

STAR WARS

TREASON

02: THE INFERNO

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HOPING TO SOLVE THEIR SUPPLY ISSUES THE CREW OF THE SWORD OF JUSTICE HEAD FOR A SPACE STATION THAT WAS LONG THOUGHT ABANDONED. HOWEVER, WHEN THEY ARRIVE THEY DISCOVER THAT IT HAS BECOME HOME TO REFUGEES THAT ARE NOT HAPPY TO BE DISCOVERED.

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

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1.

Captain Jarren Kain, commanding officer of the Venator-class star destroyer *Sword of Justice* stood by the viewports at the front of the kilometre-long vessel's bridge with his first officer Commander Adas Coroll and navigator Lieutenant Commander Maye Erranes as the ship came out of hyperspace. When first commissioned the ship had been controlled from two such compartments, one at the top of each of the tower structures towards the rear of the vessel. However, one of these had functioned as a flight control tower for the hundreds of starfighters originally carried in its vast hangar. Now that the fighter group had been reduced to a mere two squadrons the secondary bridge had been mothballed and all its functions now handled from this one.

"Clear of hyperspace now captain." one of the junior bridge officers reported from a crew pit behind them.

"Start the count lieutenant." Kain ordered, smiling at his immediate subordinates.

"Yes captain, beginning count now." the officer responded and Kain, Coroll and Erranes looked at one another in anticipation.

"So far so good." Coroll commented.

"Thirty seconds captain." the lieutenant announced and Erranes sighed.

"Bad luck there." Coroll said and he smiled at Kain, "Not long now captain." he added.

"Let's just wait and see." Kain replied and the pair waited further. As the seconds ticked by though the smile started to disappear from Coroll's face while at the same time Kain started to smile instead.

"Sixty seconds." the lieutenant said and Coroll frowned.

"Stang." he said.

"Now, now commander." Kain said.

"Let's see if he's still so happy in another minute." Erranes said.

"He won't be." Coroll said.

"Ninety seconds." the lieutenant said from the crew pit.

"Almost there." Coroll said before he looked towards the crew pit, "Lieutenant give us a countdown from one minute fifty please."

"Yes commander." the lieutenant said and then a few seconds later he began to countdown, "Ten seconds remaining. Nine. Eight. Seven. Six. Five. Four."

All of a sudden the vessel shuddered slightly and an alarm sounded.

"Power failure in starboard side, aft section." an enlisted man called out.

"Ten credits." Kain said to Coroll and Erranes, grinning, "Each."

"Of course captain. Perhaps you could use it to buy your girlfriend the moff a present." Coroll said.

"For thirty credits once Ventern's ten are included? I don't think a moff would notice anything you could buy for that." Erranes replied.

"Lieutenant are you saying that women only take note of how much a present costs and not the love that comes with it?" Coroll asked.

"That may be a very good question commander but the moff is not my girlfriend and we are most certainly not in love." Kain said, "Now I'd like you to keep an eye on things here while I go down to engineering and as well as informing Lieutenant Ventern that he owes me ten credits for the sweepstake find out if he's come up with a way to avoid us having these power outages each time we drop out of hyperspace. So far it hasn't caused us any serious problems but if we do come under attack while we've no power along the starboard side we're in trouble."

"Do you really think anyone would dare attack a star destroyer captain?" Erranes asked.

"Pirates don't tend to be that brave." Coroll added.

"Maybe not but the fact that we have an agent of the Imperial Security Bureau aboard suggests that the issue of political opposition to the Empire is growing and isn't combined to anti-authority dropouts waving banners outside military bases." Kain replied, "Now the bridge is yours commander. You know where I am if you need me."

Like the ship's bridge, the engineering section of the *Sword of Justice* was always well staffed and when Kain entered the massive compartment appeared to be very busy. This was not surprising to Kain though, with power failures happening on a far more regular basis than previously they were considered to be a serious problem for the engineering department who were continuously trying to find a permanent solution to them.

Despite their workload members of the engineering staff still paused to stand at attention as Kain passed by them on his way to the primary engineering control station where Lieutenant Ventern, the ship's chief

engineer was directing the repair efforts. Despite only being a lieutenant Ventern was older than Kain thanks to his having begun his career as an enlisted technician before gaining a field commission and unlike some engineering officers aboard other ships he took an active role in even the most basic maintenance, a principle that he expected his own junior officers to follow as well.

"Lieutenant." Kain said as he approached the control station.

"Ah captain, I'll be right with you." Ventern responded before he looked at one of his staff and added, "Get a team to that junction now. I want a visual inspection of the damage so we can figure out what needs replacing."

"Yes sir." the other engineer replied before Ventern turned away from the control station to look at Kain.

"Perhaps we should discuss this in my office captain." he suggested.

"As you wish lieutenant." Kain replied and the two men walked towards a nearby hatchway that led to the chief engineer's office. The door was partially soundproofed so that the constant noise of the main engineering compartment was at least reduced so that the chief engineer would be able to carry out his other work without being distracted.

"Lieutenant you owe me ten credits." Kain said as soon as the door closed behind them, "An explanation for why my starship keeps breaking down every time we drop out of hyperspace would be appreciated as well."

"I'm sorry captain but the power distribution system along the starboard side is just worn out. We need to be able to replace the whole thing."

"You know we can't do that. Those parts haven't been made in more than a decade. I thought you were adapting newer parts to work with our system." Kain said.

"That is what we've been trying captain. The problem is that the parts that would be most suitable come from the newer star destroyers and we're officially rated as a heavy cruiser so-

"So we don't qualify for star destroyer parts." Kain interrupted and Ventern smiled.

"Exactly captain. I can requisition light and heavy cruiser parts but the *Sword* is two to three times their size and the interfaces just can't hold up." he said, "Perhaps if you could use your influence with the moff then she could see to it that we get the better rated parts."

"Having my ex-wife's claims thrown out of court is one thing lieutenant but I really don't want to push having navy requisition procedures being re-written." Kain replied and Ventern nodded.

"I thought you might say that so I did a little digging to find out what happened to the parts that the navy ordered when these ships were still being manufactured." he said.

"Don't tell me you've actually found a source." Kain responded.

"Possibly sir." Ventern said as he picked up a datapad and handed it to his captain, "Most of the parts were stored in surface or orbital warehouses on worlds controlled by the Republic during the war but there were also a number of forward operating bases."

"You're not the only one who was in the war lieutenant." Kain commented.

"Of course, sorry captain." Ventern replied before he continued with his explanation, "Anyway the navy decommissioned those bases at the end of the war but from what I can tell a lot of the equipment was left in place when the Republic Navy became the Imperial Navy. The Venator-class was regarded as outdated then and the expectation was that they'd all be taken out of service and replaced by newer designs within a few years so nobody worried about keeping them all going for more than a decade. Of course most have been decommissioned but that doesn't really help us since they were either sold off or scrapped so we can't see if any of them have the spares we need. On the other hand I think that there is still a sizeable stock of spares at the space station codenamed *Inferno*."

"*Inferno*? That's actually one I haven't heard of. The name doesn't sound ominous at all." Kain commented.

"I'm not surprised you haven't heard of it captain. It's located in the Hellfire nebula and from the information I've uncovered its existence was kept secret for security reasons." Ventern told him.

"The Hellfire nebula? Stang Kris, why not just suggest we plunder the Emperor's personal vault on Coruscant?" Kain exclaimed.

"All the information on how to approach the station is in the datafile you're holding captain. Of course that is based on the station being exactly where it was at the end of the war. After years of being abandoned it could have drifted and that's going to make approaching it harder." Ventern said as Kain studied the file further.

"So I see. A low level repulsor field around the station to keep the gas cloud away. Drop out of hyperspace beyond that and you risk blowing yourself up." he said, "I see it's only half a million kilometres from the edge of the nebula though."

"Yes captain. Deep enough in to make detection difficult but not so deep that the gases could interfere with a hyperdrive. Plus it's not that far off our assigned patrol route."

"So how long do you think this little shopping expedition will take?" Kain asked.

"Well it's not that far off our assigned patrol route so we can probably get there in a few minutes. Of course transferring the parts to the *Sword* could take anything up to ten hours."

"Ten hours? How many parts do you think we need?" Kain said in surprise.

"It's not what we need captain, it's what we can fit in the hangar." Ventern told him and he frowned.

"The hangar?" he said.

"Yes captain. It's designed to hold hundreds of starfighters and shuttles but what's in there now? Our two squadrons of TIEs, a few shuttles and those old fighters that the navy has probably forgotten ever existed. I'm suggesting that we take all the parts that we can from the station. Sooner or later we're bound to need them."

"That does sound like a good idea. Not only us but the other ships in the line could need them at some point." Kain agreed.

"A way to keep Line Captain Marco happy captain?"

"Exactly. The *Hammer of Reason* and *Blade of Truth* may not be having the same problems we are but that could change. As you said we're officially classed as heavy cruisers so if our ships get replaced we'll probably be downgraded. Start putting together a team to recover the parts and I'll see to it that we make our diversion when we next jump."

"Thank you captain. As soon as the power is back on everywhere I'll get right on it."

"The Hellfire nebula captain? Are you insane?" Erranes exclaimed when Kain told her the course he wanted her to plot and around the bridge people turned to look at her.

"Very subtle." Coroll commented, "But she does have a point captain. You do know why it's called the Hellfire nebula don't you? Random electrical storms that ignite pockets of volatile gases and an ongoing chemical reaction that breaks the resulting compounds back down into the volatile ones for the same thing to happen again."

"That's why I want us to come out of hyperspace outside the nebula." Kain explained, "If the station has drifted just a few thousand kilometres since it was abandoned or if the repulsor field has stopped working then then coming out of hyperspace within the gas could cause serious damage to the ship. We'd never get our shields up in time."

"Serious damage? It could rip us apart captain." Coroll said.

"I don't see that we have much of a choice. We can't get the parts we need through official channels and they're too big for us to fabricate ourselves. Lieutenant Ventern has found us a supply-" Kain began.

"Potential supply. Captain we should at least send in a probe droid ahead of us." Coroll said but Kain shook his head.

"No, no probe droids. We'll drop out of hyperspace just beyond the nebula, wait for any system failures to be corrected and then raise our shields before proceeding inside. Our sensors should be able to pick up the station when we get within about a million kilometres of it." he said.

"Assuming it's still there captain. If the repulsor field did fail then its hull would act like a magnet for the energy discharges and would have been ground zero for multiple blasts." Erranes pointed out.

"Just like we'll be." Coroll added.

"Nevertheless I'm the captain so it's my call to make. Lieutenant Commander please plot a course and be ready to jump as soon as Lieutenant Ventern gives us the all clear. Commander Coroll I'm going to go and get some rest before we jump so the bridge is yours again. You know where I'll be if you need me." Kain said before he turned and left the bridge again, watched by Coroll and Erranes.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Coroll commented when Kain was out of earshot.

"Same here. Still it will be nice to have the power grid working again. Maybe then Ventern and his people can figure out what's going on down in the laundry." Erranes responded and Coroll frowned.

"What wrong with laundry?" he asked.

"Somehow they managed to lose my favourite shirt. You know the one with the Kerast Rancors team logo on it?" Erranes said and Coroll nodded, remembering seeing her wearing the shirt while off duty a number of times, "I sent it down to be cleaned with the rest of my things but when the bag came back it wasn't in it."

"It's not the sort of thing that anyone would steal either. The Kerast Rancors are terrible." Coroll said and Erranes gave him a shove.

"The Kerast Rancors are great. They've won more trophies than any other team in the sector." she said.

"Only because they've been around for about six thousand years. They haven't won a single trophy since the war." Coroll replied.

"You just wait and see. This next season will be ours." Erranes said.

"Maybe, but if you screw up this jump then none of us will live to see it." Coroll said.

2.

As a senior officer aboard the *Sword of Justice* Captain Kain could have food delivered to his quarters rather than having to eat in the officers' mess and he took advantage of this to eat while he reviewed more of the information provided to him by Ventern about *Inferno Station*. He was about half way through this when someone activated the intercom outside his door.

"Captain may I speak with you?" a woman's voice said and Kain sighed when he recognised it as belonging to Senior Agent Embrace of the Imperial Security Bureau, posted aboard the *Sword of Justice* in response to the growing level of anti-Imperial activity in the sector.

"Yes Agent Embrace. Come in." Kain said and the door slid open for her to enter the room.

Embrace wore a uniform of a similar style to the green wore by fleet officers but it was instead made up of a pale tunic and black trousers with matching cap.

"I'm not interrupting your meal am I captain?" she said when she saw the half eaten plate of food.

"Actually yes but you're here now so how may I help you?" Kain replied. Having seen the way Embrace treated prisoners Kain found himself barely able to contain his contempt for her but unfortunately her presence aboard the *Sword of Justice* had been cleared by Fleet Admiral Kellar, the highest ranking naval officer in the sector so he was unable to have her removed from the ship.

"I've heard that you're deviating our course from your assigned patrol route. I'd like to know why." Embrace said and Kain leant back in his chair while staring at her.

"Agent Embrace I can guess who told you that we will be changing course and Commander Coroll probably told you exactly why as well." he said, well aware of the fledgling relationship between his first officer and the ISB agent.

"Captain this course change is a violation of your orders." Embrace said.

"Agent Embrace this may come as a shock to you but the navy gives its captains a certain degree of flexibility. It comes with the burden of controlling all known space. Now we've already spoken about how you have no authority over military personnel so if you want to submit a complaint to your superiors you may but this ship will go where I order. Now is there anything else?" Kain said sternly.

"No captain. That is everything." Embrace said.

"Good, then kindly leave me to my dinner. I'd like to have finished by the time we jump to the Hellfire nebula." Kain said before turning back to his meal.

"Yes captain." Embrace responded and then she turned to leave his quarters.

In the corridor outside Kain's quarters Embrace walked a short distance and turned a corner before coming to a halt. Then she reached into her pocket and took out her commlink.

"Embrace to bridge." she said into it, "I need to speak with Commander Coroll."

"One moment please." a bridge technician responded before a few seconds later Coroll's voice spoke.

"Teylin, what can I do for you?" he asked.

"I just wanted to let you know that I spoke to Captain Kain about his planned diversion." Embrace said and she heard Coroll groan.

"You shouldn't have done that. Once the captain has made up his mind about a course of action, that is what we do." he told her.

"So I see. Captain Kain was quite blunt about it. I half expected him to summon a security detail to arrest me. He still doesn't seem very co-operative. I was hoping that we'd be able to put the fiasco of those two terrorists behind us and move on but he still seems to see me as his enemy." Embrace said.

"Don't worry about it. I'm sure he'll come around to the idea of you being aboard." Coroll replied, "We're all on the same side here after all."

The Hellfire nebula was a cloud of orange and yellow gas several billion kilometres across and when the *Sword of Justice* dropped out of hyperspace it loomed like a giant wall in front of the star destroyer. Random flashes of light appeared within the cloud from the electrical activity that it was known for and a significant number of these were followed by larger bursts of light as some of the gases that made up the nebula caught fire.

While officers and crew on the bridge were looking out of the forward viewports at the impressive sight of the nebula in front of the ship Ventern and his staff waited to see whether there would be any further power failures caused by the surge from the hyperdrive.

"Three minutes." Ventern announced as he watched the timer for how long they had been in realspace, "I think we can relax now." then he reached for the intercom, "Engineering to bridge, my console says all systems are operating. Do you agree?"

"Agreed lieutenant. Congratulate your men of on their last repair job." Kain responded from the bridge. Then he looked at Erranes and added, "And congratulations to you as well lieutenant commander." he told her, "I'd say that we're right on target."

"Comscan report." Coroll added.

"No contacts commander. The sky is clear." one of the comscan operators responded from a crew pit.

"What about *Inferno Station*? Is it visible?" Coroll asked.

"Negative commander." the operator said.

"It's the electrical activity in the cloud." Kain said, "*Inferno Station* was put here to keep it away from the prying eyes of the Confederacy. We'll need to get a lot closer before we can detect it. Well within the nebula itself." then he glanced over his shoulder again, "Raise shields. Weapons stand by to fire."

"Weapons?" Erranes said, "Captain what's the target?"

"That cloud commander." Kain replied and he pointed through the viewports at the nebula itself, "The electrical activity inside triggers the combustion of the volatile gases but we can't depend on that happening at the right time to clear us a path through."

"You mean we use our lasers to trigger explosions ahead of us and move through before the gases can break down and become volatile again?" Coroll said and Kain nodded.

"That's exactly what I'm proposing commander." he said.

"Weapons reporting ready captain." one of the bridge crew announced.

"Shields operating at full strength." a second added.

"Open fire. Single volley dead ahead." Kain ordered and there was a blast of energy from one of the *Sword of Justice's* main turbolaser batteries. The shot forwards into the nebula where it vanished for a moment before there was a huge explosion as a large zone of volatile gases was ignited, "Helm take us in slowly. Weapons repeat single volley at twenty second intervals. Comscan I want to know the moment you detect anything."

The *Sword of Justice* began to move forwards, heading into the Hellfire nebula. Before the ship reached the boundary of the massive interstellar gas cloud there was a second blast from its turbolasers that triggered yet another explosion, this time deeper within the nebula.

Other than the cloud of gas outside the bridge now surrounding it there was nothing for the occupants of the *Sword of Justice's* bridge to notice as the ship crossed the threshold into the nebula and in engineering the only difference was a slight variation in the sound from the engines as they compensated for the increased density of the gas now surrounding them.

The star destroyer continued to follow a course straight towards the last know location of *Inferno Station*, travelling at just a few thousand kilometres per minute. Every few seconds there was another turbolaser blast fired forwards to keep the ship's path clear of the more volatile gases that the nebula contained and where these were hit there was another large explosion. This continued until finally an object showed up on the ship's sensors.

