

Shatterpoint

Chapter 1 – Clouded Skies

Navigating through the thick soup of the Ivax Nebula, the wedge-shaped hull of the Termination pushed forward toward its destination with rolling waves of stellar material washing over its hull. Nine years of evading capture or destruction after the Battle of Endor had brought the Termination's small task force to this remote nebula on the edge of the galaxy. As the vessel dipped lazily under a floating piece of debris, a station loomed a few thousand kilometers ahead. Its huge, sloping docking bays were filled with the other vessels of the small force, nine capital ships in its entirety; and the Termination angled toward the largest bay on the station's dorsal hull. The Termination, much like the station, had been constructed in secret just prior to the battle of Endor, and commissioned for the task force's initial duties of destroying Rebel cells in the outer rim. Labeled as the Constrainer-class Star Destroyer, the twenty-four hundred meter ship dwarfed the three smaller Imperial-class vessels in the task force as it came in to dock.

With the familiar thump he associated with the docking latches being engaged, Tavion Rell sat up in his bunk, rubbing his temples with both hands before standing up. His brown eyes momentarily searched the room around him before they caught sight of the datapad he had haphazardly tossed on the floor before trying to nap before their arrival. He picked it up, tapping the display to look over the itinerary for the day.

"You could have just asked me." The voice that filled his quarters caused Tavion to tense for a moment before he relaxed.

"Damnit, Mac." He recognized the voice after a moment, which belonged to his 'personal assistant'. An AI programmed to work throughout the ship, it was supposed to assist with the day to day operations in running the vessel and would act as a secretary for the officers on board. That, at least, was what Doctor Ibble; the task force's lead scientist and one of the designers of the Termination had told him. Tavion found that 'Mac', as he had grown to call the AI system, was more of a hindrance than a help most of the time.

"What did I do this time?" The disembodied voice queried.

"How many times have I told you to let me at least get my bearings before jumping in on me like that?"

"Seventy Three," the reply was curt, very matter-of-fact.

"That's what you just did!" Tavion threw his hands up in frustration before taking a seat on his bed.

"Sorry. You should have still asked me. That is what I am here for, after all."

"Blah, fine. What does the day look like?" Tavion asked.

"You have thirty minutes of free time before you are required to report to the station's briefing room for your next assignment," Mac said, without any emotion.

"Hrmph. Who is the briefing officer? If it's that bantha nugget from the Manticore again I swear I'll shoot him."

"The Admiral."

Tavion blinked and froze for a moment. The task force's enigmatic leader, known even to his closest subordinates as simply 'The Admiral' or, 'Sir', very rarely presided over briefings, and when he did they were typically of the utmost importance to the goals of the small fleet.

"That pretty much guarantees today is going to be interesting, and where ever I am going tomorrow is going to suck," Tavion mused to himself.

"Yep," the unwanted reply made Tavion roll his eyes.

"...Bah on you. You get to sit here and be cozy all day." Tavion padded over to his armor rack, and began to suit up in his stormtrooper commando armor.

"Yes, but at least you have a butt to sit on." Tavion chuckled, it was a standing joke.

"That I do, Mac. And right now I need to get this butt to the mess hall and grab a bite. Thanks."

"Any time." Tavion slipped out of his quarters the moment he had finished suiting up. Except for his helmet, which he held in his right hand, his armor hugged his body like a passionate lover. His eyes needed a moment to adjust to the bright light of the Termination's corridors before turning to his right. He hadn't taken a half dozen steps when the door adjacent to his opened up and a woman hobbled out of the room, attempting to tug a boot over her left foot while hopping on her right.

"Ack!" She unceremoniously dropped to the floor next to him, tumbling into a little pile for a moment before finally getting her way with the misbehaving boot. "...Oh, hi there." She realized there was someone standing over her only after another moment.

Tavion chuckled, reaching down to offer her a hand. "Running late, Lara?"

"Not really, just trying to get to the mess before this briefing. Any idea what it's about, Spectre?" Spectre, Tavion's callsign, was what most of his fellow commandos had taken to calling him. He, like Lara, was one of fifty highly trained, elite commandos attached to the Task Force.

"No idea. I did hear the Admiral's going to be the one giving the briefing." He bent down, grasping Lara's arm to help her to her feet.

“Yeah, me too. Why do you think I'm in a rush? I'll be damned if I'm going to be late for that,” she said, brushing herself off.

“My thoughts exactly, I was heading to the mess too, mind if I join you?” Tavion asked with a grin.

“Not at all,” she quipped happily before motioning for him to follow.

Spectre walked behind her at a brisk pace, passing the small mess area that was reserved for the other elite commandos. He glanced inside, spotting three others trying to scarf down food – they'd obviously gotten a summons to a briefing somewhere as well.

“Not eating here?” Tavion asked Lara as they passed the room.

“Fifty's there. He still thinks he has a chance. I'd rather prove him wrong.” He chuckled, shaking his head. Each of them had a designation, like normal stormtroopers, as well as a call sign specific to their group. Some of their kin preferred to go by that simple designation, Fifty was one of them. The outfit's lead technician, Fifty was the group's resident know-it-all, and constantly tried to 'make his move' on the females in the corps.

“I thought he'd gotten the hint the last time he tried,” Tavion mused aloud.

“Nope. He thought it was 'sexy' that I threw him through that cantina window.”

“Only him.” Spectre laughed as they entered a turbolift, the doors silently shutting behind them.

“Deck Twelve, Mess Hall.”

Lara brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes as the turbolift took off. The pair were silent for the few seconds it took the turbolift to arrive at their destination. As the doors opened, the pair saw a myriad of troopers, enlisted men, and a few officers walking around the area. The entirety of deck twelve had been designed with the crew in mind with various recreational rooms, mess halls, and even a small shop set up for their use.

Moving out of the lift, the two made their way into the mess hall, which was packed with people; all vying for a 'good seat' near the large holoprojectors playing various pirated shows from a nearby holonet node. The two walked into the main cafeteria, each grabbing a tray. Spectre walked over toward a counter that had various meat based products on display, stopping in front of one of the three large cylindrical tubes that lined the counter. A holographic display appeared before his eyes, showing him the various items available today, along with their price – the crew paid in food rations, allowing them much more freedom in their diets than on most ships. He tapped one of the floating options with his left index finger, and within a few seconds a hatch on the cylinder opened, his bantha patty sandwich giving off wisps of heat. He took the food,

stopping for only a moment to grab a glass of water, before finding a table near the back of the hall and taking a seat.

"I can't believe you eat that crap. I swear it won't be a blaster bolt that gets you, it'll be that." Lara scrunched her nose at Spectre, who had a mouthful of meat and made a noise somewhat akin to a muffled objection.

"Swallow first... there you go. Caveman Spectre eat! Nom nom nom," Lara had no qualms about making fun of him.

"Oh come on. First off, you are not my mother. Second off, salad? It tastes like nothing!" His objection was blatantly ignored.

"Shows what you know." Lara picked at the salad she had chosen, sipping the Muja juice she had gotten to go with it. "They're delicious, and we grow all of our own vegetables in hydroponics, so this big plate of salad and the juice only cost me two rations. What's that burger, four?"

"Five. And every bite is delicious and totally worth it," he lied, jealous of her cheaper meal.

"Ugh. When you're out of rations for the week, again, don't come crawling to me. I'm just going to say no and 'I told you so'." She stuck her tongue out at him before nibbling at her salad.

"You and Mac, ruining my day all ready... besides, I still have fifteen left, and how many days are left in the cycle? One? Two?"

"Four, you idiot!" Lara rolled her eyes.

"Oh... Hey can I borrow some ex..."

"No!"

"Fine, fine. I'll get some from Seven, he owes me," Tavion took a sip of his water.

"What for this time?" Lara went back to picking at her salad, keeping an eye on a nearby chronometer.

"I helped him get his room ready for that last inspection. I think we filled an entire garbage compactor with the crap he'd been hoarding. He thinks everything he touches is lucky, and therefore has to keep it." Spectre took a huge bite of his patty, much to Lara's chagrin.

"Figures. Ugh. We gotta get moving in the next couple minutes, if we don't leave soon we're going to be late." Spectre frowned, attacking his meal with renewed fervor, and had managed to scarf it all down by the time Lara was ready to get up a couple minutes later. The two of them dropped their helmets over their heads as they stood, making

their way quickly back toward the turbolifts. During the jog back, Spectre grumbled, dropping one hand to his stomach plate.

"I shouldn't have eaten that so fast," he complained.

"Told you so!"

Spectre frowned under his helmet, fighting the queasiness that was settling over his stomach. No matter what happened in the briefing it seemed fairly obvious – today was going to wind up being a bad day.

The Admiral had been in the briefing room for three hours, alone. Sitting there, he watched a holographic display of a brown orb slowly rotate in front of him. His hands were folded over his nose, a bridge of knuckles nestling into the nook between his eyes. Those piercing eyes, an icy blue hue around unmoving pupils, stared at the display. His brow was furrowed in concentration, and it only broke as a voice in the back of his mind told him that others would be arriving soon. The Admiral allowed his hands to fall to the table, resting them on its surface, and tilted his head toward the blast door leading into the conference room.

"Aysa." His voice was soft, calculating, with a tone that could make a chill run down the spine of most beings.

"Yes, Admiral." The disembodied voice filled the room warmly, in stark contrast to the Admiral.

"The time, please," it was a curt statement, not a query.

"Twenty-one hundred and fifty seven minutes."

"Thank you, Aysa."

No sooner had he finished the sentence did the door open, and a man entered the room. His uniform was neat and pressed, much like the Admiral's. Rank plates designating him as a Vice Admiral shone with fresh polish on his breast.

"Vice Admiral Gaunt, as punctual as always." The Admiral's eyes tracked his executive officer, Larkin Gaunt, as he entered the room.

"Sir." The gray haired man sat down to the Admiral's right, relaxing in the plush chair. "So, how many hours have you been sitting here brooding?"

"Three," the Admiral stated plainly.

“Sounds about right, you really should get out more. I mean look at me, today I've had lunch with a few of the officers on the Manticore, sent a holocard to my daughter, and enjoyed a jog around the ship.”

“Normally, I would be happy to indulge this little game of yours, but the others should be here momentarily,” the Admiral said.

“Pah. I'll let you pass on this round, sir, but next time we're having it out.” Larkin grinned, his superior was by far younger than he, but the man had wit far beyond his years, and Gaunt enjoyed the mental spars they periodically had.

“Very well.” The Admiral's eyes drifted from his companion to the blast door as more figures entered the room. Hurrying in first were Tavion and Lara, followed by Fifty; who was wrestling with a particularly unruly tool kit. Following them was a man who simply went by his designation, 'Ten'. His body was constantly encased in combat armor, a blank faceplate masking any sort of glimpse into the man's psyche. He was respected as a soldier who led by example, insisting on being deployed on any mission which involved the corps. The four commandos took seats around the briefing table.

“I think we're waiting for one more, right?” Vice Admiral's chipper voice broke the silence.

“Oh? Who else is coming?” Lara sheepishly brushed her hair back with one hand.

“I believe Doctor Ibble was summoned as well,” Larkin looked to the Admiral for confirmation.

The Admiral nodded in affirmation and glanced between the door and a chronometer. As the time ticked past twenty-two hundred hours, a scowl came across the Admiral's face. He began to count aloud. At 'Fifteen', a disheveled man rushed through the blast door. The Task Force's lead scientist was clutching a datapad in a pair of thick black gloves that covered his hands, his white laboratory coat was disheveled and his officer's cap barely clung to his head. He quickly took a seat.

“Sorry I'm late, sir, why were you counting?” Doctor Ibble tried to work the creases out of his laboratory coat.

“I was counting the number of rations you are generously giving to the rest of us as compensation for your tardiness. Aysa, please note the Doctor's gracious donation,” the Admiral's stare fixated on the man as he spoke.

“Done.” Doctor Ibble cringed as the disembodied voice rang across the room.

“Now that we are all here and on the Doctor's schedule, let us begin.” The Admiral stood up, motioning with one hand to the holoprojector, where a series of graphs and red percentages next to the various ships in the task force appeared. “This is a graphical representation of our hypermatter expenditures for the past few months. As you can

see, we have been quickly depleting our fuel reserves. At standard power levels, we will deplete our remaining hypermatter fuel within a month, and would run into major fuel problems if we were forced into any sort of prolonged engagement. Due to this, I have recalled the fleet here, both for protection and to redistribute what fuel we have across the fleet to prevent any power shortages.”

The Admiral paused, glancing between the assorted officers, and quirked an eyebrow at the sinister look that Lara shot Tavion's way.

“Sir, why don't we just purchase more through our proxies?” The Vice Admiral's brow was furrowed, he had heard their energy problem was bad, but was unaware of the magnitude of the problem.

“Unfortunately our credit reserves are also decidedly lacking. Various expenditures associated with repairing and refitting our vessels after the last major engagement with the Republic near the Minos Cluster has made that an impossibility. By fully expending our credit reserves we could purchase perhaps another few weeks worth of fuel. However, we have been presented with an opportunity.” The Admiral motioned toward the planet floating in the center of the table.

“This is Burnin Konn, a world relatively close to our current position. It is primarily used as a massive strip mine by Figg Excavations. However, recently, the corporation has begun construction of a shipyard in orbit, and has been moving supplies here to utilize it as a refinery nexus for the various planets nearby. To that end, they have established several large supply depots both on the ground and in orbit.” The Admiral pressed his fingers onto the table, a series of red platforms floating above the world while a few buildings appeared on the surface.

“Our intelligence networks have identified these...” Three of them were surrounded by a blue glow. “...as hypermatter storage and processing facilities. In addition, the other depots are currently holding enormous stores of both Dolovite and Kammris to be used by the shipyard when it is complete. Normally a target like this would be massively defended, however, Figg Excavations has assigned a low defensive priority to the world due to its position within Figg Space. We are going to exploit that error in judgment.”

The Admiral paused as Tavion raised his hand to speak. “Yes?”

“So, we're just going to walk in and take it?” He asked, incredulously.

“Eloquently put. Essentially, yes,” the Admiral manipulated the controls as he continued to speak. “Currently, major defenses are under construction and will consist of multiple Golan-class defense platforms, automated gun turrets, and a comprehensive planetary shield system; protecting a planet-wide turbolaser grid. The only aspect of this defensive matrix currently completed is the planetary turbolaser network, which, unlike most, is controlled by fire control nodes spread across the surface. Our operation will consist of a team of commandos infiltrating the Figg holding via masquerading as a construction crew, landing on the planet, and taking out the fire control node in sector

seventeen mu.” The Admiral motioned toward a now highlighted location on the world's smallest, most southern continent.

“Precisely timed, the operation will take place when our space target's orbit puts it squarely within the protection zone of these cannons; and one of the ground based depots is a few dozen kilometers from this particular control node location. Once disabled, the fleet will arrive in the system, eliminate what little resistance is mounted, and raid both the orbital platform and the ground based depot. By the time any sort of sizable response force is able to mobilize, we should be out of the sector with enough hypermatter and raw materials to solve both of our overarching issues.” The Admiral paused again, this time yielding to questions.

“Where did this intelligence come from? Which agent?” Lara asked the first.

“Sixteen, Nine, and Four have been conducting reconnaissance of the area for several days now.” The commandos visibly relaxed, trusting intelligence from one of their own.

“How long is the station going to be in a 'good' position?” Tavion followed up her questions with one of his own.

