

STAR WARS TREASON

01: TRAITORS

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THE IMPERIAL NAVY'S VENATOR-CLASS STAR DESTROYER *SWORD OF JUSTICE* IS DIVERTED FROM ITS PATROL TO RESPOND TO AN EXPLOSION AT A MAJOR TRANSIT HUB. AS THEY INVESTIGATE THE CAUSE OF THIS THE CREW DISCOVER THAT NOT ONLY WAS THE EXPLOSION NOT AN ACCIDENT BUT THAT IT MAY BE PART OF A DEVELOPING RESISTANCE TO THE EMPIRE'S CONTROL OF THE GALAXY.

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<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.html>

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1.

The Lambda-class shuttle was not alone when it dropped out of hyperspace even though it had arrived in interstellar space rather than a star system. Ahead of the shuttle was the kilometre long form of the Venator-class star destroyer that was the shuttle's mother ship.

"We're out of hyperspace now captain. On final approach to the *Sword of Justice*," the shuttle's pilot announced over the intercom from the cockpit.

Captain Jarren Kain, the *Sword of Justice*'s commanding officer was the shuttle's only passenger and he sat alone in the rear compartment of the craft reading from a datapad. He had felt the shudder of the shuttle's exit from hyperspace moments earlier and was experienced enough to know exactly what that meant but he still appreciated that the pilot felt it necessary to keep him up to date.

"Thank you pilot," he responded and he shut down his datapad before putting it away in the holdall he had by his feet, ready to take it with him when he disembarked.

The star destroyer's massive dorsal hangar doors slid open as the shuttle approached from ahead of the ship and the shuttle's wings began to fold at the same time as its landing gear extended to enable it to dock. When the *Sword of Justice* had served in the Clone Wars the hangar bay had been packed with hundreds of fighters and bombers of various types. However, when the Republic gave way to the Galactic Empire the ethos of the now Imperial Navy had shifted away from fragile starfighters to the massive firepower of capital ships and most Venators like the *Sword of Justice* had seen their air wings reduced from hundreds to perhaps just one or two dozen starfighters and their hangars stood largely empty. Some of the docking bays that lined the main hangar were still in use though, housing the three squadrons of TIE fighters still assigned to the vessel as well as an assortment of other support craft such as shuttles like the one bringing Kain back to his ship. There were also a number of Clone Wars vintage attack craft still aboard the *Sword of Justice*, shut down and forgotten when they were taken out of service. With no pressing need to remove them they had simply been left where they were, arranging for them to be disposed being considered more bother than it was worth to gain such a small amount of extra space.

The shuttle's pilot turned the shuttle into one of the docking bays furthest into the *Sword of Justice*'s hangar, guided by a ground controller in a vacuum suit. Several technicians and maintenance droids waited in the docking bay behind the magnetic field that contained its atmosphere and as soon as the shuttle touched down they rushed forwards to begin their inspection of it. There was one other individual in the docking bay as well though, a single Imperial officer and she stood and waited while the shuttle's access ramp was lowered and Kain came walking down it.

"Captain Kain, welcome back," she said, standing at attention.

"At ease lieutenant commander," Kain responded as he looked at her and smiled, "That's a different look for you," he added.

"Sir?" she said.

"The glasses commander. You're not wearing any," Kain pointed out, used to seeing his navigator Lieutenant Commander Maye Erranes wearing silver framed eye glasses to correct her vision, "I hope you're not wearing contact lenses, you know those are against regulation."

"No captain, I'm still not into the idea of poking myself in the eyes every day anyway. It's just that I sat on my regular glasses and broke them," Erranes explained.

"Don't you have a spare pair?" Kain asked.

"Just these captain," Erranes replied and she slipped a pair of glasses from her pocket before putting them on and looking straight at Kain.

"Stang!" he exclaimed as he stared at the brightly coloured plastic frames that were decorated with stars and flowers.

"Hardly regular either sir. I can see enough to get around and I'll just use these when I really need to," Erranes said, returning the glasses to her pocket and Kain nodded.

"Okay then let's go. Send a droid to take my bag to my quarters. Since I'm back I may as well check in on the bridge. While we walk perhaps you can explain what we're doing way out here instead of at Derjat," Kain said and as he set his bag down by his feet a droid rolled towards it to pick it up.

While the droid was taking Kain's bag to his quarters he and Erranes walked in a different direction, heading towards the nearest turbolift that would take them to the top of one of the *Sword of Justice*'s two command towers. Although physically identical, the two towers had originally had entirely different purposes. One of them had been used as the star destroyer's bridge and command centre while the second had functioned as a flight control centre for the hundreds of attack craft the starship carried. Now that almost ninety-percent of these craft had been removed though the second bridge had been mothballed along with the empty docking bays and the remaining flight control function were now carried out from the main bridge as well.

"The *Hammer of Reason* and the *Blade of Truth* are at Derjat as scheduled." Erranes said as they walked, listing the other two ships of the attack line that the *Sword of Justice* belonged to. Like Kain's ship these were also Venator-class star destroyers left over from the Clone Wars that soldiered on until they could be replaced by more modern ships.

"So why didn't we go with them?" Kain asked. Then he suddenly added, "Beam." and pulled Erranes aside before she could walk into a supporting beam at the side of the corridor

"Thanks captain." she said before she went on to answer his question, "About ten minutes before we were supposed to make the jump we lost power on the starboard side. The subsidiary reactor there went down and everything on decks nine through fourteen as far forward as the side hangar access went dark. Lieutenant Ventern wanted to make sure that there was nothing in the system that would cause the hyperdrive to dump its power into the section if we tried to engage it before repairs could be made. Line Captain Morco didn't want to wait for us so he took his ship and the *Blade of Truth* on ahead of us." she explained and Kain nodded.

"I see. How many times is that now?" he said.

"Five sir. We had another brief outage not longer after you left. How was Aran by the way?" Erranes said.

"The usual. Not much different to being aboard a starship. Of course I'd rather be here ten parsecs away than sat across a table from my soon to be ex-wife and her blood sucking lawyer who is probably looking for a way to list this ship as an asset of mine when it comes to how much of my savings she gets. What savings I was able to build up while she spent most of my salary anyway." Kain said and then he pulled Erranes out of the path of a train of mouse droids, "Droids. You know you could just go down to the infirmary and get the surgery to correct your vision Maye." he said.

"I don't like poking myself in the eyes to put in contact lenses. I'm not going to let a droid shoot a blaster into them." Erranes replied before they both halted outside a turbolift. The door slid open almost immediately and the pair of them got inside.

"Okay so what's our current situation?" Kain asked and he pressed the control to take the turbolift to the bridge at the top of the control tower.

"The reactor is back online and our engineers are running simulations to see if it's safe to jump to hyperspace." Erranes answered before the turbolift doors opened again to reveal a corridor that led directly to the *Sword of Justice's* bridge. Only a large set of doors separated Kain and Erranes from the bridge and as they walked towards them the pair of stormtroopers on guard snapped to attention. Beyond the doors the bridge was manned by numerous officers and enlisted men, concentrated at the consoles to the rear of the room and the two crew pits that ran towards the large viewports at the far end where a tall man in an officer's uniform stood looking out into space.

"Commander Coroll." Kain called out to his executive officer Commander Adas Coroll, the tall man, who turned towards him.

"Ah captain." he said, "Good to see you back again."

"Thank you commander." Kain responded and he checked the exact time on a nearby console before he added, "As of fourteen twenty-five ship time I assume command of the *Sword of Justice.*"

"Of course captain. You have command." Coroll said.

"Good. Now what's our status? Can we jump and join the rest of the line or not?" Kain said.

"Lieutenant Ventern has confirmed that there's no danger if we jump. All the circuit breakers are functional so even if we lose the starboard reactor again we won't lose light speed." Coroll said and Kain nodded.

"Good." he began but before he could continue he was interrupted by one of the enlisted crewmen sat at the *Sword of Justice's* comscan consoles.

"Captain we're picking up a distress signal." the crewman called out.

"Shipping accident?" Erranes suggested.

"Or pirates." Coroll added.

"Where from crewman?" Kain asked.

"*Serren Xesh Station* captain. They are reporting an explosion and requesting urgent support." the crewman answered.

"If station damage control can't handle it then it must be bad." Coroll pointed out and Kain nodded.

"How far away are we Commander Erranes?" he said.

"About five minutes. The next nearest ships are the *Hammer of Reason* and *Blade of Truth* but they'll be a good half hour further out at Derjat." Erranes told him.

"Then lay in a course for *Serren Xesh*. Comscan advise station control and Line Captain Morco that we are responding to the distress signal.. Helm get us there as soon as you have the co-ordinates. Look alive people, there are lives on the line here." Kain ordered.

Although the jump to *Serren Xesh Station* was brief it was long enough for emergency relief teams to be assembled in the star destroyer's docking bays and also for the ship's chief engineer Lieutenant Kris Ventern to join the other senior officers on the bridge. Despite his more junior rank Ventern was older than any of the

other senior officers, a result of his having come up through the ranks instead of attending an academy and being awarded a commission immediately upon graduation. He joined the other senior officers around the planning console at the rear of the bridge. Here a hologram of *Serren Xesh* was projected over the console while displays around it showed live footage of the station as soon as the *Sword of Justice* dropped out of hyperspace.

Construction on *Serren Xesh Station* had begun thousands of years ago when it was used for deep space exploration by the Republic and the facility had been expanded during the Alsakan Conflicts when its strategic value became apparent. This expansion had continued over the millennia, even once its strategic value had declined and now the station was a major trading post that was visited by thousands of vessels every day ranging from light freighters up to the largest super transports. Given the importance of the station there was always a small force of Imperial Navy vessels present but these were generally customs corvettes meant to dissuade smuggling and their tiny crews could do little to handle a large scale emergency such as what the station was facing now.

"She's burning." Erranes said as she looked at the images of the flames coming from the station.

"It's the docks." Ventern added, studying the details of the damaged section.

"What do you recommend for deploying our damage control teams?" Kain asked the engineer without taking his eyes off the burning space station visible ahead of the ship.

"We should deploy an initial wave to the areas surrounding the fire. The station's own damage control will be operating from there to stop the fire from spreading to adjacent sections. Then we can push in from there." Ventern said and Kain nodded.

"Okay. We'll contact station control and find out where we can dock. There must be emergency air locks we can use." he said.

"You said an initial wave. Do you plan on there being further waves?" Coroll asked and Ventern nodded.

"Yes sir. I'd recommend we hold about a tenth of our people in reserve on shuttles. They should all be equipped for operations in a vacuum. The fire must be getting oxygen from somewhere and with any luck our first wave along with the station crew will be able to cut that supply off but that still leaves whatever is still in there with the fire to fuel it. If that doesn't run out almost immediately either by being burned up or flushed into space then we'll need to accelerate the process and via explosive decompression." he explained.

"So to stop the fire caused by an explosion we use another explosion." Coroll commented, folding his arms.

"An explosion we'll have total control over though. Correct?" Kain said and he glanced at Ventern who shrugged in response.

"More or less, yes captain." Ventern said.

"More or less?" Kain repeated, frowning.

"Well nothing is one hundred percent certain in situations like this." Ventern replied and Erranes sighed.

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." she said.

2.

The kappa-class assault shuttles that the *Sword of Justice* carried were intended to transport heavily armed squads of stormtroopers and naval troopers to the surface of planets or hostile vessels to carry out boarding actions but the same qualities they required for those operations made them ideally suited for moving teams of engineers from the star destroyer to *Serren Xesh Station* along with all of their equipment.

Rather than remaining aboard the *Sword of Justice*, Ventern led the operation in person and as he stepped through the air lock leading from his shuttle to the station he was met by a nervous looking man.

"Captain Kain thank you for coming," the man said.

"I'm Lieutenant Ventern, chief engineer of the *Sword of Justice*." Ventern corrected him, "Captain Kain will remain aboard his vessel unless he feels his presence here is needed."

"Of course, I apologise. My name is Adreyus Nel, administrator of *Serren Xesh Station*." the man said.

"Administrator I need to get my men into position to fight the fire." Ventern said and Nel nodded.

"Of course, come this way. There is a command post just up ahead. Dock master Tennial is there now coordinating our efforts to control the fire." he said.

"Lead the way administrator." Ventern and the man led him along the corridor until they reached a compartment where several other members of the station crew and a number of droids were gathered around hastily set up computer terminals and monitors that showed the extent of the fire as well as the deployment of the damage control teams attempting to contain the fire.

"Dock master, this is Chief Engineer Ventern from the star destroyer that has just arrived." Nel said to one of the men.

"Thank you for responding." Tennial added as he and Ventern shook hands.

"Can you tell me what happened? It might help control the situation if I knew how it started." Ventern replied and Tennial nodded before turning and pointing to a large display that showed a representation of the station's primary docks.

"As far as we can tell there was a rupture in a coolant line here in the docks on level seventeen near an electrical junction. The blast took out an entire docking bay and everyone inside." Nel told him.

"Can you show me how it spread?" Ventern said and Tennial began to point at other points on the display.

"As far as we can tell the automated damage control system failed to kick in and isolate the bay. The fire spread along the ducts to these points." he said, indicating each of the areas that the fire spread to in turn and Ventern also saw that there were symbols representing damage control teams close to each one.

"You have the fire contained." Ventern commented and Tennial nodded.

"Yes, our people were able to lock down the secondary fires before they could spread even further but at the rate they're going we could lose the entire dock and there are still enough chemicals in there to overwhelm our teams if they ignite." he said.

"What about oxygen? We saw the flames from the *Sword of Justice* to the docks must be open to space." Ventern commented.

"Yes, as soon as we could we shut off the oxygen supply to the docks and deactivated the atmosphere shields and let the docks decompress but there's enough stored oxygen in there to fuel the fire for days yet." Nel responded.

"What about casualties?" Ventern said.

"So far all we can confirm are eight dead and thirty-two injured." Tennial told him, "Mainly from among our damage control teams."

"The bigger issue is that without getting into the docking bays we can't confirm any casualties that have been suffered there. We've got more than four hundred additional beings that are unaccounted for who may be inside them." Nel added.

All of this sounded perfectly reasonable to Ventern, many of the missing beings may have been able to take refuge inside some of the ships inside the burning landing bays and could simply be waiting for rescue but there was something about the whole situation that bothered him.

"We'll use my damage control teams to reinforce yours for now." he said, "Then I have some reserves who may be able to get into the docks from the outside."

"Maybe they'll be able to get to the oxygen storage tanks and either seal them or vent whatever's left into space." Tennial said before something occurred to Ventern.

"You say the fire spread through ducts and that the emergency system didn't seal in time?" he said.

"That's right." Tennial replied.

"We have a lot of trouble with equipment compatibility on the station lieutenant." Nel said, "It's an unfortunate consequence of the prolonged period over which it was constructed."

"So why are your sensors showing that the ducts were sealed?" Ventern said.

"The sensors are faulty," Tennial said and Ventern frowned.

"Why aren't they maintained?" Ventern asked.

"They are, but like the administrator said, equipment isn't always compatible with other systems. We get blackouts of input data on a weekly basis. Now about your men, we need them to—" Tennial began.

"Yes, deploy them however you wish." Ventern interrupted, "I need to speak to the *Sword of Justice* though. Where's a comm panel I can use?"

"Over here." Nel told him and the station administrator pointed to a console where a droid was relaying instructions to the various damage control teams busy fighting the fire.

"Thanks." Ventern said before he walked across the room to the console and quickly located a comlink that would get him a channel external to the station, "Ventern to *Sword of Justice*," he said into it.

"*Sword of Justice*. Go ahead lieutenant." Erranes' voice responded.

"Commander I need a probe droid launching into the level seventeen docking bay. According to the stations staff that's where the fire started before it spread through the ducts." Ventern said.

"You think that that isn't what happened?" Kain's voice then asked.

"Let's just call it a feeling for now captain." Ventern answered, "I want a droid to check out the ducts and make sure that we're working with the right information."

"Understood lieutenant. *Sword* out." Kain said before he closed the channel.

"Probe droid ready for launch captain." Coroll said just moments after Kain ended the conversation with Ventern and the *Sword of Justice's* captain nodded.

"Deploy the droid." he ordered.

Like any ship of its size the *Sword of Justice* carried several hundred Arakyd Viper probe droids in its hold that could be deployed at a moment's notice and as soon as Kain gave the order one of the spiderlike machines was released from the ship's belly into space. Firing its basic thruster system the droid turned towards *Serren Xesh Station* and began to move towards it. Even at this point its sensors were collecting as much data as it could and relaying this back to its mother ship where it appeared in a holographic display towards the rear of the bridge where Kain, Coroll and Erranes studied it closely.

Initially the incoming data was dominated by the thermal profile of the flames still engulfing the docking bays but as the droid moved further away from the *Sword of Justice* and closer to *Serren Xesh Station* more detailed information became available. This began with more detailed information on the external structure of the station that for the time being at least seemed to have suffered minimal damage. On the other hand the explosion and subsequent fire had devastated the interior of the docking bay and the probe droid's sensors showed the wrecks of numerous starships and the remains of the equipment used to service them.

"Is that where the oxygen is coming from?" Erranes asked, pointing to one of the plumes of vapour coming from an array of pressurised containers mounted on a bulkhead at the rear of the docking bay.

"I'd say so, yes." Kain replied, nodding as he continued to watch the feed from the probe droid.