"Single sensor contact captain. Range sixty-three thousand kilometres." a comscan technician reported.

"Can you identify it?" Coroll asked.

"Physical profile matches a Republic deep space naval station commander." the technician answered and Kain smiled.

"How far from the projected target location crewman?" he said.

"About four hundred kilometres captain. There is an irregularity though sir, the power output pattern doesn't match what is expected for a station of this size and type." the technician continued.

"That could be the repulsor field captain." Erranes suggested, remembering the force field intended to keep the volatile gases of the nebula a safe distance from the station or ships docked there.

"Probably, yes." Kain commented, "Helm steer towards the sensor contact but keep it five degrees off our port bow, I don't want the station in our line of fire. Weapons maintain fire until we have a clear path as far as the repulsor field." he then ordered and the star destroyer's helmsman began to steer the ship to one side, taking it roughly towards the sensor contact but keeping it out of the direct forward firing arc. Meanwhile the turbolasers continued to be fired at regular intervals to clear their path of volatile gases, "Let's go and take a closer look shall we?" Kain added and he, Coroll and Erranes all made their way to the rear of the bridge where the main command console was located. Here Kain accessed the *Sword of Justice's* sensor feed to show a hologram of the object that had been detected.

The hologram showed the station to be exactly what the comscan technician had said it was, a typical Republic naval space station from the period of the Clone Wars more than a decade earlier. This consisted of a tapering cylindrical central section while large boxy modules were arrayed around this at the top end while assorted antenna arrays were laid out on the upper and lower surfaces of these modules. The overall layout was reminiscent of the ancient space station designs that pre-dated even the foundation of the Republic before artificial gravity had been perfected and such facilities spun to create gravity for their occupants.

"It's a Republic design alright." Coroll said.

"And since we're in a Republic designed ship we shouldn't have any trouble docking at any of these ports between the outer sections." Kain added.

"Captain may ask a stupid question?" Erranes said.

"There are no stupid questions lieutenant commander." Kain replied.

"Only stupid people." Coroll added with a smile.

"Just ask the question." Kain told her.

"Why does it look like all the lights are on?" Erranes asked and Kain and Coroll turned their attention back towards the hologram in front of them. Sure enough there were glowing points of light where the space station's viewports were located that indicated light was escaping through them.

"She's right captain. I can understand the repulsor field being left active to protect the station and allow ships to approach but stuff like lights, gravity and life support should have been deactivated to save energy." Coroll said.

"Comscan I want a full scan of that station. Are its systems all online?" Kain called out.

"Affirmative captain. Sensor indicate that all major systems are active." a crewman answered.

"What about life readings?" Coroll said.

"Indeterminate commander. I can tell that there's power to the life support system but I can't get any readings on internal conditions. Possibly a result of the repulsor field combined with the nebula itself." the crewman said.

"I've got a bad feeling about this captain. We're going in blind. If their weapons are active then-" Coroll began.

"Then it's a good job we have our shields raised and we have our own weapons manned and ready commander. Kain interrupted, "There's no sense in taking risks when we go aboard though. Tell Lieutenant Krostas that I want a platoon of stormtroopers ready to escort our boarding party and the rest of his men should be on standby to reinforce them if necessary and I can't believe that I'm about to say this but I think we should get your friend from the ISB up here. That station would make a good base of operations for a terrorist cell and while retaking may be our job fleet command are going to want her to deal with any terrorists we take alive. Hopefully this time she'll be able to avoid torturing them to death."

"To be fair captain you did order the execution of the female prisoner." Coroll pointed out.

"Only after she escaped and killed her ISB guard. I wasn't going to risk anyone else's life to protect hers." Kain replied sternly.

"Captain I didn't mean to suggest-"

"I know you were just sticking up for your lady friend Adas." Kain said, "Now Lieutenant Ventern will be taking a team aboard to inspect the spare parts and organise bringing them back aboard. The plan is to grab as much as possible and fill our spar hangar space with it. While he's doing that I want to know why this station isn't shut down as fully as it should be. Lieutenant Commander Erranes I want you to take a second team aboard and locate the main command centre. It should be located here in this tower." he continued and he pointed to a tower located at the centre of the space station's upper surface, connecting to the central cylinder, "Take a technical team to access the controls and a squad of troopers for protection."

"Not stormtroopers?" Coroll commented but Kain shook his head.

"No. I don't want any doubt about whose in command of Erranes' team. If anything does go wrong then I don't want Krostas ordering stormtroopers away from her and that means using fleet personnel only." he said.

"Captain we're about to penetrate the repulsor field." an officer in the crew pit suddenly called out and the three senior officers around the console turned to look through the viewports at the front of the bridge. Through these they saw the pale blue shimmering of the force field that then crackled with lightning as the Sword of Justice began to pass through, its shields interacting with the energy of the repulsor field.

"Captain I've just lost the navigation beacon." another crewman called out when the star destroyer finished passing through the repulsor field and Erranes quickly checked the console in front of them.

"Confirmed captain." she said, "I can't find any of the sector's navigational beacons."

"It can't be the repulsor field. Ships docked here would have had to have been able to access the beacons for up to date jump data." Kain said, "Comscan see if you can contact fleet command on Aran. Let them know our location." he ordered.

"I can't establish a connection captain. It looks like all outgoing subspace signals are being jammed." a comscan operator responded.

"This just gets better and better." Coroll said.

"Okay lieutenant commander it looks like your job just got harder. When you reach the command centre I want you to find the source of the communications disruption and shut it down. Preferably without also shutting down that repulsor field. We won't have our shields while we're docked and I don't want to suddenly find that we're dead centre of a gas explosion." Kain said and Erranes nodded.

"Yes captain, I'll put my team together now." she replied.

"Very good commander. Helm take us in. Weapons hold unless there's any indication that we are being targeted." Kain said.

"And if we are targeted captain?" Coroll said and Kain paused to think for a moment.

"Then we open fire. We take out their weapons if possible before we board the station and take back control by force." he said.

The tiny compartment was lit up only by the light being cast by the numerous display screens that had been crudely set up to show the information provided that the data feeds that had been tapped into.

"A star destroyer here?" the figure standing to the rear of the compartment said.

"It's an older type but it checks out as a star destroyer according to this." the individual sat in the operator's chair replied.

"This station isn't on any of the patrol routes." the new arrival commented.

"Maybe it's not an Imperial ship. Enough of those Venators have been sold off or just abandoned that they've been cropping up all over the place." the operator suggested.

"No, it's an Imperial ship. They're the only ones who would risk coming here."

"We came here." the operator pointed out, "So what do you want to do about the ship?"

"For now nothing. They might just take a quick look and then leave." the other figure replied.

"Even when they see we turned everything back on?"

"We may be fine, the crew of that ship might not know how much was shut down."

"And if they do get suspicious and try to board us?"

"Then we let them."

"We let them? There could be a couple of thousand troops aboard that thing. How do we fight them?"

"By being smart. We'll have a better chance of defending ourselves against two thousand stormtrooper marines and fleet security troopers than we will of surviving a full broadside even from an obsolete star destroyer. I'll go and tell the others to be prepared."

3.

The sections between the outer modules of *Inferno Station* consisted of triangular docking ports designed to interface directly with the major Republic vessels in use during the Clone Wars, Venator, Victory and Acclamator-class ships could all dock simply by flying directly into the docking ports where their prows would be gripped securely. Other ships could make use of extending docking tubes or if they were small enough land in one of the internal docking bays located in some of the outer modules.

The moment of docking itself sounded like a loud 'clump' that echoed through the forward sections of the ship, in particular in the larger forwards airlock where the teams led by Lieutenant Commander Erranes, Lieutenant Ventern and Lieutenant Krostas waited.

"Bridge this is forward airlock." Ventern said into the intercom as he stood by the control panel located beside the outer airlock doors, "I'm reading a good seal and breathable air on the other side of the door."

"Very good lieutenant you may proceed aboard." Kain responded and Ventern reached for the door controls.

"Perhaps my men should take up position first." the black uniformed Krostas suggested.

"Very well. Get them in place." Ventern replied, continuing to hold his hand over the control to the air lock door while Krostas' force of stormtroopers formed up in two rows and raised their weapons. As soon as Ventern saw this he activated the control to open the door. As well as physically connecting the *Sword of Justice* to *Inferno Station* the docking port provided a link between the control systems for their respective air locks so as the star destroyer's airlock door opened the space station's air lock also opened.

"Go!" Krostas ordered and he dashed forwards with his stormtroopers, quickly crossing the threshold into *Inferno Station*. They passed through the station's airlock and entered a large compartment on the other side where the stormtroopers spread out to cover the various approaches, "The area is secure." Krostas announced when it became clear that they were not about to come under attack and Erranes and Ventern followed along with their teams. The black uniformed fleet troopers that accompanied Erranes and the technicians also had their weapons drawn and they looked around to assess all the possible places from where they could come under attack.

"Do you have your map commander?" Ventern asked and Erranes held up her datapad.

"Right here." she said, "I've got my route planned out. Do you think the turbolifts can be relied on?"

"I don't see why not. Everything else around here seems to be working fine." Ventern told her, "The spare parts we're looking for should be in a hold two decks down from here. That's where we'll be starting our search."

"I'll leave one squad here to cover our retreat." Krostas said and he turned to the white armoured stormtroopers, "Squad Aurek hold here. Everyone else with me." he added.

"Tasus, they're here." the console operator told his superior in the improvised control room, "At least a platoon of stormtrooper marines plus a larger number of technicians."

"Then maybe they don't know we're here just yet." the man called Tasus replied, "If they did then they'd have sent more than that. Tell our people to stay out of sight but monitor the intruders' progress. If they get near anywhere that would risk exposing our presence here then we'll have no choice but to act."

Aboard the *Sword of Justice*, Kain and Coroll monitored the progress of the boarding parties by listening to their comlink signals. Despite being cut off from communication with the rest of the Imperial Navy in the sector there appeared to be no problem with communication within and around the station itself. Agent Embrace was also on the bridge by the command console, standing close to Coroll for support but the reports of how the various boarding parties were advancing towards their target destinations held little interest for her. Without anyone who could be labelled as a potential security threat to the Empire she had no role to play in the scavenging for spare parts.

"Captain I think you should take a look at this." the voice of one of the ship's junior bridge officers called out from a crew pit.

"What is it ensign?" Kain responded, walking over to the pit and looking down into it where he saw the officer standing beside one of the comscan consoles.

"Captain we still can't get any lifeform readings from inside the space station." the ensign said.

"Maybe there's no-one there." Embrace commented when she heard this and the ensign glanced nervously in her direction. Officially the ISB had no authority over military personnel but few navy or army personnel, especially in the lower ranks would risk arguing with their agents.

"Err, captain that includes our boarding parties." the ensign said eventually.

"Let me see." Kain replied and rather than return to the command console to have the information transferred to him he descended the steps down into the crew pit where he joined the ensign and the comscan operator. As he had been told the screen being used to display lifeform scans of *Inferno Station* was blank, indicating that nothing within the station was considered by the computer to be alive.

"We know that a unit was left to keep the airlock secure here captain." the ensign said, pointing to the screen, "Plus two units headed off in different directions but as you can see here our sensors are not picking up any of the tell-tale signs of life. No respiration and no temperature variations from warm blooded beings."

"Then there is definitely some sort of jamming taking place." Kain said.

"Captain I doubt that such jamming would be part of the station's normal operations." Coroll pointed out.

"Agreed commander, the same goes for the very convenient loss of communication with the outside galaxy since we came close to the station. I think this place warrants further investigation." Kain replied.

"Do you want me to take another force aboard *Inferno Station* captain?" Coroll asked.

"No, not yet at least. What I want is a couple of TIEs out there. Launch them through the port or starboard launch doors and have them carry out a couple of circuits of the station. Tell their pilots to watch for signs of other ships either docked or landing bays that look to be in use, if not now then recently." Kain answered.

Then he looked towards Embrance and added, "Agent Embrance perhaps you should take command of another of our stormtrooper platoons. I assume that you are qualified to take command of a platoon if authorised?"

"I am." she responded, "I'll go immediately."

"Stop off at the armoury." Kain told her, "Draw a weapon and body armour. I don't want you being a target."

Even though its fighter group had been massively reduced in size the *Sword of Justice* still carried twenty-four modern TIE fighters in its hangar and in accordance with Kain's order a pair of these were moved from the main hangar to the port side launch bay. While the star destroyer's prow was docked with *Inferno Station* its main dorsal hangar doors could not be opened so the side mounted secondary bays had to be used instead. These were still large enough to handle light freighters so deploying starfighters through the port side doors was not a difficult task.

Once away from the *Sword of Justice* the two fighters swung around at low speed so they could begin a flight pattern that would take them around *Inferno Station*.

"Flight leader to *Sword of Justice* we're beginning our run now." the lead pilot transmitted.

"Understood flight leader. Report in as soon as you see anything." Coroll's voice responded.

The solar panel wing arrangement of TIE fighters had the unfortunate effect of limiting their pilot's field of vision beyond what was directly ahead of the craft within a vertical arc. Therefore, in order to gain the maximum visibility possible the two pilots turned their fighter to face directly at the space station, using their manoeuvring thrusters to propel them around it. Although these thrusters lacked the sheer power of the main ion drives they were more than adequate to propel the TIE fighters around *Inferno Station* at the low speed required for their pilots to be able to carry out their detailed visual inspection of the structure.

It was the areas between the outer modules that most interested the pilots, in here most of the various docking ports and hangar entrances were to be found and almost any of them could have a small vessel present that would not have been immediately noticeable as the *Sword of Justice* had approached the station. There were further docking ports and hangars accessible from the outer edge of the modules that surrounded the core but these were far more visible and just the briefest of glances from a distance would reveal whether they were in use or not. However, the first signs of activity came not from a docking port or hangar but a viewport towards the base of one of the modules.

"Leader I have activity." the second TIE pilot said, "Viewport located starboard low."

The lead pilot looked down and to his right to where he saw the row of viewports that his wingman had been looking at. Like many of the station's other viewports there was light coming from within them but there was also a shadow visible that was moving from one end of the row towards the other.

"Sword of Justice this is flight leader. I have confirmed activity aboard the station." he signalled.

"Describe it flight leader. What do you see?" Kain asked in response.

"Movement in module six captain. I can't tell if it's a droid or organic though. Are any of our people in that sector?" the pilot told him.

"Unlikely flight leader. Continue your search and report in if you find anything else. *Sword of Justice* out." Kain said before he shut off the channel.

"Captain maybe we should send Embrance and her stormtrooper platoon to investigate that." Coroll suggested and Kain considered this for a moment.

"Module six is half way around the station. That's a long way to send a single platoon if this is hostile territory." Kain said, "We'll wait to see what the rest of the fighter sweep comes up with and what Erranes finds when she gets to the command centre. With any luck there'll be a functioning internal surveillance system that her technicians can tap into."

The turbolift cluster that Erranes led her team to using the schematic provided to her by Ventern was made up largely of personnel turbolifts. The size of her team was too large for them all to fit in one of these cars though and Embrance did not want to risk splitting it up.

"See if we can find a cargo turbolift." she said, looking around and her team began to spread out.

"Commander over here." one of the fleet troopers called out a few seconds later when he found a larger door that also had a turbolift call panel beside it.

"Okay this is it. Let's see if it works." Erranes said when she came to investigate it and she pressed the call button.

The rest of the team gathered around the entrance to the cargo turbolift and had to wait a few seconds before the door slid open to reveal the interior of the turbolift car. Unlike the personnel turbolifts this was obviously large enough to contain her entire team and they all embarked. Erranes herself took up a position by the internal control panel and studied it. Unsurprisingly the panel had the same general layout as those aboard the *Sword of Justice* and Erranes quickly located the key that would take it to the station's command centre.

The fleet troopers positioned themselves to the front of the turbolift as it began to move and held their weapons at the ready. Then as soon as the car came to a halt again and the door slid open they dashed out and formed a perimeter to cover the rest of the team as they followed them.

As Erranes looked around she saw that the turbolift had not taken her team directly to the command centre itself but it was close by and she waved towards the signposted entrance.

"This looks like it." she said and the fleet troopers repositioned themselves to allow Erranes and the technicians to move towards the command centre entrance.

Erranes reached for the control panel beside the door and as soon as she pressed the open key the doors slid apart to reveal the command centre beyond it. This had several rows of control consoles aligned towards a wall that had several large screens. The lighting in the command centre was at a lower level than other areas to reduce reflected glare on display screens but at this time the wall mounted screens were all blank.

"Your orders commander?" one of the technicians asked.

"Spread out and find me an active terminal. Something around here must be working." Erranes answered.

The she turned to the unit of fleet troopers accompanying them and added, "You make sure the room is secure."

"Yes commander." the unit leader responded and then he signalled for his soldiers to split up, sending them in pairs to each of the entry points to the command centre while Erranes and the technicians began to search for an active console that they could use to gain access to the station's computer network.

4.

While Erranes led her team to *Inferno Station's* command centre Ventern and Krostas took their team to a cargo hold that according to Ventern's research was filled with spare parts that were compatible with the systems aboard the *Sword of Justice*. Although these had been built more than a decade earlier they were listed as being unused and if stored properly they would effectively be brand new replacements for the worn out parts aboard the *Sword of Justice*.

"Are these what we're looking for?" Krostas asked while Ventern read content information from labels stuck to various cargo containers in the hold.