“Two standard hours,” the Admiral responded to the question, pointing at a list of information scrolling down the projection.

“Two hours?!” Doctor Ibble nearly dropped his datapad. “That isn't enough time to do a proper hypermatter transfer! There could be disastrous difficulties in both ensuring the safe transport an...”

The Admiral cleared his throat, his eyes boring holes into the doctor's soul with their hard stare.

“...and this is why I... invited... you to this meeting, Doctor Ibble. Your task will be to find a way to make the transfer possible. I will not accept failure.”

Doctor Ibble swallowed back bile, nodding.

“To answer the unspoken question.” The Admiral continued. “This is a full infiltration mission, no equipment or explosives will be provided to ensure that your cover cannot be easily compromised. You will have to improvise a way to take down the control installation. Through our various proxies, we have managed to get you an assignment on the world as construction contractors. On paper, your assigned duties are to survey land near and around the installation for the construction of a larger space port to service the supply depot, and determine suitable locations for additional defensive installations in the vicinity of the spaceport. Intelligence has forged identifies, papers, and the appropriate required permits. We are also dispatching actual technicians and engineers so that there is some work actually being done to quell any potential suspicions. Are there any further questions at this time?”

“What sort of resistance is expected?” The Admiral turned toward Tavion again.

“Unfortunately, it seems as if the Figgs have supplemented their normal security force with hired guns and bounty hunters, so there is no way to get an accurate determination of what sort of resistance will be in the area.” The response from the Admiral did not please anyone at the table.

“Pah. Remind me to smack those three for giving us garbage intelligence,” Tavion said, sighing.

The Admiral shook his head, frowning. “Any more questions which do not have a pointless follow-up statement?”

Hearing none, the Admiral nodded. “A full mission briefing will be given to all involved parties at zero nine hundred tomorrow. Doctor Ibble, I suggest that you get there on time.”

That's not really a suggestion. Lara thought to herself, shifting uncomfortably.

The room quickly cleared. The soldiers meandered off to attend to their various duties, while Doctor Ibble sprinted through the corridors of the ship to try to meet the Admiral's request. Soon, only the Admiral and Larkin remained in the briefing room.

“I wasn't aware that our situation was that dire.” Larkin leaned back in his chair, propping his boots up on the one adjacent to it. “My last logistical report said that we had a few months of hypermatter in reserve, not to mention a substantial credit reserve.”

“Indeed, our engagement with Task Force Copperleaf was more damaging than the initial estimates,” the Admiral sat down.

“Ah, yes. The Manticore, Domination, and Termination were in dry dock for quite some time.” The Vice Admiral nodded, remembering the short but viscous engagement with elements from the New Republic Task Force.

“Mhm. The newest inventories have put us in our current predicament,” The Admiral said, picking up a datapad.

“So I probably should have read them instead of putting them on the bottom of my datacard pile.” Larkin grinned as the Admiral frowned.

“Indeed.”

“I suppose I had better move some resources around to prepare the transports we're going to be using. How many are we sending?” Larkin's hand hovered over a datapad.

“One of our bulk freighters and a trio of Lambdas.”

“How legitimate do you want it?” Larkin asked.

“The technical teams have instructions to actually perform the work, but the forgeries are superficial. They will not hold up under scrutiny.”

“That legitimate... ugh. You know, you don't make my job easy.” Larkin grinned, removing his feet from the chair and standing up.

“If it were easy, you would not enjoy it.” The Admiral's voice was chilling, very matter-of-fact.

“Ah... Yes. I suppose so. Is there anything else?”

The Admiral shook his head negatively, and Larkin took his leave moments later. The Admiral waited for a minute before bridging his hands under his chin. He allowed his mind to drift, his cold eyes fixated on the dead brown planet displayed in front of him which held the key to the survival of his fleet.

Tavion already hated what he was wearing. Overly bulky and baggy, the jumpsuit felt like it was made for someone about twenty kilos heavier; and somehow the assurances that it was 'just his size' hadn't convinced him otherwise. He frowned, running a hand through his hair and rubbing the back of his neck to ease what was most certainly the beginnings of a tension headache.

“This sucks,” he complained.

“Tell me about it.” Lara was moving along with him as he and a myriad of others dressed nearly exactly like him boarded their designated Lambda shuttle.

“How do people actually do anything in this? It has pockets in places I didn't even know pockets could go! It's so baggy I feel like if we get hit by a strong enough wind I'll be blown away.”

“I was being sarcastic. What I meant to say was 'Shut up and stop bitching',” Lara stuck her tongue out at him.

“...I hate you.”

“Yo! Watch out! Fiddy coming through!” Fifty rushed up behind the two, strangely at home in the technician garb, and the reason for that was obvious as various pieces of equipment and stray wire were poking out of nearly every pocket of his jumpsuit.

“When did you start calling yourself 'Fiddy'?” Tavion shook his head as Fifty moved past them, planting himself in one of the seats.

“Ugh. He's been watching too many 'up and coming artists' on the holonet. He thinks he's some sort of celebrity.” Lara rolled her eyes, scrunching her nose in his general direction.

“Pfft. Don't hate. Just because you didn't think of something this cool first doesn't give you the right to say stuff,” Fifty defended himself, taking a seat.

“No, the fact that you're lame gives me the right,” Lara countered.

Fifty blew her off, waving his hand dismissively in her direction. Lara and Tavion took seats next to each other, securing themselves in their crash webbing. The dull thrum of the Lambda's ion engines filled the cargo area as its pilot began pre-flight procedures. The two of them nodded or waved to various other members of their unit as they boarded, most of them looking just as awkward as the two of them in the oversized jumpsuits. The only ones who didn't seem uncomfortable were the few technicians assigned to their shuttle and Fifty, they seemed quite at home in the tent-like dressings.

Tavion removed his identification papers from a pack he'd been given, looking them over.

“Marik. Again? Ugh. Intel is so unoriginal with these names.” Tavion rolled his eyes, starting to commit the varied information on the papers to memory.

“Are you complaining again?”

“Well, Lara.” He said, mockingly. “I'm trying to make conversation since right now you're about as engaging as a Kitonak.”

“Touche. Also, I'm Crys.” Lara was investigating her own papers.

“Sorry, Crys.” Tavion chuckled, letting out a short breath as the loading ramp began to rise

“Hey... Marik.” Lara grinned at her friend. “Where are you assigned anyway?”

“Survey team for the spaceport, you?” He had to speak up as the Lambda's reactor powered to full, the vessel ripping out of the Termination's hangar and into the soupy nebula surrounding it.

“Eh, I'm on the team that's going to be staking out defenses for that depot.” Lara turned toward Fifty as he snickered from across the Lambda, just barely audible above the roar of the engines.

“Really? Me too!” He grinned back at her.

The look that crossed her face would drive even the most ferocious Wookiee to run in terror. Somehow, she knew he was behind it.

Chapter 2 – The Best Laid Plans

The only thing worse than the view is the smell.

Jarric took another sip of caf, looking out across the desolate landscape of Burnin Konn. With the vegetation on the planet long dead from their mining operations, the only thing that remained was the rancid smell of heavy oils, fuel vapors, and ore dust which seemed to seep into everything despite the air filters. Sheltered and comfortable inside an airspeeder, Jarric leaned over to pick up a datapad that he'd haphazardly thrown on the empty passenger seat. His feet propped up near the steering column, he let out a half sigh as he set about doing real work; reassigning assets and personnel to the various projects going on around the site. He'd been with Figg Excavations long enough to land the cushy supervisor job, but not long enough to outright avoid the operation here. Eventually, once the mining area was fully set up, the starport completed, and the operation moving, it wouldn't be so bad; but right now it was about as boring as watching moss grow. He smirked, watching a pair of technicians trying to walk through a wall of dust picked up by the sometimes torrential winds.

Suckers. He thought to himself, taking a swig of his caf. Over the brim of the cup, his eyes caught sight of someone jogging toward his speeder, waving at him through the swirling dust-storm which was beginning to pick up outside. He chuckled, recognizing the figure and leaned over to unlock the passenger door. Moments later it swung open, a disheveled female Twi'lek plopping down in the seat next to him. Dust rolled down her jumpsuit as she raised her hands to her head, unwrapping thick cloth that she'd put over her head and lekku.

"Ugh! Can you believe how fast this storm came in?!" She squealed, removing enough to reveal her smudged blue face. She was pretty, as far as Twi'leks went, with high cheek bones, bright, lively eyes, and a smile that could make you feel warm on Hoth. Jarric chuckled.

"I'm surprised you haven't learned better by now, Na'tak, smart girl like you should know these things," He said.

"Blah! Nobody told me it would get everywhere! You have someone clean this thing out, right?" Na'tak asked, rolling her sleeves up a bit.

Jarric nodded, and in response she began to brush herself off, most of the particulates being sucked up by the air speeder's filtration unit and disposed of; and the remainder settled into the fabric of the seat she was on.

"Oh cmon, now you're just making more work for them," he joked at her expense.

"Good! Lazy bums... get to sit in the hangar building all day while I have to be out in this crap." She motioned outside the speeder, where the dust storm had picked up to the point where it was impossible to see anything further out than thirty meters or so. "Kinda like you, Jarric."

"Hey now, I don't want to hear you complaining, you're getting paid too much to complain."

"Hon, I'm never paid too much to complain." She grinned at him playfully, removing her gloves to reveal her slender hands. At first glance, you wouldn't expect this dainty Twi'lek to be a weapons specialist. Hired as a contractor, Na'tak had been instrumental in setting up initial surveys for defensive emplacements, and had made several recommendations to Figg Excavations.

Jarric laughed at that. "Well, well then, show me what I am paying you the big money for, what've you got?"

Na'tak pulled a datacard out from one of the pockets of her jumpsuit, handing it over to Jarric, who slipped it into his datapad.

"I've scouted three sites for a guard installation, personally I like Site One, it's got a bit of an elevation advantage, and won't interfere with any sort of plans for expansion. Of course, it'll be a bit more costly. The site's nearly directly over an ore deposit, so it'll have to be mined out first. The other two are going to be cheaper, but may interfere with future plans to expand either the starport or the depot," as she spoke, she pointed the various sites out to him on his datapad.

"Hrm. Might be a tough sell, you know how my employer feels about cost."

"Uh, yeah." She rolled her eyes, remembering the argument she'd had with Figg Excavation's upper management about their terrible idea to link the planetary turbolaser system to centralized fire control stations.

"Anyway." She continued. "I've put down markers for proximity sensors as you requested, but I'm going to need more help to fully survey the starport expansion. When is that new team coming in? I mean, I know they're coming today, but what time?"

Jarric shook his head before he glanced down at the datapad in his lap, tapping through a few pages to look at the incoming/outgoing transport list. "I think this is the tenth time you've asked. They'll be here... soon. They're scheduled for about fifteen minutes from now, but with these storms they'll get down as soon as they can."

"Where are they from?" Na'tak asked, curious.

"Rothana Heavy Engineering, about a hundred techs and support personnel," Jarric read the information from his pad.

"Good. That'll really help."

"They'd better!" Jarric set his empty cup of caf down. "They're costing me about twenty-five thousand credits a day. I'm going to put them directly under you, the Engineering super that they gave me is a moron and I don't feel like dealing with him."

"Sounds good to me." Na'tak grinned, leaning back in the passenger seat of the speeder and raising her hands up behind her head to stretch out. Jarric stole a glance at the very shapely

female next to him; even through the bulky jumpsuit, she was pretty. He turned back to his datapad as Na'tak relaxed, and nodded in the direction of the storm.

“Looks like it's breaking a bit, quick one.” He reached out for a communicator on the dash, picking it up and toggling it. “This is Supervisor Terrana to control, come in.”

“Control here. What's up, Jarric?” The controller responded quickly.

“Hey, the storm's breaking, can we get those transports down now?” Jarric asked, staring forward as he spoke to a man a few hundred kilometers above his head.

“Eh. They haven't been fully inspected yet, they're holding in orbit. We've got a bit of a backlog that we need to get through first,” the controller responded after checking his system.

“Did you run a scan?” Jarric rolled his eyes, orbital command was terribly slow with everything.

“Yeah. It came up clean.”

“Well, then give them permission to land.”

The voice on the other end groaned. “Jarric, you know I'm not supposed to do that. The last time you asked me to do it I got graveyard shift for a month.”

“I'll cover for you, I promise. I need them down here before the storm picks up again, c'mon. I'll even throw in a bottle of Corellian whiskey for your troubles,” Jarric's tempting offer brought half a minute of silence to the conversation.

“Well... Fine. Fine! I'll push em' through, but you owe me, and more than the bottle.”

“Don't worry, I gotcha.”

“You'd better, control out.” With the line cut, Jarric leaned back in his chair again, glancing over at Na'tak to see her flashing a large toothy grin.

“Done your hard work for the day?” Na'tak asked, still flashing her white teeth.

“Oh stow it!” They both laughed, looking up to the sky in anticipation of the new arrivals.

Ten minutes later, the roaring repulsorlifts of the three Lambda shuttles drowned out the howling winds outside as they set down within one of the landing bays at the small space port. Huge docking bay doors closed overhead, and slammed together with a resonating calamity that traveled through the facility. The Lambda's loading ramps lowered as two figures walked from a blast door over toward them. Disembarking from the transports, about a hundred technicians emerged, many carrying equipment to offload it from the shuttles. A few of the new arrivals walked over to meet the two approaching individuals. Jarric extended his hand as three of the technicians stopped about a meter in front of them.

“Welcome to Burnin Konn, I'm Supervisor Jarric Terrana; lead engineer for the project in this sector,” he said with a smile.

“Nice to meet you, sir. I'm Marik Lartomi, lead systems engineer. This is Crys Valoren...” Marik paused as the two shook hands. “...and Jaxter Kimara.”

“You can call me Jax, sir,” Jax nodded in his direction.

“All right, Jax.” Jarric nodded approvingly at the trio as he lowered his hand. He looked down at his datapad as he motioned toward the female to his left, who was removing wrappings from her head and lekku.

“This is Na'tak, she'll be giving you direction and supervising your work while you're here.” Had his head been raised, he would have seen the brief moment where Marik's eyes widened and met with Na'tak's; where the act was reciprocated for a split second. Both quickly erased the looks from their faces, just before Jarric raised his head again.

“How was the trip from Rothana?” He asked.

“Uh.” Marik's mind was abruptly yanked down from the orbit it had attained. “Eh. It wasn't so bad. Being stuck in those Lambdas is a pain in the ass,” he said, quickly recovering.

“Yeah, Rothana. Long trip. Must have been a long trip from Rothana.” Na'tak's tone was lost on Jarric, who just nodded and went back to tapping things into his datapad.

“Yes. Yes it was.” Marik shot a look at Na'tak, rolling his eyes at her.

“Well. I'll let you ladies and gentlemen get acquainted with each other. Na'tak make sure you give me updates on your progress. If you need me, she's got my frequency.” He tipped his hand to the trio of technicians before taking his leave. Once he was through the blast door, Na'tak placed her hands on her hips, canting her right leg to the side, and dropped her head; staring at 'Marik'. She opened her mouth to speak, but was interrupted when a wide-eyed 'Jaxter' stepped forward.

“Are you *the* Na'tak? Oh man! I am such a fan! I've heard so much about you, your work in theoreti...” He was cut off by the blue Twi'lek raising a finger and planting it on his lips. Fifty looked like he was about to faint.