Moving into the bay the droid avoided the flames as it headed towards an entry point to the service ducts that linked the docking bay to other areas of the station. These were just about large enough for the droid to enter but it did have to fold its legs to avoid them catching on the side of the duct. Using a spotlight to illuminate its path the droid proceeded along the duct.

"Looks like the fire got to the electrics in here. Maybe that's why the emergency door didn't trigger." Coroll commented.

"Or maybe it did." Kain added when the spotlight beam illuminated a barrier that blocked off the entire duct. Although this had been painted this was heavily scorched and bare metal was visible, "That looks like the blast door closed to me."

"But did it close in time to stop the flames getting past?" Erranes pointed out.

"Comscan order the droid to override the blast door." Kain called out, glancing away from the holographic display for a moment. Turning back towards the display he was in time to see the probe droid reaching out with one of its limbs, connecting to a computer access port beside the blast door. The damage from the fire had severed the power needed to operate the door but the probe droid was capable of supplying enough to engage the motor that opened the door just far enough to enable the droid to pass another of its limbs through the gap. This particular limb was tipped with a multi-purpose sensor array and the droid coiled it around to point back at the other side of the blast door to reveal that the paint coating it was still intact.

"So the door did close." Erranes said when she saw this and Kain nodded.

"That means there have been at least two sources of ignition." he said.

"Kind of rules out an accident doesn't it?" Coroll commented.

"But why would anyone want to the destroy the station's dockyards?" Erranes asked.

"Why do crazy people do anything?" Coroll replied.

"Comscan forward all this to Lieutenant Ventern, he needs to know that there wasn't a single point where the fire started." Kain ordered. Then he looked at Erranes and added, "I'm going to need a shuttle." he told her.

"You're not going over there are you captain?" Coroll said.

"Yes I am commander. What we've seen so far suggests that the station was sabotaged so now it's a matter for naval security." Kain answered.

"Captain if someone was willing to blow up the docks of a space station then they probably wouldn't think twice about taking a shot at a navy captain." Erranes pointed out.

"She's right captain, it's too dangerous." Coroll agreed.

"I'll take a squad of stormtroopers with me, okay?" Kain said.

"I'd still rather-" Coroll began.

"And when you get to be captain of your own ship you can do what you'd rather do." Kain interrupted and he reached for the intercom, "Lieutenant Krostas I want a squad of stormtroopers to meet me in the hangar bay in twenty minutes. I'm going over to the station myself."

"I'd say the fires are pretty much under control. Look, that unit of engineers is withdrawing and they aren't being replaced." the grey haired man standing on a raised walkway said to the younger woman standing beside him as they both leant on the safety rail and watched the ongoing damage control effort.

"They've received reinforcements father." the woman replied, "That star destroyer must have provided hundreds of extra men. The station crew could be using them as replacements while they rest."

"Perhaps. Although I suspect that an Imperial fleet captain would have insisted that the local staff remain at their posts if his own crewmen were expected to put their lives on the line." the older man said to his daughter.

"Then they got the job done faster than we expected." she said and her father smiled.

"Sadly the Imperial Navy still includes a significant number of competent officers, especially in its engineering division. The Emperor's purges haven't extended as far as flushing out the lower ranks yet." he pointed out.

"Do you think they'll have discovered how the fires started?"

"Perhaps. Even if they haven't already managed it then you can bet they'll find out soon. They'll send in analysis droids and find the residue of the explosives used."

"Then we don't have much time. Perhaps we should leave." the man's daughter suggested but he shook his head.

"No, our work here is too important. A message has to be sent, all we need to do is make sure that we stay at least one step ahead of the Imperials." the man told her before a loud voice was heard over the station's public address system.

"VIP shuttle landing in docking bay eight. Administrator Nel and Security Officer Task to bay eight." it said.

"A VIP shuttle?" the older man said, "I think that means that the Imperial captain himself has decided to make an appearance. We should go and check him out."

"Are you sure father? We don't have time to waste."

"Linzee my dear you know how much I like to look my adversary in the face at least once."

Docking bay eight was untouched by the fire and the various craft it contained were lined up neatly when Kain's shuttle passed through the magnetic field that kept the atmosphere inside the chamber from escaping into space. A deck hand directed the shuttle's pilot to set down at the end of a line of station security staff who had been deployed as an honour guard. At the opposite end of this line Administrator Nel and his chief of security watched as the Lambda-class shuttle deployed its landing gear before it set down on the deck. Soon after the access ramp deployed from the underside of the vessel and once it was fully extended Captain Kain finally emerged.

Unlike aboard the *Sword of Justice*, Kain now wore an armoured vest that covered the front and back of his body and he had a large sidearm strapped to his belt. In addition to his own personal protection he was escorted by a squad of eight stormtroopers who marched either side of him in two rows with their rifles carried across their chests. Finally a second officer, this one wearing a black uniform that was marked with a lieutenant's badge walked close behind him.

"Administrator Nel?" Kain said, "I'm Captain Jarren Kain, commanding officer of the Venator-class star destroyer *Sword of Justice*. This is Lieutenant Krostas my chief of security."

"An honour to meet you Captain Kain." Nel responded, "Please let me introduce my chief of security Miss Task."

"So you're the one who was supposed to stop the sabotage that has happened here." Krostas commented.

"The track record of my department is excellent lieutenant. You navy types can't just come walking in here and-" Task replied angrily.

"Actually we can go pretty much anywhere we like Miss Task and as of now this station is under Imperial Martial law." Kain interrupted before he looked back at Nel, "Administrator you'll have to turn all security operations over to Lieutenant Krostas. He'll need full access to your records and control over your security staff."

"Of course captain, I'll issue the order immediately." Nel replied, nodding rapidly.

“There are other orders that will need issuing as well administrator.” Krostas added, “For starters a curfew set between twenty hundred hours and oh six hundred hours. During other hours there will be a ban on public assembly in groups of more than six with the same limitation in private from multiple households. In addition the station is to be fully locked down. No vessels will be permitted to dock and no-one may enter or leave. This will be enforced by the customs vessels assigned to the station as well as the *Sword of Justice*.”

“This is a commercial trading post lieutenant.” Nel said sternly, “Do you have any idea what a full lock down will do to us?”

“It will stop the perpetrators of this attack from escaping administrator.” Kain said, “Don’t worry, I’m not about to have my marines start kicking down doors at random and dragging people off into the night. The Navy doesn’t do that sort of thing. Having the co-operation of your staff will make this much easier, this is a big station and my people aren’t familiar with its layout like yours are. Now how about you show us to your office and we can discuss the hand over of control of security operations to Lieutenant Krostas?”

“Of course captain. This way please.” Nel replied and he started to lead the Imperial officers and their stormtrooper escort away.

As they walked Kain glanced around the docking bay and among the ground crews at work he noticed a pair of figures looking towards him, one a man with grey hair and the other a younger woman who were both looking back at him as if watching him carefully.

3.

Three rapid flashes in space heralded the arrival of a trio of starships in close proximity to the *Sword of Justice*. Two of the massive vessels were also Venator-class star destroyers, the *Hammer of Reason* and the *Blade of Truth* that made up the rest of the attack line that Kain's ship was a part of while the third was even larger than the older warships. The Imperial-class star destroyer *Harbinger* was the flagship of the squadron that the three older ships were part of and was commanded by Admiral Lorr himself.

"Commander, Admiral Lorr is calling." one of the *Sword of Justice*'s comscan operators announced and Coroll nodded.

"Put him through." he said, subconsciously straightening his uniform tunic and cap before a hologram of the admiral as well as the captains of the other two Venator-class ships appeared in front of him.

"Where is Captain Kain?" Lorr asked.

"The captain is aboard *Serren Xesh Station* admiral." Coroll told him.

"Then the station is secure?" the admiral said.

"Not exactly sir. Our initial investigation suggests that the damage to the station was caused by sabotage. Captain Kain has crossed to the station in order to establish control with our security chief and a squad of stormtroopers." Coroll explained.

"The *Sword of Justice* doesn't have enough men alone to control the entire station without seriously weakening its own internal security admiral." Line Captain Morco said.

"No. All ships are to prepare their marine contingents for deployment." Admiral Lorr ordered, "I will receive Captain Kain's report when control of the station has been achieved."

Lorr then ended his transmission and his image rapidly faded into nothing, followed soon after by the holograms of the other two officers.

"Should we tell Captain Kain that the admiral has arrived?" the comscan operator then asked and Coroll looked down into the crew pit directly at him.

"Yes crewman, yes we should." he said.

"Captain we're going to have to deploy all of our stormtrooper marines and naval infantry if we want to establish martial law here." Krostas said as he and Kain studied the details of *Serren Xesh Station* in the administrator's office.

"We don't need to do it alone." Kain replied, "The rest of the line will be here soon and that gives us another four thousand troops. I'm sure Line Captain Morco will support the idea of martial law when he finds out that the station was sabotaged."

"It seems like an overreaction to me. Especially combining it with a lockdown." Task commented, "This is the first instance of terrorism that we've here since the Clone Wars."

"And I intend for it to be the last." Kain said, "For starters every docking bay on the station needs to be checked to make sure that there are no other devices that didn't go off. Then we need to identify the explosive used and track its source. All of that will be a lot easier if you have the support of the military."

"Forgive me captain but it sounds like I'm expected to hand over control of the station to the military." Nel pointed out before the intercom activated.

"Administrator three more star destroyers just arrived." a voice said.

"Three? Not two?" Krostas commented as he and Kain exchanged glances. Then Kain's comlink chirped and he reached for it.

"Kain." he said.

"Captain," Coroll's voice said, "the rest of the line just arrived along with Admiral Lorr and the *Harbinger*. The admiral has ordered all ships to send troops to the station."

"See?" Kain said to Krostas before raising the comlink to his mouth again, "Understood commander. Did the admiral have any instructions?"

"Only that he wants you to report to him once you have control of the station sir." Coroll told him.

"Thank you commander. Kain out." Kain said and then as he shut off his comlink and returned it to his belt he looked at Administrator Nel again, "What is the largest docking bay that's still functional?" he asked.

"Bay four." Nel replied.

"In that case direct the incoming troop shuttles to that docking bay and we'll meet them there." Kain replied.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Linzee Wa-Yen said as she and her father both used sets of macrobinoculars to study the newly arrived Imperial warships that were in the process of deploying assault shuttles towards the station through a conveniently located viewport.

"The Empire must be taking direct control of the station." her father replied, and they both lowered their macrobinoculars, "That's exactly what we wanted to avoid. This place is too important to us. Now come on, we need to see what they're bringing aboard."

"Father, watching stormtroopers isn't why we were sent here." the younger Wa-Yen reminded him.

"I know but we've already seen that the Empire considered it worth sending a fleet captain here. I want to see what else they're sending. Then we can warn the others." her father told her.

Even without their macrobinoculars the pair were able to determine the course of the approaching assault shuttles and they made their way towards the same docking bay that the shuttles were heading towards, pausing along the way each time they came to another viewport so that they could double check that they were heading in the right direction.

They accessed the docking bay where the assault shuttles were landing via a customs storage hold.

Normally cargoes would be stored there while they were cleared for entrance to the station but at present it was empty and unprotected by anything other than electronic security monitors that the pair disabled before making their way to the open doorway that led to the docking bay itself. From this point they looked across the landing deck to where the Imperial assault shuttles were landing and platoons of white armoured stormtroopers and black uniformed naval troopers were disembarking. Among them there were also several officers and Linzee focused on one in particular.

"A colonel." she commented, pointing towards a cluster of officers who had disembarked from a smaller TIE/sh shuttle instead of one of the larger Kappa-class craft. Markings on the side of this craft indicated that it had come from the Harbinger.

"And here's our fleet captain." her father added when he saw Kain and Krostas also enter the docking bay.

"Captain Kain." the Imperial colonel said as Kain approached him.

"Colonel." Kain responded with a nod of recognition and then he looked around, "I'm glad you brought reinforcements"

"The admiral thought that it would take more than the men you had available to you to enforce martial law aboard the station." the colonel said.

"So he knows about that then?" Kain commented.

"Yes captain. He received the signal you sent informing sector command of your intention."

"So he didn't think I was going over the top?" Kain asked.

"On the contrary I believe his words were something along the lines of 'If I were first on the scene I'd be rounding up anyone even remotely suspicious.' But he'll be able to tell you that in person captain, he asked me to tell you to meet him aboard the Harbinger as soon as possible." the colonel told him.

"I see." Kain said, uncertain of what to make of this.

"My pilot will take you back while I take over here." the colonel added and Kain nodded.

"Of course colonel." he said and he took another look around at the docking bay that was increasingly being filled with Imperial troops as they prepared to deploy around *Serren Xesh Station*. For a moment though he also thought that he saw a pair of figures standing in the adjacent customs hold watching the soldiers before they stepped out of sight. Kain could not blame any member of the station staff in being curious about the presence of so many troops but there was something about these particular two that looked familiar to him.

The hangars of the *Harbinger* were in fact much smaller than those of the *Sword of Justice*, despite the Imperial-class star destroyer being a far more massive vessel. This was a result of the different roles envisioned for the two types of warship. The Venators were intended to use swarms of attack craft to control space whereas the slightly newer Imperial-class star destroyers had been designed to bring massive amounts of direct firepower to bear, a result of the lessons learnt during the Clone Wars where the larger separatist warships had been able to soak up incredible amounts of damage while using thousands of vulture droids to keep Republic starfighters at bay.

An ensign was on hand in the docking bay to meet Kain as he stepped off the shuttle and he was escorted from there directly to the office of Admiral Lorr where he discovered that he was not the only officer that had been summoned to see the squadron's commanding officer. His fellow officers Captain Kyung of the *Blade of Truth* and Line Captain Morco of the *Hammer of Reason* were already inside the admiral's office when Kain was shown in. Meanwhile Admiral Lorr sat behind his desk, his white hair in stark contrast to the darkness of his skin.

"Thank you ensign. You may leave us." he said, "Captain Kain please take a seat."

"Thank you admiral." Kain replied as he sat down beside his line commander.

"So tell me what you know so far." Lorr added.

"Not much I'm afraid admiral. The fires are pretty much under control now and my engineer estimates that the last of them will be extinguished within the hour but we still don't have exact casualty data available, nor do we know exactly where they were set." Kain explained.

"You did order a full lock down though, acting under your own authority." Lorr pointed out.

"Yes admiral. It seemed the right thing to do. All the information we have so far suggests sabotage-" Kain began.

"Terrorism. It's an act of terrorism." Kyung interrupted.

"Okay then, we don't know the motives behind the starting of the fires but the information available points to a possible terrorist attack. A declaration of martial law and locking down the station will force whoever is responsible to go to ground and keep them penned up aboard it. Assuming that they hadn't left the station before the fires were triggered of course. Whatever incendiary devices were used haven't been recovered yet." Kain added.

"I'm sure there'll be time for that." Morco commented and Admiral Lorr nodded.

"Yes. In the meantime though-" he began before the intercom sounded, "Yes, what is it?" he asked.

"Admiral we've just received a transmission from sector command, Fleet Admiral Kellar's office." a voice responded.

"And what does the fleet admiral have to say?" Lorr said.

"Sir Moff Tollof wants to discuss the attack on *Serren Xesh Station* in person. She wants to see you and Captains Morco, Kain and Kyung at the capitol as soon as possible." the voice at the other end of the intercom said.

"The moff herself? Well I suppose we can't keep her waiting can we. Set a course for Aran immediately. Inform Captain Morco's line that their executive officers will have command until we return while Colonel Brinnack will oversee the decree of martial law aboard the station."

4.

Up until the Clone Wars the sector capital had been the planet Paratus, a world with a pleasant environment. However, during the war the planet had come under attack and been heavily bombed, destroying the ecosystem and plunging it into a nuclear winter that still persisted. The sector government was then relocated to Aran, the only moon orbiting Paratus where a sealed environment was created on the otherwise barren and lifeless surface. As the seat of Imperial power in the sector Aran was heavily defended to prevent a repeat of the attack on Paratus and when the *Harbinger* arrived in the system there were already two other Imperial-class star destroyers in close proximity to the moon as well as numerous orbital defence platforms that bristled with weapons.

Even though it was an Imperial warship the *Harbinger* was still challenged to prove its identity as it approached Aran until arriving in a close orbit, at which point a Lambda-class shuttle carrying Admiral Lorr, Line Captain Morco and Captains Kain and Kyung descended from the ventral launch bay and headed towards the moon's surface. Rather than landing at either the commercial or regular military starports though, the shuttle flew towards the private landing zone of the moff's palace where it landed in a hangar that contained several other such craft intended for use by them off and her staff. Then as the officers being carried aboard the shuttle disembarked from the craft they were met by two more men in Imperial uniforms. Despite wearing uniforms of identical design the appearance of the two men who met the new arrivals could not have been much more different. Fleet Admiral Kellar stood almost two metres tall, towering over the colonel he stood beside by about half a metre.

"Fleet admiral." Admiral Lorr said, "I believe you know Line Captain Morco and Captains Kain and Kyung."
"I do." the fleet admiral responded with a nod, "Captains, allow me to introduce Colonel Yal-Paratus, personal adjutant to Moff Tollof."

"A pleasure to meet you all." Yal-Paratus added, "Now if you'd like to come with me I shall show you to the moff. She's waiting in her private office."

"Lead the way colonel." Lorr responded.

Although the corridors leading away from the hangar were initially of standard Imperial modular architecture they gave way to more luxurious custom panelling decorated with art from a variety of worlds when the officers entered the section occupied by the moff herself. The doors to the moff's office were covered in the same panelling as the walls which made them difficult to spot from a distance but the presence of a pair of stormtroopers standing on guard outside made it obvious where they were.