"Exactly what we're looking for." the engineer replied with a smile and he patted the container in front of him, "This is the exact power distribution node that we need to replace the entire subsystem that's been giving us so much trouble. We may not be able to build another Venator-class star destroyer from scratch but with the parts in this hold alone I expect we could keep the *Sword* running for another decade at least." he said.

"Okay so how do we get it all back to the ship? I don't see any loading droids around here." Krostas pointed out.

"No, I suspect that anything like that was taken when the station was supposedly decommissioned. Now we know they're here though we can bring some of the droids from our ship while smaller containers can just be taken back on the repulsor sleds we brought with us." Ventern said. He then turned around and looked at the technicians that made up his team, "Okay I want everything that will fit loaded aboard our repulsor sleds. Don't worry about how vital various parts are, we'll come back for everything we miss later."

"What do you want my men to do?" Krostas asked and Ventern glanced at the stormtroopers.

"My men can handle the loading. Just have some of your stormtroopers keep watch and the rest can sweep this hold for threats. I doubt they'll find anything but there's no sense in taking chances." he said.

The crates held an assortment of handheld blasters from pistols to repeating support weapons. Most of these had not been removed from the crates since they had been brought to *Inferno Station*, apart from a few used for internal security. Now though a large group of the inhabitants had been gathered together to be issued with them.

"Are we really supposed to take on an entire star destroyer?" one of them asked when he was handed a pre-Clone Wars vintage E-5 blaster rifle.

"We don't really have a choice Okyn." Tasus said out loud from close by when he overheard this, "The captain of that star destroyer has sent a team to the main command centre so it's only a matter of time before they figure out we're here. Do you think that that same captain will just leave us be and leave? It may not look like the star destroyer was sent here specifically to find us but the Empire doesn't tolerate our kind. At the very least we'd be sent to a labour camp or more likely they'll just wipe us out."

"We have a ship. We could leave." another of the crowd called out.

"A ship that hasn't been started up since we arrived here. Even if it does work then that star destroyer could blow us out of the sky before we could jump to hyperspace. We monitored its approach and its turbolasers are powered and ready." Tasus said, "Our only hope is to overpower their boarding party. We still have the element of surprise and we can use that to our advantage. We'll fortify our position here but we'll send a team to the command centre to ambush the Imperial boarding party there. I want you to lead that team Okyn." Tasus said and he looked towards Okyn, "You're one of the few real veterans we have."

"You want them wiped out?" Okyn asked.

"No, not unless its necessary. We need prisoners who can tell us exactly why the Empire has sent a ship here after all these years and what they know. Plus we might be able to use them as hostages to deter an assault." Tasus answered and Okyn smiled.

"A lot of Imperial captains aren't worried about their subordinates if it means the difference between success and failure for themselves." he pointed out.

"Maybe not but I don't see that we have any choice. At least with hostages we have a chance to negotiate safe passage out of here." Tasus said.

"To where exactly? The Empire dominates this sector." Okyn pointed out.

"We found this place. We can find another. If necessary we'll go beyond this sector and try to find somewhere we can live in another." Tasus replied.

"Starboard docking bay reports TIEs back on board captain. The crew have disembarked and the fighters are being returned to the main hangar now." one of the bridge crew reported while Kain and Coroll continued to study the hologram of *Inferno Station*.

"So from our flyby we have something moving here and that's it." Coroll said, pointing to where the mysterious shadow had been spotted by the TIE patrol, "Do you think we could have stumbled across a group of scavengers?"

"Scavengers? No I don't think so. If it was scavengers then I'd expect them to have headed for the cargo holds and looted the parts we came here for. Someone came here to hide. The question is why. They could just be people who want to be left to themselves or they could be something more sinister." Kain replied. "Captain with respect if someone came here and took over this station then they must be guilty of something. Taking control of the station itself is a crime."

"If the Empire cared about this place then it would be inspected more regularly than one accidental visit in more than ten years." Kain said.

"You're not suggesting that we can allow squatters to move in are you captain?" Coroll asked.

"Of course not. Space stations need maintenance just like any other technology and if the wrong thing breaks then everyone aboard could die without the sector authorities even suspecting that they need help. I'm just saying that we may not need to turn this into a combat operation." Kain answered.

"I hope so captain but I can't help but be suspicious of beings that would want to come all the way out here to avoid being noticed." Coroll said.

Knowing that the Imperial boarding parties were present only in a handful of locations aboard Inferno Station Okyn and his team were able to move quickly from the area they occupied to the command centre where they encircled it.

"None of the others are reporting guards set outside the entry points." one of his subordinates told him.

"We know that they have fleet troopers with them. They must be deployed inside the command centre." Okyn said, thinking about how he would defend the command centre from attack.

"What about grenades? If we open all the doors at the same time we can take out anyone standing close by them. It's not like we need any of the consoles in there." the subordinate suggested.

"No but you heard Tasus, he wants prisoners and three grenades going off all at once will fill that room with so much shrapnel that nothing will survive. We have to do this the hard way. I want the entrance near module three hit first. Have someone open the door and jam it then lay down suppressing fire through it. I don't care if they hit anyone, I just need their attention focused on that side. We'll give them two minutes and then hit both the other entry points at once. Who's got the jammer?" Okyn replied.

"Gorten in module one." the subordinate said and Okyn nodded.

"Okay I want him moved to the team in module three. He's to start jamming their comlink frequencies the moment that door opens. Any sooner and the Imperial squad might notice something is wrong and if we give them the chance to call for help then we could be up to our necks in stormtroopers before we get a chance to finish off here." he ordered.

"I'll get right on it." his subordinate said before he darted away and Okyn gave his weapon one last check before the attack could begin.

"Lieutenant Commander Erranes, I think I've found something." one of the technicians in Erranes' team called out and she hurried towards him.

"This is a life support console isn't it?" she asked and the technician nodded.

"Yes commander." he said, "All the displays are off, just like the others but this console is definitely active."

"Life support is the first system that would be brought back on line by anyone coming aboard after the Empire decommissioned the station." Erranes commented.

"Yes commander." the technician said again, agreeing with her assessment.

"I take it that you can access the network from here?" Erranes asked.

"I can commander. Life support can only be run through a station wide network."

Erranes took out her comlink, intending to report this discovery to the Sword of Justice but moments after she activated it and before she could switch it to transmit mode the device produced a shrill tone that indicated the frequency was being overwhelmed by something. Before she could say anything about this though one of the three entrances to the command centre slid open and a volley of blaster fire came through. "Take cover!" Erranes yelled, diving behind the life support console for protection while the fleet troopers closest to that entrance returned fire.

Initially the other fleet troopers in the command centre held their positions just in case it was a diversion intended to distract from the other possible entry points. Meanwhile Erranes attempted to adjust her comlink to find a frequency that would cut through the jamming.

"Sword of Justice do you read me?" she said into it but there was nothing but a screeching sound so she tried again, "Lieutenant Krostas do you read me? We're under attack and in need of urgent reinforcement in the command centre."

"Lieutenant commander, perhaps we should send a runner." the leader of the fleet trooper unit suggested.

Sending an individual trooper to carry a message in person was regarded as a measure of last resort when it came to communications in combat, there was too much chance that they could be ambushed along the way and there was no reliable way of knowing whether or not the message had been delivered or acted on.

However, right now Erranes considered the last resort to be her only one.

"Yes, I'll do it." she said and she turned to a nearby technician, "Crewman I need you to get back to the *Sword of Justice* and tell the rear guard what's happening up here."

"Yes ma'am." the technician replied and while still keeping low to avoid the blaster fire coming through the doorway he made his way towards one of the other doors and opened it. He was about to run through the newly opened door when all of a sudden there was another volley of blaster fire that came through it and the crewman was struck twice before he fell dead.

"It's a trap!" one of the other technicians exclaimed.

"Someone get those doors closed and sealed." Erranes shouted before the final door to the command centre also began to slide open. A technician who had been hiding close to this doorway dived towards the control panel in an effort to override the opening sequence and close the door before the team could come under fire from a third direction. Before he could reach it through another blaster shot came through the gap and hit him in the back, causing him to scream in pain as he collapsed before a second shot silenced him.

"We're surrounded." the fleet trooper leader said as he looked from one entrance to another, unable to see any of the beings carrying out the attack, "We need to get out of here."

"I'm open to suggestions but it looks like they've got every door covered, whoever they are." Erranes replied.

"What about the ventilation system?" a nearby technician suggested and Erranes considered this for a moment. The deck plan she had been given by Ventern did not cover service or ventilation ducts, only the actual corridors, turbolifts and emergency ladder shafts designed to be used by the original crew. This meant that entering the ventilation system that in a station the size of Inferno Station stretched for hundreds of kilometres in total carried with it the risk of becoming hopelessly lost. However, getting lost was infinitely preferable to her entire team being wiped out without even knowing who was responsible and so she nodded.

"Okay, where's the best access point?" she said.

"You have the map commander." the technician pointed out and Erranes frowned.

"It doesn't cover the ventilation system." she said. Calling out an order to locate an access point to the ventilation system would only alert their attackers to what they were doing so Erranes instead looked at the nearby technicians and spoke in a softer voice, "Pass the word, find a vent."

The volume of fire coming through the open doorway increased without any of the attackers revealing themselves as more than brief dark shapes that fired rapidly before retreating out of sight again and the fleet troopers could only fire randomly back out into the corridors in the hope of hitting something while the technicians searched frantically for a way to access the station's ventilation system. All of a sudden a blaster shot struck the leader of the fleet troopers just as he had leant over a console to return fire and he fell dead instantly, his blaster clattering to the floor and sliding across it. Erranes had been cursing herself for not bringing her issued blaster with her so when the squad leader's weapon came towards her she watched it until it came to a halt beside a nearby console. The blaster looked to be just out of reach but Erranes considered how risky it might be to try and recover it anyway. The distance was not great overall but it would mean exposing herself to enemy fire for several seconds. Before she could make up her mind though Erranes saw a technician dash from behind another console to grab hold of the weapon. He had further to go than Erranes and before he could reach the blaster he was hit by another shot and he tumbled, his body rolling across the floor until it reached the same console that had stopped the blaster, leaving his corpse lying on top of it.

"Commander over here." one of the technicians called out and when Erranes looked around she saw the man kneeling by a wall and pointing behind a console. Guessing that the technician had located an access point to Inferno station's ventilation system Erranes began to move cautiously towards him, trying to keep below the level of the consoles around her. However, she could not remain hidden for the entire distance and she tried to judge when the blaster fire coming through the doorway facing the gap she needed to cross might cease even for just a few seconds. There was a sudden explosion from close to Erranes' head as a blaster bolt hit the console she was hiding behind and she flinched, instinctively bringing her arms up over her head for protection. After the sudden explosion came a lull though while she still as yet unseen attackers shifted their target to another area of the command centre. Seizing this opportunity Erranes dived across the gap to the next set of consoles and another volley of blaster bolts then flew through the air right behind her as the attacking force reacted to her brief appearance. Erranes was now able to crawl all the way to the technician though and when she looked behind the console she saw that just as she had expected there was an access point to the ventilation system there. However, the hole covered by the grill was too small even for someone as slender as her to fit through and the gap between the console and the wall was also too narrow. Obviously it had been intended for any maintenance work necessary to be carried out by compact droids such as the ubiquitous mouse droids that were common throughout the Imperial armed forces.

"Are they all like this do you think?" Erranes asked.

"Probably commander. It would be odd for some vents to be like this but others larger." the technician answered.

"Well that's that idea out of the window." she said before she heard a brief cry of pain and she turned to see another of the fleet troopers hit and killed.

The incoming blaster fire unexpectedly ceased and with no visible targets or even sources of incoming fire to aim at the remaining fleet troopers also stopped shooting.

"Have they just gone?" the technician beside Erranes asked her and she quickly took out her comlink and tried activating it. However, once again the device just emitted a squealing sound.

"No, I think they're still out there." she replied and she looked around, "Do you think you can get any of these wall panels of? Floor or ceiling would do as well."

"Wall panels?" the technician commented.

"We can't leave via any of the doors or through the vents so we're going to have to make our own way out of here." she said before there was a shout from one of the corridors outside the command centre.

"Lay down your weapons and we'll accept your surrender." Okyn yelled and several of the technicians looked at Erranes to see how she would react.

"Commander they haven't even tried to rush us. They might not have much strength." one of the fleet troopers commented.

With two fleet troopers already dead, including the squad leader who knew more about small unit tactics than Erranes did she knew that her team was at a significant disadvantage. Of course the longer they could hold out the more likely it would be that the *Sword of Justice* would realise that they could not be contacted and send a relief force. However, even though such a force could already be on its way Erranes could not bring herself to take that chance and risk the lives of the rest of her team.

"You've got one minute and then we use grenades." Okyn called out as Erranes thought. This was a bluff but he was gambling that Erranes would not put him to the test.

"What guarantee do we have you won't just kill us?" Erranes responded.

"None but I guarantee you'll all die if you don't surrender." Okyn said and Erranes considered the threat briefly, "Thirty seconds." Okyn added as she continued to delay.

"Okay we'll surrender. We're putting our weapons down." Erranes called out. Then she looked around at her team and added, "If you have a weapon then put it down. Everyone with a comlink or datapad should do a security reset. There's no sense in giving them access to our communication or data networks."

Erranes and the other members of her team quickly disabled their devices while the fleet troopers ejected power cells from their blasters before setting them down on the floor. Then Erranes slowly got to her feet and looked towards the doorway that Okyn had shouted through. Raising her hands she then walked slowly towards it.

"Line up! Hands on your heads!" Okyn barked and Erranes looked around and nodded. Then as she placed her hands on her head the rest of her team emerged and joined her, forming a line extending to one side of her. At the same time their attackers finally revealed themselves. All of them were dressed in dark clothing that differed from one individual to another enough that it did not look like a uniform. One common feature though was that every one of the attackers wore a mask that covered most of their features, leaving only their eyes visible. This made it impossible to identify their species but it was still obvious from the basic size and shape of their bodies that they were all either human or very similar species and from their size and the way that they moved all of them appeared to be male.

Still wearing his mask, Okyn walked up to Erranes while most of the rest of his force surrounded her team and the final few began to investigate the bodies as well as collecting up the devices that had been discarded. Okyn looked along the line of Imperial personnel and then looked Erranes directly in the face.

"Your uniforms," he said, "we need them. Take them off."

"What?" Erranes responded, "No chance."

"We're going to take your uniforms lieutenant commander." Okyn said, reading Erranes' rank from the badge on her chest, "So you can either hand them over or we can stun you and just take them and trust me if we have to do that then we won't stop with just taking your uniforms. We'll take everything." and as if to make his point he reached out and plucked the glasses from Erranes' face before casually tossing them aside.

Erranes scowled and sighed at the threat but she suspected that Okyn was being serious.

"Very well. If we must." she said and, despite her reluctance to undress even just to her underwear in front of not only a group of masked men but also enlisted men from her own ship she began to disrobe.

The rest of Erranes' team followed suit and before long they were stood in just their underwear while their uniforms were collected up by Okyn's troops.

"Bind them." Okyn ordered and his troops promptly began to bind the Imperial team's wrists behind their backs with plastic ties. The ties were not designed as restraints and although strong they dug into the wrists of the crewmen, many of whom winced as they were pulled tight.

“So now what?” Erranes asked but Okyn did not respond. Instead he simply swung the butt of his rifle as hard as he could so that it struck her in her abdomen. The pain of this strike made Erranes double over and with her hands bound behind her back she overbalanced and collapsed. Leaving Erranes lying on the floor sobbing and gasping for breath Okyn moved along the line and struck each member of the team in the same way, causing them to collapse as well. Some attempted to evade the blow but were prevented from doing so by Okyn’s troops holding them in place and before long all of the team were lying on the floor, doubled up in pain.

“Shut down the jamming.” Okyn ordered, “Get hoods on this lot so we can take them back and then let Tasus know that we have the prisoners he wants.”

5.

"Here you go captain. This is the inventory of the parts we recovered in our first run." Ventern said as he handed his datapad to Kain on the bridge of the *Sword of Justice*.

"Did you get the power couplings we need?" Coroll asked while Kain started to scroll through the list of parts.

"I made sure they were in the first crate I loaded onto one of our repulsor sleds." Ventern replied, nodding, "I've got a team installing it now. It will mean that our engines will be offline for about an hour though."

"I don't see that as a problem lieutenant." Kain said, "How much more do you think there is to be brought aboard?"

"I think we got about a quarter of what's in that hold and there could be three or four more holds to go through captain. We'll need to take some of our loading droids with us though. It looks like all the droids were taken when the station was abandoned." Ventern said.

"That raises the question about what our pilots saw moving about in module six." Coroll pointed out and Kain looked down into one of the crew pits.

"Has Lieutenant Commander Erranes checked in yet?" he asked.

"No captain. We haven't heard from her for almost an hour now." one of the crewmen in the pit replied.

"Get her on the line. I want to know what she's found." Kain ordered.

"Yes sir." the crewman replied but a moment later he looked up at Kain again and added, "I can't establish a connection to Lieutenant Commander Erranes' comlink."

"Try the other members of her team. Just find me someone to talk to." Kain said and the crewman began to try contacting other members of Erranes' team, starting with the leader of the fleet trooper squad.

"I'm sorry captain none of Lieutenant Commander Erranes' team are responding." he said.

"Confirm the connections." Coroll said.

"Negative commander, all of their comlinks are offline." the crewman said.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this captain." Coroll said and Kain nodded in agreement.

"Me too." he replied.

"Perhaps it's time to let Lieutenant Krostas off the leash captain." Ventern suggested.

"I think so. Is he back on board?" Kain said.

"I left him and most of his platoon in the hold with the remaining parts captain." Ventern said.