“Shhh, nerd, the grown-ups need to have a discussion.” She smiled sweetly at him, before returning her eyes to their previous target. “And before you ask, no there are no listening devices here, I haven't installed them yet.”

“...Uh huh. The hell are you doing here?” 'Marik', actually Tavion, asked.

“*Legitimately* working. And I'm going to ask you the same thing, Spectre. By the Goddess...” She shook her head, looking directly into his eyes. “What are *you* doing here?”

“Oh, you know... things,” he replied sheepishly.

“Don't give me that Bantha fodder. When you guys are involved...” She extended her arm, waving it furiously and pointing at the 'technicians' unloading equipment from the Lambdas. “...It means either something is blowing up or something is about to blow up.”

Tavion cringed, glancing around, a few Figg mechanics were starting to enter the landing bay to service and refuel the Lambdas. “Can we do this later? Maybe after dinner? Somewhere private.”

Na'tak glanced around, spotting what he had. She sighed, and nodded at him. Removing a piece of flimsiplast and a writing utensil. She scribbled a rough map and a frequency on it, before handing it to Tavion. “My personal comm-freq and a map to my quarters. After nine I'll be free. This had better be good.”

“It is. I promise. Go on, we'll talk later,” he said, already frustrated at their turn of fortune.

Na'tak frowned, not believing him, and turned to leave, walking away. Fifty stared at her backside as she left.

“So. Who is that?” 'Crys', commonly known as Lara, had her arms crossed over her chest. “I'd ask if we were compromised but with the way Fifty is literally drooling all over himself I assume she's at least a 'friend'.”

“That's right, you never go by her place... ah... She's an arms dealer on the *Gem in the Darkness*, a shadow port along the Corellian trade spine. We've had really good relations with her as a group and many of us individually. She's fine. She may even help us,” Tavion explained.

“Really, she seems like she's working for the Figg's. How do we know she won't screw us?” Lara asked, her lips puckered.

“Lara, relax. Really. She's not going to do anything to compromise us, yet... and she'll help us if the situation is right for her,” Tavion tried to get her to calm down, his eyes peeled for evesdroppers.

“And if it's not?” She asked.

“Then we're in deep poodoo.”

The three watched her leave the hangar, before they turned back to help the others unload their equipment from the Lambda shuttles. The three of them had the same thought as they tried to distract themselves by unloading the heavier equipment:

It is going to be a long four hours.

The remainder of the day was relatively uneventful for the Imperial forces. Able to blend in with the normal ebb and flow of events in the small spaceport, they were given temporary quarters and their initial assignments. With a few hours to burn, a few members of the infiltration team,

including Tavion, decided to take stock of where they were and just wander around. The installation itself was a collection of prefabricated structures arrayed around a few permanent landing bays.

The entire area was fairly clean, with a shimmering magnetic field being generated from a large tower in the center of the area to prevent the environmental hazards of the world from negatively affecting the starport. The inner cluster of buildings closest to the starport consisted of storage and maintenance bays, along with a rather sizable vehicle hangar with tall, wide open bay doors. Inside were a series of airspeeders, landspeeders, and a pair of T-2B repulsor tanks being serviced by Figg maintenance crews. Outside that area, in a ring around the entire installation were prefabricated living quarters. Each had ten separate apartment-like living areas, with dozens of the structures dotting the complex randomly. People, mostly technicians, could be seen entering and exiting the structures. The Imperial infiltrators made a point to note the few structures which seemed to house soldiers; marking them down for information.

Along the perimeter, emitter nodes kept the magnetic field active, and watchtowers were beginning to be constructed in areas that Na'tak had indicated with smoke emitters. Huge scaffolds with heavy-duty industrial lights rose into the sky as rotating teams began setting the first vertical support beams into the duracrete base. It seemed as if people were working on them around the clock to get them erected as quickly as possible. It was obvious that this particular area was going to become a major part of the Figg operations on this planet. Even as the system's star began to set on the horizon, larger transports began to descend, bringing titanic loads of raw materials and heavy mining equipment.

All in all, it was a terrible place to be an infiltrator. Aside from visual surveillance, it would be very difficult to get anywhere interesting without being spotted by someone. The construction crews were working around the clock to begin to improve the security of the area, and the arrival of troop transports was inevitable.

As time passed, the random pedestrian traffic began to peter out, with many of the technical and construction staff taking to their rooms for rest. Even the construction crews seemed a bit lighter, with a fewer people working once the sun set. A single figure walked across the base toward a very specific residential complex. Nobody paid him any mind, there was no reason to; and it was all the same to the figure. Rapping his knuckles on the door, he slipped inside once the door opened. Na'tak closed the door behind Tavion, and rolled her eyes at him. Wearing a white t-shirt and sweatpants, her rather curvy body was far more visible than when she was wearing her normal clothing.

Na'tak motioned toward a large couch at the far end of the room. It was a fairly spacious inside, with an open auto-chef area on one side and a door on the left which led to a refresher and bedroom. The central area had a holoprojector on one end of the room and a workbench on the other side which was packed with datapads and various weapons. Tavion plopped down on the couch unceremoniously, looking up at her with a grin.

“Well, I suppose you're wondering why we're here, right?” He asked coyly.

“No. I was hoping you'd be able to help me with some survey calculations and galven coil design,” she responded sarcastically. Na'tak sat down on the other end of the couch, crossing her legs and leaning back.

“You're pretty when you're mad,” Tavion had very little shame.

“I'm pretty all the time, but thanks. Now spill it,” Na'tak's bright eyes stared at him.

“Damn. I thought that'd distract you.” Tavion grinned.

“Not a chance, **spill it!**”

“All right.” Tavion's face got deathly serious. “Standard thing applies, you good with that?”

“Yeah yeah, if I tell anyone then you'll have a new blue me-hat because you'll skin me alive or some fodder like that, then feed me to Ten... whatever. Spill it.” Na'tak had dealt with the Task Force before, she knew their operational paranoia.

“Hey, I've gotta check. Right. Long story short... We're here for hypermatter. That and some ore,” he was truthful with her, it wouldn't serve him to be dishonest.

“What?” Na'tak blinked. Tavion could tell the gears in her head were going because she was subconsciously wiggling her bare toes.

“Yep. Energy shortage, fleet wide. The depot here has enough to take care of us for a long time, and we're going to make some credits while we're at it.”

“Jeez, Spectre. You really know how to put me in a spot.” She frowned, sighing.

“What do you mean?” He asked.

“Who do you think they're contracting to do the security for this place!?”

“Judging by your reaction, you,” Tavion stated the obvious.

“Yes!” She squealed. “I mean, this could be really bad for me.”

“Well, we'd reimburse you,” he said passingly.

“What about my reputation?! You really can't pay people off for something like that!” She was getting angry, her voice raising.

“Yeah, there is that.” Tavion rubbed the back of his head. “Well, wait, they're just starting to build the defenses, right?”

“Yeah. I just started last week,” she said slowly, in an attempt to calm down.

“Well... we're only going to be here a few days, I think. Why don't you just work slowly, then do a huge 'I told you so'?” Tavion asked, reaching for a solution for her.

Na'tak paused, unfurling her legs and letting her bare feet land on the floor. She furrowed her brow, deep in thought for some time.

“That... could work. I mean they've already rejected me once... I could propose some radi... hmmm.” She spoke like this to herself for a short while, before raising her head. “This isn't very ethical.”

“You're an arms dealer,” Tavion said, very matter-of-factly.

“Point. Fine. I'll help you, but I want three things.” Na'tak's eyes glistened with mischief.

“Er. Well, I... let's hear them.” Tavion sighed, rubbing the back of his head again as he yielded to the stare of death coming from the Twi'lek female.

She extended her right index finger, pointing her other at it. “First, I want out of here if things go wrong, no questions asked. Second, I expect to be reimbursed for my help. Generously. Very generously if things go wrong. Third, I want to talk to the Admiral.” Tavion blinked, shifting uncomfortably.

“I can do one and two, no problem... number three...” He trailed off as Na'tak just shrugged.

“Those are my conditions. Take em' or leave em'. If you leave em', I won't tell Jarric, I owe you that much, but I won't help. Here's a hint: You need my help.” She grinned brightly, much to Tavion's displeasure.

“Ugh. How about a comm with him?” He countered, somewhat in desperation. What she was asking would put him in a very bad predicament.

“Face to face or no deal. Business meeting. You know how I do business.”

Tavion let out a long sigh. “All right, deal. I don't... ugh. Fine! Let's not talk about this anymore, but deal.”

Na'tak grinned widely, lunging across the couch to grab Tavion and wrap him in a hug, planting a soft kiss on his cheek. “Thank you sweetie.”

“Oh, yeah. Thank me for you taking advantage of me... How the hell does that work,” he shook his head, unable to believe what he'd just agreed to.

“It just does, deal with it.” She grinned, leaning back again. “So, I guess you want some information.”

“For what I am inevitably going to be paying you? Yeah, at least information.” Tavion waved his hands defensively as Na'tak gave him a devilish look. “...No. Not that. Oh c'mon.” She laughed at him.

“I know. I'm just playin'. Drink? We'll be here awhile.”

“After what I just agreed to give you? I'll take three.” Tavion rubbed his face. His head would be throbbing before the night was over.

While the Task Force's infiltrators were continuing their mission on the ground, a few of the ships of the fleet were situating themselves in the hyper route between Burnin Konn and Zhanvox. Spearheaded by the Termination, the Manticore, and two of the fleet's Interdictor cruisers were waiting patiently. Dwarfing the modified Imperial II-class Star Destroyer which was situated below the massive warship, the Termination was buzzing with fighters and support craft running combat patrols. On the bridge, the Admiral sat in his command chair, watching a holographic display of the fleet gently float in front of him, with a counter ticking down the seconds. To his right, Vice Admiral Gaunt stood, watching the display as well.

“Only a few minutes now, sir,” he said, breaking a long silence.

“Thank you, Vice Admiral. I am able to read.” The Admiral stared forward, his eyes fixated on the counter.

“Sorry, sir, just making conversation.” Larkin turned back to the forward viewport.

“I am not in the mood for a conversation when we are about to initiate a critical part of our operation.”

Larkin shrugged, adjusting his cap. “You should lighten up a bit. Sir.”

The Admiral glared at Larkin, who seemed undaunted by the gaze. “I... Enough. The convoy will arrive in one minute. Tactical.”

“Sir!” The junior officer yelled from his console.

“Shields up. Battle stations. Communications, I need to know everything they try to say once they emerge from hyperspace.” The Admiral adjusted how he was sitting as the holographic display registered the small flotilla's shields raising. He'd waited as long as possible to raise the ship's shields in order to conserve energy. klaxons went off across the ship as the crew readied for imminent combat.

The space in front of the Termination lit up as a rather large convoy ripped out of hyperspace, yanked out by the Interdictor's gravity wells. The fairly heavy escort, spearheaded by an older Victory-class Star Destroyer seemed to hesitate for a moment. The Imperials did not.

“All forward batteries, open fire!” The red gleam in the Admiral's eye was sinister, and his face lit up in a green hue as the massive forward armament of the Termination opened up. Dozens of green turbolaser blasts rippled out in waves, slamming into the Victory Destroyer's unshielded hull as their crew desperately attempted to raise their shields. Armor plating melted off of the

ship under the sheer force of the brutal attack as the Task Force's starfighters and strike forces lanced forward. The heavy turbolasers on the Termination raked up the enemy destroyer's hull as its weapons began to return fire, splashing harmlessly against the Termination's heavy shielding. Focusing on the base of the Victory's command tower, a small explosion rippled up the front of the ship before dissipating into the coldness of space.

The vessel began listing to the side, as the Termination's gunners were focusing on the enemy's critical systems, utterly decimating the exterior hull of the ship. Eventually, the vessel's shields raised, temporarily sheltering the ship from the attack.

“Report,” the Admiral did not take his eyes off the enemy fleet.

“Their flagship's exterior hull has been heavily damaged, prow targeting array is offline, their shields are currently holding but are dropping rapidly. The other enemy escorts are accelerating and beginning to launch starfighters. I'm reading just about three wings of mixed X-wings and Y-wings. Two Nebulons, two Dreadnoughts, four Corellan Corvettes, along with that Victory destroyer.” The tactical officer was looking over the shoulder of one of the enlisted men at the sensor consoles.

“Very well. Begin ionizing the enemy convoy craft, continue the assault on their flagship.”

The Admiral's eyes continued to light up as return fire from the enemy fleet began to intensify against his own vessel. Its powerful shield grids were shrugging off the assault, but were slowly weakening, partially due to the damage, and partially due to the conscious effort to conserve hypermatter that the fleet was forced to make. Blue ion energy joined the green bolts racing out of the craft, sending waves of energy over the various convoy craft which were scrambling in an attempt to get out of the gravity wells of the Interdictors. A few of them fell dead under the capital ship's assault, getting caught in the Termination's tractor beams as, even with the battle raging, it began dragging disabled ships toward it.

The Task Force's starfighters ripped into the Figg's X-wings and Y-wings, the shielded TIE Interceptors displaying superior training as they utilized the various convoy ships as cover, and came down on the ships in waves. A few of the Y-wings broke through the Imperial lines, launching torpedos at their Interdictor cruisers, only to have most of them shot down by point defense cannons on the Termination, and the Interdictors themselves were utilizing their quad laser cannons to send waves of fire along the attack vectors. The few warheads that slammed home did minimal damage to the ship's shields, both Interdictors were able to shrug off the disorganized, weak assault.

“Sir! Picking up communications from the enemy ships. They are requesting reinforcements from Zhanvox. Estimated time to arrival is... Twenty one minutes,” the communication officer held his headset close to his ears to ensure he picked everything up.

The Admiral closed his eyes for a few moments, before shaking his head. “No. They're too close. Seventeen minutes. They figure we're listening. Smart.”

“Sir! Enemy Victory's shields are almost down, eleven percent and collapsing. Shield grid one is down to forty two percent,” the tactical officer reported.

“Rotate shield grids one and four, redirect fire to their command tower.”

The Termination, taking a page from the ships of the Mon Calamari, used a complex shield system consisting of four layers. The vessel was able to project these layers over its hull, and rotate them to allow their drained shields to recharge during combat, dramatically prolonging the staying power of the vessel. Normal tactics of focusing fire on one section of the hull to overload the shields were rendered useless; as the enemy fleet was quickly realizing. The Admiral watched his display as the orange layer of shielding dissipated, before being replaced by a fresh blue layer; and then re-establish itself a few molecules from the hull to begin recharging.

The battle raged for minutes, the Victory Destroyer reduced to a drifting hulk in space as its command tower exploded under the heavy turbolaser fire. While the Imperial forces were taking starfighter losses and sustaining shield damage to their capital ships, the Termination and Manticore were herding transport craft into their cavernous hangars. The defending capital ships continued to strike back at the Imperials, their fire intensely focused on their command ship.

“Shield layer two is down, three is sustaining damage. Seventy eight percent. One is only back up to forty two.”

The Admiral nodded imperceptibly. Impossibly, his eyes picked up the faintest of course corrections from one of the enemy's vessels.

“Helm! Thirty degree starboard rotation, flank speed!” He screamed.