"The moff is expecting you." the moff's secretary said, triggering the control that caused the doors to slid open.

The inside of Moff Tollof's office was decorated in the same style as the area outside while the moff herself sat behind a large desk. Moff Erian Tollof was in her fifties but had aged very well, being a highly attractive woman and when the military officers entered the room she sighed and turned away from the protocol droid she had been speaking with.

"Get that sorted." she told the machine, "I have more important business."

"Your excellency." Yal-Paratus said, "I believe you know Admiral Lorr."

"Yes we've met several times." Tollof responded, "Line Captain Morco as well."

"It's good to see you again moff." Morco said and she smiled at him for a moment, "These are my subordinates Captain Kain of the *Sword of Justice* and Captain Kyung of the *Blade of Truth*."

"Captain Kain and his crew were the first to respond to the distress call from *Serren Xesh Station* where he quickly acted to establish control." Lorr added.

"Oh really?" Tollof commented, looking at Kain and smiling at him as well, "Now gentlemen please sit down and tell me what's going on."

"Since he's the only one who's been aboard perhaps Captain Kain should explain." Kellar suggested.

"A very good idea fleet admiral. Captain, please begin." Tollof agreed.

"Err, of course your excellency." Kain said nervously and he glanced at Morco before he continued, "The *Sword of Justice* had been separated from the rest of the line because of a technical issue so we happened to be the closest warship to *Serren Xesh Station* when we received the distress signal and we proceeded straight there. When we arrived a number of the docking bays were engulfed in fire and acting on the advice of my chief engineer we used a probe droid to determine that the fires had started in multiple docking bays individually, suggesting that they were started deliberately."

"Has anyone claimed responsibility for this yet?" Tollof said, looking towards Colonel Yal-Paratus.

"No your excellency." he replied.

"So we don't know if it's any of the groups we've been looking at or if there is another one." Tollof commented

and Kain frowned.

"There are groups?" he said, "Confederate holdouts?"

"Some of them seem to be, yes. A number of Separatist vessels known to have been active during the war remain unaccounted for." Kellar told him.

"There seem to be a number of other groups that seem intent on political violence that aren't related to the Confederacy though." Yal-Paratus added.

"You're kidding me. What do they want?" Kain said in disbelief.

"What else captain? They want to bring down the government." Kellar answered.

"Emperor Palpatine promised the beings of the galaxy that the Empire would bring a strong and peaceful society and it's our job to deal with these insurrectionists. I want them caught and punished as quickly as possible. For the time being all we're dealing with are a few isolated groups of extremists but if they start coordinating their activities then we could be dealing with a widespread rebellion." Tollof said.

"Your excellency if there is a chance that we could be looking at an organised military threat then the Navy needs to be made aware of it. My people can't effectively counter something we don't have any knowledge of." Kellar said.

"Don't worry fleet admiral, your department will be given all the information it needs to do its job." Tollof replied, frowning, "In the meantime where do we stand with *Serren Xesh Station*?"

"My entire line is currently deployed there your excellency." Morco said, "Plus troops from all three ships as well as Admiral Lorr's own destroyer are stationed aboard to maintain the state of martial law that Captain Kain declared."

"I see, you declared martial law Captain Kain?" Tollof said, turning towards Kain and looking straight at him.

"It seemed like the best response." he said.

"Oh I agree captain. Martial law will give our people the authority they need to run down these rebels in the shortest time. That was good thinking and I applaud it. I appreciate men who can be decisive." Tollof replied, "However, I don't like the idea of having three star destroyers pinned down because of this terrorist attack. Four if we count the *Harbinger*." she continued.

"Your excellency perhaps just one of the ships should remain at *Serren Xesh Station* while the others return to their scheduled patrol routes." Yal-Paratus suggested, leaning towards the moff as he spoke.

"So the *Harbinger* then? It's the only ship with enough troops aboard to maintain martial law." Kellar said.

"No I don't think so fleet admiral." Tollof replied, still looking at Kain, "An Imperial-class star destroyer is far too valuable an asset to keep out of action for long. I think that Captain Kain's vessel would be a much better choice. He was first on the scene after all and he's shown himself able to take charge. He will be given full investigative authority in this case and can report directly to my office. The troops already deployed from the other ships can remain aboard the station and be transferred back again once the perpetrators of this outrage have been caught."

"That sounds reasonable enough." Lorr commented, "I for one would rather not be bogged down in a criminal investigation."

"Just remember to leave enough transports to return your troops to your ships with them. It'll be easier than arranging for transport later on." Kellar said and Lorr nodded.

"Of course fleet admiral." he said.

"Then it's settled." Tollof said, "Captain Kain will return to *Serren Xesh* to apprehend the terrorists while the rest of you will return to your vessels and your regular duties. In the meantime I will be able to tell the press and Senator Corrus that everything is under control and that the terrorists will soon be in custody."

"An excellent plan your excellency." Yal-Paratus commented.

"Your excellency if we are done here?" Kellar asked and Tollof nodded.

"Yes fleet admiral, you and your men are dismissed. Colonel, remain with me a moment longer please." she said before watching as the five naval officers all exited from her office. Then as soon as the door slid shut she turned towards Colonel Yal-Paratus, "Colonel I want you to find me all the information we have on this Captain Kain. I think he deserves to be watched very closely."

In a turbolift taking the officers back to the palace landing bay Kain noticed that Kellar, Lorr and Morco were all looking at him and smiling.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"Nothing captain, nothing at all." Lorr commented.

"I think you've just been given a wonderful opportunity." Morco added.

"An opportunity to screw up my career if I don't find these terrorists before the press go berserk about *Serren Xesh Station* being shut down?" Kain said.

"Oh forget the case for now. Play your cards right and you'll be heading for a staff position very quickly. The moff will see to that." Kellar replied, "She prefers to have her favourites close to her."

"I take it your meeting was productive captain?" Coroll asked when Kain returned to the *Sword of Justice* and made his way to the bridge.

"Possibly." Kain responded and Coroll and Erranes exchanged glances.

"That's not a very convincing answer. Care to enlighten us more?" Coroll added.

"I've been given the lead on the investigation into the attack on the station." Kain explained, "I'll be reporting to Moff Tollof directly."

"What about Admiral Lorr and Line Captain Morco?" Erranes asked.

"The *Harbinger* and the other ships of our line will be resuming their assigned patrol duties. Their troops will stay put so we can maintain martial law but I'll be in command of them." Kain answered, "So have there been any developments while I was gone?"

"The fires have been extinguished captain." Coroll replied, "Ventern is investigating the docking bays now to try and find any evidence that may have been left behind."

"We've also taken on some casualties." Erranes added, "A group of people with serious burns were found sealed inside a transport ship. The station's bacta tanks were already filled so we took them on instead. Doc says they should all be healed enough to be released within a week."

The 'Doc' that Erranes referred to was the 2-1B medical droid that served as the *Sword of Justice's* medical officer instead of a living doctor. It was not the only medical droid aboard the ship, in fact all of the star destroyer's medical staff were droids. This meant that they could be available around the clock and work for several days straight unlike humans who would require significant periods of rest even under the most favourable circumstances.

"Are there any injured aboard the other ships?" Kain said but Erranes shook her head.

"No sir. The casualties aboard us were referred to us by Lieutenant Ventern and we still have some capacity." she said.

"What about Lieutenant Krostas?" Kain added.

"Still aboard the station directing our troops sir. There are two officers from the *Harbinger* that outrank him so they've taken overall command but I suppose they'll be answerable to you now." Coroll answered.

"I suppose they will, yes and since I'm in command of this investigation I think I ought to go and see how they are doing. Commander Coroll you have command again. Our blockade stands, no ships may dock or depart with the station, any that try to do so are to be seized and their crews detained for questioning."

"And if they resist?" Coroll asked.

"You may fire if fired upon commander. I won't have our people put at risk because someone refuses to follow instructions." Kain told him.

"Yes captain." Coroll replied, smiling as Kain turned and started to walk away.

When troops from the *Sword of Justice* had first been deployed to Serren Xesh *Station* they had begun to set up their command post in the station's main security section and when as the ranking officer Colonel Brinnack had taken over he had seen no reason to change this. When Kain was admitted to the security section he found the colonel along with a stormtrooper wearing the red pauldron of a commander, Lieutenant Krostas and several other junior officers some of whom Kain recognised as coming from his ship or the others of its line whilst the others must have been a part of the *Harbinger's* complement of marines and naval infantry. All of them were gathered around a strategic planning display that showed a hologram of the station divided in variously coloured sections.

"Captain on deck!" Brinnack snapped when he saw Kain enter the room, once again wearing an armoured vest and carrying a sidearm and all of the gathered officers snapped to attention.

"As you were." Kain said and the officers relaxed again, "Colonel I take it that you have been informed of the change in command?"

"Yes captain. Admiral Lorr and the *Harbinger* are returning to their patrol along with the *Hammer of Reason* and *Blade of Truth*. Moff Tollof has given command of this operation to you in the admiral's absence." Brinnack replied.

"Correct. Now I've been brought up to date on the state of the fires by my own officers so how about you bring me up to date on your operation?" Kain said.

"Of course captain. I have deployed a company of our troops to each of the sections of the station shown here, operations, residential, technical, all of them are now under our control along with an extra company sealing off the docking bays. That leaves us with a standing reserve of three companies who can be called on to respond quickly plus the troops that are off duty that can be activated within an hour." Brinnack explained.

"That all sounds reasonable." Kain said. As a fleet captain ground troop deployment was not Kain's personal area of expertise and he relied on Lieutenant Krostas' expertise for such operations but he could tell that Colonel Brinnack had planned his deployment carefully to not only cover the entire station but also provide a sufficient reserve to enable any area to be reinforced quickly, "What sort of response have we had from the station occupants?" he added.

"The station's own security force have been generally co-operative but they obviously aren't happy at having their authority usurped. On the other hand so far the attitude of the general population has been pretty co-operative. They all know that we came in response to the fire so they have been supportive of our deployment. Of course that will change the longer we keep the station locked down. We have had a few requests from labour guild agents for an assurance that the lockdown will be lifted as soon as possible."

"And what did you tell them?" Kain said.

"That their question would be passed to the officer in command as soon as possible." Brinnack told him, smiling and Kain frowned, knowing that he was going to be the one who would have to deal with the irate agents of the labour guilds.

"Have there been any leads in finding who was responsible for the sabotage?" he asked.

"Not yet captain. We've secured all the security recorder footage but we're waiting for further information from your Lieutenant Ventern about what we should be looking for." Brinnack replied.

"Yes, I was informed that he was conducting an examination of the docking bays to try and find out how the fires started." Kain said and Brinnack nodded.

"Yes captain. He has several analysis droids with him to trace the ignition point in each docking bay." he said,

"I understand the plan is then to conduct a full spectrum analysis to search for explosives or examine electronics to see if they were manipulated to trigger the fire."

"That sounds like Lieutenant Ventern." Kain commented, "Are you okay holding things down here while I go and check on his progress?"

"Captain I'd recommend an escort as long as you're aboard the station." Krostas said and Kain nodded in agreement.

"Okay, would a squad of naval troopers satisfy you lieutenant?" he said.

"Yes sir." Krostas responded and Kain looked at Brinnack.

"Can you arrange that colonel?" he said.

"Easily captain. We have plenty of naval troopers in our reserve and I can assign you a squad from your own vessel so you're familiar with them." Brinnack replied.

"Very good. Get them here immediately. I want to go to the docking bay as soon as possible." Kain ordered.

5.

"There's another droid." Linzee said and she and her father ducked back out of sight behind a burned out cargo lifter, waiting while an Imperial analysis droid floated past on its repulsorlift field.

"There are dozens of those things." her father said and she nodded.

"And that's in this bay alone." she added, "Perhaps we should get out of here." she then suggested but her father shook his head.

"No. If we let the Empire continue its examination of these docking bays then it's going to lead them to Azmal and his group before we can get to them." he said, "We need to scrub the bays of evidence, do you have the canister?"

Linzee reached into the holdall she carried over her shoulder and lifted out one end of a cylinder of compressed gas and nodded.

"Right here father." she said and she looked upwards, "Where do you think the best place to release it is?"

"We need to get as high up as possible to allow the gas to spread. It should neutralise any residue of the explosive left behind by Azmal's bombs but we need to hurry. The way those droids are working they're going to find the evidence before we can destroy it."

"Over there. Maybe we can use that crane mount to get us up nearer the ceiling." Linzee suggested but before she and her father could move from behind the destroyed lifter they heard the sound of marching boots.

"Those aren't droids." her father commented and he peered around the lifter to see Kain enter the docking bay with a squad of black uniformed fleet troopers marching either side of him, "It's that captain again." he said and he pushed Linzee back as he retreated only for this to cause the gas cylinder to bang against the side of the cargo lifter.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Linzee said as it produced an audible 'clang'.

"Move!" her father snapped and the pair of them broke into a run, however this was not before Kain and some of his escort turned towards them. Despite having glanced the pair briefly and from a distance on two previous occasions Kain immediately recognised them as the pair of beings who had appeared to have been watching him and now their presence in the supposedly isolated docking bay told him that they had to be up to no good.

"Over there!" he exclaimed to the squad of soldiers accompanying him, "I want them taken into custody for questioning. Don't shoot them unless you can help it."

The squad of fleet troopers immediately broke formation and started to run towards the two fleeing figures with just two of them remaining close to Kain to protect him. Kain himself was not satisfied with just letting the fleet troopers pursue the fleeing pair though and he too broke into a run with his remaining bodyguards following close behind him.

"Captain perhaps you should just let the squad handle this." one of them called out to him.

"And just sit around waiting while they take all the risks? I don't think so." Kain responded as he kept on running.

The Wa-Yens reached a hatchway into a maintenance area and paused only as long as it took for the door to slide open before diving through. Then once they were on the other side Linzee's father produced a slender model of blaster pistol while the door slid shut behind them and used it to destroy the opening mechanism.

"That should slow them down for a while." he said just as there was a hammering on the other side of the door as the first of the naval trooper to reach it attempted to force it open.

Seeing this, Kain took out his comlink and lifted it to his mouth.

"Kain to all units, two suspects fleeing through maintenance area forty-two. I want them cut off before they can make into the wider station." he said into the device then he shut it off and returned it to his pocket before giving anyone the chance to respond.

Kain was still not content to leave the pursuit entirely to the troops under his command though and with most of the squad of troopers assigned to escort him still attempting to force open the hatchway the Wa-Yens had fled through he waved for the two troopers still accompanying him to follow.

"This way." he told them, "We'll look for another way around."

On the other side of the door Linzee and her father ran through the maintenance area. The access hatches to this part of the docking bay area had sealed as soon as the systems in the docking bays themselves had detected the fires and so it had been spared the level of destruction that they had suffered. To begin with they made their way to the hatchway leading to the adjacent docking bay but when this slid open they saw a unit of stormtroopers heading directly towards them and Linzee quickly closed the door again.

"We can't go that way." she said.

"No." her father agreed, breathing heavily, "We'll try going back."

"Back?" Linzee responded and her father nodded.

"If we cut through the landing registration office we can get back into the other docking bay. They won't be looking for us there." he said.

"They'd better not be." Linzee said.

"Don't worry Linzee my dear." her father said, "We can always resort to the ventilation system if we have to. It would take weeks for them to search that."

"Then maybe we should start with that." Linzee suggested.

"I doubt we'll be able to drag that cylinder along a ventilation shaft Linzee and I'd hate to have to abandon it. That stuff isn't easy to come by, remember?"

"I remember." Linzee replied and the pair then hurried back through the maintenance area, heading towards the hatchway that would in turn lead them to the landing registration office where crews of arriving ships would log details of their ships along with crew, cargo and passenger manifests. However, as they were getting close to this the door suddenly slid open and Kain entered the maintenance area through it along with his escort.

"Down!" Linzee's father hissed and the pair of them ducked before they could be seen by Kain or the soldiers.

"Okay so now we need another way out." Linzee commented as they both hid behind a workbench and looked around for an alternative means of exit.

"Over there." her father whispered, aware that Kain and his men were close by and he pointed towards a hinged grill set in the base of a nearby wall, "Think that leads to the ventilation system?"

"I don't see that we have any choice." Linzee said, "This cylinder won't fit though."

"Then leave it here. As you say, we don't have a choice." her father replied and she took her holdall from her shoulder and set it down.

"Okay let's go." she said and the pair of them suddenly darted across the room towards the grill. This movement did not go unnoticed though and before they were even half way to the grill Kain spotted them and he drew his blaster as he turned.

"You! Stop right there!" he yelled but the Wa-Yens ignored him and continued to move quickly towards the grill.

Although the top of the grill was hinged, indicating that it was designed to open easily it remained closed when Linzee reached it and kicked at it with her foot.

"There must be a latch." she said and her father quickly produced his blaster again. As soon as one of Kain's bodyguards saw this he raised his own blaster and fired, sending a blue pulse of energy across the room that hit the old man and caused him to slump to the floor unconscious.

He dropped his blaster as he fell but Linzee was able to grab the weapon before it slid out of reach and she quickly turned it towards the grill, firing two shots in rapid succession that destroyed most of it and left a hole large enough for a person to pass through. Tucking the blaster into her jacket Linzee grabbed hold of her father by his arm and pulled him towards the hole in the grill, keeping a tight grip on him as she crawled inside. The duct on the other side of the grill sloped down at a forty-five degree angle and the sides were smooth enough that she began to slide down the shaft immediately, pulling her father in with her.

