Larcus. Transmit the data.”

Gram briefly shut off his comlink so that he could connect it to his datapad. Then he reactivated it and used it to transmit the downloaded base plan from the datapad to the Firebrand. Leaving the two devices connected together, he then drew his pistol and looked at the map shown on the datapad’s display.

“Okay men, let’s move.” He ordered, “This way.”

Kavan sat in his command chair, gazing at the displays all around him. He was not a military leader and the fact that three star destroyers and hundreds of fighters and bombers were attacking his base was too much for him to handle. The Imperial capital ships were technically out of date by more than a decade, but against the meagre pirate force present they were more than enough. He did not really care about the raiding vessels that had been swatted like flies by the star destroyers, after all he could make more money by building replacements for their captains, but the simple fact was that his base was doomed. Lazaras had fled with the last operational ship and now there was no way off the asteroid for anyone. From frantic reports from across the half of the base that he was still in contact with, the destruction of the connecting framework having cut him off from the other asteroid, he knew that a force of around a hundred Imperial stormtroopers had forced their way on board and were at that very moment making their way through the base’s corridors towards several key areas.

So far there had been no attempts by the Imperial Navy to communicate and call for the base to surrender and it occurred to Kavan that this was because they were confident of a quick victory in any case. Therefore, he determined the longer and more drawn out he could make the battle the more likely they were to offer favourable terms.

“Close and seal the blast doors.” He said suddenly over the panicked voices of the command centre crew, “All of them.”

Garm fired at a pirate just as the man fled around a corner. The bright red bolt connected with the man and Garm heard him scream as he tumbled out of sight. Then he heard another sound from around the corner, a dull and sustained rumbling. Immediately Garm knew what it was.

“Move!” he yelled and he ran forwards, reaching the corner just in time to see a heavy blast door sealing itself and blocking the corridor that he knew was the most direct route to the command centre.

“Maybe we can hotwire it.” Vay commented as she caught up with Garm.

“It’d take too long.” Garm replied as he looked at the datapad again, “We need to find another way around.”

“The fighters are almost all aboard.” The hologram of Captain Celtis reported to Captain Naje, “What now?”

“Hold your fighters and your position.” Captain Naje replied, then she looked at the image of Captain Yay,

“Launch a pair of your fighter squadrons to form a CAP, the *Firebrand* will do the same. That should give us an adequate screen in case any more enemy ships show up. That one that got away may have gone for help. Hold your bombers for now, but have them on standby just in case.”

“Shall we deploy more troops to the base itself?” Captain Yay asked.

“No.” Captain Naje replied, “We’ve not heard from anyone that the baradium has been secured. Our boarding parties are making steady progress as it is so I don’t see the need to put anyone else in harm’s way if something goes horribly wrong.” Then after a very brief pause she added, “But there’s no harm in having a few platoons on standby.”

6.

Garm peered into the vertical shaft.

"It doesn't look very wide." He said, "But I think we can make it." Then he pulled his head from the shaft and looked at Vay, "I hate to ask this-" he began.

"But you need me to go first." She replied, "So I can sense if there's anyone waiting for us at the top, right?" "If you don't mind." Garm replied.

Vay said nothing in return; instead she just attached her lightsaber to her belt, climbed into the shaft and began to climb upwards. Larger than Vay, Garm squeezed in after her. He paused just long enough to look at the stormtroopers waiting behind him.

"Wait here." He told them, "we'll signal from the top if the way is clear."

"Yes sir." The squad leader replied as Garm disappeared into the shaft and followed Vay up it.

The shaft was not intended to be climbed, but there were adequate handholds for both Garm and Vay to be able to. The main problem was actually finding them, the only source of light was what spilled in through the hole where Garm had removed an access panel on the deck below so the further up they climbed the darker it became.

Reaching the top of the shaft, Vay stopped and pressed herself up against one side.

"Garm," she whispered, "come on up."

Garm followed Vay to the very top of the shaft, taking care not to make any more noise than necessary. The sound produced by striking the shaft walls could echo all the way up and alert anyone near the top. Then it would be a simple matter for them to pour blaster fire into the shaft and kill both him and Vay.

"What is it?" he whispered back as he reached the same level as Vay, squeezing up along side her.

"There's no one outside." She replied.

"Then why did you call me up here?" Garm asked.

"I just thought you may want to be a gentleman and open the hatch for me."

Garm sighed and delivered a kick to the hatchway that led from the shaft and onto the deck where the command centre was located and it dropped away with a resounding 'clang'.

"Ladies first again I think." Vay said and she pushed her way past Garm out of the shaft, pressing her body up against his as she passed him.

The first thing Garm did when he was out of the shaft was reach for his comlink and set it to the stormtroopers' frequency.

"Sergeant, the way is clear." He said, "Come on up." And without waiting for a reply he put the comlink away again and drew his pistol.

As they waited silently for the stormtroopers to follow them up the shaft Garm studied the plan of the deck and by the time they had all arrived he had plotted a route to the control centre. Without speaking, he began to walk towards it and waved the others on behind him.