"In that case take another stormtrooper platoon with you back to the hold for protection. Lieutenant Krostas is to take his platoon to the command centre and find out why Commander Erranes and her team aren't responding. If they can't establish contact with us from there then they are withdraw and report in person." Kain ordered.

Most of the stormtroopers deployed to secure the *Sword of Justice's* prow airlock were still aboard the star destroyer but two full squads had crossed to Inferno Station and deployed to cover the corridors that led away from it and it was one of these fire teams that first became aware of an approaching group of people from the sound of their footsteps.

"Contact right." the team leader reported, the comlink built into his armour passing the message to the rest of the stormtrooper force as well as Embrance who was still aboard the *Sword of Justice* with the bulk of the force.

"Can you identify them?" she asked.

"Negative agent. No visual contact yet." the stormtrooper told her.

"I'm on my way." Embrance said and she hurried from inside the *Sword of Justice* to Inferno Station. Here the stormtroopers had raised their weapons in anticipation of a target appearing but when the people whose footsteps they had heard came into view they saw that they were all wearing Imperial uniforms. Some were standing up by themselves while others

"Technicians and fleet troopers. They're from Lieutenant Commander Erranes' team." Embrance said. The stormtroopers continued to hold their weapons ready as the apparent fleet troopers and technicians hurried towards them and Embrance saw that there was no sign of Erranes among them, "Where's Lieutenant Commander Erranes?" she called out.

"We got separated. There was an ambush." one of the men in a fleet trooper uniform responded, "We took casualties so we came back here to get them to the infirmary."

Embrance nodded but beside her one of the stormtroopers spoke quietly.

"Agent Embrance I don't recognise any of those troopers." he said and Embrance moved her hand towards the blaster holstered on her waist. On a warship with a crew numbering in the thousands it would be unusual for any member of the crew to be able to recognise every other one by sight but in the specific case of the

ship's complement of fleet troopers, the stormtroopers trained with them enough that there was a much greater chance of them being able to recognise them.

"Who are you?" Embrace shouted towards the approaching group of men and the man in the fleet trooper's uniform in particular, "What's your operating number?"

"I'm Trooper Ferris." the man told her but he made no mention of his operating number and Embrace drew her weapon.

"Stay where you are." she ordered.

"We have injured. We need to get them medical attention immediately." the man calling himself Ferris said.

At the same time the stormtrooper beside Embrace was speaking into the comlink built into his armour and although she could not hear what he was saying it became clear when more stormtroopers emerged from the *Sword of Justice*, including two armed with light repeating blasters. This additional squad remained further back than the existing fire team, keeping out of sight of the approaching group but ready to respond at a moment's notice. All of a sudden Embrace's comlink sounded and she took it from her pocket.

"Embrace." she said.

"Agent Embrace what's going on down there? We just overheard a stormtrooper calling for back up." Kain said.

"We have a group approaching that claim to be part of Lieutenant Commander Erranes' team. They are wearing Imperial uniforms but they have not been able to provide positive identification yet. The leader claims to be a Trooper Ferris." Embrace told him.

"There was a Ferris on Erranes' team. Has he given you his operating number?" Kain asked.

"No captain, just his name." Embrace answered.

"Agent we've lost contact with Lieutenant Commander Erranes' team entirely. This could be a trick of some kind. Tell them to hold their position until we can confirm their identity." Kain ordered.

"I've done that captain. They say they have injured that we need to get to the infirmary." Embrace said.

"I'll tell Doc to send a medical team to you. Those people are not to be allowed aboard until we know for sure who they are." Kain replied.

"And get out of the way." Coroll added, "Let the stormtroopers do their job."

"Understood." Embrace said before she shut off the comlink and returned it to her pocket. Then she looked along the corridor again and called out, "Stay right there. Come no closer. A medical team is on its way."

"We have seriously wounded. We need to get them into a bacta tank right now." Ferris responded and as his group continued to advance Embrace started to retreat.

"Stand to." she ordered and the stormtroopers who had remained concealed now revealed their presence by taking up firing positions and pointing their weapons along the corridor.

The approaching men immediately realised that they would not be allowed to enter the star destroyer unopposed and they dived to the sides of the corridor, even those supposedly injured suddenly showing themselves to be perfectly healthy. The men dressed as fleet troopers drew their blasters while those in the uniforms of technicians also produced smaller blasters from within their overalls.

Almost in unison the stormtroopers and the group of infiltrators opened fire on one another and the corridor was filled with bright red flashes of blaster fire. One of the stormtroopers and two men disguised as technicians were hit almost immediately and as they fell to the floor the firing continued.

A man dressed in a fleet trooper's uniform produced a grenade and he hurled this towards the stormtroopers. The explosive bounced off a bulkhead before it exploded between the two opposing groups and the corridor was briefly blocked by a cloud of smoke and shrapnel. This did nothing to disrupt the aim of the stormtroopers though, the targeting system built into their helmets able to penetrate the smoke.

"Advance." a stormtrooper with a squad leader's pauldron on his shoulder ordered and while their opponents' vision was obscured the white armoured marines pushed forwards while maintaining their fire. This accounted for two more of the insurgents but as the cloud of smoke began to thin they were able to pick out the movement and another stormtrooper was hit as well. The infiltrators were definitely on the defensive now, with the heavily armed stormtroopers outnumbering and outgunning them and the man using the name Ferris decided that their position was now untenable.

"Fall back!" he yelled and he started to retreat while still laying down fire.

His men followed the order and began to fall back while the stormtroopers advanced along the corridor. Upon seeing this the stormtrooper squad leader brought his men to a halt and they ceased fire while they took cover.

"Surrender!" he shouted but the infiltrators continued to try and withdraw so the squad leader opted for the only other option for preventing their escape, "Open fire." he ordered and the stormtroopers opened fire again. This time the infiltrators were caught out in the open and the volley of blaster fire cut through them easily. More than half of those that had remained when they began to retreat fell right away and for the rest their attempt to withdraw in an orderly fashion turned into a rout.

Fleeing without any sense of co-operation turned the men trying to escape into easy targets and the stormtroopers fired their blasters repeatedly while only a handful of randomly directed shots came back at

them and not one of the infiltrators made it to the safety of the junction that would have got them out of the line of fire.

“Clear!” the stormtrooper squad leader called out when the last of the infiltrators was lying on the floor, “Check them out. Secure weapons and check for survivors.”

The stormtroopers immediately moved forwards, still keeping their weapons held at the ready as a precaution against any of the supposedly dead men being very much alive and waiting to spring an ambush. At the same time Embrace began to advance as well, also with her blaster in her hand.

“If there are survivors then I want them taken into custody and given first aid. They can’t answer questions if they’re dead.” she ordered.

“Yes ma’am.” the stormtrooper squad leader replied while his men picked their way among the bodies, checking each one in turn. As well as looking for signs of life the stormtroopers conducted searches for weapons and communication and data devices that could provide clues to their identities or lead to any other accomplices.

The man dressed as a fleet trooper and using the name Ferris had a comlink in one of his pockets and the stormtrooper who searched his corpse held it up.

“Comlink.” he announced and Embrace hurried towards him to inspect it for herself, “It looks like an older model.” the stormtrooper added as he handed the device to her and she nodded in agreement.

“Yes it is. Clone Wars vintage I’d say, Confederate issue.” she said. Then she looked at the stormtrooper and added, “Anything else trooper?”

“Just the uniform ma’am.” he responded, “That looks real to me.”

“Which means that he probably took it from the real Trooper Ferris.” Embrace said.

“The only damage is from where we shot him. Ferris was probably alive when it was taken from him.” the stormtrooper commented.

“Or they killed him in a way that didn’t damage his uniform.” Embrace pointed out before another stormtrooper called out.

“I’ve got a live one over here!” he shouted and Embrace looked towards him.

“I’m coming.” she replied before she hurried down the corridor to see the living infiltrator.

Despite being alive the man in a technician’s uniform had been hit more than once and the energy of the blaster bolts had burned him severely.

“I think I can stabilise him but there could be internal damage.” the stormtrooper told Embrace.

“Just make sure he doesn’t die before we can get him to the infirmary.” she said as she took out her own comlink again, “The medical droids can make sure he won’t die until he tells me everything.”

6.

"You have a prisoner?" Kain said when Embrace contacted the *Sword of Justice's* bridge to tell him about the surviving enemy soldier.

"Yes captain. He was wearing the uniform of one of our technicians. All of the uniforms being worn by the enemy look to be genuine so they must have taken them from Lieutenant Commander Erranes' team." Embrace said, "His condition has been stabilised for now but his injuries look serious."

"Okay I'll send a medical team to pick him up and then I'll meet you in the infirmary." Kain told her before he closed the channel.

"You know if they got Maye's team then they probably have her as well." Coroll said and Kain nodded.

"I know, I just don't want to think about that." Kain replied. Then a moment later he added, "But that doesn't mean to say that I'm going to give your girlfriend free reign to torture that prisoner. Now I'm going down to the infirmary. The bridge is yours while I'm gone. Contact the infirmary, tell them I'm on my way and to send a team to pick up the prisoner."

Kain made his way to the nearest turbolift and let it take him down the tower assembly to the ship's infirmary. The *Sword of Justice* had no organic medical staff, instead all of them were droids and the chief medical officer was a 2-1B droid known informally as 'Doc'.

"Good afternoon captain. I take it that you are here about the prisoner." the droid said when Kain entered the infirmary and Kain nodded.

"Yes, I want to observe his treatment. He needs to be able to answer questions and time is an important factor. We have crew missing and he's the only lead we have to getting them back safely." he said.

"I understand captain. However, my programming requires me to act in the interests of a patient. I cannot take part in an interrogation." Doc reminded Kain.

"Don't worry, I know and I'm not about to let anyone be tortured." Kain said.

"Captain I am receiving a signal from the units sent to recover the patient." Doc said. One of the benefits of using droids for a medical staff was their ability to instantly share data wirelessly, providing the treatment droids in the infirmary with an assessment of a patient's condition before they arrived.

"Is he still alive?" Kain asked.

"Yes captain. The patient is alive but currently unconscious. He has suffered serious burns to his face and torso. If left untreated then I would assess an eighty percent chance that he would die within seventy-two hours." Doc answered.

"And if treated?" Kain added.

"The burns are deep and tissue damage is significant. The initial assessment suggests that the patient will require extensive bacta regeneration plus a prosthetic replacement for his right eye." Doc said.

"And how long before he can answer questions?"

"That will depend on the exact extent of his injuries captain. There is a chance that he will require full regeneration before being able to communicate." Doc said.

"Okay, well just do what you can. I'll wait here while you carry out your examination and see what you have to say after that." Kain said before he walked towards a chair positioned at the side of the room and sat down.

Kain did not need to wait long for the droids sent to collect the injured prisoner to arrive in the infirmary. Two of the droids were of humanoid construction with obvious probes and sensors built into their forearms and heads while the third was a flat slab that moved around on a repulsorlift field and was intended to act as a stretcher with a padded upper surface that included more sensors for determining the nature and extent of the injuries to the patient being carried. Behind them came a security detail of stormtroopers and Agent Embrace, keeping close enough to be able to watch the prisoner carefully but still maintaining enough of a distance

"Bring the patient over here." Doc said when the droid entered the infirmary and the stretcher droid turned towards him while the two first aid units instead headed for their charging positions at the far side of the room.

Embrace also accompanied the stretcher droid while Kain got up to join her. On the other hand the stormtrooper escort remained by the entrance.

"So what's his condition Doc?" Kain asked as the droid conducted a more thorough scan than the first aid droids had been able to carry out.

"As the initial scans indicated this man has suffered severe burns from the effect of blaster fire." the medical droid responded, "As anticipated all function in the right eye has been lost. The nerves behind are intact so the installation of a prosthetic is possible. I am also concerned about damage to the respiratory system. The

right lung has suffered damage from the penetrating heat. The damaged tissue will have to be surgically excised before being regenerated." Doc explained.

"How long will all that take?" Embrance said.

"The fitted of the prosthetic will take the longest time." Doc responded but Embrance just sighed.

"I'm not interested in cybernetic eyeballs. I just want him in an interrogation room as soon as possible. I don't care about how comfortable he is."

"I have already explained to Captain Kain that my programming requires me to protect the well being of my patients and that I cannot be a participant in their mistreatment." Doc said and Embrance glared at the droid angrily.

"And what if I just shut you off?" she said sternly.

"Then I would be unable to carry out my duties." Doc answered.

"Nobody is shutting down our chief medical droid." Kain announced before looking at Doc, "Doc I do want this man ready to answer some civilised questions as soon as possible. Make sure his injuries are stabilised and provide an IV for painkillers." he continued before he turned and started to walk away.

"Captain I don't think-" Embrance began.

"Agent Embrance with me." Kain interrupted, not bothering to turn around and she hurried after him.

"Captain I don't think-" she repeated when they were in the corridor outside the infirmary and heading towards the turbolifts that would take them back to the bridge. However, once again Kain did not give her the chance to finish.

"I know what your opinion is Agent Embrance but I'm telling you exactly what is going to happen. Firstly Doc will treat that man lying on that bed in the infirmary. He will make sure that he isn't just about to die on us and then we'll put him in an interrogation room and question him about Lieutenant Commander Erranes and the rest of our missing people. What we will not do is use anything that could be considered torture." he said.

"Does that include not withholding pain medication captain? I noticed you specifically asked for him to be provided with that." Embrance commented.

"Of course I did Agent Embrance and no, you are not to withhold it. Just the opposite in fact." Kain replied.

"What?" Embrance said, frowning.

"I mean that if he won't answer questions then the dosage of his pain killing medication should be increased slightly. Not to a lethal dose of course, just enough so he can feel the difference and his body will react to it." Kain said.

"I don't understand captain." Embrance said and Kain smiled.

"No, I don't suppose overseeing the medical treatment of the people you deal with is of much concern to you agent so let me explain. Have you ever been around someone hooked up to an IV delivering pain killers?" he said and Embrance shook her head.

"No captain." she replied.

"Well let me tell you that the standard drug used by the Navy and I think all the other branches of Imperial service is pretty potent stuff and very efficient. Even a small dose will desensitise you to crippling pain and that comes with some equally potent side effects. For example you tend to say whatever pops into your head to whoever is stood right beside you no matter how inappropriate it may be." Kain said and Embrance's frown turned into a smile.

"And since when your asked a question that you know the correct answer to that answer will be the first thing you think of he'll tell us everything." she said.

"Now you get it agent, maybe there's hope for you yet. Of course by giving him more than the advised dose we risk giving him an addiction problem but frankly that's something I can live with." Kain told her.

Erranes concerns about what her captors had intended to do with her had grown the moment that she had been ordered to remove her outer clothing and these became even worse when her wrists were bound behind her back and a stale smelling hood pulled over her head. However, after she and the other surviving members of her team had been led through what seemed like a random path of twists and turns with only the occasional shove and shout to direct them as they stumbled blindly onwards she heard something that put her mind slightly at ease.

"Okyn is back with the prisoners." she heard what sounded like a woman's voice call out and she hoped that the presence of women among the group would temper the worst instincts that an all male criminal group may have towards a female captive.

"The assault team's already gone in." Okyn told the woman who had been on lookout, "We've got all the spare uniforms and their other gear with us."

"Okay put the prisoners in lock up and get their stuff to our tech boys." the woman responded.

"They'll have their work cut out for them." Okyn said, "This lot were able to secure everything before they surrendered. Their officer might know something useful though."

"There was an officer with them?" the woman asked and pointed at Erranes.

"The woman." he said, "Her uniform is in the bag with the others. She's a lieutenant commander."

"A lieutenant commander eh? Well I think Tasus will want to question her personally." the woman said.

"Yes I think he'd enjoy that. I'll get her to him now." Okyn said and a moment later Erranes felt a hand grab her by the arm, "Okay lady, this way." he told her.

"I am an officer of His Imperial Majesty's Navy." Erranes said from under her hood, "I demand that you release me and my men immediately."

This just provoked a laugh from a number of the people around Erranes who found the idea of a bound and blindfolded woman in her underwear daring to try and make demands of them highly amusing. Okyn dragged Erranes through several doorways that she heard open and close before they finally reached where he was taking her to.

"Sit." he told her sternly, pushing Erranes to the floor and she felt a vertical pipe close by, guessing that Okyn intended to secure her to it. Sure enough she heard the sound of another plastic tie being fastened as he wrapped it around the pipe. Then the back of her head was pushed against the pipe and Erranes felt another tie being wrapped around her neck.

"No!" she exclaimed.

"I wouldn't struggle if I were you." Okyn warned her, "I don't have any cutters for these ties and if I get this too tight you'll choke before I can do anything to stop it."

Erranes doubted that having her choke to death would be in Okyn's best interests in the short term but being choked to death was not something Erranes was willing to risk just to cause him some inconvenience. The plastic tie was still pulled fairly tight, forcing Erranes to keep the back of her head and neck right up against the pipe while her bound arms were then caught between her body and the pipe. She guessed that this had been done deliberately to prevent her from getting into a comfortable position, especially since the tie around her neck made any attempt to move difficult at best. As a final touch Okyn grabbed hold of Erranes' ankles one at a time and bound them together with another pair of plastic ties, rendering her almost totally immobile.

"You can't keep me like this forever." she said defiantly.

"I don't need to." Okyn replied, "But you'll stay here until you've told us everything we need to know."

"And then what? You'll kill me?" Erranes said.

"That depends on whether you can give us a reason to want to keep you around." Okyn said before Erranes suddenly felt his hand on her thigh and he added, "Of course I can think of a way you could convince me." Erranes squirmed at the thought of this, only to have the tie around her neck press against her and while she spluttered and coughed Okyn began to laugh as he stood up and walked away.