"They went in there." Kain said as he and his bodyguards ran to the destroyed grill and peered into the shaft but by this time Linzee and her father were well out of sight. Kain then stood up straight again and took out his comlink, "Colonel Brinnack are you there?" he said.

"Yes captain." Brinnack's voice responded.

"Colonel I've pursued the suspects to a duct in maintenance bay fourteen. I need to know where it leads before I risk going in after them." Kain told him.

"Of course sir. Is there a reference number?" Brinnack asked and Kain checked around the remains of the grill until he saw a small numbered plate stuck to the wall that identified the duct.

"It's trill herf xesh one-one-three-eight." he said.

"Checking the station schematic now captain." Brinnack said and there was a pause as he checked the station's design schematic. Kain then heard Brinnack start to laugh.

"Colonel what's going on?" he asked.

"Nothing captain. It's just that that duct only goes to one place, a trash compactor." Brinnack answered.

"Whoa!" Linzee exclaimed as she reached the bottom of the duct and along with her still unconscious father and plummeted into the pile of trash. Luckily most of this was reasonably soft and pliable so she was not injured when she landed. She was however, partially buried by the trash and she had to push it out of her way as she struggled to reach her father to check on him.

"Oh thank goodness." she said to herself when she found that he was still breathing and that there were no obvious signs of injury, "You're still alive." However, at that moment she became more aware of the smell of

the trash that surrounded her, much of which was partially decayed and she winced, "Great work Linzee. What an amazing new smell you've discovered."

Then there was a sudden rumbling sound and to Linzee's horror the walls at either side of the compartment began to move inwards. Grabbing her unconscious father again she struggled to drag him towards the only doorway leading out of the trash compactor. By the time she reached this the walls had already closed in to around half their original distance apart and this had pushed some of the trash high enough that it in turn dropped down on Linzee, covering her in a variety of unpleasant smelling substances. There was a control panel beside the door with several buttons but when Linzee pressed this nothing happened and she began to frantically jab at the panel repeatedly.

"Hey! I'm trapped in here!" she cried out, banging her fists on the door in a desperate attempt to attract attention outside the trash compactor.

As the walls continued to close in on one another the level of the trash between them continued to rise and Linzee turned to try and push it away to keep it from burying her and her father completely. Then as suddenly as the walls had started to move closer to one another they stopped moving entirely, leaving them a distance apart equal to the width of the doorway. This was followed by a 'hiss' as the door slid open and Linzee quickly pulled her father through it, the pair of them landing in a heap on the floor outside.

As Linzee looked up to see who it was that had shut down the trash compactor and released them before they were crushed to death she was roughly grabbed by gloved hands that dragged her to her feet and snapped binders around her wrists.

"Good day young lady." Kain said, smiling at Linzee, "You may consider yourself under arrest on suspicion of terrorist offences and I wholeheartedly recommend that you are co-operative." then he looked at the naval troopers holding her, "Take her back to the ship and get a stretcher party down here for him." he ordered.

6.

“Congratulations captain.” Coroll said when Kain returned to the bridge of the *Sword of Justice*, “That must be a record time for an investigation like this.”

“We can’t be certain that those two are directly responsible for the explosions. This case is far from closed yet commander.” Kain replied.

“Even so they must be guilty of something. They were hanging around and they ran when discovered.” Coroll pointed out.

“Those are hardly the actions of innocent people captain.” Erranes added, “If they had a good reason for what they were doing then why didn’t they just stop when you challenged them?”

“That’s what I intend to find out when I question them.” Kain said before one of the crewmen in the pit beneath the officers spoke up.

“Captain I’ve got the infirmary on the line for you.” he announced.

“Put them through crewman.” Kain ordered.

“Captain this is DC-Two-One-B.” the artificial voice of the droid known to the crew as ‘Doc’ said.

“Yes Doc, what can I do for you?” Kain responded.

“Captain I have run a preliminary analysis of the blood samples taken from the two prisoners you have brought aboard.” Doc said.

“Have you found a DNA match in the Imperial database already?” Kain asked.

“No captain, I submitted the samples less than a minute ago. However, my analysis has detected numerous matching points in the DNA from each prisoner. They are undoubtedly closely related, most likely father and daughter.” Doc answered.

“That’s interesting. If there are more of them on the loose then perhaps it’s the rest of the family.” Coroll suggested.

“That sounds plausible but I want more than a DNA match between these two before I order Colonel Brinnack to start rounding up families.” Kain said. Then he turned his attention back to the intercom, “Doc what’s the condition of the male patient?” he asked.

“Still unconscious captain. However, I have run a neurological scan and there does not appear to have been any significant damage from the stun blast. He can be revived rather than allowing the stun to wear off naturally if you wish it.” Doc said.

“No thank you Doc. Hand the patient over to security. They can monitor him in the detention section until he wakes up. Is there anything else you wanted to discuss?” Kain said.

“No captain, that is all.” the droid responded.

“Okay then, bridge out.” Kain said before he turned to Coroll and Erranes, “I’m going down to the detention section now.” he said.

“The female prisoner?” Coroll asked and Kain nodded.

“I want to find out what she has to say for herself.” Kain said.

“Should we let sector command know?” Erranes asked

“Let’s wait until we know what we need to tell them.” Kain replied.

When Kain had returned to the *Sword of Justice* with the two prisoners Lieutenant Krostas had also accompanied them and when Kain entered the star destroyer’s security section he was going through the possessions confiscated from Linzee and her father.

“What do we have lieutenant?” Kain asked.

“IDs for a start captain. They look pretty real and they scan okay.” Krostas said and he handed a pair of plastic cards to Kain. Each of these bore an image of one of Linzee and her father along with their names and other basic information, “I’ve put the serial number of the blaster taken from them into the system as well to see if it comes back as being registered.”

“Cryn and Linzee Wa-Yen. Natives of Taron.” Kain said as he read the identity cards. Just as Krostas had said the cards looked like genuine identity cards of the type issued on worlds across the Empire. These were designed to be as difficult as possible to forge but Kain knew that this did not mean that it was impossible. Then he looked at a nearby monitor that showed Linzee sat on a chair in an otherwise empty room, her arms bound to it behind her back, “Has she said anything yet?”

“No captain, nothing. Not even the usual protests of innocence and demands for a lawyer.” Krostas replied.

“Well maybe she’s in the mood to talk now.” Kain said, tossing the two identity cards back onto the table with the other confiscated belongings.

“Are you going in there captain?” Krostas asked.

“Yes, why not?” Kain replied.

"Well it's just that that room is rather small and the ventilation isn't all that good. It's pretty ripe in there right now." Krostas explained.

"With any luck that'll make her more co-operative. Run these IDs through the system and see what you can find." Kain replied before he headed towards the cell where Linzee was being held.

As soon as he opened the door he knew that Krostas had been telling the truth when he had warned Kain about the smell inside the cell. The trash that Linzee had come into contact with in the compactor had soaked into her clothing and now the odour filled the small room. This did not put Kain off entering though and he still closed the door behind him.

"Hello Linzee." he said and she looked up at him, "Assuming that's your real name." then he lifted his datapad and started to read from it, "The casualty count so far is eighty-six dead and one hundred and twelve injured. That's in addition to the material damage which I'm told will run into tens of millions of credits." "Nothing to do with me." Linzee replied.

"Ah so you can speak." Kain said, smiling, "The problem is that for someone who says that they had nothing to do with the attack you were hanging around the area an awful lot and then you chose to run when challenged. As my senior officers say, hardly the actions of someone who is innocent."

"You're wasting your time with me captain. The real bombers are still out there and they'll strike again." Linzee told him in return.

"You expect me to believe that you're here to stop another attack?" Kain said.

"From a certain point of view, yes." Linzee told him and he folded his arms as he glared at her.

"So what are you? Imperial Security Bureau? Imperial Intelligence? Sector Ranger?" he said.

"I don't work for your Emperor. That's the point." Linzee said.

"So you're planetary law enforcement then. Well you're a long way from Taron Miss Wa-Yen, about six parsecs outside of your jurisdiction to be exact." Kain replied mockingly.

"No, I'm not planetary law enforcement." Linzee said, "Look captain, can we be straight with one another?"

"Oh please do." Kain said.

"Don't you have a problem with the way the Republic morphed into the Galactic Empire?" Linzee asked.

"Should I have?"

"Of course you should. Palpatine engineered everything captain."

"I see, he engineered being voted into office and winning the war."

"What would you say if I told you that he'd made sure he'd be on the winning side no matter who won?" Linzee said.

"I don't put much faith in conspiracy theories." Kain commented.

"Palpatine craves power. Look at the way he's centralising everything he can, especially when it comes to the military. The Republic's Judicial Department had a force less than a million times smaller than those commanded by the Empire. When the Military Creation Act was passed under the emergency powers it was supposed to be a temporary measure, not a means to create a standing army or navy that has been used to crush any dissent. Just look at Erat, Innett or Lorko."

"The Imperial military exists to protect the peace Miss Wa-Yen. Take the garrisons away from any of the planets you've mentioned and they would descend into anarchy in less than a day."

"Only because the Empire has stripped them all of the ability to protect themselves captain. Even on planets that aren't under martial law the military or some other facet of the Empire will act to crush any open protest."

"I've seen plenty of protests on the news Miss Wa-Yen. I've not seen any of them massacred by stormtroopers." Kain pointed out, "If you don't like the way the Empire is run then vote for someone who will change it. The Senate is democratically elected after all, or did you forget about that?"

"If you think that the Senate is any sort of check on the Emperor's power then perhaps you should try looking up what happened to any senator who supported any motion that went against his centralisation of power, or see just how many bills that began on the Senate floor have made it into law. The truth is that the Imperial Senate exists only to rubber stamp the laws that the Emperor wants. Eventually he won't even bother with that. Sooner or later he'll disband the Senate entirely and rule by decree, using his moffs to control the galaxy directly."

"Now you're just making things up. In any case none of this explains anything about why I should believe that you were aboard *Serren Xesh Station* to prevent further attacks. You certainly didn't do anything to stop the sabotage of the docking bays." Kain said.

"Because a lot of people want to stop Palpatine before it's too late but not all of them agree on the way to go about it captain." Linzee replied.

"Let me guess, you're a terrorist but you're one of the good ones." Kain said.

"A terrorist uses violence instead of democracy captain. I'm committed to democracy, to the restoration of the Republic and its values and I've never killed anyone."

"Maybe not, but the blaster you had tells me that you're willing to kill. That model doesn't have a 'stun' setting." Kain said.

"As a last resort, yes you're right. I will kill but I was sent here to track down the people who bombed the docking bay and get them to stop."

"If you're so committed to protecting the innocent then how about you tell me who's really responsible for the attack? That way I can have them picked up before anyone else gets hurt or killed." Kain said.

"Because there may be a way to stop the attacks without executing dozens of beings and more dragged off to labour camps just for wanting to end a corrupt regime. What could motivate me to cause that?" Linzee responded.

"Miss Wa-Yen," Kain began, "what you've said to me so far could still be considered an admission of treason."

"Only if I'm right and the Empire is a totalitarian dictatorship, otherwise at worst I'm a vigilante. So which is it captain? Which of us is really fighting for freedom?" Linzee said.

"I suspect that your definition of freedom differs a lot from mine Miss Wa-Yen and you might want to reconsider keeping the information I think you have to yourself. Things will go a lot better for you if you cooperate." Kain said and then he turned to leave.

"You mean torture captain? That isn't exactly the hallmark of a civilised society now is it?" Linzee called out after him as he walked out of the holding cell and the door dropped shut behind him.

Outside the cell Kain saw Krostas standing at a nearby console, watching the monitor that showed the image of Linzee sat in her chair.

"Did you get all of that lieutenant?" Kain asked and Krostas nodded.

"Every last word captain. It was quite the confession wasn't it?" he said.

"Yes it was, but it concerns me that we could be dealing with more than one group of terrorists here. If we spend too much time focused on one then the others could escape, possibly the very group we're looking for." Kain replied and Krostas pointed to the monitor.

"We have her and if what she said to you was true then she knows exactly who we're looking for. All we need to do is break her." he said.

"Lieutenant I want you to follow up on these two on the station." Kain told Krostas, "Their IDs say they came from Taron so try and find out when they arrived and what their movements have been since then. Our guest in there seemed to be suggesting that she's a part of a larger movement so even if she hasn't met with the saboteurs we're after then she could have met someone else who can provide us with information about who they are. Make sure that both Colonel Brinnack and I are kept updated but remember that the colonel's primary task is to maintain martial law."

"Yes captain." Krostas responded before the intercom sounded and he reached out to activate it, "Krostas." he said.

"Lieutenant is the captain with you?" Erranes' voice asked and even though it was an audio only link Krostas nodded as he looked at Kain, "He's right here commander." he added before he stepped back from the console.

"Yes commander?" Kain then asked.

"Captain we've just received a transmission from the moff's office on Aran, she's been told about the two prisoners and wants to see you for an update as soon as possible." Erranes told him.

"Brinnack must have reported to Admiral Lorr." Krostas commented and Kain nodded in agreement.

"And now I have to spend more time in a shuttle flying between here and Aran when I should be leading this investigation." Kain replied. Then he turned back to the intercom and added, "Okay commander, have my shuttle prepared and log a flight plan for Aran, I'll-" then Kain stopped speaking.

"Captain are you still there?" Erranes said when the pause went on.

"Yes I'm here commander. I won't be going to Aran alone though, I want you to come with me as well. I may need some back up. Meet me in the hangar as soon as the shuttle is prepared to launch. Kain out." Kain said.

"So what's she like?" Erranes asked as the shuttle carrying her and Kain to the moff's palace, "The moff I mean."

"Yes, I realised that. She seemed pretty ordinary to me." Kain answered.

"She seems pretty attractive on the news." Erranes commented and Kain smiled for a moment.

"I didn't notice." he said before they looked at one another and smiled again.

"On final approach now sir." the pilot then announced.

This time the shuttle was met only by Colonel Yal-Paratus and the diminutive officer watched as Kain and Erranes descended the shuttle's access ramp.

"You aren't alone I see captain." Yal-Paratus said.

"No, this is Lieutenant Commander Erranes my adjutant. She's also the Sword of Justice's navigator." Kain replied.

"A pleasure to meet you commander, now if you'd both like to follow me I'll take you to the moff. She's been waiting for you captain." Yal-Paratus said and then he turned around and started to walk away.

Kain and Erranes followed Yal-Paratus into the palace and Kain soon noticed that the route they were taking was not the same as the previous time he had been in the palace.

"This isn't the way to the moff's office that I remember," he commented.

"No." Yal-Paratus replied, "The moff is currently in her personal apartment, that's where I'm taking you."

"Her personal apartment?" Erranes commented.

"I guess even the moff needs to relax." Kain added.

"It's just through here." Yal-Paratus said as he halted in front of a closed doorway that was guarded by a pair of stormtroopers. The two armoured figures did not move as the colonel took one of his code cylinders from his tunic and presented it to the door's security panel. This caused the door to immediately slide open and Yal-Paratus beckoned for Kain and Erranes to go through ahead of him.

Stepping through the open doorway the two navy officers found themselves in a luxurious hallway where they were met by a service droid.

"Good afternoon Colonel Yal-Paratus. How may I assist you?" the machine said.

"Moff Tollof requested Captain Kain's presence." Yal-Paratus replied.

"Confirmed. The invitation is logged in my databanks. Who is the second guest?" the droid asked.

"My adjutant. Lieutenant Commander Erranes." Kain told it.

"There is no Lieutenant Commander Erranes listed as a guest." the droid said.

"No, she will remain with me." Yal-Paratus said and the other officers both looked at him.

"Colonel, the commander-" Kain began.

"Moff Tollof asked for you specifically captain." the colonel interrupted.

"I'll be fine captain." Erranes added.

"Please accompany me Captain Kain." the droid said.

"Okay, lead the way." Kain responded and he let the droid begin to move before he started walking behind it.

The droid led Kain a short distance to a closed door that opened automatically as it approached but rather than going through the droid moved aside.

"Moff Tollof will see you now captain." it said and Kain shrugged before he walked through the door.

The room on the other side was decorated in the same luxurious style as the rest of the moff's private chambers that Kain had already seen but it was significantly larger. Even before he had entered the room he had noticed a chemical smell and now he saw that this came from the large swimming pool that it housed.

"Ah captain, thank you for coming." Moff Tollof's voice said and Kain looked down to see the moff in the water and leaning on the edge of the pool with just her arms, head and shoulders visible.

"Your excellency." Kain replied and the moff smiled.

"Cut the 'your excellency' crap. It's just the two of us here so why don't you call me Erian?" she said.

"Err, if you say so your- Erian." Kain said.

"Good that's better and since we're on first name terms I'll call you Jarren." Tollof said, "Now why don't you tell me about these two prisoners you have?"

"So far there isn't much to tell. I've spoken with the female prisoner and she's as good as admitted that she's part of a group opposed to the Empire but she denies being directly involved with the fires that were started aboard *Serren Xesh Station*." Kain told her.

"This is concerning. If opposition to the Empire is able to organise then this attack could just be the start of worse to come. I'm going to send a specialist to debrief your prisoners." Tollof said.

"My chief of security is looking into their background now." Kain said.

"And that's all good but we have people who are experts at getting information out of unwilling subjects."

"So you're handing this over to Imperial Intelligence then?" Kain asked.