Garm paused when he reached the junction that he knew to be the last one before they reached their destination and he looked at Vay.

"Well?" he whispered.

Vay nodded.

"Someone's there." She replied softly.

"Okay then, on my command." Garm said and he took a deep breath before letting out a sudden cry of, "Now!"

The pair of pirates standing guard outside the command centre turned to face the charging Imperial squad as soon as they heard Garm's cry. But they were facing Garm, Vay and a full squad of stormtroopers. One of the pirates was able to get off a shot, but Vay blocked it with her lightsaber and deflected it harmlessly. Then the stormtroopers returned fire, sending rapid bursts of energy into both guards that saw them dead before the Imperial troops reached them.

Garm then found himself facing one last obstacle. Between him and the command centre was another blast door.

"Vay." He said, "I think I should leave this to you."

"Stand back." Vay replied with a smile and she plunged the blade of her lightsaber into the door.

"They're cutting through!" one of the command centre staff exclaimed as the centre of the blast door began to glow a dull red.

"That's impossible!" Kavan snapped, spinning his chair around to see for himself. But sure enough the structure of the heavily armoured blast door was heating up at its centre, the glow getting brighter by the second.

Garm flicked the selector of his blaster pistol from 'Kill' to 'Stun' and then watched and smiled as the stormtroopers did the same. When the shooting started the last thing he wanted was for vital intelligence to be lost just because it was fried by a careless shot.

"Almost there." Vay called out and Garm looked at the glowing door.

"Okay then, get ready." He said, though the stormtroopers did not need to be told this.

Then it happened suddenly. The heating effect of the lightsaber blade weakened the structure of the blast door enough that it was no longer able to support its own weight and it collapsed, causing Vay to leap backwards as she shut off her lightsaber to avoid being splashed by red hot metal. This left a massive hole in the door that Garm was able to rush through at the head of the stormtroopers. He fired his blaster rapidly without bothering to aim, he only wanted to keep the pirates' heads down long enough for him to get through the hole without one of them shooting him first.

Behind him came the stormtroopers who took more care in their aim. With many of the pirates focused on Garm they were easy targets for the stormtroopers and several of them fell instantly.

This was all too much for Kavan who had never seen battle. He earned a living as an engineer, not a soldier and without being struck by a single stun blast he dropped to the deck and curled up in a ball, closing his eyes tight and screaming in panic.

The shooting ceased as swiftly as it had begun and Kavan held his breath and listened. Then he opened his eyes and looked up to see Garm, Vay and the stormtroopers looking down at him.

"Put him out." Garm said flatly and the next thing Kavan saw was the stormtrooper's rifle butt heading towards him.

Calmly Garm wandered over to the viewport and looked out into space where the debris from the battle drifted between the base and the only one of the venator-class ship he could see from here. Garm guessed that it was the Firebrand, but he had no way of knowing for certain. Nevertheless he continued to look at the ship as he took out his comlink and activated it once more.

"Captain Naje," he said, "the command centre is secure. We have prisoners."

Garm did not speak as he gave Vay a lift back to her apartment upon their return to Estran.

"You look like you could use a drink." She said to him as he pulled up outside, "Head into the garage and leave your speeder there."

Garm did not reply, but did as Vay said anyway. She tried to sense what he was thinking but found only emptiness. He remained silent as he parked the speeder and then accompanied Vay in the turbolift up to the luxury apartment she occupied as part of the cover story that she was Moff Horatian's mistress.

Vay be careful.

The voice in her head delivered its warning again, but Vay paid it no attention. No unexplained presence in the force was going to control her actions.

When they reached Vay's apartment Garm slumped himself down on the sofa while Vay headed for the kitchen. When she returned with two mugs of caf she found him with his datapad in his hands, staring at the display. Vay looked at the display as she set a mug down on the table for Garm and sat down beside him. It showed an image taken about a decade earlier, one that showed him in the uniform of a junior ISB agent standing next to a woman in a white dress.

His wedding.

Sadness.

"Are you okay?" Vay asked him, putting her drink down on the table.

"I'm sorry." Garm said, "I should go." And he began to stand up.

"Wait no." Vay said, catching hold of him. Then she looked into his eyes and took a deep breath.

Vay no!

Vay looked deep into Garm's mind and as she leant closer she whispered into his ear.

"You don't need to be alone tonight." She said, "Neither of us does." And she kissed him.

Garm dropped the datapad to the floor and wrapped an arm around Vay as she moved closer still. Then as they both stood up he began to unfasten his tunic while she unzipped the back of her bodyglove.

In a darkened room Imperial Inquisitor Ibram Kellensen watched the image being transmitted by the surveillance device he had planted in Vay's bedroom. His face showed no emotion as he saw Garm and Vay together on the display that floated in the air in front of him. With a wave of his hand a virtual keyboard appeared along with a second free-floating display and he began to type.

Your Highness,

There has been an unexpected development.