With a lurch, the massive vessel lunged forward, twisting to the side directly into the path of one of the convoy's Corellian Corvettes as it tried to cut across the Termination's prow hull. The tip of the destroyer caught the vessel just to the side of its bulbous bridge; its shields immediately collapsing. Ripping into its hull with a grinding noise that resonated through the ship, the Termination's hull bit into the small vessel like a lightsaber going through Sullustian jam. It raked through the ship, killing dozens as they were incinerated by the Termination's shielding or jettisoned into space via the sudden decompression. As quickly as it had begun, the grinding stopped, the corvette's hulk drifting off with its remaining momentum.

“Tactical.” The Admiral spoke once his vessel stopped shaking from the impact. “Report on the cargo craft, and their fleet.”

“We've captured nine of the seventeen cargo ships, sir. Their Victory destroyer is dead. One of their corvettes is ad...”

“Tell me what I do not know, Tactical.” The Admiral interrupted the report, frowning. The tactical officer could feel, rather than see, the look on the Admiral's face.

“Er. Yes. Uh. One of their Nebulon frigates has lost shields, the other is fine. Dreadnoughts are at about sixty percent shields, and the three Corvettes have sustained minimal damage,” he reported quickly.

“Very well. Focus all batteries on that damaged frigate. Signal the fleet that we're withdrawing. Now.” The Admiral was keeping an eye on the chronometer that was slowly ticking.

As the Imperial fleet began to rotate toward their hyper vector, the batteries on the Termination focused on the designated frigate. Waves of energy washed over its hull, explosive decompression causing bulk heads and chunks of the hull to be blown off the vessel. As if predicting its fate, escape pods began jettisoning from the craft. Unfortunately, the small warship was unable to hold up against the mile and a half long vessel, along with the various strike craft swarming around it, and exploded in a brilliant white nova as its main reactor detonated. After gathering their strike craft and starfighters, even amongst the heavy fire still coming from the escorting fleet, the Imperial task force jumped to hyperspace, their mission complete.

The loss of critical convoy craft carrying weapons and equipment would severely hamper the Figg's defensive construction efforts on Burnin Konn. In addition, they'd be forced to reinforce their convoys incoming from Zhanvox. Believing their existing escort to be heavy as it was, they would need to reassign ships from the defense of the world itself to their convoys. As it was, two Star Destroyers and a pair of Interdictors could do some damage to convoy craft, but certainly not deal any damage to a planet.

Certainly not.

Work on Burnin Konn was dull. A day's work involved walking around the desolate landscape, dealing with gale-force winds blowing dust particles in your face; planting recording devices in the ground and waiting for ten minutes or so while they took measurements. They repeated this for a few hours before getting a short break to eat and drink, only to be sent out again to somewhere worse, to do the exact same thing. Tavion spit a wad of mucus and dust out of his mouth, trying to get the metallic taste of the air out of his system while waiting for his recording device to finish. The technician with him, another of the infiltrators but not one of his normal commando brothers, looked almost at peace with the work. Fortunately, Tavion had managed to distract himself with planning their inevitable attack on the installation. With the information given to him by Na'tak, they'd figured out a few gaps in the security coverage on the ground; all they needed were some weapons and explosives. Unfortunately, Na'tak had refused to help procure them, as they'd be easily traced back to her, so Tavion had been tasked with figuring out just how to get what they needed. His thoughts were broken by a tap on his shoulder. His head turned so that his eyes could focus on the man who was now talking to him with a stupid grin on his face.

“Don't you love this? Field work is the best,” he said.

“Ugh. You're kidding, right? This is horrid.” Tavion yanked the recorder out of the ground as it beeped; finished taking its readings. The tech bent down, planting a white smoke beacon where the recorder was.

“Ah. You're one of the Commandos,” he said, quietly, after doing a quick glance around for eavesdroppers.

“Yeah, sorry for stepping on your toes here,” Tavion was more sorry that he was stuck here.

“Nah, it's great. Normally these recorders are a pain in the ass to set up and take apart, but you're pretty much doing it spot on. I've gotta ask, how much longer are we going to be here?”

Now it was Tavion's turn to glance around, and he spoke very softly. “As soon as we get weapons, a few of us are going to give it a shot tonight and if it goes well... then we'll probably hit the day after, around zero two hundred, and be out before breakfast.”

The technician nodded, it hadn't been so bad, he thought. A bit more boring than his normal work on board the Termination, but it was a nice change of pace.

“Well, if you need anything let me know,” he said to Tavion, nodding at him.

“A shower, and my armor. This dust gets everywhere. I think I'm about three kilos heavier just because of it.”

“That's because you're wearing your outfit wrong,” the technician quipped, laughing to himself.

“...What?” Tavion was stupefied.

“Yeah, come here.” Tavion wandered over to the tech, who slipped his hands down his neck.

“There's a flap here, feel it? You pull this up and it cups your neck to prevent anything from slipping down on you. And then here...” He reached under his shirt, pulling an identical flap of cloth out and draping it over his waist. “Helps keep things from going up... and down here will take care of your boots.” He did the same thing to his ankles.

“Well, thanks for feeling me up, I feel like I should give you some credits... and thank you for ending this damned torture.” Tavion was absolutely relieved at the drastic improvement.

“No problem. Just remember who helped you out when things start getting crazy. You're in our world when we're doing this stuff; and most of us are handy with a blaster... but not like you guys.” The technician grinned, it wasn't often they could one-up one of the Commandos.

“Ha! I will. Thanks. I think we're done here, right?” The technician nodded, and Tavion paused. “Hey, what's your name? Like, your actual name, not a designation.”

“Uh.” The man blinked, it was rare that one of the soldiers asked a question like that. “Elliot, sir.”

“Tavion.” He extended his hand, grasping the other man's. “Nice to meet you.”

“You too... You're not about to kill me, right?” He asked, shaking Tavion's hand slowly.

“What?” Tavion blinked.

“Well, there's this rumor... you see... that uh, nobody knows you elite commando's real names outside the corps, and if anyone finds out; well, you have to off 'em.”

Tavion laughed for a good ten seconds or so before shaking his head, grinning. “No... No. But had I known that I'd have played you for it.”

“Well, that's good to know.” Elliot returned the grin.

“Well, Elliot, let's get back to Na'tak with the readings we've taken, see if she has anything else for us.”

Elliot nodded in affirmation, picking up a few pieces of equipment that they'd left on the ground before moving with Tavion across the desolate landscape. With no foliage or vegetation, it was quite easy to see their destination – a 109-Z hovercraft sitting about a kilometer and a half away from their current position. It took them about ten minutes, and when they arrived they saw a few additional teams coming back to the speeder where they'd started from. They were mixed, two of the five returning pairs were Imperial infiltrators, while the other three were Figg personnel. They had split most of their people into small groups across the complex to gather more through intelligence and lower their chances of being detected; it made communication a bit difficult, but made things significantly safer.

“Anything new out there?” Na'tak waved at the two as they approached, sitting on the side of the speeder with her legs dangling off.

“Dust, rocks, not really.” Tavion shrugged.

“There's a Kommite deposit about a klick underground at Site Two. Noted it on the pad.” He tossed a datapad to Na'tak, which she easily caught, sticking her tongue out at Tavion.

“Looks like I've got one good engineer!” She said, at Tavion's expense.

“Ha ha. Very funny. Anything new?”

Na'tak's face went deadly serious for a moment, and she nodded; almost imperceptibly motioning toward another team which was a few hundred meters away. Tavion nodded, understanding what she meant. Once all of the teams had arrived, and Na'tak listened to their initial reports, she twisted about, picking up a crate from inside the speeder, and set it down on the ground.

“So, a bit of news for everyone. A couple hours ago the resupply convoy that was supposed to bring a bunch of troops, equipment, and weapons here was attacked by an unknown Imperial force. They report that the attackers used two Star Destroyers, one of a custom design, and a pair of Interdictors...”

Tavion suppressed a smirk, he recognized the tactic; it was one that the Task Force used often to attack convoys.

“...So, seeing as how there are hostiles fairly close to us, near Zhanvox, some of the defending ships in orbit are being re-routed to convoy defense duties to prevent this from happening again. As it is, we're going to be set back probably a week or two, and we can't equip any sort of garrison so that's on hold until we can get more weapons from the suppliers.” Na'tak seemed a bit flustered, and took a deep breath before continuing.

“And, seeing as how our mutual employer absolutely loves to turn down, deny, or otherwise ignore my recommendations; I'm supposed to arm you all.”

That got Tavion to react, his eyebrow raised; and murmurs broke out amongst the technicians. The Imperial infiltrators joined in as an afterthought, as to not look suspicious by remaining quiet.

“Since they're operating so close, the company is worried about any sort of attack that may come our way. I think it's a bunch of poodoo, and told them it was a really stupid idea to arm you all. Unnecessary, and stupid.” The Imperials all managed to suppress their laughter.

“So...” She kicked the crate, opening it up to reveal a series of holsters and DH-17 blaster pistols. “Grab one of each. And before you ask, yes, this means you all get hazard pay.” There were a series of exclamations of approval to that.

The men each went in, grabbing a blaster and a holster. Within seconds, Tavion had it secured around his waist, had checked its power pack and Tibanna gas canister, and had it holstered. Most of the others were still fiddling with wrapping the holsters around their waists.

“Looks like you've done that before.” One of the Figg technicians motioned over to Tavion, who instantly regretted his undue diligence in being quick to arm himself.

“Eh. I served in the Rothana Defense Force while finishing classes.” He said, thinking quickly. “We sat around all day, did drills, and made sure that we looked good. This is pretty much all I remember from that.”

A few of them laughed, one of the others nodded toward him. “I did the same thing, signed up for a home guard while finishing up my studies.” He was the second to manage to get his weapon in the holster. “Boring crud.”

“Yeah, but hey, didn't have to pay a single cred for schooling,” Tavion said, trying to get out of the conversation.

“I hear that, man. Here, why don't we help these civilians?” He chuckled, and Tavion joined in as they went about helping the remaining technicians put their holsters on and get the blasters situated.

“You boys almost done feeling each other up? Hell, if I had known it was going to be ten of you touching each other, I'd have brought a holocam.” Na'tak giggled from her perch.

“Yeah yeah, we're all set.” The man who had helped Tavion with the rest of their little entourage spoke up. “Are we done for the day? My back is killing me.”

“Yeah, we're all set, get aboard.” Na'tak slipped into the speeder, followed by the remainder of her small team. The repulsors on the speeder fired up, and the vehicle lurched as Na'tak piloted it across the dull brown terrain. Most everyone was silent on the trip back, a few closed their eyes and tried to doze off, mostly they were relaxing from a long day. Most everyone, except Tavion, of course. He was inwardly grinning at the sudden change in fortune, figuring that the Admiral was behind the raid for just such a reason. Already, he was planning tomorrow's operation in his head, which would see them off of this desolate rock. He just hoped nothing unexpected would happen to change their fortune.

Chapter 3 – Firestorm

Jarric leaned back, sipping a small tumbler of whiskey. The day had been extremely productive, which was cause for a bit of celebration. The various teams were doing very well, and aside from that little convoy fiasco, everything was on schedule. He was euphoric; which was why he was waiting with an open communication line to Rothana. He figured that he deserved to give these new teams a bit of additional praise, so he'd pulled some strings and gotten through to the Engineering Lead at Rothana Heavy Engineering, and was just waiting for the man to pick the communicator up. He was idly looking over the most recent reports when a voice stirred him.

“Good Afternoon, Mister Terrana, I'm Director Holtz, what can I do for you this evening?” The director's voice was slightly annoyed.

“Hey! Thanks for taking my COMM. I just wanted to let you know that the teams you sent here have been doing absolutely wonderful work. They're really to be commended for their professionalism and their talents. I have a few specific names if you'd lik...” Jarric was cut off by the Director.

“Excuse me... Mister Terrana, who are you with?” The director seemed legitimately confused.

“Uh. Figg Excavations,” Jarric said.

“Mister Terrana, I am a very busy man, a very busy man interrupted from one of his few nights off; to speak with someone who has no business contacting Rothana. We have no engineers, technicians, or personnel assigned to Burnin Konn. We've never had any sort of professional contact with your organization. So, thank you for the lovely interruption, and have a nice night.” The communication line was cut, leaving Jarric sitting there with wide eyes and a gaping maw. Regaining his mental fortitude, he glanced down at his deck with his eyes still wide, opening it up to look at the holdout blaster sitting inside. He picked up his communicator.

“Na'tak. My office. Now. Bring Marik,” he said with a sneer.

“Something wrong, Jarric, you sound ba...” Na'tak was cut off.

“NOW! Get here right now!” He screamed into the COMM before throwing it to the side.

He was fuming, and wanted answers, he downed the remainder of his whiskey, pouring himself another one. Scowling, he breathed in deeply through his nose as he tried to get his temper under control. Maybe there was a logical explanation, if not; he had his blaster.

About ten minutes, and six drinks later, the door to his office opened, and Na'tak stepped in, followed closely by Tavion. Jarric's eyes tracked the man as he entered, and the two new arrivals could tell something was wrong, very wrong. Na'tak eyed the nearly quarter empty bottle on the table, and frowned, somewhat concerned.

“Something wrong, Jarric?” She asked, her brow furrowed.

“Sit.” The 's' was a bit slurred, and he pointed toward the two chairs in front of his desk, both took their seats. “Do ya know who I just got off the comm with?”

Both shook their heads. “...Rothana,” he said. The answer didn't phase Tavion at all, but Na'tak's eyes widened for a moment.

“Oh? What'd they have to say?” She asked, fidgeting a bit nervously in her seat.

“Tha' they've never sent any teams here.” He pointed a finger at Tavion. “You're a pile of poodoo, and I know it, so spill it. Right now.”

“Supervisor Terrana, perha...” Tavion closed his mouth as Jarric spoke over him.

“Don't you Supervisor Terrana me! Shut up, shut up! SHUT UP!” He yelled, ripping open his desk drawer and brandishing his hold-out blaster and pointing it right at Tavion.

“Woah! Jarric! Calm down...” Na'tak squealed, as Tavion slowly raised his hands.

“No! I will not. That fleet that hit the convoy? That have something to do with you?! Talk, damnit!” He yelled, half mad.

“All right. All right.” Tavion leaned back in his chair, his eyes looking between Jarric and the gun. “Take it easy. I'll talk.”

“G...Good.” Jarric seemed a bit surprised that it actually worked, but kept the weapon trained on Tavion.

“Name's not Marik. You can call me Tavion, or Spectre,” he paused. “Most people call me Spectre. I am a member of an Imperial task force based out of this sector which is in dire need of hypermatter and credits. The fleet that attacked your convoy was in fact completely related to us. There are about a hundred and twenty-five armed men in your

complex who are fully prepared to destroy everything you've made, and probably walk away smiling." Tavion smiled gently at Jarric, whose eyes were wide and his mouth agape. Na'tak's face was the exact same, though for different reasons.

"W...What?" Jarric couldn't believe what he'd just heard.

"Hey. I figure if I tell you the truth you'll let me live, right?" Tavion continued to smile softly, lowering his arms as he shifted his weight forward slightly.

"You come in here, make a fool out of me, plan to wreck everything we've done, and you think I'm going to let you live?!" He screamed, standing up and thrusting his blaster forward at Tavion. Na'tak dove for cover while Tavion just sat there.

"You... Argh!" He pulled the trigger, but instead of the satisfying blaster bolt, the weapon clicked.