"No. Intelligence are effective but their methods tend to take time we may not have. I think that the Imperial Security Bureau is better suited to this task." Tollof answered.

Kain knew of the Imperial Security Bureau of course, most Imperial citizens did, but as part of the military he had had little contact with it. The ISB's jurisdiction was over civilians rather than army or navy personnel, however by reputation alone he considered them efficient investigators who were utterly dedicated to the cause of protecting the Empire from internal threats.

"Of course." he said and Tollof smiled.

"Excellent, then that's settled. Now I understand that you're having some legal problems at the moment.

Something to do with your ex-wife?" she said.

"Ah, so you know about that?" Kain responded.

"I hope you don't mind but I had Colonel Yal-Paratus run a check on you after our first meeting and he found the court petition that your ex-wife's lawyer filed against you." Tollof said, "I saw how she's trying to take you for everything you have and decided that I can't have my officers distracted by such things so I've stepped in."

"You're expediting the issue?" Kain asked.

"Actually I've dismissed it." Tollof said, "I see no reason why your ex-wife should have any claim at all on any of your property or future income. I issued the decree about three hours ago."

"I'm not sure what to say." Kain said, startled that the most powerful person in the sector would intervene on his behalf.

"How about thank you Erian?" Tollof said and Kain smiled.

"Thank you Erian and I really mean that." he said.

"Excellent, I'm glad you're happy. Now before you return to your ship how about you join me for a swim?"

Kain paused for a moment before he replied.

"Unfortunately I don't have a swimming suit with me." he said and Tollof smiled again.

"Neither do I." she replied.

While Kain met with Moff Tollof, Yal-Paratus took Erranes to the palace kitchen where a service droid prepared her something to eat and drink while she waited.

"Do all guests get wine like this?" she asked as she took another sip of the beverage she had been given. Ordinarily naval officers were not supposed to consume alcohol while on duty but on this occasion she had been specifically offered it by a superior officer.

"Actually that's a rather plain vintage." Yal-Paratus replied, "I'm afraid that the good stuff is reserved for visitors of higher rank. The moff as well of course."

"I suppose rank really does have its privileges." Erranes said before she gulped down what was left of the wine in the glass and it was then that Yal-Paratus' comlink sounded.

"Yes?" he said into the device.

"Colonel, Captain Kain is returning to his ship now." a voice said.

"Understood. I will escort Lieutenant Commander Erranes back to the hangar." Yal-Paratus responded before he turned off his comlink and put it away again. Then he looked at Erranes and added, "I'm afraid it looks like there won't be time for another course lieutenant commander."

"That's okay colonel, I think that I'll have to spend an extra few hours in the gym as it is to burn off all these extra calories anyway." Erranes replied as the pair of them got to their feet.

Yal-Paratus then escorted Erranes back through the moff's private residence to the palace's hangar where the shuttle from the *Sword of Justice* was already powered up and ready to take her and Kain back to their ship. Kain was already aboard, sat in the passenger compartment when Erranes boarded the shuttle.

"How did your meeting go with the moff then captain?" Erranes asked, sitting down beside Kain.

"She's in a hurry for results so she's ordering a specialist from the ISB to be sent to the *Justice* to question the prisoners." Kain answered. Then he frowned and sniffed, leaning closer to Erranes, "Is that alcohol on your breath I can smell Lieutenant Commander Erranes?" he said and Erranes smiled back at him.

"Colonel Yal-Paratus offered me a small drink, yes captain. It would have been rude to say 'no'." she replied before she noticed a somewhat chemical smell herself, "Wait, is that chlorine? Why do you smell of chlorine captain?" she said and Kain leant back in his chair.

"Moff Tollof invited me to join her for a swim." he told her, "It would have been rude to say 'no'."

7.

Coroll had a mug of coffee in his hand when he met Kain and Erranes as they disembarked from the shuttle upon its return to the *Sword of Justice*.

"You two stink." he said when he smelt the alcohol and chlorine on Kain and Erranes, "What happened on Aran?"

"Let's just say that what happens in the moff's palace stays in the moff's palace." Kain said before he added, "Hopefully at any rate. Now has anything happened since we left commander?"

"We have a special guest captain." he said, sipping at the hot drink he held, "She said that you were expecting her."

"She?" Erranes commented as they all started to walk towards the exit from the hangar bay and Coroll nodded.

"Senior Agent Teylin Embrace of the Imperial Security Bureau." he said, "She arrived about half an hour ago with a pair of security officers, had the two prisoners transferred to her custody and asked for space to set up her equipment. I've given her a compartment in sector fourteen on the starboard side."

"Right where we've been having the power outages you mean commander?" Kain pointed out.

"Lieutenant Ventern thinks that his men have dealt with that for the time being captain." Coroll responded, "Besides, we've moved everything we could out of that area because of the outages so there isn't really anywhere else she could go."

"Okay, now what about Agent Embrace herself? What are your thoughts so far?" Kain said and Coroll smiled.

"I think I may have to try and sleep with her." he said and Kain winced.

"What about that rule you have about not sleeping with other members of the crew Adas?" he said.

"I think the navy has a few rules about that as well." Erranes added.

"Ah but she isn't part of the crew, is she?" Coroll pointed out, "She isn't even military so we're in two totally separate chains of command. She's a legitimate target."

"How romantic." Erranes commented.

"Look commander, I'm sure that this Agent Embrace must be a charming woman but how about you don't lead her on only to break her heart?" Kain said and Coroll sighed.

"Very well, if you insist captain." he replied.

"Good, now is our guest in sector fourteen now?" Kain said.

"Yes captain, along with the prisoners." Coroll replied.

"In that case I'm going to go and introduce myself. You two carry on with your duties." Kain said just as they reached a junction in the corridor and while Kain went one way Coroll and Erranes went the other.

"The captain sure knows how to spoil my fun doesn't he?" Coroll commented when Kain was out of earshot, "I could have had something wonderful with Teylin." and Erranes snorted, "What?" Coroll asked, lifting his mug to his mouth again.

"It's just that I think it's odd for the captain to lecture you on not sleeping with someone you're working with when I'm pretty sure he's just slept with Moff Tollof." Erranes replied and this caused Coroll to spit his coffee out in shock.

Senior Agent Embrace wore the official pale tunic and black hat and trousers of the Imperial Security Bureau rather than the green worn by some agents when serving with military units and when Kain entered the compartment she had been assigned she stood up straight.

"Captain Kain." she said.

"Agent Embrace, I see you're making yourself at home." Kain responded, looking around at how technicians from his ship's engineering department were setting up the equipment that Embrace had brought with her. From what Kain could see this consisted primarily of a pair of metal frame structures that from the looks of the restraint points fitted to the one that appeared to already be complete were intended to be used to secure the prisoners in a fixed standing position while they were being interrogated. Kain had once attended a lecture by an officer from Imperial Intelligence in which the idea of forcing a captive to remain in an uncomfortable position for a significant amount of time could help break down resistance to questioning and preventing them from adopting a more comfortable stance. Kain guessed that these frames were intended for something like this, preventing the prisoners from moving into more comfortable positions.

"Yes, your engineers are quite efficient." Embrace responded.

Kain then glanced at the two security officers that Embrace had brought with her. Both of these wore the uniforms of the COMPForce assault division of the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order, the same overall body that the ISB was also a part of.

"If your guards are both here with us then who's looking after the prisoners?" he asked, "I was told that they were transferred to your custody on your arrival."

"And they were captain." Embrance answered with a smile and she walked over to a pair of large metal cases that stood just over a metre tall and the same in width and depth. Kain had assumed that these were filled with more equipment but Embrance leant on one of them and patted it with her hand.

"Here they are captain." she said.

"You locked them in boxes?" Kain commented and Embrance nodded.

"Exactly." she said, "The interior is lined with a material that adapts to the exact size of an occupant once they are placed inside. Of course they are stripped and tubes inserted for supplying air and nutrients as well as carrying away waste while a repulsorlift generator neutralises the effects of gravity and inertia on them. The result is that the prisoner is held unable to see, hear, speak or move and has no inclination of motion, orientation or time. Total sensory deprivation. Sometimes a day or two in one of these is enough to break a subject on its own. Of course we may not have that long so I'm just using it to soften our subjects up before we use these." and she pointed to the frames being assembled.

"You'll hold them in stress positions?" Kain said and Embrance smiled.

"Stress positions captain?" she responded, "Imperial Intelligence may think that's a good way to go about getting information but the ISB prefers more efficient methods that work in hours rather than days. We aren't squeamish like intelligence interrogators. A lot of them used to work for the Republic's Judicial Department Intelligence Service and they've never really addressed the change in government policy regarding interrogation."

"You make it sound like torture Agent Embrance."

"That's such a crude word for what I do captain. The drawback with torture is getting answers without feeding information to the subject about what is wanted, otherwise they'll just tell you what they think you want to hear to get the pain to stop. Droids are far better at that than real people are. I prefer to offer an incentive for information. Make the subject want to tell me what I need to know." Embrance said.

"And what can you offer them?" Kain asked.

"Oh that's easy. You see while someone may be able to tolerate pain or discomfort inflicted on their own body they are often less resilient to seeing those close to them suffering. It may sound sexist but the nurturing instinct can be especially powerful in women so that's what I'll be exploiting here. The male prisoner, Cryn Wa-Yen I believe is name is, he will be subjected to electrical shock while the female who I believe is his daughter will be forced to watch. I'll start to question her after she's witnessed her father's suffering with the promise that I'll inflict more pain on him if she doesn't answer my questions to my satisfaction. Another benefit of this is that I can take Cryn right to the point of death, rendering him senseless but without preventing his daughter from speaking."

"Nobody said anything about this sort of thing happening on my ship." Kain said sternly.

"The ISB's methods are fully approved captain and as of the moment I came aboard the treatment of the two prisoners became my responsibility, not yours. I am no more subject to your orders than you are to mine." Embrance told him and he frowned.

"We'll see about that." he said before he turned and stormed out of the compartment.

After leaving the compartment where Embrance was getting ready to subject the Wa-Yens to her interrogation methods Kain made his way to the bridge as quickly as he could and when he reached it he found that Ventern had returned from *Serren Xesh Station* and was speaking with Coroll beside a console.

"Ah captain, you'll be pleased to know that the analysis droids have identified the explosive substance used in the attack." the *Sword of Justice's* chief engineer said and he pointed to a monitor mounted above the console, "It's a commercial brand that was modified with an incendiary agent and oxygen emitting compound."

"Smaller bang than military grade detonite but a big fireball that can burn in a vacuum until the compound fuelling it is used up." Coroll added.

"Excellent. I take it that that is not something very common." Kain replied and Ventern shook his head.

"Absolutely not captain, it's a custom mix. Find the being with any of this on them and we'll have found our bombers." he said.

"Excellent. In which case we won't have to deal with that woman the ISB sent us." Kain said.

"Your meeting didn't go well then I take it captain? I thought she seemed perfectly charming." Coroll responded and Kain looked at him.

"Adas, remember how I told you not to sleep with her because I didn't want her upset?" he said.

"Yes captain." Coroll replied as Ventern also looked in his direction.

"Well I take it back. She's an adult and as long as she consents to anything you do I don't give a damn about how upset she gets further on down the road." Kain told him.

"Lieutenant Ventern, how may I help you?" Brinnack asked when Ventern entered his command centre aboard *Serren Xesh Station*.

"Captain Kain asked me to bring you this. It's my report on the explosive used in the bombs. Your men will have to monitor for traces of it." Ventern told him and he handed the colonel a datapad on which there was a copy of the chemical analysis that had been carried out on the explosive residue.

"This looks straight forwards enough." Brinnack said, reading the information Ventern had just presented to him, "I'll have this profile uploaded to our IM-fours." he added, referring to the compact sentry droids that were often deployed to support Imperial troops. These small repulsorlift powered machines carried no weaponry but did carry an effective array of sensors that were capable of detecting the telltale chemical residues of explosive compounds. There were many such compounds in the galaxy in addition to similar but perfectly innocent chemicals that could trigger a false positive to a general sweep. However, possessing a precise chemical breakdown of the explosive used meant that the sentry droids could be configured only to scan for an exact match.

"That's what the captain had in mind." Ventern said, "He also suggested that I take a look at the station's manifest and customs records to see if anyone admitted to bringing in any of the component chemicals. Nothing used is on the banned list but the core explosive at least would need to be declared."

"The station's customs staff have been placed under my control as well." Brinnack told him, "I'll find you some of their agents, they ought to be able to help you navigate their system."

"Thanks you colonel, that would be appreciated." Ventern replied and Brinnack turned to one of his staff.

"Sergeant find some suitable customs personnel to support Lieutenant Ventern." he said before turning to another and adding, "And I want this chemical profile distributed to all of our patrols as quickly as possible. Tell them to detain anyone that has traces of it on them, no matter how slight the readings may be."

Coroll smiled when he entered the officers' mess aboard the *Sword of Justice* and saw Embrace sat by herself as she ate, reading from a datapad at the same time. First he approached the serving droids to select his meal, presenting his identity card so that the cost could be charged to his account.

"Enjoy your meal commander." a droid said automatically as Coroll was putting his card away again but he did not respond to the machine. Instead he carried his tray over to where Embrace sat and looked down at her.

"Mind if I join you?" he asked and she looked up at him.

"Be my guest commander." she replied and he set down his tray before sitting opposite her.

"So what are your initial thoughts of the prisoners?" he said.

"Oh probably the usual sort of underworld scum. They cling to the old fashioned principles of the Republic that led to the Clone Wars." Embrace answered, "If they had their way the entire galaxy would be plunged into anarchy."

"Do you think you'll be able to break them?" Coroll said.

"Oh yes, everyone breaks eventually and from what I know of these two suggest that they're not different. Nothing in their profiles suggest that they have been given any form of conditioning to resist interrogation." Embrace said and Coroll smiled.

"So an easy job then?" he said.

"Perhaps." Embrace said, "Although I do have concerns about your captain."

"Captain Kain? Why?" Coroll said, remembering how Kain's attitude towards her after their meeting seemed to be very negative.

"Captain Kain is obviously a capable military officer or else he wouldn't have been given command of a star destroyer, even one considered to be of an obsolete design. However, he seems to have something of a sentimental streak that those in my line of work can't afford. His use of the word 'torture' to describe the ISB's methods is proof of that. He has no power to interfere in my interrogation but he could delay it if he tries to. Do you think he will?" Embrace said and Coroll thought about this for a few moments. He knew that Kain was a man of principles, not given to blindly following orders but he also respected the military chain of command. He may question an order but he would do it through the proper channels rather than simply refusing to carry it out.

"That depends. I doubt he'll order you to stop what you're doing, he knows that you're not part of the naval chain of command. If he does try to get involved then he take it to our superiors to try and get your orders changed." Coroll told her.

"And what about you Commander Coroll? What would be your response if Captain Kain asked for your opinion of what he should do?" Embrace asked him.

"I'd remind him of the number of people who have already been killed. Making two admitted terrorists a bit uncomfortable for a while hardly seems disproportionate when measured against the possibility of another attack that could cost just as many lives again." Coroll said, "Particularly given that our presence here could make us a target for the next attack."

"You think that the terrorists could target this ship?" Embrace said.

"It's something I don't think we can rule out. The captain has our comscan watching for any signs of a weapon being locked onto us and the station's own turbolasers have been secured but who knows what the

terrorist could try next? The sooner they're either in custody or dead and we can be back on patrol instead of effectively tethered to *Serren Xesh* the happier I'll be." Coroll said and Embrace smiled.

"You know what commander, I think that the two of us are going to get along just fine." she said and Coroll smiled back at her.

"I'm very glad to hear that Senior Agent Embrace." he replied.

8.

When Krostas entered the bridge he walked directly up to Kain while he was speaking with a junior officer in one of the crew pits beneath him.

"Captain," he said.

"Ah lieutenant, you have an update?" Kain asked in response.

"Yes captain. I found details of where the prisoners were quartered among their belongings so I took a squad to check them out as well as a couple of analysis droids." Krostas told him.

"And did you find anything interesting?" Kain said.

"Yes sir. There were two military spec blaster carbines hidden among their belongings. They'd been disassembled and were packed to avoid detection by sensors. I suspect that they were smuggled aboard the station when they arrived from Taron." Krostas told him.

"They came straight from Taron?"

"Yes sir. A commercial transport called the *Dawn of Accania* brought them here two days ago."

"That's long enough for them to have supplied the explosives used in the attack."

"If they did then they didn't leave any residue in their quarters that the droids were able to pick up. Of course that doesn't mean they didn't bring it aboard in a sealed container that they passed on to someone else before they then unsealed them." Krostas replied.

"Everything so far points towards these two actually coming from Taron so I think that needs following up. Forward copies of their IDs to the authorities on Taron and see what they have on them. Send copies of the DNA profiles that Doc took as well. If they are travelling under false identities then their DNA may still give them away." Kain told him and he nodded.

"Yes captain. Do you want me to pass this information to the ISB agent as well?" Krostas asked and Kain considered this for a moment. Although so far he had developed something of a dislike for Agent Embrance and was reluctant to assist her in any way he could not deny that she had a job to do and the more information she had to begin with, the less she would need to employ the interrogation methods that Kain found so distasteful. However, he also preferred not to have any more of his crew involved in what she was doing than necessary.

"No, I'll do it." he said, "Is everything on that datapad?" he then asked, looking at the datapad that Krostas was holding.

"Yes captain, it's all here."