After leaving Erranes alone Okyn went to find Tasus, finding him in the tiny control room and watching the bank of monitors.

"The assault on the star destroyer failed." Tasus said when he became aware of Okyn, "They didn't even manage to get aboard. Worryingly our surveillance suggests that one of the assault team was taken alive. He was injured so he may not be alive for much longer but the crew of that ship may be questioning him already."

"We still have prisoners of our own." Okyn reminded him, "Were you told who they are?"

"No, just that you managed to take them." Tasus said.

"One of them is an officer, a lieutenant commander." Okyn told him and Tasus turned around, smiling.

"Really? A lieutenant commander." he said.

"Yes, I don't know if she's the star destroyer's first officer or not but I've separated her from the others." Okyn said.

"Her"? The officer is a woman?" Tasus commented and Okyn nodded.

"She is. Don't worry, no-one's taken advantage of her. She's been treated exactly the same as the male prisoners. I just left her tied up in the old computer room by the guard room. I figured that's the best place to keep her."

"Is she blindfolded?" Tasus asked and Okyn nodded.

"Yes, all the prisoners were hooded so they wouldn't be able to see where we were taking them. She's still got hers on." he said.

"Good. I think we'll leave her to sweat on her own for a while yet. Let her imagine what's in store for her before I finally question her." Tasus said.

"Of course sir." Okyn replied.

"In the meantime I want you to review our defences again. If the Imperials do find out where we are we may need to defend ourselves." Tasus said.

7.

“Just give the word captain and my stormtroopers will tear this station apart. We’ll get Lieutenant Commander Erranes and her people back.” Krostas said when Kain contacted him to bring him up to date with the situation.

“And in the process you could get them all killed lieutenant.” Kain pointed out, “Until we can determine exactly where they are being held a mass search and destroy operation could just tip our hand to the other side. We have one of them in custody and even if he doesn’t know exactly where our people are being held he will probably have some idea. Until then I need you and your men to keep providing protection for our engineers while they transfer spare parts from *Inferno Station* to the ship.”

“Yes captain. As you wish.” Krostas said before Kain closed the channel.

“You know there is something to be said for a large scale deployment to the station captain.” Coroll commented, “We can deny control of large tracts of the station to the enemy. At least deploy forces to secure the main command centre and power plant.”

“Sending Erranes and her team to the command centre was how they were ambushed and they were protected by a squad of our fleet troopers. Obviously the enemy knows enough about this station to be able to organise an assault against professional soldiers. I want all our troops ready for immediate deployment but none of them are to go anywhere just yet. I also want an assault shuttle prepared. If the enemy are located close to the outer hull then we may be able to gain the element of surprise by hitting them from outside.” Kain said and Coroll smiled.

“I like it captain. I’ll lead the assault team of course.” he said but Kain shook his head.

“Sorry commander but I’ll be taking that role.” he said.

“Captain your place is here on the bridge commanding the *Sword*.” Coroll told him.

“My place is wherever I see fit and I want to be on hand to oversee the assault. Don’t worry I won’t be leading the charge or anything like that. Neither of us are marines so no matter which one of us took charge we’d be stuck at the rear.” Kain replied.

All of the devices recovered from the bodies of the infiltrators were laid out on a long bench while the uniforms that had been removed from them were in piles along a different bench. Ventern walked along the bench of equipment, pausing every now and again to study a particular device more closely before returning it to the spot he had taken it from.

“Do you see anything significant Lieutenant Ventern?” Embrance asked as she watched him.

“Not really. Some of the weapons are ours of course, taken from Erranes’ team obviously.” Ventern answered without looking around at her, “The rest is considerably out of date. I’d say that nothing is less than about ten years old.”

“So these criminals could have been aboard *Inferno Station* for that long.” Embrance said and Ventern paused, then nodded.

“Yes, that sounds possible. None of the older equipment is Republic or Imperial issue but some of it was used by planetary forces. More was separatist issue as well.” he said.

“Lieutenant, are you suggesting that we’re facing a group of separatist holdouts?” Embrance asked, knowing that although the official position of the Empire was that no such holdouts still existed, being the agent to expose one and bring its members to justice would benefit her career greatly.

“No, I’m not saying anything like that, but I’m not saying that they aren’t either. All I’m saying is that they have some equipment that was used by Confederate forces but that could have been bought off the open market. The members of the Confederacy did sell their products widely before the war after all and pretty much everything their forces had that wasn’t a weapon of mass destruction was sold off after the war to pay for reconstruction.” Ventern said.

“I assume that you at least have the skill to examine the comlinks and datapads for any useful information lieutenant. Or will you also be as vague about that?” Embrance said in irritation.

“Don’t worry Agent Embrance, my people and I know what we are doing. Captain Kain has already asked me to examine all of the internal files of the devices. He thinks we might be able to use them to determine what communication frequencies and protocols these people are using and maybe information about their strength and deployment from the datapads and memory devices. Their identity is something else that he is interested in of course.” Ventern replied.

“How long do you expect that will take?” Embrance said and Ventern looked at the bench full of devices again, considering how long testing each one would take.

"About four or five hours maybe. Less if I can be supplied with access codes for them. Maybe you should think about asking that question to the prisoner." he told her eventually.

"Lieutenant I want a full copy of all of your findings.." Embrace said.

"I'm sure that the captain will provide you with-" Ventern began.

"Lieutenant I don't want to wait for whatever pieces of information Captain Kain choses to disclose to me. I want, no, I need the full raw data." Embrace interrupted. She had no authority to order Ventern to turn over anything of course, but she did have sufficient security clearance to receive the information and she hoped that Ventern would agree to her request.

"As you wish agent Embrace. I'll make sure that you get everything directly." Ventern replied.

"Very good lieutenant. I'll let you get on." Embrace said with a smile.

Erranes flinched when she heard the door to the compartment she was being held in open and she spluttered again as the cable tie around her neck dug into it again because of the movement.

"Hello lieutenant commander." Tasus said and Erranes instinctively turned her head towards the source of the voice, again feeling the cable tie around her neck press against her. For a moment she wondered how much her captor might know about her but then she remembered that her rank would have been obvious from the badge on her uniform, "Please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Doctor Tasus and I am the leader of this little community. Now perhaps you'd like to tell me who you are." he added.

"Erranes. Lieutenant commander. Operating number isk dorn-" Erranes began.

"Oh enough of that!" Tasus snapped at her, "I want to know the person I'm speaking to. Assuming you are a person at all and not some human looking thing churned out by the brainwashing process of the Imperial Naval Academy system."

"The Empire doesn't brainwash people." Erranes replied and although thanks to the bag that still covered her head she could not see the expression on Tasus' face he smiled.

"Ah the denial of the obvious." he said, "Young lady let me tell you something of the history of my people. All we have ever wanted was to be able to get on with our lives without being told what to do or being forced to hand over the produce of our labours to a distant government that we have no say in. We tried relocating on our world, moving away from the cities and into the wilderness where there was no-one for hundreds of kilometres but still your Empire came after. Our only choice was to flee our homeworld but even then the reach of the Empire was long and all the worlds we hoped would welcome us were no different to our own. That's when we looked further afield. Fortunately for us one of our number had heard of this place and we were able to track it down. We've been here for a decade now just keeping to ourselves but yet again here you are to drive us out."

"We didn't-" Erranes began before she realised that Tasus' speech may have been intended purely to generate sympathy and trick her into revealing information about herself or the *Sword of Justice*, "Erranes. Lieutenant commander. Operating-"

"I don't care about any of that Lieutenant Commander Erranes." Tasus interrupted, "All that interests me is getting my people out of here safely. For now that means that you and your people will be our hostages to make sure that your captain doesn't order an armed assault against us and then to guarantee that our transport is not shot down when we leave. We'll find somewhere to leave you where you can make your way back to civilisation of course. We have no interest in keeping you prisoner indefinitely and I really don't want to harm any of you."

"Tell that to the families of the men your troops murdered." Erranes said.

"Murder? This is our home and you invaded it lieutenant commander. That means we have to defend ourselves and despite my reluctance to use force I will if I have to. Now are you going to co-operate or not?" Tasus responded.

Erranes hesitated, considering how to respond. One thing she was sure of though was that she had no intention of giving her captors any information.

"Erranes. Lieutenant commander." she began before she heard Tasus turn and start to walk away. She hoped that this meant he was frustrated enough that he was going to leave her alone again but when she heard the door open again he spoke to someone just outside.

"Come on in. Unfortunately our guest is being stubborn. Perhaps you can convince her to be more reasonable." he said and Erranes heard someone else entering the room.

Erranes listened as the newcomer moved around the room, still unable to see what was going on. However, some of the sounds she heard hinted that two additional people had just entered the room rather than just one and while one walked over to stand beside her the other headed to a different part of the room. The presence of someone looming over her while she remained bound and helpless in her underwear made Erranes nervous about their intentions, especially considering what Okyn had said to her but then she heard something that took her by surprise and confused her more.

The sound was of water or some similar liquid running from a tap into a container, the duration of the sound suggesting that the container was large. Then when it stopped she heard the other newcomer walking towards her.

"This is your last chance to co-operate Lieutenant Commander Erranes." Tasus said but Erranes did not reply, "Continue." Tasus told the two newcomers.

"Hold her head back." the man holding the container told his comrade and Erranes suddenly felt her head being grabbed firmly and tilted backwards. The man holding her was not concerned with the cable tie around her neck and again she felt this dig into her. It was not his intention to strangle Erranes however, only to align her head looking upwards so that when the other man started to pour out the water from the container he was holding it came down over her face.

The water soaked into the hood Erranes still wore, sealing the fabric against her face while also blocking the holes in the weave. The combination of this suddenly left Erranes unable to breathe and she began to struggle violently. The cable ties binding her dug into her flesh as she did this but the pain was secondary to the panic induced by the sensation of suffocating.

"Enough." Tasus said after what seemed to Erranes like an eternity and the flow of water ceased.

The water already poured onto the hood still prevented Erranes from breathing and she continued to struggle until all of a sudden the hood was pulled from over her head. The room she was being held in was brightly lit and the sudden change from the pitch blackness of being blindfolded made Erranes blink despite being more focused on drawing in breath, gasping for air.

"I'm sorry that we have to do this Lieutenant Commander Erranes but your stubbornness made it necessary."

Tasus said while Erranes continued to try and catch her breath again and adjust to the light. She looked up at her captor and tried to focus on his face but without her glasses everything appeared blurred, "My only concern is the well being of my people and if that means making you a little uncomfortable then I'm afraid that's a price I'm willing to pay."

"By suffocating me to death? I thought you said you weren't going to harm me or my people." Erranes responded hoarsely after the cable tie digging into her neck as she struggled.

"Oh you were never in any real danger. I understand that the process makes a being feel as if they are drowning but the effect is temporary. As long as the covering over the face is removed of course." Tasus said, "Now I think you've had long enough to get your breath back so how about we go again? Or are you willing to answer a few simple questions?"

Erranes knew from her training that there were many ways of coercing information out of beings without resorting to the outright torture that organisations such as the Imperial Security Bureau were using with ever greater frequency but just because she knew that these methods were not supposed to inflict real injury did not mean that she wanted to be subjected to any of them.

"I won't do anything to compromise the safety of my ship or its crew." she said and Tasus smiled.

"And I'm not asking you to young lady. I just need a few basic bits of information so I know who I'm dealing with. Let's start with the name of your ship and its commanding officer." he said.

"The *Sword of Justice*, commanded by Captain Jarren Kain." Erranes answered.

"Very good. Now how long has this Captain Kain been an officer in the navy?" Tasus asked.

"He joined during the war." Erranes told him.

"Ah, so he swore an oath to the Republic Then perhaps he won't be the sort of closed minded fanatic the Empire is churning out of its academies." Tasus said before he looked at Erranes again and added, "And how would you describe your relationship with him? I've heard that some captains promote subordinates in exchange for-"

"We aren't sleeping together. We never have. He never would." Erranes interrupted.

"He never would?" one of the men standing behind her commented, "Have you offered-"

"No. Of course not. Is that why I've been stripped and tied up? So you can ask me about my sex life?" Erranes snapped angrily.

"I apologise for my subordinates Lieutenant Commander Erranes. All that interests me is your captain. I want to know what sort of person I will be negotiating with. I take it that he will negotiate for the lives of you and your men? Or are you expendable?" Tasus said.

"He'll talk to you but he won't surrender anything. The only point of negotiation will be your surrender." Erranes said.

"Well I hope for all our sakes that he can be persuaded to be more flexible than that." Tasus said before he turned his attention to one of the men standing behind Erranes, "Gag her." he ordered and before Erranes could protest a rubber ball was forced into her mouth and strapped in place. All Erranes could then do was watch as Tasus walked over to an intercom panel on the wall and activated it, "Okay I think I have what I need. Establish the link and tell them that I want to speak to Captain Jarren Kain." he said into the intercom.

8.

Kain, Coroll and Embrance were all stood around the command console at the rear of the *Sword of Justice's* bridge, studying the projected hologram of *Inferno Station* when a junior officer called out from one of the crew pits.

"Captain Kain there's a message coming through for you." he said and Kain and Coroll looked at one another.

"We got through the jamming?" Kain asked.

"No sir." the junior officer responded, "The signal is coming through one of the umbilical connections to *Inferno Station* but they are asking for you by name."

"Who's 'they' lieutenant?" Kain asked.

"I'm afraid I don't know sir. We can't trace the signal any further than the umbilical connection."

"It must be the terrorist occupying the station." Embrance said and Kain glared at her.

"Thank you Agent Embrance. It's good to know that the Imperial Security Bureau can supply me with information that is quite obvious." he said, "Thoughts?" he added, looking at Coroll again.

"It could be an attempt to establish a data link and slice into our network." Coroll suggested and Kain looked back at the junior comscan officer.

"Make sure our firewall is secure and then put them through." he ordered.

"Yes captain." the junior officer said and Kain saw on the console in front of him that the communication channel was now open.

"This is Captain Kain. Who am I speaking to?" he said.

"My name is not important Captain Jarren Kain." Tasus' voice responded, "What is important is that we both have something that the other wants."

"And what would that be?" Kain asked.

"I of course have your people and you have the power to permit my people to leave in peace." Tasus said.

"I want proof that my people are unhurt." Kain replied.

"Of course you do captain and I can show you that your first officer is perfectly safe." Tasus said and Coroll leant in close to him.

"It must be Erranes. They think she's your XO." he said and Kain nodded in agreement.

"Which means she hasn't given much away." he whispered back before responding to Tasus in a louder voice, "I want proof that Lieutenant Commander Erranes is alive and unharmed."

"And you are right to request such proof Captain Kain. Here, let me provide you with it. This is real time footage from the camera set up in this very room to monitor her." Tasus said.

"Captain we're receiving an addition data stream on the same channel. Do you want to let it through?" the junior officer in the crew pit called out.

"What does our security make of it?" Coroll asked.

"Security scans suggest it's just a video file with no active content sir." the junior officer answered.

"Let me see it then." Kain ordered and he looked down at a display on the console in front of him just as it activated to show an image of Erranes stripped to her underwear, bound and gagged. All of her captors had moved out of shot and there were no features in the background to give any indication of where the footage was being taken. The video lasted just a few seconds before ending, at which point the playback looped back to the beginning and repeated.

"The time stamp looks current captain." Coroll commented as he checked the data that came along with the video footage.

"That could be faked." Embrance pointed out, "Captain there is software that will replace time stamps while streaming accurately enough that you'd never know you were looking at an older recording."

"This proves nothing." Kain told Tasus, "I want to speak with Lieutenant Commander Erranes now. If she isn't on this channel in two minutes then I'm going to assume that you've murdered her and her entire team. I'll order my ship to disengage from the station and use our turbolasers to destroy it."

"I don't think you would captain. I've been told you're not the sort to waste lives." Tasus responded.

"You've not given me any proof that any of my people are alive over there and I'm well within my authority to destroy a pirate vessel." Kain said sternly. Then he looked around towards the crew pits and spoke again in a voice loud enough that that all of the bridge crew were able to hear as well as it being picked up by the microphone for the communication system, "Tell our engineering and security teams aboard the station to withdraw immediately." he said.

"Very well captain, I agree to your terms. You may speak to her." Tasus said and he beckoned for the other two men to bring Erranes to him. The cable tie around her neck was cut to release her from the pipe but her limbs remained bound as she was lifted and dragged towards the communications panel where Tasus stood. With her ankles bound so that they crossed Erranes could not easily stand on her own and the two guards continued to support her while Tasus looked her in the eye, "Be careful what you say my dear. It only takes a word or two to prove that you are alive." he whispered before loosening the gag enough to pull it from her mouth and let it hang around her neck instead. Then she felt a blaster pressed into her spine.

"Go on, talk." one of the men holding her ordered.

"Hello captain. It's me." Erranes said.

"Lieutenant commander are you okay?" Kain asked.

"I wouldn't say that I'm comfortable captain. Quite the opposite in fact." Erranes answered and she felt the blaster pressed against her spine jabbed in harder, "Although I think that this is one of those times when it makes you glad to be wearing clean and sensible underwear."

"Have your captors harmed you in any way? Or any of your team?" Kain said.

"Some of my team were killed before we were captured captain and since then I've been separated from them. Tasus has-" Erranes began before all of a sudden Tasus clamped his hand over her mouth and lifted the gag back into position before tightening it again.