In the split second his eyes left Tavion to look at the weapon, the commando struck. Rushing forward from his chair, he planted his left knee on Jarric's deck and smashed his closed fist directly into Jarric's nose, feeling a satisfying crack under his knuckles. Jarric reeled back in his chair, and Tavion pounced on him, straddling him in the chair and slamming his balled fist into the man's wrist twice before the holdout blaster slipped from his grasp. Tavion snatched the weapon up with his left hand, looking it over, before turning his attention back to the man who was now bleeding profusely from a broken nose and groaning in pain.

"You son of a bitch. I'll kill yo..." Jarric's glazed eyes focused on the blaster which was now pointed between his eyes.

"Merr-Sonn model Q4. Good weapon, four hundred credits or so from a respectable dealer. A civilized man's weapon. That's probably what they told you, at least. You're drunk, supervisor. You forgot to disengage the safety. I noticed when you were waving it around like a drunken idiot." Spectre made a point of disengaging the safety.

"Na'tak! Help!" Jarric desperately looked around for her.

She just shook her head, backing up into a corner. "I'm sorry, Jarric."

"You bit..." Spectre grabbed the barrel of the hold out blaster, smacking Jarric's already broken nose with the grip of the gun. Jarric screamed out in pain, grasping at his face. Spectre didn't care, and continued to smash his face and hands with the blaster like a club, hearing the cracking of the man's fingers as they shattered under the blows. Jarric's cries of pain echoed across the room as each successive blow was made with more force. Tavion wrenched the blaster high over his head, whipping it across Jarric's forehead and opening up a gash which began bleeding profusely.

"Be polite. She's a lady, and frankly you don't have long to live so you might as well be nice," Tavion said, coldly.

Jarric's eyes widened, his face covered in blood. Spectre just nodded at him. "But hey, I'm a sport." Spectre moved back a bit, allowing Jarric to stand up, blood seeping down his face; it dripped onto his shirt and the ground. Spectre tossed the blaster over toward Na'tak, who squealed and dodged the flying weapon.

Jarric stumbled, inebriated and unbelieving of what was going on. The blood coming down from his face was proof that it was. He spit a wad of blood and mucus on the ground, sneering at Spectre. "What, you just want to..." He was cut off as Tavion lunged forward, grabbing Jarric's head and slamming his knee into his abdomen. Jarric doubled over, screaming in pain, only to be thrown to the ground again as Tavion brought his arm up and around, slamming his forearm into the back of Jarric's head.

"I didn't say I was going to give you a chance. Just that I'm a sport." He kneeled down next to Jarric, grabbing the back of his head as he tried to get up. Jarric screamed, groaning as blood continued to pour down his face from a new cut across his forehead.

"You won't get away with thi..." He was interrupted as Tavion slammed his face into the ground repeatedly.

"Heard it before." Tavion slammed his fist into the back of Jarric's head again, hearing another crunch and a groan of pain. Jarric was crying now. Tavion drew his DH-17, flicking the safety off. "I hate it when they cry. Killing civilians like you is always a pain, no professionalism, you should have just drank yourself to sleep."

"Please. Please." Jarric was bawling now, crying. "I have a famil..." He didn't finish the sentence as Tavion fired into the back of the man's skull twice in rapid succession; blood splattering against his clothing and all over the floor. Blood began pooling from the corpse's skull as Tavion stood up, rolling his shoulders as he slipped the blaster back into his holster.

"I can't stand it when they say they have a family." Tavion glanced over toward Na'tak, whose eyes were wide and her hands clasped over her mouth. "What?"

"You could have just shot him! Why do you have to be so brutal!?" She squealed loudly, staring at him.

"He pulled a gun on me." Tavion shrugged. "It's his own damned fault."

"Just stop." Na'tak breathed in deeply, removing her hands from her mouth. "Well, I guess this means tonight's the night, right?"

"Yeah. When will someone be in here to check up on him?" Tavion asked, checking the door.

"A couple hours."

Tavion nodded, as he noticed Na'tak continuing to glance between him and the body.

"Right. You should get back to your room, just stay there. When you hear explosions, head toward the starport, everything will be fine," he said.

"...Yeah. Everything will be fine. Really, next time, just shoot someone; please."

"For you? Fine. Right now, please just go." Tavion retrieved Jarric's hold out blaster, slipping it into his belt before wiping his bloody hand off on his pants. Na'tak nodded, quickly removing herself from the room to make her way back toward her room. She moved quickly, shuddering at the violence that Tavion had exhibited. She'd seen her fair share of people being shot before, but the brutality of the attack was something she did not see very often. It still disturbed her every time.

Tavion stood there for a few moments, breathing in deeply before fetching his communicator from his belt. He toggled it to the frequency tied to their tactical communication network and raised it to his lips.

"This is Spectre. Operation is a go. Right now. This isn't a joke. Get your asses up and in gear."

He raised the DH-17, rolling his shoulders as he counted back from ten to give Na'tak a head start. Once he reached 'zero', he burst out of the room, glancing left and right; to his right was a pair of soldiers walking down the hallway, chatting with each other.

Two blaster bolts from Tavion's DH-17 ended their lazy patrol, and their lives.

"Got a light?"

"For you, sweetie, yeah." Farril pulled a lighter from his pocket, extending it to his partner, Illia. She nodded approvingly, leaning in so that Farril could light her cigarra. She took a long draw, closing her eyes before blowing the smoke out of her nose.

"How much longer do we have?" She asked.

"By my chrono we'll be here for another hour before break," Farril responded after glancing at his wrist.

"Ugh. Why don't we call it ear..." Illia was interrupted by her COMM crackling to life.

"Hey! We've got a problem here! We need armed help over at th..." KSSSHHHT. The communicator went dead, both Farril and Illia glanced at each other, blinking a few times.

"Command, come in. Your last transmission got cut off, repeat please." There was no response.

"Repeat, please. What's going on over there." Illia looked back over toward Farril. "The hell is going on?"

"No idea." Farril drew his blaster, motioning to a group of technicians which were running directly at them. "Hey, look at them." Farril started walking forward, waving at them. "Hey, what's going o..."

Five blaster bolts rang out, three of them striking Farril in the chest and stomach. He stumbled backwards before collapsing to the ground, dead. Illia's eyes widened in terror as she realized that the blaster bolts came from the technicians. Looking up, she saw a series of red flashes that signaled the end of her life. The five technicians jogged over to the starport entrance, one of the technicians, Fifty, bent down to pick up the two dead soldiers communicators.

"Spectre. This is Fifty." His own COMM crackled to life.

"Spectre here."

"Starport's secure. We just killed the last two guards. How are things going on with you?" He asked, starting to look over the blast door controls.

"We're securing the transports now." Fifty could hear the sounds of an active fire fight ringing over the communicator. "Two of our techs are down, a couple soldiers got them. Eight took a hit to the shoulder, but he'll be fine. I think they only had about twenty or so armed guards, we're not running into any heavy resistance."

"What about the techs that they armed?" Fifty motioned toward the door, the other Imperial infiltrators with him began to secure it as he looked out across the complex.

"If you put a Star Destroyer about five yards in front of them, they'd still have a pretty good chance to miss it. Death Star troopers were more accurate than they are," Tavion said to lighten the mood a bit.

"Heh. A'ight. I'll have a transport secure for when you get back from the gun's control center. Seven and Twelve are trying to jam their communications and I've got two of them on me now so I'll let you know if they get a distress call out."

"Good." There was a final blaster retort over the communicator before the background noise stopped. "One more thing. Na'tak will be heading over, we're taking her with us. If you misbehave I'll deal with you myself."

"Yeah, I see her now." Fifty had noticed the blue Twi'lek sprinting across the complex grounds a few moments before Tavion had mentioned her.

"Keep yourself safe. No more casualties. Spectre out."

"Fifty out." He cut the COMM just as Na'tak stopped a meter or so away from him, doubling over as she tried to catch her breath.

"All... the people... I get to be... stuck with... and its you..." She was gasping for air as she wasn't used to sprinting for so long.

"Awe, it's okay sweetie. Spectre told me to treat you right, so I'll treat you right." He laughed. "No, seriously, this is Serious Fifty, it's mission time. Help me get one of these transports working so we can get off this rock with everyone?"

Na'tak nodded, raising one hand and motioning for him to lead the way with two of her slender fingers.

"I swear, you guys are going to screw me over one day, and not in a way I'll enjoy."

"Well hopefully not today. The two of us should be able to take care of breaking into a shuttle, and the others are going to be heading over toward the control installation soon." Fifty shrugged, walking through the space port en route to the nearest landing bay to look for an appropriate shuttle; Na'tak was close behind him, her blaster drawn.

"Relax. We've already swept it," he said, to alleviate her fears.

"Easy for you to say, if anyone sees me and reports back I'm finished. Frankly I'd rather not take the risk, thanks."

"Point. A'ight. Suit yourself." Fifty shrugged, smacking the control panel for one of the landing bay's blast doors. The door made a very loud grinding noise as it opened, much to Na'tak's displeasure. Upon opening, the two were presented with a pair of Lambda shuttles sitting in the center of the bay, illuminated only by a few active glowpanels above them.

"Eh, not big enough." Fifty shook his head. "We need a sentinel or something."

"There's one in hangar seven. Just down the hall and to our left," she motioned toward the location with her blaster.

"I should have asked you first." Fifty mumbled, following Na'tak's directions and stopping in front of the appropriate blast door.

"Gee, if I had a decicred for every time I'd heard that..." She shook her head, watching Fifty as he used a multitool to rip off the external panel of the blast door and try to hot wire it.

Na'tak sighed, shaking her head. After a minute or so, the door clicked and began to open with a loud grinding. "You know, you could have asked me, I have a keyca..." She cut off her sentence as she spotted three technicians servicing a Sentinel-class Landing

Craft inside, and ducked behind the door, shooting at glare at Fifty. He shrugged, drawing his blaster.

"My bad," he said, apologetically.

"I hate you!" Na'tak stared at him.

"Just... ugh. Sorry. We'll have to take them out."

"They're techs, stun them. Please," she said, looking at him with pleading eyes.

"...Fine." Fifty set his DH-17 to stun, rolling his shoulders as he looked over at Na'tak. She'd drawn what seemed to be a heavily modified E-11, which Fifty whistled at.

"Nice piece," he said, jealous.

"Shut up. They'll hear you."

"...Ma'am." He saluted her mockingly, grumbling. He blinked as Na'tak whipped around the corner, raising her blaster carbine in both hands and firing two bolts across the hangar. The blue stun bolts, obviously a modification to the weapon, slammed into one of the technicians, knocking him unconscious. Fifty ripped around the corner, running forward before firing his own weapon at the techs. He caught one on the shoulder, and the man screamed as his arm went numb. The two returned fire, blaster bolts whizzing past the two of them. All four combatants dove for cover, and Fifty heard two screams as he got behind a crate; one from another of the Figg technicians as he was hit by both Fifty and Na'tak; the other was from Na'tak.

Unable to worry about her potential injury, Fifty vaulted over his crate, rushing forward as he saw the technician looking over toward where Na'tak was taking cover... He planted one foot on the object the technician was hiding behind, leaping over it and pointing his blaster straight down. The tech's eyes widened as Fifty blasted him in the face twice with his weapon, set to stun. As he landed on both feet, the technician fell to the ground, stunned. He heard Na'tak groan nearby.

"You okay!?"

"I'm hit. It's... it's not too bad. I've got a vest on." She stood up, clutching her stomach, blood was seeping out of her fingers, but it didn't look life threatening. She stumbled over toward the Sentinel, holstering her blaster.

"Sit down, I'll take care of the Sentinel. I'll take a look at that in a couple minutes. Are you sure you're okay?" He asked, legitimately concerned for her health.

"Yes! Please do it quickly. It hurts." She was trying to put as much pressure on the wound as possible, wincing in pain.

“Yeah yeah...” Fifty moved over toward the loading ramp, pulling a fusion cutter out of one of his many pockets as he started to slice into the control panel for the Sentinel's loading ramp. Within a few minutes, he heard a familiar SNAP and the loading ramp of the Sentinel dropped gently to the ground. Wasting no time, he started helping a very pale blue Twi'lek up the loading ramp to the shuttle. He hoped that the remainder of the assault was going well.

The speeders were racing across the desolate terrain of Burnin Konn, kicking up dust and creating a billowing wave behind them. It was a few kilometers to the turbolaser fire control installation, so the Imperial infiltrators had 'requisitioned' a few vehicles. Two T-2B Repulsor tanks flanked them, manned by a few of the elite commandos, they weren't really vehicle jocks, but they knew how to point a weapon at something and fire at it. In the distance, the installation loomed, a large tower-like structure with dozens of antennae pointing up into the sky. Arrayed in the corners of the installation were large guard towers with a three meter tall wall surrounding the facility. The main gate was guarded by a pair of heavy weapon emplacements, and a missile launcher of some sort flanking the gate.

Tavion bit his upper lip, glancing between the installation and the communicator in front of him. He was sure they would have been picked up by now, and were probably skirting the edge of the installation's weapons. He hoped that their ruse would hold up and that they would try to establish communications with the incoming vehicles.

A rough tap on Tavion's shoulder broke him out of his thoughts, and he glanced behind him. Towering over him was Ten, who had a face guard on, it would be a cold day on Mustafar when Tavion would be able to see his face.

“What's up?”

Ten just shook his head, pointing at the installation ahead. Tavion turned, squinting his eyes, a moment later he had a pair of macrobionoculars forcibly put over his head from behind.

“Ah, thanks Te...” He paused, as he saw various armed men running across the defensive bastions, manning the guns, the missile launcher and emplacements beginning to track toward the incoming Imperials.

“Shit!” Tavion snatched his communicator. “EVASIVE! Right now!” He screamed into the communicator seconds before a series of bright flashes and contrails raced toward them as the missile launcher began firing off anti-vehicle missiles toward the incoming repulsor speeders. The five vehicles scattered as E-Web emplacements lit up the ground in front of the airspeeders. Tavion yanked the flight yolk to the right, sending it careening out of the way of the incoming attacks. Heat washed over the speeder from the nearby explosions as missiles slammed into the ground around them. Return fire from the T-2Bs slammed into the main gate of the installation, blowing chunks out of the heavy armor plating as they swiftly closed on the installation.

“Eight!” Tavion yelled into his communicator, trying to get in touch with one of the T-2B tanks.

“Yeah? What? I'm busy piloting here!” The response was accompanied by a nearby explosion.

“We need to get in, now. What can you give me?” He asked in a hurry.

“These Rebel tanks fire limp noodles! Give me five minutes and I'll knock the door down.”

“Not good enough!” Tavion yanked the flight yoke to the side to avoid an E-WEB barrage raking across the ground toward the speeders.

“Fine, fine! Right through the front door it is then, get behind us.” The two T-2B repulsor tanks whipped in front of the three speeders, which fell in line behind them. Heavy weapons fire ripped into the two tank's shields, sending rippling waves of blue energy across the two vehicles. A pair of missiles slammed into the front tank, dropping its shields and ripping a gouge across the front armor; undaunted, it continued to fire into the gate door ahead. A huge crash accompanied the two repulsor tanks slamming into the front gate, blowing it open. The lead speeder, already damaged, dropped to the ground abruptly as its repulsors cut out, skidding along the ground with a shower of sparks spraying out from its underbelly. Coming to a stop, its hatch popped open, and three wounded but living commandos crawled out of the tank as the other vehicles came to a stop alongside them.