"Good, send a copy to mine and I'll take it down to her." Kain ordered and Krostas nodded before looking down at his datapad.

"Of course captain." he said as he instructed his datapad to copy the files relating to the investigation of the Wa-Yens and their backgrounds, "You should have it now."

"Thanks. Now wish me luck because I have to go and face Agent Embrance again, something I would not wish on anyone." Kain replied.

When Embrance returned to the compartment she had been assigned she found one of her security officers standing guard outside.

"Are they prepared?" she asked.

"Yes ma'am." the guard responded, "Secured and waiting for you to begin."

"Very good." Embrance said before she opened the door to the compartment and stepped inside.

In the compartment the two cases that the prisoners had been held inside now stood open and empty, the outline of a human body in a fetal position evident in the spongy lining. The Wa-Yens meanwhile had been moved to the two frames that were now both fully assembled. Both had been stripped and magnacuffs fitted to the frames held their ankles and wrists so that their limbs were spread as wide apart as possible. Although they were positioned facing one another they were both hooded so could not see anything until Embrance walked up to them and pulled the hoods from their heads. These revealed the gags used to silence the prisoners and here was the only difference in the way they had been restrained. Linzee's face was completely covered from just below her nose to the bottom of her jaw by a full muzzle that sealed her mouth shut while her father's mouth was instead wedged wide open to permit access to the inside of it.

"Let me explain how this is going to work." Embrance said as she set the two hoods down on top of a wheeled trolley that had a number of objects laid out on it. Many of these were basic hand tools but others obviously used battery power to enhance their ability to cut, pierce or burn, "I need information that I think you have," she added, looking at Linzee, "and until you give me that information your father is going to be made to suffer."

Upon hearing this Linzee shook her head furiously but Embrance ignored this as she picked up a set of pliers and walked over to where Cryn was secured.

"Before I start asking questions though I need you to see that I am serious about making your father suffer, so I'm going to begin by showing you the sorts of things I'm capable of. After that we'll have a little chat and you can decide if you're going to co-operate or if I need to inflict more pain on him." Embrance continued before she thrust the pliers into Cryn's wedged open mouth and grabbed hold of one of his front teeth.

Kain frowned for a moment when he rounded a corner and the ISB security officer on guard outside the compartment provided to Embrance came into view. Realising he was doing this he took a deep breath and calmed himself before walking up to the man.

"I take it that she's in there?" he said.

"Senior Agent Embrance is inside, yes captain." the guard replied.

"Good." Kain said and he reached for the control to open the door. However, before he could the guard stepped in front of him.

"Senior Agent Embrance is currently occupied on official business captain. I'll let her know that you stopped by." he said.

"Get out of my way." Kain said sternly but the ISB guard remained where he was and did not respond, "Okay then we'll do this the official way." Kain added and as he stepped backwards he took out his comlink, "Kain to security." he said into it.

"Security, Ensign Nikkan here captain." a voice responded.

"Ensign is Petty Officer Tresk and his squad on stand by?" Kain said, asking specifically for the leader of a unit of naval troopers rather than stormtrooper marines. Although stormtroopers were known for their efficiency their separate command structure meant that they may not be totally reliable when it came to conflicts between rival Imperial groups. On the other hand Kain trusted the fleet troopers assigned to his vessels to be loyal to him.

"Yes captain. They're right here now." Nikkan responded.

"Good. Send them to me immediately. I'm in sector fourteen, starboard side." Kain said.

"Where the ISB have been stationed sir?" Nikkan commented.

"Exactly. Tell Petty Officer Tresk that his men are to set their weapons to 'kill'. Kain out." Kain said before he shut off the comlink and as he was putting it away again he looked at the security guard. The man was simply staring back at him, giving no indication that he was in any way concerned, "You have until Petty Officer Tresk and his men arrive to get out of my way." Kain told him.

"You don't have the authority to issue orders to me captain." the guard responded and Kain smiled at him.

"Ah you see, now that's where you're wrong. The ISB may have a separate chain of command to the navy but while aboard one of his majesty's naval vessels you are still subject to naval regulations. For example, when a ship's captain gives an order to anyone whether they are a member of the crew or a passenger such as yourself that order is to be followed. Not doing it is considered mutiny. Can you guess what the penalty for mutiny is mister?" Kain said and a moment later he added, "Well, do you?"

"Death." the guard said, frowning.

"Exactly, death. Normally by firing squad but as captain I do have the option of having a mutineer hanged, electrocuted, given a lethal injection or simply tossed out into space and left to suffocate. Now get out of my kriffing way before I order Petty Officer Tresk to either shoot you or escort you to the nearest air lock." Kain said and then he glanced along the corridor as his attention was drawn to the sounds of rapid footfalls and a squad of black uniformed troopers came rushing into sight with their weapons already drawn, "Make your mind up quickly. I think you have about three seconds before they get here."

Without speaking the ISB guard then stepped aside, giving Kain access to the control panel.

"Good choice." Kain said right as the squad of naval troopers arrived.

"Reporting as ordered captain." Tresk said, snapping to attention.

"Very timely petty officer." Kain replied, "I need you and your men to remain here. I have business to discuss with Agent Embrance of the ISB and I don't want to be interrupted." he added before he opened the door and stepped inside the compartment.

Kain came to a sudden halt when he saw Linzee and her father bound in the metal frames. Although Linzee did not appear to have been physically harmed in any way that he could see, Cryn bore the marks of obvious physical abuse. Mainly these were burns that were spread across his body but there was also a significant amount of blood pouring from his open mouth that was collecting in the tray positioned beneath him to catch any bodily fluids instead of allowing them to land on the floor. Clearly Embrance was carrying out her stated aim of encouraging Linzee to provide information in order to save her father from being tortured.

"I'm rather busy here captain. The guard outside should have told you." Embrance said when she became aware of Kain's presence and she set the electrical prod she had been using to deliver shocks to Cryn down on the trolley beside the blood covered pliers.

"Oh we had a deep conversation about the authority of a ship's captain and the consequences of trying to subvert it Agent Embrace." Kain replied. Then he glanced at Linzee and added, "So how exactly does someone answer questions while they're gagged?"

"I haven't started asking the questions yet captain. Right now I'm just making a point about my willingness to inflict pain." Embrace told him, "Now is there a point to this interruption?"

"Lieutenant Krostas followed up on the information found among the prisoners' personal belongings and took a team over to the station to search their quarters." Kain told her, holding out his datapad for her to take,

"Among the items found were illegal weapons and information on the ship that brought them here. A request is being submitted to the authorities on Taron to see whether they've got any more information on them."

"Yes this is interesting. Conclusive proof that they came here planning violence." Embrace said as she scrolled through the report compiled by Lieutenant Krostas as well as the images that had been taken of everything found in the Wa-Yens' quarters.

"Everything there is in the central computer and you've got full access to it." Kain added.

"Thank you captain, this will help me greatly. The more physical evidence is available the easier it is to verify the answers I'm given." Embrace said and she started to pass the datapad back towards him only to pull it back again, "This model has an image recorder built in doesn't it?" she asked.

"Yes, why?" Kain responded but rather than answer Embrace simply activated the recording function and aimed the lens towards Linzee before taking a still image of her restrained naked in the frame.

"There you go captain. Feel free to distribute that to your crew." she said as she turned off the datapad and handed it back to Kain, "Now is there anything else?"

"Yes there is just one more thing Agent Embrace." Kain said sternly, "I am the final authority on my ship and while you may have been given jurisdiction over the handling of these prisoners you do not get to make decisions about the running of it. I've already warned the guard you stationed outside about the consequences of disobeying my orders and that is the last warning anyone is getting. If it happens again then action will be taken." then he turned around and exited the compartment, finding Petty Officer Tresk and his men apparently staring down the ISB guard, "You may stand down for now petty officer." Kain told him, "Return to your station."

"Yes captain." Tresk responded before he and his men turned and walked away.

9.

Like any major trading station *Serren Xesh* maintained detailed records of cargoes imported and exported and with the assistance of an Imperial Customs officer Ventern went through both lists, attempting to link imports to exports. *Serren Xesh* itself had no need of commercial explosives so any brought to the station ought to be promptly re-exported. With millions of tonnes of cargoes imported and exported there were a huge number of records even for just the past month but to make Ventern's job easier there were flags placed against some to indicate that they included particularly dangerous goods.

"There, what's that?" he asked, pointing to an entry in the import logs that was flagged as containing explosive materials.

"That's a transport ship that makes regular runs between here and Derjat. It supplies the miners with provisions and equipment on the outward run and returns with alloys used for starship construction that typically gets shipped on to Wyndigen." the customs agent answered.

"Mining requires explosives. Where do they come from?" Ventern said.

"Taron I think." the customs agent replied.

"Taron. Where those two we've arrested come from. I suppose it could just be a coincidence but I think we should follow it up." Ventern pointed out, "How are the explosives handled when they get here?"

"Off loaded by labour droids and placed in a secure hold until they can be loaded on an outbound ship." the agent said.

"Okay so who has access to this secure hold?" Ventern asked.

"Normally no-one other than customs and security and even we have to log our entry and exit. Plus secure cargoes are held in high security containers that can't be opened without triggering an alarm."

"Normally?" Ventern commented.

"Well if something goes wrong in the hold then obviously we have to send in a maintenance crew but a security team would check them in and out." the customs agent told him.

"A maintenance technician would have the knowledge needed to sabotage the docking bays." Ventern pointed out, "I want to see the maintenance logs for the time periods where there were explosives stored in any of your high security holds."

"We don't have those. You'll need to speak to station maintenance sir." the customs agent replied and Ventern sighed. Aboard the *Sword of Justice* he had access to detailed cargo manifests and maintenance logs and it was irritating to him that such things were not as easy to access aboard *Serren Xesh Station*.

"Okay I'll handle that later. What about the transport from Taron that brought the explosives here in the first place?" Can you show me that?" he said.

"Yes sir, that I can do." the customs agent replied with a smile and he used the reference for the exported cargo of explosives to bring up the corresponding import record. However, as soon as he did this Ventern noticed something was amiss.

"The weights don't match." he said and the customs agent frowned.

"The numbers are only out by a few kilogrammes. It's well within tolerance." he said. The shipment of explosives had been several tonnes in weight and the discrepancy of a few kilogrammes represented only a tiny portion of this. Ventern knew that even the best scales could be out by a small percentage. However, when dealing with explosives that could have been used to carry out a terrorist attack Ventern was not willing to overlook anything, no matter how trivial it may appear to be.

"I need to see the calibration data for the sensors used to make these measurements. If this is accurate then almost fourteen kilogrammes of explosives went missing from that shipment." Ventern said, taking out his comlink, "*Sword of Justice* this is Ventern." he said into it.

"*Sword of Justice* here." the voice of one of the star destroyer's comscan operators responded.

"I need to speak to the bridge duty officer." Ventern said and moments later he heard Erranes' voice.

"Go ahead lieutenant." she said.

"Commander I may have found the source of the explosives used in the attack on the docks." Ventern told her, "There's a shipment of commercial explosives from Taron that was missing some of what was imported by the time it was moved on to its final destination."

"Isn't that stuff supposed to be monitored continuously?" Erranes asked.

"It should, yes and it may just be a measurement error but it needs looking into." Ventern answered.

"How much are we talking about here?" Erranes said.

"Up to fourteen kilogrammes are missing commander. Given that the attack on the docks used at most three or four kilogrammes that could mean that there's another ten kilogrammes somewhere aboard the station." Ventern told her.

"Ten kilogrammes? I've got a very bad feeling about this." Erranes responded.

"Ten kilogrammes?" Coroll said when Erranes told him and Kain what Ventern had told her, "What sort of damage can be done with that much explosives?"

"Used correctly Ventern seems to think that it would be enough to destroy one of the station's fusion reactors." Erranes replied.

"And if these explosives were stolen from a supposedly secure shipment I think we can assume that whoever is responsible is also capable of getting to a reactor." Kain added before one of the crewmen in one of the bridge crew pits called out.

"Captain, the infirmary has received a report of a medical emergency." the crewman said.

"What sort of emergency?" Kain asked, immediately concerned that somehow a terrorist had got aboard the *Sword of Justice* and injured some of the crew.

"It's not defined captain but it has been reported to the infirmary by Agent Embrace." the comscan operator said and Kain and Coroll looked at one another.

"The prisoners." Kain said and he spun around and ran from the bridge.

Kain hurried as quickly as he could from the bridge to the compartment where Embrace was carrying out her interrogation and when he got there he found the door open and unguarded. Rushing into the room he discovered the guard inside with Embrace and a pair of medical droids despatched by Doc. All of them were gathered around Cryn, who had been taken down from the frame where he had been restrained the last time Kain saw him and laid out on the floor. Meanwhile Linzee looked on in horror.

"Stand clear." one of the droids said as it placed a pair of probes to Cryn's chest and a moment later the man shuddered when a powerful electrical shock was delivered to him.

"Subject is still in cardiac arrest." the second droid said.

"Then shock him again!" Embrace snapped.

"Configuring for defibrillation." the first droid said before it suddenly added, "Negative heart activity detected."

"You mean he's dead?" Embrace asked.

"Confirmed. All life signs have failed." the droid answered.

"What do we do next?" the ISB guard added, looking at Embrace.

"Nothing." Kain said before she could reply.

"Captain what are you doing here?" Embrace said, not having noticed him standing in the doorway until then.

"The bridge is informed of emergency situations Agent Embrace. I came to find out what was going on aboard my ship."

"It's a minor setback, that's all." Embrace said, getting to her feet, "Obviously there was something wrong with him that we weren't aware of. Nothing I did should have caused this."

"But it did, didn't it? I want a full report immediately and I'll be comparing it to the autopsy report from our medical droids so I don't recommend leaving anything out."

"Of course captain. As soon as I'll finish my interrogation of the second prisoner and then-" Embrace began.

"Now Agent Embrace!" Kain shouted at her and she jumped, not used to being spoken to in such a harsh tone.

"Yes captain." she said before she looked at the guard, "Return to your post. You'll be relieved as usual." she told him and he nodded before the pair of them walked around Kain to exit from the compartment. Meanwhile the two medical droids began to wrap Cryn's body in a sheet for removal.

Kain then looked at Linzee. Although the gag she still wore muffled her sobs it was obvious that she was crying over the death of her father right in front of her.

"I'm sorry." was all Kain could think of to say.

One of *Serren Xesh Station's* technical staff arrived at the Imperial Customs office with a datapad in hand that contained the maintenance log for the secure hold where the explosives from Taron were stored before being shipped to the mines on Derjat.

"As you can see sir there were two incidents in the hold while that shipment was stored there that required a response from our department. An air seal blew causing a temporary loss of atmospheric pressure and there was an electrical fault with one of the labour droids." the technician told Ventern as he was looking at the datapad.

"That could explain the weight discrepancy." the customs agent suggested, "If the droid needed repair then it could have affected the calibration of its sensors."

"Or it could have been the point at which someone removed explosives from the crate." Ventern pointed out.

"No, that's not possible. The repair technicians are watched by security." the technician told him.

"We'd have to be dealing with a larger conspiracy by both technical and security staff." the customs agent added but Ventern remained unconvinced.

"Are these labour droids modified in any way?" he asked but the technician shook his head.

"No. They're off the shelf models." he answered.

"Then how are they controlled? This pattern of droid doesn't have a remote programming option." Ventern said.

"That guarantees that no-one will be able to slice into them remotely and use them to access the secure hold." the customs agent said.

"We use an overseer droid as a controller. A standard EV-series." the technician said.

"Interesting. I want that droid transferred to the *Sword of Justice* as soon as possible for a full examination. The EV-series is advanced enough for someone to adjust its programming to remove explosives after using a labour droid to break open a crate." Ventern said.

"Of course sir. I'll see to it now." the technician responded before he turned to leave. Once he was in the corridor outside the customs office he walked a short distance before ducking into an alcove and taking out a comlink, "I've just spoken with the Imperial Navy's engineer." he said into the device, "He wants the supervisor droid moved to their ship."

"Don't worry, I'll have it ready for them." a voice responded before the channel went dead.

"I'm sure she didn't do it deliberately captain." Coroll said as he and Kain made their way to the *Sword of Justice's* infirmary.

"Oh I don't doubt that it wasn't deliberate, she needed to be able to keep torturing that man so she could force his daughter to talk." Kain replied.

"That man was a terrorist captain, the same as his daughter. Remember the weapons that Lieutenant Krostas found?" Coroll pointed out.

"Yes and I also know that the carbines were still in pieces when they were found. Call me a traditionalist but I believe that you should have evidence of a crime before declaring someone guilty of it." Kain said and Coroll frowned.

"Do you seriously think that he and his daughter didn't intend to kill anyone captain?" he said.

"No, not at all. I'm just not entirely sure who they came to *Serren Xesh* intending to kill. What if the woman was telling the truth about being here to stop the real culprits of the attack on the docks from striking again?" Kain said.

"Then they could have just called in an anonymous tip to station security." Coroll replied just as they reached the infirmary and went inside.

"Doc." Kain called out across the room when he saw the 2-1B medical droid on the far side checking on the status of a patient with a second droid, "Do you have the results of that autopsy yet?"

"Yes captain." the droid responded, turning around and walking towards the two senior officers, "Cryn Wa-Yen's heart failure was as a result of chronic muscular atrophy, most likely caused by a viral infection in the patient's history."

"If he had a weak heart then why wasn't it on the bio-data included on his identity card?" Coroll asked.