"You've spoken to her now captain and you know that she is alive. My demands are very simple, even if you were to leave now it would only be a matter of time before more Imperial troops arrived to wipe my people out so the only solution is for us to evacuate. We have a ship but I need a guarantee of free and safe passage out of here. Of course we'll take your people with us to ensure that there are no last minute double crosses. We'll leave them where they can be found of course, but by that time we'll be safely out of the sector. You have one hour to make up your mind captain." Tasus said and then the channel went dead.

"Captain there's no way you can let them escape." Embrance said but Kain did not respond. Instead he began to access the *Sword of Justice's* computer records.

"Captain what are you doing?" Coroll asked.

"Checking the list of Confederate war criminals that are still unaccounted for." Kain answered.

"You think that these people are war criminals from the Clone Wars?" Coroll added.

"We know that not all of them were confirmed dead or captured." Embrance pointed out.

"As soon as Maye used the name 'Tasus' they shut her up and ended the call. I think that there's something about that name that is significant." Kain explained. Then he frowned.

"Something wrong captain?" Embrance said when she saw this expression.

"The name Tasus isn't listed here at all. More than three hundred names and Tasus isn't one of them as either a given or family name." Kain told her.

"He could still be a fugitive captain. Maybe we should check the Sector Rangers list." Coroll said.

"I have my own list of dissidents as well captain." Embrance added.

"I think we're dealing with more than just political malcontents agent, but check it anyway." Kain replied before he noticed Ventern enter the bridge and approach them, "Lieutenant, you have something?" he added.

"Captain I've been looking over the devices taken from the group that tried to gain access to the ship and I've found something interesting." the engineer answered and he held out one of the datapads that had been captured.

"Okay, so what am I looking at?" Kain asked.

"That datapad is Confederate issue captain. High level government issue. High enough that if it was captured by the Republic or early Empire forces then it would never have been sold off as surplus. It would have been taken apart until it could be proven that there was nothing else hidden inside." Ventern explained.

"I take it that the amount of dismantling would make it impractical to put back together again." Coroll commented.

"More like impossible commander. Internal elements of the processing components would have to be burned out to get around any built in security but the circuitry inside that device is perfectly intact. I've checked the basic ID files and that datapad was owned by the science ministry on Derjat." Ventern said.

"The Separatist capital in the sector during the war." Kain said and Ventern nodded.

"Exactly captain. They took their security pretty seriously so if that datapad is here now and operable then at least one person in the enemy force had a high level of security clearance there during the war." he said.

"Yet nothing showed up on the list of fugitives for the name Tasus." Embrance pointed out.

"Tasus?" Ventern said.

"Erranes' captors allowed us to speak with her briefly to confirm that she's still alive. She mentioned the name Tasus and they cut her off almost immediately. It must be significant but it's not on the Empire's list of outstanding fugitives from the war." Kain told him.

"Someone the Empire never found out about?" Ventern suggested but Embrance shook her head.

"No, we recovered all the Confederacy's records at the end of the war. We have full lists of everyone who

worked for them and spent a long time comparing their details to those of the dead.” she said and Kain smiled.

“But how did we know for certain that the dead were who we thought they were Agent Embrace?” he said.

“You mean this Tasus faked his own death?” Coroll said and Kain nodded.

“Exactly. What we need to check is the original list of fugitives from before the names of the dead were removed.” he said.

“But captain that list is more than a decade old.” Embrace said.

“So is the Sword of Justice agent.” Kain reminded her and he looked down at the console as he began to run a search on the files kept in the main computer, “This ship will have been given an original copy of the list that should still be in the computer. Later revisions will have been added rather than used to overwrite it. Isn’t that right lieutenant?”

“Yes captain. File deletion would only be considered if the computer’s file storage space was close to being filled and at the rate a ship like the *Sword* adds files that will take about fifty years.” Ventern said.

“And here it is.” Kain added when he found the earliest version of the fugitive list and opened it, “Now let’s see if we have a Tasus in here.” he added, entering the name into the search function and almost immediately the hologram of Inferno Station being shown above the console was replaced by one of Tasus as he had appeared at the end of the Clone Wars.

“Doctor Myn Tasus, Bureau of Medical Research.” Coroll said, reading the name shown along with the hologram.

“In other words a germ warfare specialist.” Embrace added.

“Not only that. Looking at this record it looks like he was more interested in surgery. The kind of surgery you carry out without anaesthetic.” Kain told her.

“I heard about the Confederacy running experiments on captured clones.” Ventern commented, “It was rumoured that they were looking for weaknesses that they could exploit.”

“You mean like by releasing a plague that was genetically engineered to affect only the clones while leaving everyone else unharmed?” Coroll suggested.

“That sort of thing, yes commander.” Ventern responded.

“Of course you’d design it so other beings could still be carriers. That way it would spread across the galaxy.” Embrace added.

“From this file it looks like he cut up more than just clones. I’m not surprised that the Empire wanted to get their hands on him.” Kain said, continuing to read the reports of Tasus’ activities during the war.

“And now he has his hands on Maye and the rest of her team.” Coroll said.

“Lieutenant Ventern we need a way to locate where this Tasus is holding our people. Do you have any suggestions?” Kain said.

“There might be something on one of the datapads we recovered but it could take some time to locate and access it.” Ventern said, “I think taking a look at their comlinks is a better idea. If we send a simple ‘ping’ on the frequencies they’re using then we might be able to establish a connection trace.”

“Why not send out the signal on our frequencies and see where the comlinks they took from our people are located? It would save time in trying to isolate the settings of the comlinks we captured.” Embrace said.

“Because they can just turn our comlinks off without disrupting their own operations and if they did leave any activated then it could just be to lure our troops into a trap.” Ventern replied.

“Okay lieutenant get started on trying to crack their communications. If you can find us a way to listen in to what they’re talking about then I’d rather have that, it could give us an idea about their plans to repel an attack. If not then just get us those frequencies and we’ll find out where they’re hiding.” Kain ordered.

“That was silly.” Tasus told Erranes as he pushed the gag back into her mouth, “I blame myself partially, I should have never used my name to begin with but what’s done is done and now we must both deal with the consequences. Of course that is going to be worse for your crew than me, you see I’ve gone to too much trouble to make myself and my people appear to be dead and I need to make sure that the galaxy continues to believe that is the case. The Empire doesn’t waste its time hunting dead people but if they know you’re alive they’ll never stop coming after you.” then he looked at the guards holding her and added, “Secure her again. We’ll need her and her men to make sure that the star destroyer doesn’t shoot us down when we leave but after that we can dispose of them all.”

Erranes tried to struggle as she was dragged back towards the pipe but she was helpless to prevent another bag being placed over her head to replace the original one that was too wet to be used as a blindfold without suffocating her. After this another cable tie was looped around her neck and while Tasus simply turned around and walked out of the room she was secured to the pipe by her throat again. The two guards followed him and once again Erranes was left alone in the room unable to move or see and now unable to call out. After abandoning Erranes, Tasus made his way to another small compartment where several of his followers were gathered together with a number of datapads that held various lists of equipment and resources.

"Doctor Tasus." one of them said when Tasus entered the room and Tasus looked at her.

"What's our status?" he asked.

"Our engineers say that the ship will be ready to launch in about an hour doctor. The problem is getting everything aboard. The larger-" the woman began.

"Well forget the heavy equipment. There's plenty of time to get the smaller modules on the transport." Tasus interrupted.

"That's going to mean leaving some pretty important equipment behind sir." one of the men in the room pointed out.

"Maybe so but what good will any of it do us if we can't even get away from here?" Tasus said, "All of the heaviest equipment is machinery we discovered here anyway, it's not anything we brought with us. We managed just fine without it before then. I'm sure there'll be room left over for some but we need to be careful to select only the most useful things. Oh, I also want to run some tests on our prisoners before we leave."

"What sort of tests?" the woman who had spoken first asked.

"Basic blood and genetic ones. My research has been hampered for a long time by the lack of test subjects. I think hanging onto a couple of the prisoners could be useful so I'd like to know which are the best ones to retain. We can hardly keep them all after all, rations may be tight for a while and I'm not wasting any more food than necessary on people who won't be working." Tasus said.

"Will you test the officer as well?" another man asked but Tasus shook his head.

"No, she wears corrective lenses for her eyesight and that makes her a flawed specimen. She can die with the others." he answered.

9.

Keeping communication signals from being intercepted and understood by an enemy had been an issue for militaries even before the creation of the Old Republic around twenty-five thousand years ago and in that time many different technologies had been developed to achieve it. Even during the thousand year period when military development came to a near total halt following the Ruusan Reformation that almost entirely demilitarised the Republic secure communications remained an important requirement for many government bodies and so that technology had continued to develop.

The comlinks carried by the group that had attempted to board the *Sword of Justice* were designed to send their data as quickly as possible, using frequencies that more mundane devices could not monitor and encrypting all data to make listening in on messages as difficult as possible. However, despite the numerous security features designed into them the comlinks were still the product of a previous generation of technology that had been superseded by the Empire and many of them had been captured and studied to gain an understanding of how they worked.

This meant that even though Ventern was not able to immediately activate one of the comlinks and start using it to monitor the communications of Tasus' men he did know how to dismantle one and which parts of the internal circuitry he needed to access in order to trigger the transmitter module. This would not broadcast any sort of understandable signal but it would trigger a response from any receiver in range and that was all Ventern needed to establish a connection trace and determine their location. He had the internal circuitry of the comlink he had dismantled laid out on a workbench, connected to an assortment of sensor probes as well as a computer terminal that was programmed to interface with it.

From close by an intercom panel sounded and Ventern reached out to activate it.

"Engineering. Ventern." he said.

"Lieutenant what's your status? The captain is getting impatient." Coroll's voice said.

"Captains are always impatient." Ventern replied, "But you may tell him that I'm ready to initiate the comlink pulses. I've set the system to broadcast a series of five quarter second pulses at varying intervals."

"Very good lieutenant. Comscan is on standby for a connection trace now. Commence broadcast." Coroll told him before he shut off the intercom.

Despite having been tasked with organising the group's defences Okyn was still able to help out with the packing of equipment that was to be loaded aboard their transport ship. Tasus' group had been well armed when they arrived on Inferno Station and although all of their small arms had now been distributed to group members there were more powerful weapons that were unsuitable for use aboard the station because of the risk of collateral damage but that could not be left behind just in case they were needed at a future date when the group had relocated. Okyn was making sure that each of these weapons was properly packed and accounted for when he heard a brief pulse of static from his comlink. Initially he thought nothing of this but then he heard another pulse that was rapidly followed by a third. Significantly though he also heard this same pulse of static coming from the comlink of a nearby sentry and he realised that this was no mundane interference being picked up at random.

"Turn off your comlinks! Everyone turn off all communication devices!" he shouted and he frantically pulled his comlink from his belt and deactivated it just as it was producing another brief blast of static. Then he broke into a run, heading for the compartment that Tasus used as his private office, "Is he in?" he asked the trio of people busy packing equipment in the adjoining compartment.

"Yes but he said not-" one of them began but Okyn ignored him, instead rushing to the door leading to Tasus' office and opening it.

"Doctor I'm sorry to interrupt you," Okyn said as he burst into the office and found Tasus working at a computer terminal, "but we may have a major problem."

"What's wrong?" Tasus asked and Okyn held up his comlink.

"I heard static pulses from my comlink and others sir." he said, "I think that the crew of that star destroyer are using a captured comlink to establish a connection trace."

Tasus' eyes widened when he heard this and he leapt up from his chair.

"Spread the word. Shut off all personal communication devices. Use the hardwired intercom only, we know that is secure." he said and Okyn nodded.

"I'll see to it right now." he said.

"Good. I'm going to go to the control centre. If the navy is trying to locate us then that means that they will most likely be planning an assault to free the prisoners and wipe us out." Tasus added and the two men rushed from his office.

While Okyn began spreading the word that all comlinks and other similar devices needed to be fully shut down to prevent them being used to establish the group's location Tasus ran to the group's control room where he found one of his followers dutifully monitoring the video feeds from the various security cameras that were scattered around *Inferno Station*.

"Doctor, how can I help you?" the man asked, looking over his shoulder at Tasus.

"Are there any indications that the Imperials are on the move?" Tasus asked.

"No doctor." the duty officer answered, "They pulled their personnel out of the hold area that one of their initial teams headed for but they just headed back in the direction of their own ship. None of them headed in our direction that I could see and our forward unit hasn't reported anything either."

"We think that they're preparing for an assault. I want you to monitor all our communication frequencies for signs of intrusion. Okyn is getting the word out that our comlinks aren't to be used. If anyone needs to contact someone who isn't close to an intercom they'll have to send a runner instead."

"Doctor perhaps we should seal some of the blast doors between here and the star destroyer. I can isolate this entire module if you want." the duty officer suggested.

"We need to keep a route open to our ship. How certain are you that the doors will work immediately?" Tasus responded.

"If we're just sealing one or two at a time then I can pretty much guarantee it but if you need me to operate any more than that then the system could overload. We just set the system up for damage control, we didn't expect to have to defend against an entire star destroyer full of troops. Okyn had me prepare a pattern of closures that would limit the ability of the Imperial troops to approach us from multiple directions. It would stop them bringing their numerical advantage to bear. I also suggested that we keep the doors closest to the star destroyer open and let some of its troops advance along routes that are blocked further ahead of them. Then we drop doors behind them and trap them until they can find a way to cut through. By the time they discover that they can't surround us I reckon that we can have several platoons trapped. We may even get lucky and catch a command unit. I've figured out the best pattern to use but I haven't been able to present it to him yet." the man sat at the control console told Tasus and he nodded.

"Do it." he said, "I'll tell Okyn to deploy our people to defend that approach but I want a clear route to the hangar maintained as well. If they do launch an attack then sooner or later the crew of that star destroyer will make it here and I want us to already be leaving by that point. We'll drop the last couple of blast doors along their route and leave them to have to cut through while we withdraw. I'll let Okyn know and he can deploy our troops accordingly."

"Yes sir, I'll start the process right away." the duty officer said and he called up the program that had been written to control the station's blast doors from their improvised control centre. Meanwhile Tasus turned around and left the room again, heading out to find Okyn and bring him up to date.

The holographic image of *Inferno Station* continued to be shown over the command console at the rear of the *Sword of Justice's* bridge while the connection trace was being run. With each pulse from the captured comlink circuitry though the image was updated as the star destroyer's sensors detected the minute energy fluctuations caused by the response of the communication devices carried by many members of Tasus' group. The position of each fluctuation was marked with a dot on the hologram and once the effects of all five pulses had been processed there was an obvious pattern.

"Module six. Right where our pilots spotted movement." Kain commented when he saw the largest cluster of dots in one section of just one of the outer modules. There were a handful of other returns as well that were scattered through other modules and the station core, including a small group quite close to where the *Sword of Justice* was docked but these accounted for less than a tenth of the total number of returns.

"It makes sense captain." Coroll replied, "That location is close to the main life support hub as well as the emergency reactors to keep life support operating if the main one needs to be shut down for any reason."

"That reactor will be able to power more than just life support too, especially if they limit it to just their little part of the station." Kain pointed out, "They'll be self sufficient for air and power."

"So no-one can just shut off either and let them freeze or suffocate." Embrance said.

"Given that they have a significant number of our people as hostages we couldn't do that anyway Agent Embrance." Kain said.

"Captain we have their location. Let me and Lieutenant Krostas take an assault team and we'll flush out these traitors." Embrance said.

"Like I said earlier agent, I'll be leading the assault team and it will happen on my timescale. Before we go rushing in all blasters blazing I think we should know more about what might be waiting for us other than just a bunch of dots telling us where their comlinks are." Kain said before he activated the intercom, "Kain to infirmary, are you there Doc?" he said into it.

"Yes captain, I am here." the droid's synthetic voice responded.

"What's the condition of the prisoner? I need to talk to him soon." Kain said.

"I have stabilised his condition captain but I would like to keep him here under observation for a while longer yet." Doc told him.

"Why? Is there something specific that makes you think his condition could deteriorate?" Kain asked.

"No captain. It is merely a precaution." Doc said.

"Then I'm ordering you to release the prisoner to Lieutenant Krostas for questioning. I assure you that he'll be kept under constant supervision." Kain ordered and he shut off the intercom before the medical droid could object.

"Captain I think I should be present for the interrogation." Embrance said and Kain smiled at her.

"Of course Agent Embrance." he said, "Maybe you'll learn something."

The prisoner remained strapped to the stretcher that had been used to transport him to the interrogation room when Kain and Embrance entered. As well as restraining him securely it avoided the use of more conventional binders that would make his injuries worse if he struggled against them.

"I'm not sure I see the point in making him comfortable captain. Even Imperial Intelligence makes use of stress positions to break down a subject's resistance." Embrance commented.

"Trust me, he won't notice having his arms and legs bent at an uncomfortable angle." Kain replied and he looked at where the intravenous dispenser for the prisoner's pain medication was being set up beside the stretcher.

"Captain we'll be ready to proceed in a couple of minutes." Krostas said from where he stood beside the stretcher, also watching as the output line from the dispenser was being connected to the prisoner's arm. Kain then looked down at the prisoner himself. The man was awake but he was staring up at the ceiling above him.

"Has he said anything yet?" Kain asked.

"He's called us a few things but that's about it sir." Krostas answered before the men who had been setting up the dispenser stepped back and nodded at him, "We're ready sir." he added.

"Okay sit him up." Kain ordered and Krostas' men lifted one end of the stretcher so that the prisoner was brought into a sitting position, looking straight at Kain and Embrance, "Do you know who I am?" Kain then asked the prisoner.

"An agent of evil." he said.

"I'm Captain Kain, commanding officer of the star destroyer *Sword of Justice*." Kain told him.