“Move it!” Spectre yelled to the team on his speeder, hopping over the side of the speeder and onto the ground in a crouch. Fifteen others jumped off with him, all drawing their weapons, fire fights broke out almost immediately as the defending soldiers turned their weapons inwards and began to open fire on the Imperials and their vehicles.

“Suppression fire on that tower!” The still active T-2B tank unleashed a barrage of firepower into the barricades surrounding the perimeter of the installation. The defending soldiers went for cover, as the Imperial infiltrators used the distraction to add their own fire to the tank's. Under the cover fire, the group of soldiers rushed toward the main installation, and four of the tertiary control buildings. Tavion and a team of nine others ran directly toward the main installation, sprinting the entire distance before reaching the door. They crowded the door, using the alcove it was nestled in from cover from the fire which was beginning to intensify from the defenders.

“Get it open, right now!”

“I'm working on it, damnit! Don't rush me Spectre. Just keep them off me.” One of the Commandos, 'Lucky', or Seven, depending on how he was feeling that day, was huddling in front of the blast door's control panel. He had the front face of the panel ripped open and was looking inside at the myriad of wires and the circuit board inside.

"These guys suc..." He was forced to duck as a heavy blaster bolt slammed into the side of the alcove, blowing a chunk of armor out of it and showering him in sparks and small pieces of debris.

"Just get it open!" Tavion yelled, firing back at the gunner to force him to go for cover.

"Just hold the kriff on. These doors aren't that easy to bypass, they have safeguards an..." A spark erupted from the panel, and the doors slid open. Seven looked between the wires in his hands, and Tavion for a few seconds. "...Annnnd that's why I'm Seven."

Tavion grabbed his shoulder, yanking him inside the installation just as a few of the guards began rushing toward their position. He slapped the controls to the blast door, waiting for it to shut before blasting the control panel with his blaster.

"That should slow them down a bit. You three..." He pointed to Ten, and two of the other commandos. "Find their computer core, we'll need to shut it down or destroy it." He motioned toward a team on his right, led by Lara. "I need you three to see if they have an armory in here, we'll need explosives of some sort. Myself, Seven, and Fifteen will hit the command center. Our source..." Tavion was careful not to use Na'tak's name for fear of listening devices. "...has indicated that there are probably only a dozen or so guards actually inside the installation. Move quickly, they start realizing what we're trying to do they'll re-route the system through another node. Go."

Armed with a rough interior layout from Na'tak, the three teams broke off quickly, Ten's team ran down the first adjacent hallway they came to; while the second team quickly moved toward the nearest turbolift nexus. Tavion's team forged straight ahead, quickly moving down the hallway and ignoring tertiary doors to either side as they focused on the objective at hand. Tavion glanced down at a piece of flimsiplast in his off-hand, holding the DH-17 tightly in his right.

"Up ahead, two hallways; to the right. There will be a security checkpoint in front of an express lift. Two guards, maybe three," he said, motioning with the barrel of his gun.

"Gotcha, boss." Fifteen nodded toward Tavion, holding two blasters; one in each hand. He was the kind of soldier who mostly spoke with his weapons, very little finesse; but he was a damned good shot and would throw himself in front of a blaster bolt at a moment's notice.

"Hopefully there aren't many. I'd like to get out of here, we don't know what these guys are going to do when they find out what we're doing here." Seven frowned, checking his weapon.

"They're a corporation. Probably sue a bunch of people, write it off, and move along. They're not going to bombard the place or anything." Tavion waved his hand at the two of them, so that they'd be quiet. He planted his back firmly on the wall, scooting over

toward the intersection in question before tilting his head around the corner and snapping it back.

The two commandos looked at him intently as he raised one hand. He extended his thumb, index finger, and middle finger initially, before pointing at his middle finger. Tavion fully extended that arm into the sky, making a gun with his finger and thumb. He then touched his fingers to his opposite bicep. Lowering his arm, he pointed at the other two fingers, before only extending that arm to his head, and making a gun out of his fingers again. Both commandos nodded in acknowledgment.

Tavion raised his blaster toward his chest, grasping it with both hands before taking a deep breath, and nodding to the other two. He whipped around the corner and dropped his blaster to chest level, pointing it directly at an armored individual standing between two unarmed guards. In the man's hand was a rifle, and it was tracking to point toward Tavion as he fired. Three blaster shots lanced out in quick succession, followed by six more as Seven and Fifteen came around the corner. Seven dispatched his opponent with two well placed shots to the head, the man going limp; the pistol which was in his hand clattering to the ground. Fifteen bombarded his target with four bolts from the two weapons in his hands, three of them landing and sending the man spinning to the ground. All but one of Tavion's bolts went wide as the man with the rifle dove for cover; the one blast that did it seemed to ricochet off his shoulder. It had been mostly ablated by his armor.

"Unit seven to command, unit seven to command! I've got enemy soldiers, requesting reinforcements!"

The yell sent a chill down Tavion's spine. "Damnit! Stop him!"

The three Imperial commandos rushed forward, only for the enemy soldier to abruptly stand, weapon in hand. He fired two quick blasts toward the three charging men before ducking back down. The first went wide, slamming into a wall; but the second caught Fifteen just above the knee, sending him toppling to the ground, screaming, and clutching his leg. Wasting no more time, Tavion vaulted over the console that the man was using as cover just as he was coming up for another barrage. He slammed his knee directly into the man's faceplate as he rose; knocking him backwards as they both sprawled to the ground. Ignoring the pain in his knee, Tavion twisted about, raising his weapon and firing repeatedly into the armored soldier as he scrambled for his own weapon. After the third shot, the body went limp. Tavion pushed himself to his feet, looking back at Fifteen clutching what was probably a ruined leg, as Seven tried to get him to calm down. Tavion grabbed the soldier's utility belt, unhooking it from his waist and tossing it toward the pair.

"There's probably something you can use in there. Help him, and get him to the extraction point." Tavion frowned, angry at himself for having failed to down the soldier with his initial attacks.

"What about you?" Seven grabbed the utility belt, rummaging through it. He was grateful when he found a fastflesh medpack, ripping it open. Giving Fifteen a heavy painkiller, he set to work on the wound.

"What do you think I'm going to do?" He bent down, picking up the dead soldier's E-11 carbine. He holstered his DH-17, before looking the three men over. He picked up one of the soldier's utility belts, clipping it around his waist.

"Something stupid." Seven shrugged. "Good luck, Spectre."

"You too." He tapped the call button for the turbolift with the butt of the E-11, breathing in deeply before letting it out slowly. "This is going to suck."

"You can deal with Fifteen instead, if you want."

"HA! No. I'll shoot people instead. Besides, you started on him first," Tavion shook his head with a grin.

"Jerk." Fifteen chuckled, before his face turned serious again as he started to treat the blaster wound by first working on removing the melted clothing from the wound.

Tavion slipped into the turbolift as it arrived, glancing over the control panel before thumbing the button labeled '3'. As the lift doors shut, he tipped his hand toward Seven, who saw him out of the corner of his eye and just nodded in reply. Tavion sighed yet again as the lift began to move, readying the weapon as the lift ascended. After what seemed like a preposterously long time, the lift doors opened. Tavion leveled his weapon forward as he swept the hallway, slowly walking out of the lift, one foot moving painfully slow over the other. He had come out a few floors below the command center, Na'tak had indicated that there was a way to the command center from here; it would bypass any sort of defenses they had near the lift nexus.

Trying to get his bearings, he moved over to a nearby door; slowly pushing it open once finding that it wasn't secured. He paused as he spotted a cot along one wall, personal effects scattered about the room, an opened closet with a few uniforms, and a personal computer station along the far wall.

"Huh, they put their quarters close to C&C just like we do." He said to nobody in particular, nodding approvingly. Moving forward, he kept sweeping the area with his blaster, though he didn't really expect to see anyone; everyone was most likely at their duty stations. He moved around the area cautiously, rubbing the back of his head with the barrel of the carbine. Tavion was confused, having been sure there was a way to the higher levels that didn't involve the lift. Nearly ready to resign himself to whatever awaited him via the lift option, he noticed a door with a control panel next to it, and Aurebesh markings for 'maintenance'. Moving over to the door, a quick blaster bolt rectified the problem of the lock; and he slipped inside. Greeted by the stench of industrial cleaners, he flicked a switch to the left of the door. Flickering glowpanels established themselves, casting dim light across the room.

"Hrm. That's a bit better." He walked over to a hatch embedded in the wall, grasping the large circular latch and spun it about, yanking it open with a grunt. He slipped his head inside, looking out across a grated walkway, the lighting here was surprisingly better than inside the facility. He found himself in the superstructure of the building, with various grated walkways and ladders snaking across the facility itself. Enormous power conduits laced through the various structures like arteries, powering the facility from the underground reactor. Tavion cautiously walked forward, closing the hatch behind him and securing it, before walking toward the nearest ladder leading toward his objective. His boots made echoing thumps against the grated walkway as he moved, his left hand sliding along a yellow guard rail for stability as his right clutched his weapon tightly.

Reaching the nearest ladder, he tucked the E-11 into his shirt, ignoring the cold metal against his skin and the awkward weighted bulge it made in order to ascend. Making his way to the top level of the causeway, he stepped off the ladder, drawing his E-11 again. It was almost too easy at this point. He started making his way over toward the very obvious hatch which would lead him to what was most likely the 'guts' of command and control when he paused in mid stride. Something didn't quite sit right with him.

"This **is** too easy." Frowning, as he did often when he spoke with himself, he took stock of what was in front of him. The grated walkway went forward for another ten meters or so before there was a two meter solid landing, and the hatch itself. He kneeled down in the middle of the walkway, looking at what was knee level for him toward the door. He didn't notice any sort of glimmer which would indicate a trip wire or other such device; but he was still wary. Rummaging around in the utility belt that he'd taken, fishing around for a few moments before removing a cloth and a pocket flamer. He set the cloth on fire, tossing it forward and letting it float toward the ground. He grinned, feeling clever as he figured that the black smoke coming out of the burning cloth would reveal anything that he couldn't see. He facepalmed as the cloth floated down, breaking an unseen laser; precisely what he had intended to use the cloth to find. klaxons began going off, and red lights flashed about the area as an intercom went off.

"Intruder Alert, maintenance corridor Two-Alpha." Tavion frowned, dropping his head.

"...Damnit. If only Fifty were here, he'd say something sexist, and... do something." He sighed, rushing forward and looking about the area directly next to the door. Getting an idea that wasn't as stupid as his last, he clambered up the hatch, grabbing onto the lip of the hatch and climbing up on top of it. He reached up, grabbing a conduit running overhead with one hand as his other tucked his E-11 back into his shirt. He pulled himself up, scrambling to get on top of the conduit and lying out across it. There was a loud click and a grinding noise as the hatch swung open and three armed soldiers stepped out, sweeping the area with their blasters. A fourth came out behind them, attired in heavy combat armor and holding a T-21 light repeating blaster.

"False alarm?" The lead soldier looked over the edge of the catwalk from side to side.

"No. There's someone here." The commando in the back raised his weapon, creeping forward and looking around. "Are you stupid or do you not see the burning cloth on the ground? He thought he was clever."

Yeah, I did. Tavion thought to himself, keeping his breathing quiet as he watched the four soldiers continue their sweep of the catwalks. Once they had moved forward about ten meters or so, Tavion swung over the edge of the conduit he was hiding on top of, landing in the middle of the catwalk with a thump. The four soldiers turned around as he grabbed the handle of the door, and quickly swung it shut.

"Suckers!"

"Clever..." The commando shook his head, motioning for the other three to follow him as he began making his way to another floor; knowing that their opponent would do something to prevent them from following him.

He did, on the other side of the door; Tavion blasted the latch over and over, melting it into the hatch to prevent them from opening it from the other side. Content with his work, he turned about, finding himself in a small maintenance room like the last; only this one had an open door leading outside. Moving out of the room, he swept his blaster about, looking intently down hallways to his left and right before moving down to his left. Ahead was a large four way intersection with a security station in the center. It had been manned by the four soldiers that he had just outwitted, and therefore was empty. Upon reaching the station, he took stock of his position.

The station itself had a large console that ran along in a semi-circle, facing the main turbolift nexus to his left. The various screens detailed areas of the installation, and by taking a peek, Tavion could see that the other teams were fairing fairly well. He spotted Ten on one of the monitors, who was moving with a very obvious limp, and shook his head in awe at the commando's resiliency. Another monitor showed the four troopers he just left behind, moving through the superstructure toward the level below the command center; they were moving quickly. Realizing he'd only have a few minutes until they returned, he drew his blaster yet again, moving down the hallway toward the command center itself. His left hand picked up his communicator, toggling it.

"This is Spectre, I need information on our evac."

"Yooooo! Spec!" Tavion sighed as Fifty came over the communicator. "I've got a Sentinel en route with a pissed off and wounded Na'tak, bout two minutes out."

"Wait, did you just say she's wounded?" he asked, frowning.

"Yeah, about that, don't you have a mission to do?"

"..." Tavion sighed. "I'm gonna need you at the command center, hot evac. You good for that?"

“Sounds like fun. Be there in a couple. Fifty out.”

“Spectre out.” He cut the COMM, stalking over toward the command center's opened blast door. He poked his head inside, seeing that it was actually mostly vacant. Most of the command staff had obviously evacuated elsewhere, only a few uniformed men were standing at consoles, with a gruff looking individual screaming into a communicator. Tavion announced his presence by firing his E-11 once, blowing a hole into the side of the nearest man's head, and causing him to slump over his console. The other four in the command center turned toward the sound of the blaster shot.

“Good evening. If you'll all raise your hands and move off to the side, I won't blow another hole in your faces.” He waited a moment before turning his blaster to another one of the men sitting down. “NOW!”

Scurrying like cockroaches, the seated men moved off to the side of the command center while the standing individual scowled at Tavion, moving over slowly.

“Big man, eh?” The individual sneered at him.

“Yep. With a compensation problem. Try me.”

“That's a new one.” The gruff man walked over to the other three men, standing with them.

Tavion moved over toward one of the control consoles at the front of the command center, looking over the panel for a few moments before getting to work. With his left hand working the controls, he started by disabling the safety interlocks which would prohibit the other teams from accessing the systems that they needed to access. He grinned as seconds later warning klaxons began to ring and the display showed that systems were failing across the installation. He figured that they had been waiting at the installation's computer cores for him to relinquish system control. He continued to work the console for a minute or so, accessing various parts of the installation's interior security to close blast doors along routes that the commandos would not be taking to evacuate; seeking to make things as easy as possible for their incoming transport. Tavion heard explosions outside, and the sounds of heavy repulsors – the Sentinel must have arrived. Stealing a glance, he saw the landing craft rising above plumes of smoke coming from the perimeter defenses, and level with the command center.

Tavion's COMM crackled to life. “Get down.” Fifty's voice was unmistakable.

He dove for cover, the four others in the room with him wisely did the same moments before the main transparasteel viewports of the center blew inwards, showering the area with shards of material. Tavion stood quickly, seeing the four Figg men struggling to get to their feet. The gruff man was the first to his feet, sneering at Tavion with a gleam of rage in his eyes.

“We'll find you.”

The Sentinel whipped around, its loading ramp lowering as it backed up to hover in front of the hole it'd made. Tavion chuckled, moving over toward the hovering vessel.