"It is possible that the condition was undiagnosed sir." Doc told him, "The infection itself may not have been considered serious enough to the subject to have sought medical attention at the time. After that the symptoms may have been mild enough that the subject was unaware of any continuing problem."

"Right up until he was beaten, burned and electrocuted." Kain commented, "I think this has gone far enough. Doc I want a copy of your report, list every injury Cryn Wa-Yen suffered during his interrogation and copy it to me. The moff wanted to be kept up to date so I think she needs to know exactly what's going on here."

"Of course captain." Doc responded and Kain looked at Coroll.

"I don't see the point in making a public spectacle of this commander. I'll have comscan set up a holonet channel to my quarters. You can return to the bridge and handle things there." he said.

"Do you think the moff will take a call right away captain?" Coroll replied.

"I think there's a pretty good chance. Even if she doesn't then I'm certain that I'll still be able to get through to the palace. Colonel Yal-Paratus seems pretty clued in to everything that's going on. I'd try going through Fleet Admiral Kellear but I doubt he'd appreciate me bypassing the chain of command and going through Line Captain Morco and Admiral Lorr will take too long. I want Agent Embrace made to stop what she's doing." Kain said.

"She's only doing her job captain." Coroll protested, "It's not like she's abducting people off the streets just for saying they don't like the Emperor."

"Yes well there are different ways of going about her job. Besides Adas, I'd have thought you'd appreciate having her use a slower method of extracting information. It would keep her around here longer." Kain said and Coroll frowned.

"Captain I don't think my intentions towards-" he began before Kain held up his hands.

"Okay maybe I shouldn't have said that. Having a man who was in my custody isn't something I thought I'd ever have to deal with." he said.

10.

When Kain returned to his quarters he had time to make himself a hot drink before the intercom sounded. "Captain I have your channel to the moff's palace." the voice of a crewman told him and he gulped down another mouthful of coffee before placing the mug on a nearby counter.

"Thank you. You can connect me now." he said, standing in front of his quarter's holographic scanner.

"Putting you through now captain." the crewman said and moments later a hologram of Moff Tollof herself materialised in front of Kain.

"Captain Kain," she said with a smile, "what can I do for you?"

Kain noticed that she used his rank and surname instead of addressing him more informally as she had done when they last met in her palace. Whether this was because they were now communicating over an official channel or not was something he could not know but he decided to address her in kind.

"Your excellency there has been a development with the two prisoners." he told her.

"Ah, so the ISB agent has extracted the information needed to wind up this little terrorist operation?" she asked.

"No your excellency. Agent Embrace has been using techniques that I'd describe as torture and this has resulted in the death of the male prisoner. As far as I know she hadn't even begun her questioning. I want your permission to take over responsibility for the interrogation." Kain explained and the smile disappeared from Tollof's face.

"That's unfortunate." she said.

"A man dying is more than unfortunate I'd say." Kain commented.

"I mean that he died before he could talk." Tollof responded, "Look Kain, the ISB has a wide latitude for conducting counter terrorist operations and unfortunately sometimes things like this are going to happen."

"Then you're not going to do anything about it?" Kain asked.

"No, I can't get involved. The prisoners are known to be terrorists and as such the ISB can claim jurisdiction. If I try to stop Agent Embrace from carrying out her duty then I risk losing the support of COMPNOR. If you feel that she has violated their procedures or gone beyond her authority then you can submit a complaint to their internal affairs division." Tollof said.

"I guess even a moff has limits on their power." Kain said.

"The Empire isn't about making sector governors local dictators." Tollof replied, "Of course if the woman prisoner dies as well then it won't look good for Embrace."

"I was hoping for a solution that wouldn't involve anyone else dying during interrogation." Kain said.

"In that case all I can suggest is that if you and your people can uncover what happened on Serren Xesh themselves then Agent Embrace won't have any further need to question the woman prisoner." Tollof told him.

Kain could tell that he was getting nowhere. Tollof clearly did not want to go out on a limb for a person considered a terrorist by the Empire. On the other hand her suggestion that he could put a stop to the interrogation of Linzee was valid.

"Thank you for your time your excellency." he said, "I'll let you know if there are any further developments."

"Of course. Hopefully next time you'll be able to update me in person rather than over the holonet though."

Tollof said before she ended the connection from her end and her hologram rapidly faded away to nothing. Kain then reached for the intercom, connecting to the bridge.

"Bridge where is Agent Embrace right now?" he asked.

"She's in her quarters sir. My board shows she's using the subspace comms system to send a message to Aran. Do you want me to page her?" a comscan operator told him.

"No, she's obviously busy. Let her finish her conversation. Let me know on my comlink if she ends her call though. Kain out." Kain responded before he shut off the intercom. He had no interest in talking to the ISB agent but he wanted to be sure that she was not in the compartment where Linzee was being held.

Leaving his quarters he headed for the compartment where Linzee was being held and as he walked he took out his comlink.

"Kain to infirmary. Doc I want you to meet me where the prisoner is being held for interrogation immediately." he said.

"Of course captain. I shall be there in four minutes." the droid responded and Kain returned the comlink to his pocket.

When Kain reached the corridor where the compartment was located he could see Doc approaching from the opposite direction. As expected one of the guards Embrace had brought with her was on duty outside the compartment but this was not the one who had been on duty when Cryn had died.

"Senior Agent Embrace is not here captain." the guard said when Kain reached the doorway.

"I'm not here for her." Kain replied and he looked towards Doc just as the droid walked up to them as well, "I want a medical examination of the female prisoner run."

"I haven't been informed of this." the guard said.

"I've no need to inform you of anything." Kain said sternly, "But if this prisoner also has any underlying health conditions then perhaps it would be advisable to know about them before Senior Agent Embrace kills her as well. Don't you?"

"Of course sir." the guard answered and Kain smiled at him.

"Good. Now that's settled Doc and I can begin." he said and he opened the door to the compartment before he and Doc both went inside. Kain closed the door behind them so that the guard could not see what was happening before looking at Doc and adding, "Doc, shut down." he said.

"If you are sure captain." the droid responded and Kain nodded.

"Yes, I'm sure. Shut down." he said.

"Very well captain." Doc replied and then the droid's head tilted downwards as it shut down as Kain had ordered.

Walking quickly to the frame where Linzee was bound Kain reached for her gag.

"We don't have long." he said as he loosened it and pulled it down so that she could speak.

"If this is a rescue then-" she began.

"Of course it's not a rescue. It's an attempt to convince you to see sense." Kain replied and Linzee glared at him angrily.

"You murdered my father and you talk about me seeing sense?" she hissed.

"I didn't kill him, that ISB rancor cow did and I've already raised the issue with Moff Tollof. She wouldn't intervene to stop Embrace but she did give us both a way out. If you give me the information needed to find the people who attacked the docks then there won't be any need for the ISB to question you." Kain told her.

"Why should I help you?" Linzee responded.

"Did you not listen to what I said?" Kain said, "Helping me will stop Agent Embrace from torturing you. Plus I thought you said that you came to *Serren Xesh* to stop the people who planted the bombs. Surely that's a win-win situation."

"And what happens to them?" Linzee asked.

"Does it matter?" Kain answered.

"Of course it does. Killing them was supposed to be a last resort and we certainly weren't going to torture anyone." Linzee replied.

"They've killed hundreds of people and as far as I know you haven't actually killed anyone. From my point of view they are far more deserving of what's happened to you than you are." Kain said.

"I can't." Linzee said and Kain sighed and shook his head.

"Then there's nothing more I can do for you." he said and he reached to replace her gag.

"No wait!" she snapped, "Okay the guy you're looking for is called Azmal. He leads a resistance group based on the station. The attack on the docks was their first big strike but they've been carrying out other minor attacks while gathering weapons for at least a year now. From what we know he and most of his people work in the technical divisions. It gives them access to pretty much every part of the station. There are files about them on my datapad."

"My security chief didn't find any files." Kain commented.

"He wouldn't, they're hidden. Go to the calendar function and enter the key code trill herf xesh one-one-three-eight. Everything we have is there." Linzee told him, "So what happens to me afterwards?" she added.

"You were found in possession of an illegal weapon and every word you said to me before Agent Embrace arrived was recorded. You'll probably spend at least a decade in prison." Kain told her.

"No good deed goes unpunished huh?" Linzee commented before she forced a smile and Kain smiled back at her.

"I guess not." he said before he replaced her gag.

"Signal coming in from the *Sword of Justice* colonel." one of Brinnack's staff announced and both the colonel and Ventern looked at him from their respective consoles.

"Put it through sergeant." he said and a small hologram of Kain appeared on top of the console in front of him, "Captain, what can I do for you?" he asked. As Ventern moved across the room to join him

"Colonel we've made a major breakthrough at this end." Kain told him and he held up a datapad, "This was recovered from among the prisoners' belongings and I was able to crack the security code to access a set of hidden files."

"How did you manage that captain?" Ventern asked and the hologram of Kain smiled.

"A lot of people leave these things set to default so I just tried one-two-three-four-five and it worked. I got the idea from the combination to my luggage." he said and Ventern sighed.

"You should change that." he said.

"Perhaps but for now we've got a name, Azmal." Kain said and Ventern frowned.

"Azmal? I think I've heard someone mention that around here." he said.

"He works in the station's technical division, specifically droid maintenance." Kain told him and he grinned.

"I knew it." he said.

"Well Azmal is the leader of a terrorist cell. Our prisoners had names and profiles on six of them, plus images of two others." Kain said.

"Just give me the details captain. I'll have them picked up and brought in for questioning." Brinnack responded.

"No, just prepare a couple of squads. I'm coming over to handle this myself and I want weapons set to 'kill'." Kain said.

"You aren't taking prisoners captain?" Brinnack said.

"We can't discount the possibility that the terrorists will attempt to use droids against us and I don't want to lose anyone just because they couldn't adjust their weapon setting in time. Besides these people are murderers, I see no reason not to use lethal force against them in return. Why burden taxpayers with the cost of a trial before they are executed?" Kain told him and he nodded.

"Of course captain. The troops will be waiting when you arrive." he said.

"Captain I requested that the droid maintenance section turn over a droid for inspection. I suspect that it was used to steal the explosives used in the attack." Ventern added.

"I recommend caution with anything they provide lieutenant. If they suspect that you're on to them they may try to booby trap anything they hand over." Kain said and Ventern nodded.

"Understood captain. If they provide the droid before you get here I'll have an analysis droid look it over before shipping it to the *Justice*." he said.

"That's probably a good idea. Whatever you do though, don't let them realise that we're on to them. I don't want them to have the chance to go to ground. I'll be with you in under a quarter of an hour. Kain out." Kain said before his hologram disappeared.

"Captain Kain!" Embrace called out as Kain was walking down a corridor to the *Sword of Justice*'s armoury.

"I'm in a bit of a hurry Agent Embrace." he responded and he carried on walking, "Can we walk at the same time as we talk?"

"Of course captain." Embrace said as she rushed to catch up with him, "I hear you're about to conduct a raid on a terrorist cell."

"That's correct Agent Embrace." Kain replied.

"May I ask how you uncovered this cell?" she asked.

"Oh it was easy really, I just did some honest investigating. No torture and no need to kill anyone." Kain answered with a grin and Embrace frowned.

"Captain Kain I realise that we've got off on the wrong foot but we are both on the same side here. Both of us want the terrorists neutralised." she said.

"Then you should be happy Agent Embrace because I'm about to neutralise them." Kain said.

"Yes captain and I'd like to join the operation." Embrace added.

"No." Kain said simply.

"Captain I was sent here-"

"You were sent here to conduct an interrogation Agent Embrace and you got less information out of our surviving prisoner than I did during my first five minutes with her." Kain interrupted, "What I'm about to undertake is a military operation and you aren't military."

"I could get authorisation from Admiral Lorr." Embrace pointed out.

"Not in the next ten minutes and not without breaking communications silence on the issue." Kain said, "The encrypted point to point signal I used to alert Colonel Brinnack may have been secure but there are no guarantees that a long range subspace signal won't be intercepted. So once again Agent Embrace, no you are not joining this operation and that is final."

Two squads of stormtroopers were assembled in the hangar when Kain's shuttle brought him to *Serren Xesh Station* again. Standing in front of them were also two black uniformed lieutenants that Kain recognised as part of the crew of the *Sword of Justice*.

"Excellent work on assembling the force so quickly colonel." Kain told Colonel Brinnack who was standing close to the base of the shuttle's ramp as he descended. Once again Kain was wearing an armoured vest for protection while leading the assault but this time he had also drawn a blast helmet to go along with it. Kain had not limited himself to improving his armour protection though and instead of his issued blaster pistol on his right hip he had an E-11 rifle holstered on his left. Despite being no larger than his DH-17 pistol this weapon had superior stopping power and a much better rate of fire. It was clear from the equipment that he had chosen for himself that despite his rank Kain intended to be more than just a passive observer of the raid.

"Yes captain. Both squads come from your own ship's complement again." Brinnack responded.

"So I see." Kain said and he glanced at the two stormtrooper officers assigned to lead the squads, "Now what about the terrorists?"

"We were able to use the data you supplied to track them all captain." Brinnack told him, "It appears that all of them are in an area of the maintenance section."

"All in one place? How convenient." Kain said and Brinnack nodded.

"Yes sir. I haven't done anything to keep them sealed in just in case that alerts them to the fact that we're on to them but Lieutenant Ventern is monitoring the area to see if anyone comes or goes." he explained.

"Is there much activity?" Kain asked.

"No sir. Ventern noted that they seem to have locked themselves into the section they are in. The details are all here." Brinnack answered and he handed Kain a datapad.

Looking at this Kain saw that it included a floor plan showing the compartment where Azmal and the rest of his group were gathered. This showed that there were four entrances and this made planning the assault very easy.

"Okay we have a total of four ways in." Kain announced to the assault force, "I don't want to leave any way out for the targets so each squad will be split into two fire teams and each team will take a different door. We'll breach the doors explosively and go in shooting. Remember that these individuals have shown themselves willing to kill so take no chances. Any target that has not specifically surrendered is to be considered an active threat and dealt with appropriately."

"So keep shooting until they stop kicking?" one of the officers commented and Kain smiled.

"That's one way of interpreting it ensign." he said, "Now let's move out."

"Captain are you sure about leading this assault yourself?" Brinnack commented, "We can monitor it just as well from my command centre."

"No, I need to be directly involved colonel." Kain replied, shaking his head, "The moff put me in charge of this investigation so I want to prove to her that I was able to bring it to a successful conclusion without the ISB having anything to do with it."

"Of course sir, I understand fully." Brinnack said.

11.

Dividing his force into four fire teams, two led by the junior stormtrooper officers and one led by himself, Kain deployed the teams to cover all four possible access points to the area where the terrorist group led by Azmal had gathered. This was a droid maintenance workshop and had a pair of doors suitable for human sized beings or droids to pass through as well as two for much larger machines or bulky containers of parts mounted on repulsor sleds. As each team reached its assigned position the team leader contacted Kain via comlink.

“Besh team in position.”

“Dorn team in position.”

“Cresh team in position.”

“This is Kain, Aurek team is also in position. Deploy breaching charges and sound off.” Kain responded, using his comlink to address all of the other groups at the same time. When he gave this order one stormtrooper from each team began to fix strips of detonite tape to the door in front of them. The detonators that were then fixed to this tape were all designed to be triggered by the same coded wireless transmission, enabling Kain himself to detonate all four charges simultaneously with his comlink.

“Dorn team, charge set.”

“Besh team, charge set.”

“Cresh team, charge set.”

“Understood. All charges are set. Position yourselves for entry, detonation will take place in thirty seconds.” Kain told the other teams that made up the assault force before he adjusted his comlink to broadcast the trigger signal to the detonators.

Looking around him he waited for the stormtroopers to position themselves ready to take advantage of the door being blown open as soon as the charge was detonated. The armoured soldiers all retreated several metres away from the human sized doorway before they crouched down and aimed their weapons towards it. A quick glance at the chronometer on his wrist told Kain that the thirty seconds he had given the other teams were now up and he pressed the button on his comlink to trigger the four charges.

“How do you want this set?” one of the members of Azmal’s group asked as he prepared the modified programming for the EV-series supervisor stood close by. The chest panel of this had been opened and every spare bit of internal space filled with industrial detonite. To make even more room for the explosives the regular power cell had been removed and replaced with a much smaller one. This would of course reduce the amount of time that the droid could remain active before needing recharging but the smaller power cell would still power the droid for an hour or more and that was enough for the purpose Azmal had in mind for it.

“The droid needs to blow in their hangar.” Azmal told him, “With luck there will be enough munitions and fuel cells there to trigger secondary blasts.”

“Do you really think that we can take down a star destroyer Azmal?” one of his group asked and he smiled.

“Whether we succeed or not it’ll send a message to the Empire and it will panic the troops they have here on the station enough that we’ll should be able to seize one of those customs corvettes. Then we can get away from here and spread our revolution across the sector.” Azmal replied and then he opened a nearby equipment case to reveal the variety of blasters it contained, “Everyone needs one of these.” he added before there was a loud booming sound from all directions.

The explosive embedded on one side of the tape that had been stuck to the four doors was designed to focus the blast towards the adhesive side only, meaning that the explosive force was directed into the doors. This sliced neat holes in each of the doors, blowing the centre sections inwards along with a shock wave that scattered any small and unsecured objects in all directions. The combination of the concussive shock wave and flying debris coming from multiple directions at once stunned Azmal and his group.