"Ha! What would you know of justice?" the prisoner snapped at him.

"More than a band of terrorists." Embrance said but Kain ignored them both.

"Tell me about your group. We know that they are located in module six but I'd like to know how many of you there are." he said, starting with something simple to test the effectiveness of using the pain medication to stimulate the prisoner into providing useable information. The prisoner looked as if he was going to speak for a moment but then he just turned his head aside and Kain nodded at Krostas. The lieutenant promptly reached out and increased the dosage of pain killers being given by the dispenser and a few moments later the prisoner let out a sigh as the chemicals entered his system, "How many?" Kain repeated, "How many of you are there?"

"About six hundred." the prisoner said slowly, the large pauses between his words indicating that he was not fully alert. Kain looked over his shoulder and smiled at Embrance before turning back towards the man and leaning closer to him.

"Okay so now tell me how many of them are warriors." he asked.

"Only Okyn." the prisoner answered slowly and Kain was about to move on when he added, "But he has taught the rest of us."

"So we could be us against six hundred troops." Embrance said.

"That's a large force even if they are only half trained." Krostas added.

"How many can actually fight?" Kain asked the prisoner.

"Won't tell." he replied.

"Lieutenant." Kain said and Krostas increased the dosage again. Kain then waited to see the reaction from the prisoner to the higher amount of the drug being pumped into him, "How many can actually fight?" he repeated.

"A hundred. Maybe." the prisoner said.

"That's better but with a hundred men you can still hold a reasonably large area." Krostas said, "Especially if they've got repeating blasters and have set up proper defensive strong points."

"Tell me about the part of the station where you live. Is it set up to defend against an attack?" Kain said and he saw the prisoner's head move from side to side slightly.

"No. Too difficult." he said.

"So there are no defences?" Kain added.

"Just the cameras." the prisoner replied.

"What cameras? Tell me about the cameras." Kain said.

“Set them up when we came here.” the prisoner said and again there was a pause before he continued,

“Let’s us know if a ship docks or if anyone – if anyone goes where we don’t want them.”

“Where don’t you want people going?” Kain asked.

“Main command centre. Main reactor. The approaches to the section we live in.” the prisoner said, pausing between each of the three for so long that it took several seconds for Kain and the other Imperial officers present to realise that he had come to the end.

“We should find out about their weapons as well.” Embrace said and Kain glanced at her.

“Yes, thank you for the suggestion agent.” he commented before looking at the prisoner again, “How well armed are they? Do they have anything but small arms?” he asked but the prisoner suddenly shook his head frantically.

“Shall I increase the does again sir?” Krostas asked.

“What are we at now?” Kain responded.

“Sixty-five sir.” Krostas told him.

“Okay, try taking it up to seventy.” Kain ordered and Krostas pressed the button to increase the pain medication dosage again.

As with the previous increases there was a brief delay before the prisoner reacted to the change but this time when he exhaled his head also slumped sideways.

“What happened?” Embrace asked as Kain reached out to touch the prisoner’s neck, checking it for a pulse.

“I pushed the dosage too high and he blacked out from it.” Kain answered, “Lieutenant cut the level back to where it was when we started. Then tell Doc that he can have his patient back. After that I want you to join me on the bridge. We have an assault to plan.”

10.

When Kain and Embrance returned to the *Sword of Justice's* bridge they found Ventern present, studying the holographic image of Inferno Station that had been magnified to show only part of the station. From the dots representing contacts from the connection trace this was obviously the outer module where Tasus' group was operating from but Kain noticed that more details had been added.

"What's going on?" Kain asked when he joined them.

"That's a very good question captain." Coroll replied, "I had comscan focus our sensors on module six to see what we could discover about the enemy forces and they noticed a pattern of energy surges. I asked Lieutenant Ventern to take a look and see what he thought of them."

"So what are they?" Kain said.

"Are they setting up weapons?" Embrance added.

"I don't think so." Ventern answered, "Comparing the positions of the surges to the schematics of stations like this I'm pretty sure that those are places where there'd be blast doors. It looks to me like someone is closing them one by one."

"Creating that fortress the prisoner said they didn't have?" Embrance suggested, looking at Kain.

"It certainly sounds like it." Kain replied.

"Captain we've noticed a couple of things about the pattern of closures." Ventern continued, "Firstly although the doors they're closing all lie between us and them they aren't closing them for the entire distance. You'd have to get about half way there before you came up against the first of them. Secondly they are leaving a direct route through this sector wide open."

"I say that both of them are traps captain." Coroll added, "They'll be lying in wait for any force taking the clear route and they want us to advance to the closed doors so they can then close more behind us, trapping our forces between doors. I recommend that our force heads for the station core and then proceed into module one before circling around and attacking from the opposite direction."

"No, it won't work." Kain said, shaking his head.

"The prisoner said that the terrorists have set up a surveillance system." Embrance added.

"They'd see our force coming no matter what corridor we take and deploy their forces accordingly. What's the status on the assault shuttle?" Kain said.

"You're going to breach the hull?" Coroll said and Kain nodded.

"Yes. If the connection trace is accurate then the enemy forces are based less than a hundred metres from the outer hull. We should be able to cover that pretty quickly. With any luck there won't be cameras outside the station so the first the other side will know is when we blast through the hull. I want a diversionary force to proceed along this clear path at the same time though. They are to meet and engage the enemy but there's no need for them to advance after that. I just want the enemy's attention focused away from where the main force will attack from." then he looked at Ventern and added, "Do your schematics show anywhere that we can breach the hull without putting any blast doors between us and them?"

"If I may captain?" Ventern said and when Kain nodded he reached out to adjust the hologram displayed in front of them. He adjusted this to zoom in closer on the area of the outer module where Tasus' group was located, "This point here is best captain." he said, pointing to the hologram.

"That's the level above." Embrance commented and Ventern nodded.

"Yes, that's what makes it the best place to strike. We know that the enemy control all of this section of the lower level." Ventern replied, moving his hand to indicate where the connection trace had indicated Tasus' forces were located in their greatest concentration, "The problem is that if you hit the outer hull at the closest point then you actually end up in a corridor that circles around the outer edge of the module. To get the hundred metres to the target area you have to circle around four hundred and no matter which direction you go there are blast doors that can be closed to block your path if they react quickly enough. On the other hand breaking into the level above gets you into a service corridor that runs all the way to the core. You can proceed the hundred metres in and then use a baradium gel charge to burn through into the lower level and then just drop down."

"I suppose having a tonne of ceiling fall in would prove quite unsettling." Coroll commented.

"Yes and burning through a floor is going to be easier than burning through a blast door. Are there any other routes we can follow on different levels to get around the blast doors?" Kain said.

"Not unless you're willing to burn through about four or five decks. It looks like the doors on nearby levels have been closed as well." Ventern told him.

"They obviously thought of that." Coroll said just as Krostas entered the bridge.

"Reporting as ordered captain." he said when he walked up to the command console.

"Lieutenant Krostas you're just in time. Take a look at this." Kain said and he pointed to the hologram, "I'm proposing that we'll take two platoons aboard an assault shuttle and enter through the hull here. Lieutenant Ventern has identified this as the most vulnerable point in the enemy's defensive perimeter. Then we'll use a charge to access their headquarters from above. Blast doors limit the approaches on the lower level to just one route that looks like a trap so we'll send a larger diversionary force there to occupy their attention."

"That looks good sir. With any luck we'll be able to bypass their defences entirely. I assume that the larger force will advance as the enemy falls back?" Krostas said.

"That's the idea, yes." Kain answered.

"In that case might I suggest equipping them with heavy weapons? We have some E-webs in the armoury." Krostas said.

"Won't that slow them down?" Coroll pointed out.

"Yes commander but their primary purpose is to just pin the enemy down then rapid movement isn't going to be an issue. Plus when the enemy do fall back I expect they'll start closing more blast doors. With heavy repeating blasters or concussion missiles our troops may have a chance to disable them before they can close. If not then they'll have to use thermal detonators to burn through."

"At this rate there may not be much of the station left afterwards." Ventern commented.

"Well you're the one who first suggested burning through floors to get where we need to be." Kain pointed out and then he looked at Krostas again, "Lieutenant Krostas go and get the assault teams ready. We'll move out as soon as possible."

"Yes captain." Krostas said before turning around and walking away from the console again.

"Captain I'd like to renew my objection to you leading the assault in person. As first officer it should be my responsibility." Coroll said.

"And deny you the chance of an instant command if I get killed Adas? I'd never forgive myself." Kain responded with a smile, "Now if you don't mind I need to go and fetch my blaster. Then I need to draw a set of armour from the armoury as well. Agent Embrace if you're coming along as well then now's the time to speak up."

"Yes captain, I'm coming." she said.

The Beta-class assault shuttle was just large enough for the two platoons of stormtroopers that made up the main assault force along with Captain Kain, Agent Embrace, Lieutenant Ventern and a unit of specialists needed to set the charge to burn through the deck to their target but it was standing room only inside the craft.

"The diversionary force are moving in now captain. Updates will be fed to the pilot" Krostas told Kain as they boarded the shuttle.

"Okay I'd like us to be in position when they engage the enemy. Let's go and join the crew in the cockpit shall we? I get the feeling it will be a little less cramped in there." Kain responded.

"An excellent idea captain. I'm glad this trip won't take long." Embrace added as the trio of officers squeezed past the soldiers crammed into the shuttle towards the cockpit.

As expected there was more room inside the cockpit, despite its compact design but all of the seats were still taken up by the flight crew.

"Ah captain we just received clearance to launch." the pilot said when the officers entered.

"Very good. You may launch when ready." Kain replied and the pilot activated his communication system.

"*Sword of Justice* this is shuttle *Besh One*, we are launching now." he said before pulling back on the flight controls and for a moment Kain felt the shuttle begin to rise before its inertial dampeners kicked in and the motion became perfectly smooth.

As with the TIEs launched earlier, the shuttle was launched from one of the *Sword of Justice's* side hangar doors and as soon as it was in space the pilot set a course that took the craft around *Inferno Station*, keeping as close to the hull as possible to limit the possibility of detection. It took only a few minutes for the low speed manoeuvre to get the shuttle into position, at which point the pilot brought it to a halt.

"In position now. Deploy breaching tube." the pilot said.

"Deploying tube." another of the crew responded as he extended a tube from the side of the assault shuttle facing *Inferno Station*. This was mounted around one of the assault shuttle's hatches so that when it made contact with the space station's hull it formed a sealed passageway between the two that could be pressurised to allow troops from the shuttle to board the space station without requiring vacuum suits.

"Boarding tube in position. Plasma charge is armed." the crewman said and the pilot glanced over his shoulder towards the officers behind him.

"We're all set captain." he said.

"Should we go now captain?" Krostas asked.

"No. We don't know if there are any of the cameras located up here. If there are then the enemy will know the moment we breach the hull and I want to keep our presence here a secret until they are already engaged

against the diversionary force.” Kain explained.
“Of course captain.” Krostas replied.

The squad of stormtroopers that led the advance of the larger diversionary force was armed with their standard Blastech E-11 blaster rifles. Thanks to their compact size and balance these could be wielded with one hand and this allowed the armoured soldiers to carry large blast shields mounted on the forearms of their free arms. As well as offering considerably enhanced individual protection for the stormtroopers, at a moment's notice these could be placed side by side to form an armoured barrier that would also provide protection for the more heavily armed squads following them. Many of these carried heavier blaster rifles but there were also several light repeating blasters and grenade launchers available for support fire. As a final boost to their firepower the stormtrooper force included four weapons teams, two armed with concussion missile launchers and two that carried tripod mounted E-web heavy repeating blasters and their associated power sources between them.

The force's approach towards the area occupied by Tasus and his followers was detected by the network of hidden cameras and Okyn gave orders to deploy his best fighters to defend the approach. Having been taught that it was best to lure an enemy into a location from which they could not easily retreat before launching an attack these troops allowed the stormtroopers to advance about half way along a long, straight corridor before they launched their attack. This began by them pushing a repulsor sled laden with boxes filled with scrap metal across the corridor at their end before shutting off its repulsorlift unit so that it came crashing to the floor and formed an immovable barrier for them to use as cover before a squad of them rushed to deploy behind it. Armed with Clone Wars vintage blaster rifles, these troops then starting firing rapid bursts down the corridor, the shape of which offered no cover to the advancing stormtroopers. However, although in theory the stormtroopers were caught in a deadly killing zone they quickly dropped to their knees with their blast shields held in front of them and returned fire over it. This left both sides behind solid cover and armed with weapons of similar strength and resulting in a theoretical stalemate as neither side could penetrate the defences of the other. Normal Imperial doctrine would have called for the stormtroopers to continue their advance behind the cover of the shields but in accordance with Captain Kain's orders they held their position while their heavier weapons were brought forwards. At the same time as this was happening the senior stormtrooper activated his comlink.

“*Sword of Justice* this is assault leader. We have engaged the enemy. The captain is clear to proceed with stage two.” he transmitted.

When Coroll heard the transmission from the stormtrooper leader he smiled.

“Comscan send to assault shuttle. Diversion is underway. You are clear to proceed with phase two.” he said.

The boarding tube running between the assault shuttle and *Inferno Station* held a squad of stormtroopers who all faced the blank looking hull at the far end of the tube. All of a sudden there was a brilliant flash of light that came simultaneously from all around the ring at the very end of the tube. This could have been blinding but the stormtroopers' helmets included full protection against such threats and none of them even averted their gaze for a moment as the directed blast of plasma burned its way through the station's hull. When this was done the loose section of hull dropped back into the station, pushed by a brief pulse from a repulsorlift generator also mounted in the ring at the end of the tube.

“Breach complete. Moving in.” the stormtrooper squad leader said into his comlink and he waved his men forwards. The stormtroopers then dashed along the boarding tube and burst into *Inferno Station*, spreading out as quickly as they could to avoid all of them being killed by a single grenade blast or burst from a repeating blaster. However, they found themselves in an entirely empty corridor that stretched ahead of them for hundreds of metres, “Clear.” the squad leader reported and his squad advanced further along the corridor to make room for the squads that followed them, exiting from the boarding tube as quickly as they could. Only once all of the stormtroopers had disembarked from the assault shuttle did the team responsible for laying the baradium charge disembark with Kain, Krostas and Embrace.

“All troops present and correct sir.” a stormtrooper told Kain and he looked at his datapad.

“Advance. According to the schematic we need to lay our charge one hundred metres that way.” he said and without hesitation the two platoons of stormtroopers began to move forwards down the corridor.

11.

Tasus was busy organising the transfer of data that had been stored in Inferno Station's computer to portable drives that he could take with him. Even given the station's limited resources he had still been able to conduct some research and he did not want to lose any progress. However, when he was notified that the Imperial assault had commenced he interrupted this to make his way to the control room.

"What's our status?" he said when he entered the room and found both Okyn and the duty officer watching the security monitors mounted on the wall.

"We've got a large force of stormtroopers attacking the clear route." Okyn replied.

"What about the other routes?" Tasus asked but Okyn shook his head.

"Nothing. Only the route we left clear is being attacked. They're completely ignoring the routes we planned to use to trap them. Somehow they must have figured out that we were closing the blast doors and which ones we left open.

"Can we hold them?" Tasus said.

"So far, yes. But they're being cautious. They brought blast shields and have dug in just like our troops. Basically we're exchanging fire but the lines aren't moving and I've got a bad feeling about this." Okyn said.

"Why?" Tasus responded.

"Because this is a hostage rescue mission and those stormtroopers should be doing everything they can to get here as quickly as possible to secure the safety of their people that we're holding. Instead they just stopped." Okyn explained.

"Wait. Look at that." the duty officer said suddenly and he pointed to a display showing the feed from a camera that was focused on the stormtroopers' front line. This also showed the more heavily armed stormtroopers firing over the barrier of linked blast shields but this was not what had caught the attention of the duty officer. Instead it was the squad of stormtroopers behind the line that were setting up a tripod. Then once this was in place the three men in the control room watched as an E-web heavy repeating blaster was mounted on it so that it pointed over the line of blast shields and it was connected to a portable fusion generator. Moments later a steady stream of energy blasts erupted from the muzzle of the weapon and filled the corridor.

This torrent of heavy blaster fire impacted the side of the repulsor sled and its dense cargo just as much of the lighter rifle fire had done but the energy blasts from the E-web were powerful enough to blow large holes in the container and then shatter the scrap inside so that pieces fell to the floor. Okyn knew that it would not be long before the improvised barrier was completely destroyed and the men behind it left vulnerable so he reached for the intercom to contact their forces.

"This is Okyn," he said into it, "fall back to the secondary position in the gallery." then he looked at the duty officer and added, "Okay seal the blast door." he said.

As Okyn's men began to withdraw from their position a set of blast doors began to close just in front of where the repulsor sled was positioned. Immediately the crew of the heavy repeating blaster diverted their aim to the wall where the segments of the door were emerging from, hoping that they could destroy the mechanism before it got the chance to seal the corridor and block their way. The walls and other surfaces here were too heavily armoured for even the E-web's blasts to penetrate though and the senior stormtrooper instead signalled for another weapon team to move forwards.

"Concussion missile. Single round." he ordered as one of the stormtroopers armed with a concussion missile launcher rushed up to the row of blast shields and pointed the weapon down the corridor, aiming it at where the blast door was emerging from the wall.