"Try it. It'll be fun." He rushed forward, launching himself into the Sentinel's waiting bay as the four troopers he'd evaded a few minutes before began firing toward the shuttle as they rushed the command center. The Sentinel banked away, moving to pick up the other infiltrators which had completed their objectives and were moving out toward their designated evacuation point. The four soldiers moved up toward the hole in the wall, watching them load into the transport as it lifted off the ground and raced toward space.

"Good timing." The older gentleman walked over toward the soldiers.

"Thank you, sir. I think it was just enough to convince them."

"Seems to be, are the beacons in place?" He asked.

"Yes sir, four of them have been set up, their fleet should arrive shortly and pick up the designated items."

"Good. I've spent a lot of money to get this far, I'd hate if things fell through now."

"It'll be fine, Mister Figg. According to our intelligence they're desperate enough to take the bait without really thinking twice. This operation proves it." The commando shrugged, motioning to the retreating shuttle.

Thaddeus Figg nodded, waving dismissively at the commando. Both resigned themselves to watching the Sentinel's engine block as it sped away. As it left sight, and the flashes far overhead belonging to capital ships emerging from hyperspace filled the sky; Thaddeus grinned.

"Your days are numbered... 'Admiral'."

Chapter 4 – The Calm

After securing the materials stolen from Burnin Konn, the same officers who had been in the briefing room before embarking on the operation were present there now, with one addition. Na'tak was seated to the Admiral's right, a heavy bandage wrapped around her abdomen where she'd been shot. The wound had been expertly treated by the ship's head doctor, Cyrel Vandroth, and he had given the familiar Twi'lek a 'through examination'. It had only been a few hours since they had made a swift strike at the Figg's holdings on Burnin Konn, and the commandos were still excited over their victory, chatting between each other. The Admiral had been silent since the others had entered the briefing room, his hands steeped under his chin and his eyes were darting back and forth between Na'tak and the others.

"Good evening." He finally spoke, heads turned over toward him as the conversation ceased.

“Congratulations on a well accomplished mission. The materials gathered from the raid will sustain the task force for some time. Our hypermatter crisis has been averted, and the materials will be transferred to Aurora eventually. The raw materials are still being processed on the Manticore for distribution to our proxies and eventual sale. Operational casualties were well below our estimates; twelve dead storm technicians, twenty two injuries, mostly amongst the Corps.” The Admiral eyed Ten, who had refused normal medical treatment upon returning.

“Fleet losses were minimal, a few squadrons of TIE Interceptors and a handful of Bombers, most of the pilots ejected and were able to be recovered.” The Admiral was reciting the reports from memory. “There was some damage to the Termination's shield emitters, but they have been repaired and the issue which caused the damage in the first place has been rectified. Again, this was far below expectations.”

The assorted commandos seemed very pleased with themselves, and their chatting continued. Vice Admiral Gaunt and Doctor Ibble just nodded, and absorbed the information. Na'tak listened intently, unwilling to say or really do anything for fear of causing a faux pas.

“Of course, that leaves the acquisition made during the operation,” the Admiral said after a short pause.

“What acquisition, sir?” Tavion seemed confused, he wasn't aware of any additional acquisition.

The Admiral turned his head, looking straight at Na'tak with his icy cold eyes. “Her.”

Na'tak blinked, looking back at the Admiral. “...E...Excuse me?” Her voice squeaked at first, but she found herself after a moment.

“A poor attempt at a joke apparently. I hope that your stay on board the Termination will be more pleasant now that you have received medical attention.” The questioning look on her face was erased as the Admiral continued to speak. “I would be remiss if I did not request your lovely presence on my vessel for at least a few days while we ensure that you will both recover and to simply observe you for a few days to quell my paranoia. Upon the completion of this short stay, you will be given the items which you negotiated with Spectre. All of them.” He emphasized the last part, and Na'tak's eyes lit up.

“That sounds good to me!” She grinned at him, though it slowly erased itself as the Admiral's stare did not change at all.

“Indeed. Not that I would be particularly bothered if it did not 'sound good', I am pleased that you are comfortable with this arrangement. You will be afforded the same rights and privileges as any normal member of the crew, with a few additional perks. You will have access to the officer's lounge, and unlimited rations for your stay. In return, I ask that you do not 'snoop' into sensitive areas of the vessel. I simply ask, and will not demand, because should you violate this you will be shot on sight.”

Na'tak blinked. “How will I know what not to get into?”

“I believe that was my cue, Admiral?” Aysa spoke up, the disembodied voice filling the briefing room. Na'tak's eyes widened, and she looked around for the source.

“It was.” The Admiral smirked.

“Good afternoon Miss Na'tak. I am Aysa, an artificial intelligence programmed to act as a personal assistant to various members of the crew. For the remainder of your stay, I will be helping you with anything you require.”

“Wow, what kind of technology was required to...” The Admiral raised his hand to interrupt Na'tak as she spoke.

“Aysa will answer any and all of your questions, once we are done here,” he said to quiet her.

Na'tak nodded. “I do have one I'd like answered now.”

The Admiral sighed. “Go ahead.”

“Who do you normally serve, were you created for me?” She was wide-eyed, like a child in a candy shop.

“I was not created for you, ma'am. I normally serve the Admiral.” Na'tak blinked.

“Uh... Thank you.”

“You are welcome, Miss Na'tak.”

“Now that the two of you are acquainted, may I continue?” The Admiral waited patiently until Na'tak nodded, curling up a bit in the chair she was sitting in.

“Spectre. Since you were so kind as to negotiate with Na'tak so that she would assist us in the mission; you will be responsible for her well-being and her actions while she is on board. I assume this additional responsibility will not interfere with your normal duties.” He eyed Tavion, before returning his piercing glare to Na'tak. “Are there any questions?”

“Yes, sir.” Lara spoke up. She'd managed to escape the raid without injury, and was more chipper than normal. “Why aren't we rendezvousing with the fleet at Aurora?”

“Simply because we have a few items to attend to before we are finished with our deployment. Once we are done, we will be returning to Aurora to resupply and distribute our cargo of hypermatter to the other vessels in the fleet. To answer your inevitable follow-up question, there will be a few days of down-time before the services of the corps are required again.” Lara nodded, content with the answer.

“Very well, if there is nothing else; you are all dismissed.” The briefing room emptied quickly, save for the Vice Admiral, who stood at the blast door for a moment before turning his head back toward the Admiral.

“You don't believe for a second that she's not legitimate.” The Vice Admiral grinned, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned in the archway.

“You are perceptive as ever, Vice Admiral Gaunt,” the Admiral said, remaining in his seat.

“What is it then?”

The Admiral waved his hand dismissively. “Nothing that needs to be discussed right now, Larkin.”

“Very well, sir. Good evening.” The Vice Admiral turned, walking out of the briefing room. As the doors closed behind him, he rubbed his chin. The Admiral did not usually call him Larkin.

“I normally don't even eat this well at home!” The first place that Tavion had taken Na'tak, since he was responsible for her, was the mess hall. The Twi'lek had decided to take advantage of the fact she was a guest, and was assaulting an extremely large plate of food with reckless abandon. He chuckled, shaking his head as she made an absolute mess of herself and her plate.

“You know, eating like that isn't very lady-like,” Tavion said, amused.

“Shuddup.” She said, with a mouth half full of food. “You got me shot and that means I can do whatever I want, so blah.”

“Fine, fine.” Tavion raised his hands defensively, before setting them back down on the table.

“So.” Na'tak glanced around, before lowering her head and her voice. “Is what the Admiral said true? I could get shot and killed here?”

“Eh. Normally yes, but you're a guest, so no. You'd be taken to the brig, but you certainly wouldn't be shot. I don't know what was wrong with him, he seemed pissed off about something. The mission went fine, for the most part, and I know for a fact he's heard of you; I don't know. Something's off.”

“Yeah, he didn't seem very pleasant at all.”

“He's not.” Tavion chuckled. “I don't think I've ever seen him pleasant.”

“How is that effective at all?” Na'tak set her fork down, scrunching her face a bit.

“He's gotten us out of some situations that a lesser commander wouldn't have been able to survive with his ‘no BS’ attitude. That and for the most part the other officers deal with any issues that crop up. The Admiral doesn't need to be pleasant,” he explained.

“That's another thing... Admiral what?” She asked, having been annoyed by that since she'd heard about him.

Tavion shrugged. “Dunno. Does it matter?”

“Uh, yeah it does. I mean...” Na'tak paused, trailing off. “...I guess not really, it's a bit creepy though. So, what are you going to show me first?” Na'tak grinned at him, abruptly changing the subject.

“I'm not your tour guide, ya know. You could just ask Aysa to show you around the ship.”

She blinked. “Wait, what? How do I do that?”

“I forgot to give you this.” He reached into a pocket, pulling out an ear bud. “Put that in, and then say something to her.” Tavion grinned, enjoying the fact that Na'tak didn't know the ship and her systems.

Na'tak picked up the ear bud, slipping it over her left ear and securing it in place. “Hi... Aysa?”

“Good afternoon Miss Na'tak, what may I do for you?” The soft voice from the ear piece made her jump for a moment, Tavion laughed at her surprise.

“What can you tell me about this ship?” She asked, timidly.

“I can provide detailed technical specifications, associated data charts, and answer any potential questions you have. If you request sensitive information, I will inform you of that fact; but will not be able to divulge such information on order of the Admiral,” Aysa's voice had a soft tone to it as she spoke.

Na'tak grinned widely, looking over at Spectre. “She knows just how to sweet talk me.”

“Well then, I'll leave you two to whatever it is that you're going to do. I have some debriefings to attend. Let me know if you get bored, I'll show you some of the entertainment venues on board.” He stood up, taking his leave and leaving the blue female sitting alone. She pulled out a datapad, half giggling to herself as she fired it up to take notes.

“All right, well the first thing I want to know is...”

“...How to possibly be less boring.” The aged voice to her right demanded her attention, and she turned to address it. Vice Admiral Larkin Gaunt sat down next to her, setting his cap on the table.

“Er. Eep. Hi, uh, sir. I'm sorry, I can go if you'd like,” Na'tak fidgeted, surprised to see one of the flag officers here.

“Only if you'd like to run away from an old man. No, no, please, stay. I actually came to find you. My name is Larkin, by the way. Please don't bother with the 'sir'. It has never really suited me anyway.”

“Okay, Larkin.” She relaxed a little bit. “You came to find me?”

“Of course! You're a guest on this ship, and a rather well known one at that, there aren't many Twi'lek arms dealers, and fewer still who deal with us. Besides, I have a few questions that only you can answer,” he said with a sweet smile.

“How many others are there? That deal with you, I mean.”

“Zero.” He winked at her, laughing. Na'tak smirked in response.

“I suppose I should feel privileged then; that I get to serve the illustrious Task Force and her Admiral.” She mockingly bowed her head toward Larkin. “Anyway, you mentioned questions?”

“Mhmm. I wanted to get your side of the story. I guess the question really is: Why are you here? And before you start to answer, please know that I am convinced that you are legitimate, I've heard nothing but good things from those on board this ship whom have had interactions with you. You're pretty much universally liked.” He paused. “Well, Fifty's 'like' is borderline creepy, but we'll not concern ourselves with that,” Larkin shook his head in mock disgust.

“Ha! Yeah, he's cute. It'll never work, but he's cute; so that's a plus.” She leaned back in the chair. “Anyway, I was finishing a delivery to a police force on Gerrenthum and got a comm from Figg Excavation asking about weapons. After a conversation with one of their purchasing agents, she put me through to Jarric. He was leading the operation on Burnin Konn. We got together a few times, and he extended an offer to me to work out their defensive set up. I accepted, obviously; the money was right. I made a bunch of recommendations, and they took most of them, a big one they didn't take was my recommendation to de-centralize their turbolaser control network for the planetary guns. Look what that got them.” She chuckled, the Vice Admiral joined in, smiling broadly.

“It got them a rude wake-up call, please, go on.”

“Well, I'd been there for a short time, when Tavion shows up out of nowhere with Lara and Fifty, fortunately Jarric; who I was with at the time, had no idea who they were. I was able to take him aside and spoke with him. He offered me compensation, to make up for the money I'd lose by 'quitting', a way out, and a meeting with the Admiral.” She paused as Larkin burst out laughing, shaking his head and closing his eyes for a moment. He rubbed them with his right hand, laughing for a solid thirty seconds before stopping and raising his head again.

“I'm sorry. Really. Normally people don't want to talk to the Admiral, they want to avoid him at all costs. I'm typically the one they run to first. Anyway, sorry, please continue,” he said after recovering his senses.

Na'tak chuckled. “Well, I accepted; frankly I could tell that ‘it’ was about to hit the fan, and frankly I didn't want to be left behind to deal with it. I gave your guys the layout to the base, information, and assistance once the attack started. I was shot while escaping. Fortunately, Fifty was able to patch my wounds. I think he was more excited to have an excuse to touch me without me smacking him. We stole a Sentinel, extracted everyone, and got out. You know the rest.”

The Vice Admiral nodded, rubbing his chin. “Well, that makes me feel better, pretty much meshes exactly with what our commandos reported.”

“Anything that didn't?”

“Nothing major; they had more details on the actual execution of the operation. Soldier things.” He waved his hand dismissively. “I don't know, I suppose I was actually hoping that there was something different between the stories.”

“Wait, why?” She asked, confused.

“Well, the Admiral was acting strangely...”

“That's the second time I've heard that. How?”

“Do I know? I've served with the Admiral for a long time now.” Larkin rubbed his chin, glancing up for a moment. “Since just after Yavin, actually, so he's been my superior for nearly seventeen years now. We were on a different ship, in a different circumstance, but he's been the same the entire time. It's easy for me to tell when something's bothering him. There's something about what happened that he's not content with, but...” He shrugged. “I can't make heads or tails of it. He may just be paranoid; that's common.”

“Gotcha, well, is there anything else?” Na'tak was relieved to be off the subject, it was beginning to creep her out.

“Oh come now! I'd be a terrible host if I just asked you a bunch of questions and didn't have any sort of follow-up.” He stood up, extending his hand toward the much younger lady. She took it, standing up. “I think it's time you saw some of the more fun things on board the ship.”

Na'tak smiled, releasing Larkin's hand and following him as he walked out of the mess hall. “After today, I could certainly use some fun.”

A few days passed without incident. The Termination and Majestic, operating together, met with a few convoys from various Task Force proxy corporations and entities. Primarily exchanging supplies and personnel, the convoys came and went as a gentle tide. Throughout the operations, much of the ship was run at reduced personnel levels to allow the various men and women who served on the ship some well-deserved R&R. Na'tak had spent most of her time either talking with Aysa, or spending time with the commandos she knew from her work on the *Gem in the Darkness*, the shadow port that she called 'home'. She was so fully absorbed in the workings of the ship and learning more that she did not find it odd that she was summoned to the Termination's main conference room on the bridge.

Once she arrived, she smiled warmly at all of the familiar faces. The Admiral was scowling as usual and giving each person a stare which could turn them to stone. Vice Admiral Gaunt was writing a letter to someone, tapping idly into his pad as he waited for the meeting to start. Tavion, Lara, Fifty, and Ten were here as well, and all but Ten were chatting amongst themselves

candidly. None of them were armored, except for Ten, which was fairly rare. She took a seat near them, waving back to Lara who wiggled her fingers in the Twi'lek's direction.

“I am glad that you could find time from your busy day to attend our little meeting, Miss Na'tak. Typically, on board this vessel, we show up on time when the commanding officer is involved in the meeting.” The Admiral's icy voice filled the room.