Moments later the first of the stormtroopers came through one of the holes that had been blasted in the doors and he fired a rapid burst from his rifle at one of the terrorists. The burst hit the man in the chest and he fell dead instantly. The rest of the group responded by diving for cover behind the nearby work benches while more stormtroopers burst into the compartment through the holes in the doors. Azmal purposely threw himself towards the case of blasters and he reached inside to grab one. The weapon he grabbed was a rifle meant for the civilian market so was incapable of fully automatic fire but Azmal still fired it as rapidly as he could by holding it over the bench beside him to try and disrupt the stormtroopers’ assault while the rest of his men crawled towards the crate as well to arm themselves.

Azmal's fire caused one of the teams of stormtroopers to seek cover while the officer commanding them remained in the corridor outside and fired through the hole instead. He could only cover one direction though and although he was able to pin down one of the fire teams the other three were able to enter the compartment unhindered and advance towards the terrorists. The blaster bolts they fired as they advanced were bright red rather than blue, indicating that their weapons were set to kill and that they were not especially concerned about being able to take prisoners.

One of Azmal's men emerged from cover to fire a pistol at one of the closest stormtroopers and the blast caught the soldier in his shoulder. The angle of this shot meant that it was deflected away by the stormtrooper's armour but it still caused him to roll aside out of the line fire just in case there was a follow up shot from the terrorist. The man did fire another shot that passed over the stormtrooper but in doing so he remained exposed long enough for another one of the armoured soldiers to shoot him in return and he spun as he fell sideways.

"We need to get out of here!" one of Azmal's group exclaimed.

"We can't, they're everywhere." another added.

"Then just fight. What do we have to lose?" Azmal said before another of his men was hit. Azmal then noticed Kain among the assault force, noticing him to the rear of one of the stormtrooper fire teams and seeing the rank badge on his armoured vest. It then occurred to him that if he could kill Kain then the loss of a senior officer may throw the assault into confusion.

Keeping low and doing his best to remain out of sight of the stormtroopers while they exchanged fire with the stormtroopers Azmal crawled between the various workbenches of the workshop in an attempt to get into a better position from which to attack Kain directly. Unaware that he was being hunted, Kain advanced with his men although he was wise enough to keep the stormtrooper fire team he commanded ahead of him so that the elite infantrymen could do their job properly. The assault force had the advantage of both surprise and numbers but the terrorists had been able to find cover solid enough to absorb blaster fire while the Imperial troops needed to expose themselves in order to advance.

Nevertheless the stormtroopers pressed on, co-ordinating their movements and firing to ensure that the terrorists remained under constant fire. As the assault force got closer to the terrorists Kain noticed the EV-series droid and remembered that Ventern had mentioned requesting that such a droid be sent to the *Sword of Justice* for examination. The casing of the droid was open but Kain could not quite make out what was inside from his current position so he started to move to one side, hoping to get a better look. As he attempted to reposition himself he noticed movement that did not come from one of his men and he turned just in time to see Azmal crouching between a pair of work benches and aiming his blaster straight at him. Rather than attempt to aim and fire before Azmal could, Kain threw himself aside to get out of his line of fire before there was the flash of blaster fire and Kain felt the heat of an energy bolt pass close by him. He rolled across the floor as he landed and in doing so he saw the explosives that had been packed inside the droid's casing. Although ordinary explosives, both industrial and military grade could be set alight without risking a detonation the extreme energy contained within a blaster shot was a different matter as well as the incendiary chemicals that the terrorists had been shown to add to their explosives making it more likely that even a near miss with a blaster could trigger at least part of the charge with disastrous results.

"Don't hit the droid!" he called out before he turned and raised his blaster, expecting Azmal to appear around the workbench beside him at any moment. However, the terrorist did not appear and Kain got back to his feet before advancing to look around the bench himself with his rifle held ready to fire. Seeing that Azmal was gone he looked around the compartment to double check the progress of his force.

As far as Kain could tell all members of the assault force, both stormtroopers and officers were still fighting whereas the amount of fire being returned by the terrorists seemed to be significantly diminished. Continuing to advance behind the stormtroopers he stepped around a large and immobile droid to see a terrorist leaning against it. Kain quickly pointed his rifle down at the man before he realised that the terrorist was already dead, a large burn from a blaster hit scorching his chest and Kain looked around for another target just in time to notice someone dart between two other workbenches. He recognised this as Azmal immediately but before he could bring his rifle to bear on the terrorist leader he had disappeared from view.

Azmal heard the sound of another of his group being hit by a blaster bolt, her scream being cut rapidly short as she died. It was clear to him that his group was being overwhelmed and he came to the conclusion that escape was not possible while there were stormtroopers advancing on all sides. However, there was still a means by which he could strike a blow against his enemies, even if it did mean sacrificing his own life. When the alternative seemed to be spending the rest of it in an Imperial prison at best, killing himself to be able to take the lives of Imperial troops and a fleet captain seemed like a much better option.

The obvious means for doing this was to trigger the explosives that had been placed inside the EV-series supervisor droid. The detonator that was being prepared when the Imperial assault began was still lying on a workbench but Azmal had his blaster and he knew that it could trigger the explosives if he could hit them. The difficulty was getting such a shot though. The droid was turned away from his present location and

shooting it from this angle would result in too much energy being dissipated as it burned through the casing and so he looked around, searching for a route that would get him to where he needed to be. He kept low as he moved, he would have crawled on his hands and knees if he had not wanted to keep hold of his blaster just in case he suddenly needed it. He ignored the other members of his group as he moved while they yelled at one another to fill in gaps as the stormtroopers continued to advance and these calls were interrupted now and again by more screams as members of his group were steadily picked off one by one.

The shouts had ended by the time Azmal saw the droid directly ahead of him. There was still one other terrorist crouched between him and the machine and he guessed that he and this man were the only members of the group remaining. While this man continued to fire at the stormtroopers Azmal headed to the droid that was now just a few metres ahead of him. Before he could reach the machine though he felt something heavy fall on him and he collapsed. It took a few moments for him to realise that it was the body of the last other remaining member of his group and that this was now lying on top of him.

His blaster had fallen from his grasp and he had to drag himself out from beneath the body of his former comrade, reaching out for his weapon. However, just as the blaster came within reach and he was able to place his hand on it a foot suddenly came down and stood on it.

Azmal gasped in pain as his fingers were being crushed and it took him a few moments to notice that the boot standing on his hand was not the short white style worn by stormtroopers. Instead it was the taller black boot worn by officers and as he looked up he found himself looking straight at Kain who was staring back down at him and pointing his blaster at Azmal's face.

"Imperial scum. The galaxy will never-" Azmal began but before he could finish Kain simply shot him without saying a word.

"Sir." a stormtrooper said from behind Kain and he looked around.

"Yes trooper?" he asked.

"All the terrorists are dead sir." the stormtrooper told him and he nodded.

"Secure everything in this room for analysis. Nothing gets removed until it has been cleared." he replied.

"What about the bodies captain?" one of the officers asked

"Check them first and bag them. I'm going to take them back to the *Sword of Justice* and dump them at the feet of that ISB agent." Kain answered.

12.

When Kain's shuttle returned to the *Sword of Justice* he made his way to the vessel's bridge where he found not only Coroll and Erranes waiting for him but Embrace as well.

"Well that's sorted that out." he said as he walked towards the console the others were gathered around, "Although I have to say that I prefer being here on the bridge of a star destroyer even when it's under fire to being shot at in person."

"So you're thinking of transferring to the infantry then captain?" Erranes commented with a smile.

"No. Definitely not." Kain responded.

"It's just a pity you couldn't have taken any of them alive captain." Embrace added, "The ISB may have been able to learn more about the extent of opposition to the Empire aboard *Serren Xesh Station*."

"Agent Embrace if this operation is anything to go by I'm surprised that the Imperial Security Bureau is able to gain any useful information from anyone." Kain said. Then he looked back at Erranes and added, "Lieutenant Commander Erranes I want a course laid in for Aran. We'll hand the prisoner over to the Sector Rangers and they can deal with her."

"Actually she's to be transferred to an ISB facility." Embrace said and Kain glared at her.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I mean that there is still a lot we may be able to learn from her captain. We know that she is part of an underground network on Taron that we need to know more about." Embrace told him, "You may check with your superiors captain, it's all been arranged. When we reach Aran I will take the prisoner with me."

"Don't worry Senior Agent Embrace, I'll take your word for it." Kain responded, "Erranes lay in that course. Coroll the bridge is yours for now. I need to go and return this gear to the armoury. I want us ready to jump as soon as Ventern gets back with our troops from the station. Brinnack can handle the winding down of martial law."

"Yes captain, it will be done." Coroll said and Kain nodded.

"Very good commander." he said before he stormed from bridge.

"I really don't think he likes me." Embrace said as she watched him leave.

"No, I don't think he likes you at all." Erranes added.

It took more than half an hour for all of the personnel deployed to *Serren Xesh Station* to return to the *Sword of Justice* and by this time the hyperspace jump from there to Aran had been plotted and keyed into the starship's flight computers.

"Captain all hands are aboard and the jump is plotted." Coroll told Kain over the intercom.

"Okay I'm on my way up commander. You may commence with the jump." Kain responded and Coroll smiled.

"Yes captain. Proceeding with jump." Coroll said before he closed the channel, "Ship status?" he asked.

"All systems set for jump commander. All air locks are sealed and the navigation computer is keyed into the helm." Erranes responded.

"Helm are we ready?" Coroll added.

"Yes commander." an officer standing in one of the crew pits and looking over the shoulder of the star destroyer's helmsman.

Standing at the front of the bridge, Coroll turned to look out through the main viewports overlooking the massive hangar doors.

"Helm, engage hyperdrive." he ordered.

"Engaging hyperdrive." the helmsman responded, however moments later an alarm began to sound.

"Power failure on starboard side." one of the bridge crew reported.

"Stang, it's that damned coupling again!" Coroll snapped, "Get me Ventern."

"Putting you through to engineering now commander." another crewmember said.

"Engineering, Ventern here." Ventern's voice said.

"Lieutenant we've just lost power on the starboard side again. I thought you were supposed to have corrected that problem." Coroll said.

"Yes commander, the circuit breaker has tripped so the outage is localised. The reactors are still running within tolerance. I'll have a maintenance party on site in ten minutes." Ventern told him.

"So we can still jump?" Coroll asked.

"Yes commander, the hyperdrive is still powered." Ventern answered.

"Commander should we proceed with the jump?" the officer in the crew pit said.

"No, we'll wait for the captain." Coroll said, "Lieutenant Ventern please find whatever it was that caused that circuit breaker to go and fix it as soon as possible."

"We're on it commander." Ventern said before the channel was closed and Coroll looked at Erranes.

"Do you know where the captain is?" he said.

"Looking now commander." she replied and Coroll sighed.

"If he's stuck in a turbolift then we're in trouble." he said.

"I've got the captain on the line now commander." Erranes announced.

"Captain where are you?" Coroll said.

"Standing outside a turbolift down the corridor from my quarters. What's going on?" Kain's voice responded.

"That circuit breaker on the starboard side has gone again. We've lost power to several sections. The reactors are still stable though and we have full flight control. Do you want us to commence the jump to hyperspace?" Coroll said.

"No, I don't want to take the chance on there being more to this than we know about at the moment. What are Ventern's people doing about the problem?" Kain said.

"He's sending a team to isolate the problem and fix it now captain." Coroll told him.

"Then let's wait to see what he has to say about it before we risk jumping into hyperspace. Kain out." Kain responded before he turned off his comlink.

"Commander I have Agent Embrance on the line." one of the comscan operators announced.

"Put her through." Coroll ordered. Then once the channel was opened he added, "Senior Agent Embrance, what can I do for you?"

"Commander what's going on? I can hear alarms. Are we under attack?" Embrance asked.

"No, the issue is a technical one. We've suffered a power loss to part of the ship. It's nothing to worry about but Captain Kain has ordered that we delay our jump to hyperspace until it can be corrected." Coroll answered.

"Which part of the ship?" Embrance added.

"The starboard side," Coroll told her.

"Commander the compartment where my prisoner is being held is on the starboard side. Has it been affected by the power loss?" Embrance said and Coroll's eyes widened.

"Stang!" he exclaimed.

"What's wrong commander?" Kain asked as he finally made it to the bridge.

"Captain the section of the ship that's lost power includes the compartment assigned to Agent Embrance." Coroll told him.

"Can you raise the guard?" Kain said, looking down into the crew pit to the comscan operators.

"Nothing on the intercom captain." one of them replied.

"Contact security. Tell Lieutenant Krostas to send a team to investigate immediately." Kain ordered.

"I'm on my way to the bridge." Embrance added over the intercom when she heard this.

"That isn't necessary Agent Embrance. This is an internal security matter." Kain said.

"That woman is my prisoner captain, I want to make sure that your people handle this properly. Embrance out." Embrance said before she shut off the intercom.

"Company's coming." Erranes muttered.

"Someone better tell Krostas to hurry his men along. I'd like it if we could just tell Embrance that her prisoner is still right where she left her when she gets here. It will save a lot of fuss." Kain said.

"What if she has escaped somehow?" Erranes asked.

"Then we'll find her." Coroll answered, "One way or another she won't get far."

Embrance arrived a few minutes later, before the security team sent to check on the prisoner could report in.

"Well captain?" she asked as she entered, "What's going on?"

"We're just waiting to find out ourselves." Kain replied before one of the bridge pit crew spoke up.

"Captain I have security on the line." she said.

"Please tell me that the prisoner is secure and it was just a comms fault stopping us contacting the guard." Kain said but the woman shook her head.

"Security reports that both the guard and the prisoner are missing captain." she said.

"Could the guard have gone after the prisoner?" Erranes asked.

"Surely if he'd seen that she was escaping then he'd report in." Coroll commented and he looked at Embrance who nodded in response.

"That's exactly what he'd do." she said before turning towards Kain, "I hold you responsible for this captain." she said.

"Oh really Agent Embrance?" Kain responded with a smile, "Was it me that removed her from this vessel's security section? As you have been so fond of reminding me agent, the prisoner was your responsibility. Now though locating and recapturing her is mine so kindly stand back and do your best to keep out of the way."

"Captain I have an escape pod activating on the starboard side." another crewmember called out.

"Can it be overridden?" Embrance said.

"It's an escape pod, control is entirely local to prevent a system malfunction from blocking the launch in an emergency." Kain said, "Our only hope is that our troops can get there in time to stop it."

"Security reports a patrol is four minutes away captain." Erranes said as she checked a nearby console.
"Pod launch in ten seconds captain." the crewmember called out.
"Our troops will never make it." Coroll said before the escape pod launched, accelerating rapidly away from the *Sword of Justice*.
"Comscan check that pod. Are there any life signs?" Kain asked.
"Yes captain, the pod is definitely has a single occupant." one of the comscan operators answered.
"We can't let her reach the station. Lock a tractor beam." Embrance said.
"I don't think so." Kain responded, "I'm bringing this to an end once and for all. Weapons arm port side batteries. I want a firing solution on that pod."
"Captain you can't do this." Embrance said and Kain looked back at her.
"Yes Agent Embrance, I can." he said.
"Laser cannon locked on target and tracking captain." a crewmember announced and Kain nodded.
"Open fire." he ordered and outside the star destroyer there was a bright green flash as one of the warships laser turrets opened fire.
Although the escape pod was still accelerating it lacked manoeuvrability and made for an easy target. It also lacked armour protection beyond what was necessary for surviving entry into a planet's atmosphere so when the energy blast struck it the tiny craft exploded, leaving nothing behind larger than a few centimetres across.
"Target destroyed captain." a crewmember reported and Kain looked at Embrance.
"I think that brings this matter to a conclusion." he said to her.

Kain was alone in his quarters, his uniform tunic and hat both hung up when there was a knock on his door. Walking across the room to it he opened the door to find Embrance standing outside.
"Ah Agent Embrance." he said and he stepped back from the doorway to allow her to enter, "I have my report here." he added, picking up a datapad and handing it to her, "As you can see the power outage was triggered by an unidentified power surge knocking out the circuit breaker. The same surge also disrupted the magnacuffs securing the prisoner and caused them to open. She was then able to take the guard by surprise and kill him. We haven't found his body so she must have taken it with her to prevent it from being found."
"A lot of this is assumption captain." Embrance replied.
"If you have any better ideas I'm willing to hear them." Kain said.
"No captain, I don't." Embrance admitted.
"In that case I will arrange for a shuttle to take you back to Aran while this ship rejoins the rest of our line." Kain said.
"Actually captain that's why I'm here." Embrance said, "The ISB is concerned about the existence of organised insurgent cells even if they are only capable of local operations. The information obtained from the woman-"
"The information I obtained you mean?" Kain interrupted but Embrance ignored him and continued.
"The information obtained from the woman suggested that some of them may be trying to expand their operations to other parts of the sector. The director has petitioned Moff Tollof to place ISB agents aboard a number of larger warships so that they can respond to any insurgency more rapidly. I have been ordered to remain aboard the *Sword of Justice* for the foreseeable future."
"I assume that this has already been cleared with Fleet Admiral Kellar?" Kain said and Embrance nodded.
"It has." she said.
"Then I suppose I'll be seeing a lot more of you Agent Embrance. For now though I could do with some sleep. You are dismissed." Kain responded.
"Of course captain." Embrance said and she turned around and left Kain's quarters.
When the door closed behind her he sat down on the edge of his bed and sighed.
"I've got a very bad feeling about this." he said to himself.