Behind him a second stormtrooper loaded a missile into the launcher before stepping back. The launcher armed stormtrooper then fired his weapon, using its inbuilt targeting laser to guide it towards the blast door as it emerged from the wall. There was a limited back blast from the weapon as the rocket motor ignited but the launcher was designed to absorb most of this and what little was left posed no risk to the stormtroopers in their energy reflecting armour. Although normally used at much longer ranges and outside the missile was still useable within the confines of the space station and it struck the wall exactly where the stormtrooper was aiming. The powerful warhead exploded on impact and sent a shock wave back down the corridor. The blast from the warhead was enough to punch a large hole in the wall deep enough to reach the blast door and mechanism. This resulted in a sudden grinding sound before the segments stopped moving while the corridor remained more than half clear.

"Advance." the senior stormtrooper ordered and the soldiers equipped with the blast shields began to move forwards again.

"Understood Sergeant." Kain responded when the senior stormtrooper of the diversionary force informed him of their progress. Then as he returned his comlink to his pocket he looked at his datapad again, checking the inertial navigation function, "Okay this is it." he announced, "Set the charge right here."

"Yes sir." one of the fleet troopers from the demolitions unit replied as he and his men moved forwards. One of them removed a pack that he carried on his back and from it a canister was removed. This contained highly volatile baradium gel and Kain backed away while the fleet troopers laid this gel in a large rectangle that extended for the entire width of the corridor. At the same time several stormtroopers were unravelling syntherope lines that they could use to lower themselves to the level beneath them rapidly and safely, "Charge in place captain." the lead fleet trooper told Kain.

"Very good sergeant. You may continue." Kain responded.

"Stand clear for detonation!" the sergeant yelled and everyone backed away from the gel on the deck while he took out his comlink. Then he used the device to send a signal to the detonator that was set into the gel and in an instant there was a flash of light and a blast of heat. There was no explosion though, the baradium reaction being almost silent as it melted through the deck plating in just a few seconds and the large rectangle cut free promptly dropped down to the level below with a loud 'crash'.

"Go!" Kain ordered and around him the stormtroopers with syntherope lines rushed towards the hole, fixed the lines to the edge of the deck plating and slid down one handed, holding their rifles in their free hands just in case they came under attack.

The chamber that the stormtroopers landed in contained several members of Tasus' group but they were all workers who had been loading supplies. The sound of the ceiling collapsing before the stormtroopers began to drop down through the hole stunned these people and they were barely aware of the stormtroopers as they descended. However, it did not take long for them to recover their senses and they immediately began to run towards the exit, intending to raise the alarm. The stormtroopers did not hesitate in opening fire though, even unarmed and fleeing opponents were legitimate targets to them and they wasted no time in gunning them down.

"Clear, but our presence may have been detected." the squad leader transmitted, aware that the sound of the ceiling collapsing combined with volleys of blaster fire would have been audible for a considerable distance.

"Imperial troops have entered the base! Imperial troops have entered the base!"

Tasus and Okyn turned their heads when they heard this shout coming from outside the control room and they rushed out to investigate.

"What's going on?" Okyn said, grabbing hold of the man running along the hallway while shouting his warning.

"They've broken in sir! At least a platoon of stormtroopers. They breached the secondary hold and it was theirs in under a minute. They'll be here at any moment." the man said.

"The frontal attack must have just been a diversion." Okyn said, looking at Tasus.

"Well do something Okyn." Tasus said, panicking at the thought of Imperial troops so close to their position.

"Yes sir. I'll do what I can to organise the troops we have left here and I'll summon our forward unit back. I think we should seal all the blast doors we can and begin our evacuation." Okyn replied and Tasus nodded.

Okyn then rushed away, searching for troops he could use to hold back the sudden and unexpected Imperial assault. On the other hand Tasus looked back into the control room at the duty officer.

"Seal all the blast doors as far as the gallery. We need to buy time for our troops to get back here." he said and the man sat in front of the displays. Then he turned back around and hurried away.

Kain and the other officers waited for all of the stormtroopers to descend to the level below before they followed them down through the same hole and as soon as they landed on the deck one of the stormtrooper platoon sergeants rushed up to them.

"Report sergeant." Kain said to him.

"Captain this compartment is secure and our troops are pressing forwards." the stormtrooper told him.

"Resistance?" Kain asked.

"Disorganised. The enemy are numerous but their training is limited." the stormtrooper answered.

"They probably sent their best to deal with the diversion, just as you planned sir." Krostas commented and Kain nodded.

"Carry on sergeant. I want the captives located and secured as quickly as possible." he said.

Even though Okyn had a much larger force available to him than the stormtroopers could muster they lacked training and experience and when they came under fire many of them panicked and tried to retreat. The stormtroopers were making liberal use of automatic fire and grenades in their advance and it obvious that

they were more concerned with advancing rapidly than with taking prisoners. Okyn knew that the hostages were their ultimate goal and this gave him an idea.

"You! Over here!" he called out to a unit of his troops who had been setting up a light repeating blaster to cover the approach to the compartment that was used as a public mess hall. These were some of Okyn's better fighters who had been recalled from the fighting against the Empire's diversionary force so he knew he could rely on them.

"Yes sir." the leader of this team responded as the weapon was picked up again.

"With me." Okyn told them and then he turned and hurried out through an exit that led to a narrow corridor. He used this corridor as a short cut to a larger chamber that he rushed straight into. The room on the other side was guarded by another half dozen of Okyn's more capable troops but these had not been sent to fight the stormtroopers, instead they had remained here to guard the members of Erranes' team who had been captured, "At ease." Okyn told the guards and they lowered the weapons they had brought up as soon as the door opened unexpectedly.

"What's happening out there sir?" one of the guards asked.

"The Empire's here. They bypassed our defences and they'll be right on top of us at any minute. We need to adopt a more radical strategy and we need the prisoners for it." Okyn said.

"A human shield?" the guard commented and Okyn nodded.

"We'll position them around the primary section. At the very least it should slow the stormtroopers down long enough for us to get the evacuation organised." he said.

Erranes heard the sound of the door opening again, followed by rapid footsteps as someone hurried towards her. Then she felt someone pull her head as far from the pipe as the cable tie around her neck would allow before the tie was cut.

"I think it's time for me to leave lieutenant commander," Tasus said, "and you are just what I need to make sure that none of your friends get in my way." then he also cut the cable tie binding her ankles and lifted her to her feet. Having been sat down and tied up for so long made Erranes unsteady on her feet but Tasus held her up as he pushed the muzzle of a blaster into her side, "Now let's move. There's a transport waiting in the hangar and we're both going to be on it. At least as long as I need you as a hostage anyway."

Tasus then pushed Erranes towards the doorway and peered into the corridor outside to make sure that the Imperial forces had not already reached it. Seeing that the way was clear he stepped out of the room, pulling Erranes along with him.

Despite having two platoons of well armed stormtroopers ahead of him Kain still held his blaster in one hand while keeping his datapad and the map it contained in the other.

"If the connection trace was right then we should be no more than thirty metres from the enemy's headquarters." he said to Krostas and Embrance.

The stormtroopers had made maximum use of the firepower available to them to get this far, using as much blaster ammunition as well as grenades as they considered necessary to clear their path. The result of this was that more fifty of Tasus' group now lay dead behind them while only two of the stormtroopers had been killed and one injured in return. Kain was encouraged by this rapid progress but also aware that the assault force had yet to locate any of the hostages. However, this changed when all of a sudden one of the stormtrooper platoons ceased fire.

"Captain you need to see this." the platoon commander said over his comlink.

"I'm on my way." Kain responded and the three officers advance to where the platoon was deployed. The stormtroopers still had their weapons aimed ahead of their position but they had now ceased fire entirely while they waited for orders from Kain. Looking beyond the stormtroopers' line it was easy to see why they had suddenly halted their attack even while they were still being fired on. Ahead of them was a long improvised barricade behind which a number of Okyn's troops were using as a defensive position while in front of the barrier the members of Erranes' team who had been captured had been made to kneel, their wrists still bound and still hooded. While stormtroopers were trained as far as possible to ignore friendly losses in pursuit of their mission their orders in this case were to secure the safe return of the hostages and now they required further orders to resolve these two contradictory conditions.

"Our people." Krostas said when he saw this.

"Captain with one strong push-" Embrance began.

"We'd lose half the hostages in an instant. If the enemy didn't shoot them they'd get hit by stray fire from our own side." Kain interrupted.

"Captain that service corridor we passed about twenty metres back loops around this chamber. Give me one squad and we can circle around them." Krostas suggested quietly and Kain nodded.

"Set your weapons on 'stun' lieutenant." he replied and Krostas waved for a nearby squad to fall back from

their position and follow him instead. Then Kain turned to the platoon commander and as he changed the setting on his own weapon he added, "Spread the word to your men as well. Set for 'stun'."

"Yes captain." the stormtrooper responded before he issued the order to his men.

"Deliberately shooting the hostages captain?" Embrance commented and Kain nodded.

"Stunning them all will take them out of the equation." Kain replied.

"Stun blasts won't penetrate that barricade though captain." Embrance pointed out.

"No but we can force them to keep their heads down while Krostas and his squad circle around them. If any of them try to lean over to shoot at us or the hostages they'll expose themselves to our fire." Kain said.

"And why have Krostas and his men also set their weapons to stun when the barricade will block their line of fire to the hostages?" Embrance asked.

"Like you said agent, stun blasts won't penetrate that barricade but there's a chance that a lethal one will. Plus all of the hostages they've got lined up are men. That means Erranes must be somewhere else and they could have her behind that barricade." Kain answered.

"Captain what about my platoon?" the commander of the second stormtrooper platoon said.

"Leave one squad to cover our rear then take the rest and keep pushing in that direction and see where it takes you." Kain told him and he indicated the hallway that the second platoon had been firing down while sporadic blaster fire came back towards them.

"Yes captain." the stormtrooper responded before directing his men down the hallway.

12.

Although Okyn's tactic of using hostages as a human shield was working for the time being he knew that it was only a temporary state of affairs. The area of *Inferno Station* that Tasus and his followers had occupied had provided them with everything they needed to live there, it had not been chosen for its defensive qualities and there were too many different routes of attack for it to be possible to secure them all. He expected that sooner or later they would find a way around the barrier and its human shield but he hoped that before that could happen the word would be given that the transport was ready for take off. Until then though, he and anyone who could be pressed into action with a weapon needed to try and hold back the Imperial troops.

Looking over the barricade he saw the stormtroopers who remained in cover while holding their fire. Behind them he caught sight for a moment of a man in a fleet officer's uniform and he raised his rifle. However, the man moved out of sight before Okyn could fire, remaining visible just long enough for him to notice the rank badge on the man's chest.

"So Captain Kain, capturing your first officer has left you short of competent staff has it?" Okyn muttered to himself when all of a sudden there was an explosion from close by and as he turned he saw that the sealed hatch to his force's flank had just been blown open. Almost immediately there was a volley of blue flashes through the doorway that hit several of the already startled men close by it and they all collapsed to the floor. At the same time the stormtroopers on the other side of the barrier also opened fire, their weapons emitting blue stun blasts instead of the bright red lethal ones. Okyn was surprised to see that the first volley of these shots were not aimed over the barricade at his men but at the hostages in front of it instead and one by one they fell to the floor, putting them out of the line of for his men unless they chose to expose themselves. This soon became a moot point though as the first of the second group of stormtroopers emerged through the blown open hatchway, firing as they came.

"Advance!" Okyn heard Kain shout from over the barricade and the main stormtrooper force began to move forwards.

Two of his men started to point their weapons towards these troops but they were struck by stun blasts fired by the stormtroopers instead coming through the hatchway and Okyn decided that there was only one option open to him and his men.

"Fall back! Retreat to the hangar." he ordered and he beckoned for his men to retreat in the opposite direction. Defiantly he fired his blaster at one of the stormtroopers and the hit took the man off his feet despite the armour he wore before he began to back away. However, just as he turned his back on the hatchway Krostas came through and fired at him. The shot hit him between the shoulders and he immediately fell forwards, landing in a heap on the floor while more of his men fell around him.

"Captain Kain." Krostas shouted as he looked at the unconscious separatists around him, "The position is secure."

"Is Lieutenant Commander Erranes there?" Kain responded as he dashed up to the barricade.

"No sir, there's no sign of her." Krostas said.

"Stang!" Kain hissed.

"Just wake one of these men up captain. I'll get her location out of them." Embrance said.

"I'm sure you would agent." Kain commented without looking at her and then his comlink sounded, "Kain, go ahead." he said into the device.

"Captain we've located what looks like a command centre." the voice of the second stormtrooper platoon commander told him.

"Okay I'm on my way." Kain said before he turned to Krostas, "Lieutenant secure this area. If you find anyone that's still awake then try to keep them that way long enough to tell you where Erranes is."

Kain was shown into the command centre by the stormtroopers who guided him there and apart from the wall covered in display screens the first thing he noticed was the body of the duty officer that had been placed in the corner.

"Did he resist?" Kain asked.

"He had a weapon and refused to drop it captain." the stormtrooper commander answered and Kain nodded, glad that it meant the enemy officer was dead instead of any of his troops even if that did mean he could not answer any questions, "The system has given us the location of a hangar where the enemy's transport is located captain." the platoon leader added but before Kain could reply he spotted movement on one of the display screens and when he turned to look more closely he saw a man dragging a hooded figure along a

corridor. The figure in question was clearly a woman in her underwear and Kain knew in an instant that he had located Erranes.

"Where is that?" Kain said, pointing to the screen.

"Corridor herf, section four sir." the stormtrooper commander answered and Kain quickly checked his datapad to determine the location relative to the command centre.

"Okay sergeant you send a unit to secure that hangar and see if any of these controls will open the blast doors holding our other forces back." Kain said before he looked at the two stormtroopers who had escorted him to the compartment, "You two with me, we're going to get Lieutenant Commander Erranes back."

Tasus' progress towards the hangar was slowed by having to drag Erranes along with him but he knew that abandoning her would likely mean that the *Sword of Justice* would shoot his transport down before it could reach the safety of hyperspace so he put up with her stumbling along with him while listening to the distant sounds of fighting.

"Get up and get a move on!" Tasus snapped at Erranes when she tripped again and he had to pick her up, "Just remember that if we get caught then you'll be the first in your crewmates' line of fire."

As if waiting for a statement such as this there was the sound of footsteps and Tasus looked behind him just in time to see a pair of stormtroopers to appear around a corner. Tasus immediately spun around to face them, pulling Erranes in front of him to form a shield and pointing his blaster towards the two stormtroopers who immediately took cover at the corner.

"Drop your weapon and release the hostage! Now!" one of the stormtroopers shouted but Tasus just fired a shot that impacted the wall close to the soldier's head instead.

"I don't think so. Not while I've got your superior officer here as my hostage. Now you just stay there while we get to our ship." Tasus responded loudly and he began to back away, keeping Erranes between him and the stormtroopers, "See?" he said to Erranes, "They won't fire if it means hitting you and that makes you my ticket out of here." but as he took another step backwards he suddenly felt the muzzle of a blaster pressed to the base of his skull.

"They also don't want to hit me by accident. That would be considered mutiny." Kain said calmly, "Now drop your weapon and release my navigator."

"Navigator?" Tasus commented.

"Yes my first officer, Commander Coroll, is quite safe back on my ship Doctor Tasus. Now you have until the count of three." Kain told him but Tasus immediately shoved Erranes aside and spun around, attempting to bring his blaster bear on Kain. Guessing instantly what Tasus was planning, Kain did not hesitate and he fired his blaster into the man's face from point blank range. Had his blaster been on a lethal setting the energy blast would have decapitated Tasus but instead the bright blue flash that enveloped the man's head rendered him instantly unconscious and his blaster clattered to the floor before he landed in a heap beside Erranes.

Kain only had to glance down the corridor towards the two stormtroopers and both men leapt to their feet and came rushing towards him. At the same time Kain reached down and pulled the hood from Erranes' head before removing her gag.

"Hello lieutenant commander. You were late returning so I thought I ought to come and find you." he said.

"Captain Kain." Erranes replied, blinking her eyes as she tried to focus on him, "That is you isn't it?"

"Yes it's me," he said, "and I brought you a spare set of glasses." then he reached into a pouch on his belt and produced a pair of spectacles that he placed on Erranes. However, instead of the thin metal frames of the usual spectacles she wore this particular pair had bright plastic frames that were decorated with stars and flowers.

"Oh very funny." Erranes said as Kain grinned at her.

"Let's just get back to the ship. I'm sure Doctor Tasus won't mind lending you a jacket." he said as he helped her to her feet.

Kain had just finished his report into the events at Inferno Station when the intercom in his quarters sounded.

"Kain." he said into is.

"Captain there is a priority message coming in for you from Aran. It's Moff Tollof." one of the bridge crew told him.

"Put her through." Kain said and a moment later a small holographic figure of a woman appeared in front of him, "Moff Tollof." he said and she smiled.

"Oh Jarren you know better than that." she replied and Kain smiled back at her.

"Sorry. Erian." he said.

"That's better. I just wanted to call to congratulate you. The capture of this Doctor Tasus, a man we were all assured for many years was dead is quite a feather in your cap. It's already been decided that you and your senior staff will be receiving medals for tracking him down and bringing him to justice." Tollof told him.

"We came here by accident really. My engineer located the spare parts we need to keep our ship running. Those are now aboard by the way and they should keep the entire line supplied for about a decade." Kain pointed out.

"Yes well I think we'll keep that bit quiet Jarren. It doesn't look good to say that our cruisers are breaking down."

"I just don't like the idea of misrepresenting my actions. That never looks good when it gets out." Kain said.

"Don't worry about that Jarren. Just come to Aran when you get the order and Senator Corrus and I will pin those medals on your chests." Tollof replied.

"A formal ceremony? Isn't that a bit over the top?" Kain said.

"Maybe. But how else am I supposed to bring my favourite captain to my palace so soon?" Tollof said.