Na'tak blinked, as she realized that the Admiral was talking to her, and checked her chronometer, she couldn't have been more than thirty seconds late.

“Excuse me?”

“You were twenty six seconds late. As you are a guest and a business person, I will extend a professional courtesy to you and forgive this transgression. Should you decide to be late to a second meeting, I would suggest you head straight to the hangar and ask for a ride to the nearest station; because if you do not I will drop you off in an escape pod in the middle of a hyperlane somewhere. Am I clear?” The smile on his face was nearly as unsettling as his stare.

“I... Uh...” Lara nudged Na'tak with her foot, shaking her head slowly. “...Yes. Crystal clear.”

“Very good. To make things brief, the Termination and Majestic will be splitting up for a short time. The Majestic is to be dispatched to Aurora to distribute her stores of hypermatter to the fleet. The Termination will be holding station near the Gem in the Darkness to take on supplies that we are purchasing from a few of the vendors. As such, I have authorized a forty-eight hour shore leave for the crew. You four...” He pointed at the four commandos. “...will be responsible for the crew's behavior on the station, and by that I mean I simply would like you to attend to any problems that come up, otherwise consider yourselves on leave as well.”

The commandos grinned, forty-eight hours of leave was rare, let alone at a port as large as the Gem. Na'tak smiled as well, realizing she'd passed whatever test the Admiral had for her, and was being brought home.

“Your smile tells me you understand what this means for you, Miss Na'tak, so I will forgo explaining it. Vice Admiral Gaunt, you are to be given temporary command of the Manticore to oversee the transfer operation.” The Vice Admiral did not even look up from his datapad, simply thrusting an upward turned thumb in the Admiral's direction.

“Very well. Questions?” The Admiral waited for a few moments, before nodding. “As I said, brief. You are all dismissed, transports will be dispatched to the Gem beginning in approximately one hour. Miss Na'tak, would you so be so kind as to remain here.”

Na'tak swallowed hard, figuring that she was going to be chastised for being late. The Admiral patiently waited until everyone had left before speaking.

“Aysa, please close the conference room door, increase lighting to normal levels.” The blast door leading to the bridge slid shut and locked as the lighting in the room increased significantly. Na'tak blinked a few times; she hadn't realized that the lights were dimmed.

“I believe that one of the terms of your negotiations with Tavion was a one-on-one meeting with me. I am not one to violate the terms of an agreement. I assure you that this is quite one-on-one, save for Aysa; and I can temporarily dismiss her if necessary,” he said, bridging his fingers.

“Uh. No. She's fine.” Na'tak shifted, pulling a datapad out of one of her many pockets and setting it down on the table. “So I guess we should get down to business.”

“If that is what you would like to discuss, then by all means please open the conversation. I am simply fulfilling our end of this bargain,” he said, staring at her.

“Right, well. I'd like to talk about becoming a supplier for your fleet. I have many contacts along the Corellian Trade Spine and the Hydian Way, and would be able to procure nearly anything that you required for your operations. I specialize in dealing in arms and weapons, and would offer a competitive rate for your forc...” The Admiral raised a hand to interrupt her.

“Miss Na'tak. Your reputation precedes you as an accomplished dealer. To be frank, I do not need to hear your sales pitch, as polished as it may be. Allow me to tell you what we require, and what we are willing to pay; I believe that you will find the terms generous. If you do not, then I will be open to negotiation. Is this acceptable to you?”

Na'tak was taken aback by the Admiral's candidness, she had been told to expect him to be direct, but this was quite different than anything she'd ever encountered in her business transactions.

“Sure, let's hear it.”

“I require two things at the moment. The first is something that fits your expertise; within forty eight hours I require two thousand metric tons of high explosives. For this job, I will offer you your at-cost price for the explosives, plus a twenty percent commission if the order is fulfilled in the time frame required. The second is a request that I do not believe you get often, however; I believe you are the right person for the job because of your extensive contacts.” The Admiral paused, eying her closely.

“I require help, essentially. Paid help, mercenaries, guns-for-hire, whatever you would like to call them. Not land forces, but naval forces; primarily small ships. Starfighters and transports are preferred, and I will accept nothing above one hundred meters. My offer will be five thousand credits per vessel. However much you guarantee in payments will be doubled, and that amount will be awarded to you as compensation for the second task. Of course, it will be modified appropriately if any of the vessels you procure do not actually perform what I am to ask of them, but I am sure you understand what I am offering.”

She did. Na'tak had credit signs in her wide open eyes. The Admiral seemed to disregard this, continuing without waiting for her to respond.

“The time frame for this task is also forty eight hours. I will require their services within a few hours of that point. Instructions will be transmitted via a secure communications bouy. Are these terms acceptable to you?” He asked, reading her answer from her face.

“Yes!” She exclaimed, before managing to regain her professional decorum. “Er. Yes, I think I can do it, I'll just need to know what you require everything fo...” She was interrupted yet again by the Admiral raising his hand.

“One of the reasons that I am comfortable in offering you this work is that I have been told that you do not ask questions. I will not answer any more, this is my only offer. Take it or leave it.” The Admiral leaned back in his chair, folding his arms on the table.

“Fine. I'll do it, on one condition,” she said, confidently.

The Admiral's right eyebrow arched as he spoke. “I do believe that I was speaking Basic when I said that it was my only offer. Please, go on, I am amused just enough by this to not simply throw you out of this room.”

Na'tak frowned, she wasn't sure how serious the Admiral was. “My condition would be that you contact me again if you have further work. If I'm to become a supplier the...”

For a third time, the Admiral raised a hand, frowning. “Miss Na'tak, I will promise you that you will be contacted if and only if your expertise suits my needs. In a word: No. If you have issue with that, then I will take my business elsewhere. To turn a phrase: This is your chance, take it or leave it,” he said, speaking to her as if she were a child.

Na'tak sighed, nodding. “I accept.”

“Very good,” he said, pleased, “you are dismissed.”

Na'tak blinked, standing up and walking out of the conference room. She was confused; her business interactions did not go that way, ever. The money was insanely good, so she didn't really mind, but it was quite a surprise.

“...Damn, how does he do it,” she said to nobody in particular. She glanced over her shoulder as she watched the doors to the conference room close, with the Admiral's eyes boring directly at her until the doors slammed shut.

“I don't think I want to know.”

Four Gamma-class ATR-6 Assault Transports from the Termination raced toward the enormous space station with their ion engines blazing like blue fire. Following lighted guidance beacons toward their destination, the Gem in the Darkness was swarming with ships of all shapes and sizes. The station maintained a small standing defense force of a few wings of starfighters, and it was armed with dozens of turbolaser batteries to enforce the strenuous peace in this area of space. There weren't too many problems here, as the station and the various vessels surrounding it cooperated to ensure things remained mostly calm. The four task force transports raced past a pair of Republic X-wings escorting a Lambda shuttle, and a few kilometers later lanced over the dorsal hull of an Imperial Carrack cruiser; taking on supplies from an Incom cargo ferry. In the cockpit of the lead ship, Tavion rolled the assault transport across the beacons, following them

toward one of the Gem's massive hangar bays. Fifty was sitting next to Tavion, watching the Republic shuttle and flipping it off as they passed it.

“If only we weren't here, turbolaser right into the cockpit of the shuttle. Blam! Whoops, was that us?” Fifty used his hand like a gun, ‘shooting’ the shuttle repeatedly.

“Yeah, and instead you perform the galactic-standard 'I am an idiot' move of flipping someone off. Really? Are you twelve?” Tavion sighed, aligning the prow of the vessel with the banking guidance beacons.

“You're a ball-buster, Spectre. Really. Ugh.” Fifty pouted, leaning back in the co-pilot's chair.

Tavion guided the vessel inside, where a myriad of vessels were sitting ranging from a few small snubfighters to a large transport that seemed to belong to a rather well off individual who was standing at the bottom of its loading ramp. He seemed to be barking orders to droids scurrying around the hangar. The four Assault Transports drew a few heads to turn as they sat down in tandem. Their loading ramps lowered, and the various commandos on board the vessels began filing off, most of them carrying large packs. Na'tak was one of the first off the transports, grinning broadly her eyes darted around the hangar. She turned back as Tavion and Fifty started to walk off the transport as well.

“Home sweet home. Hey. I'm going to go head to the shop, catch up on a few things, and I have a bunch of comms to make; you two want to meet me for dinner later?”

“Yeah, we'll meet at your shop. Nineteen hundred hours?” Tavion asked, shouldering his own pack.

Na'tak blinked, and glanced at the chronometer on her wrist. “Er. Yeah. Seven. No problem. That should give me a little time to take care of some business.”

“A'ight, take care Na'tak,” Tavion chuckled at her decidedly civilian reaction.

“You too! Bye!” She scurried off into the station proper, leaving the two commandos to their own business. Picking up their packs, they started walking after her to get into the station itself.

“So where are we staying this time?” Fifty grinned, nudging Tavion with his elbow.

“We? No. Not happening, get your own room. The last time we got a room together I couldn't get the smell of oil off of me for three weeks.”

“Bah, fine. Well see if I invite you to any sort of sexy party in my room.”

Tavion sighed, rolling his eyes. “Go away, please. I'm on leave now and I really would like to just relax, oka...” He turned to face Fifty, and noticed that he'd already raced off somewhere else.

“Damnit.” Walking forward, Tavion stepped through the hangar bay doors and into one of the enormous promenades in the station. Across the area dozens of bars, shops, and businesses

ringed the perimeter while the inner cloister was filled with denizens of all shapes and sizes. Things were casual and unrestricted here. The only official looking people around were the heavily armored station guards that stood like statues at various points across the area to enforce the peace. The entire area was busy and noisy, with bright lights overhead illuminating the area to the point where it seemed to glow. Tavion looked about the area, grinning as he looked at all of the store fronts, heard the noise of activity, and smelled things that would normally make him cringe; but here, he embraced it.

He walked over toward a console next to the entrance to the hangar, tapping it to bring up a diagram of this level of the promenade. Tavion did a quick search for lodging, and grinned as he noticed a trio of potential establishments. He chose the priciest of the three, mainly because the fleet was picking up the tab, not him, and quickly memorized the way there. He rolled his shoulders, walking over toward his destination – he knew he was getting close as he saw the number of people wearing formal clothing skyrocket. Looking entirely out of place, he walked straight into the establishment, the 'Corusca Hotel', and stepped up to the main counter.

“Heya, Francis.” He grinned at the man standing behind the counter as he read his name from the tag on his vest.

“Good afternoon, sir.” Francis glanced over Tavion, looking him over as he would a poor cut of meat.

“I'd like a room,” Tavion said, quietly.

The man quirked an eyebrow at that, chuckling. “Our rates are one hundred fifty credits per night, sir,” Francis replied, with an air of condescension.

Tavion shrugged in response, pulling out a credit chit and tossing it on the counter. “That probably has a few million behind it, or would you rather I go somewhere else?”

The man behind the counter blinked, before glancing back and forth between the chit and Tavion.

“Uh, certainly, sir. Let me just finish setting this other customer up with a room, if you would.”

Tavion nodded, following the man with his eyes as he walked over toward another individual in an Imperial uniform. Tavion recognized the man, and waved toward him; grinning.

“Hey, Lieutenant Drolin, how's life on the bridge?” The lieutenant turned toward Tavion, he was surprised to see the commando here. His face seemed to twist for a moment before he regained his composure.

“Uh, just fine, sir. How are you?” His voice was soft, and he spoke abnormally slow for a normal person; but as the Termination's communication's officer, he needed to be understood at all times.

“You can drop the sir, we're on leave! Tavion is just fine. What brings you here? I didn't know that the bridge crew was getting their stay comped as well.”

“We're not.” That made Tavion blink, he was a bit confused as to why the lieutenant would spend his own money to stay at a place like this, but he didn't really think anything else of it.

“Er, well. It sounds like a fancy place, I'm sure you'll enjoy yourself. You know what, hey... uh... maestro? Bell boy? Whatever your name is.” Tavion motioned toward the man behind the counter. “Put his room and such on my tab, will you?”

“That's really not necessary...” The lieutenant trailed off.

“I insist! Please,” Tavion said, with a large smile on his face.

Francis shrugged, taking the credit chit that Tavion had tossed on the table. He ran it through a device on the counter, tapping commands into a connected console. After a few moments of fiddling with the console he nodded and handed the credit chit back to Tavion. Francis turned about, picking two keycards off of a large board, and handed one to each of the two men.

“There you are, gentlemen. Your suite is on level three...” He nodded toward the lieutenant before turning to Tavion. “And yours is on level four. Do you require someone to take your bags?”

“Nope, I'm fine. Quick question though, is there any good place to eat nearby?” Tavion asked, glancing around the lobby idly.

“Well, sir, the restaurant connected to this establishment,” Francis pointed over toward a nearby opened door with a red sign above it, “is renowned as one of the best in the station. However, if your tastes are a little less exquisite, there are a few establishments in the 'C' section of the station's outer promenade, I have a small list here.” Francis procured a piece of flimsiplast, sliding it over to Tavion.

“Thanks, man. I appreciate it. Anyway, gonna go drop this stuff off and then take a look around. What have you got planned, Lieutenant?”

“Uh, just some relaxation. Hence why I was going to blow the credits on this place, complimentary everything? I'll take a massage, thank you very much. Thanks for comping the room though,” he said, nodding appreciatively.

“Eh, it's on the fleet. I'm sure you deserve it.”

“That I do. I'll try not to run your tab up too much.” He grinned. “Take care, Tavion.” The lieutenant waved to him as he took his bag, moving toward the turbolift nexus.

“You too, Lieutenant.” Tavion moved toward a different section of turbolifts, slipping inside once he got there. He tapped the controls to send him to the third floor, and once it arrived, he walked toward his room. He took note of the hallways, rubbing his eyes at the very strong lighting and bright accouterments arrayed across the area. Various paintings and sculptures flanked the hallway like stoic soldiers. Upon arriving at his room, he slipped his key card into a panel next to the door, and it slid open. Stepping inside, he stood in awe for a moment at the suite

he'd been given. He was taken aback at the sheer size of his living arrangements, the room was enormous. The entire area was lavishly furnished, with a few holographic paintings on the wall that changed every few minutes. There was a large bar, as well as an auto-chef on one side, and a door on the opposite end leading to a bedroom with an absolutely gargantuan bed.

He stepped into the bedroom, grinning as he looked into the refresher. The refresher itself was about as large as his room on the Termination, with a steam bath in one corner and a standard refresher on the opposite side. Going back to the bedroom itself, he opened a large closet and looked at all of the formal clothing arrayed there as a courtesy to someone who rented the room. Reaching over, he pushed down on the bed, testing its resistance for no reason other than that he could. He nodded approvingly before walking back into the main room of the suite.

“Thank you for the room, Admiral. My tab is going to be ridiculous and I will giggle when you yell at me for it.” He grinned, tossing his bag onto a couch. He plopped down next to the bag, before grabbing a remote control off of the table sitting in front of the couch. Tavion promptly activated the large television set. He surfed for a few moments before settling on a 'reality' television channel, something he normally would normally never touch. In this case, however, he had about five hours to blow, and he was going to spend them doing nothing but rotting his brain on the worst that the galaxy had to offer.

As he propped his feet up on a table that probably cost more than he made in a month, there was one thought that kept going through his head:

This was the life.

Hours later, Tavion found himself sitting at a table with Na'tak and Lara in *The Corellian Run*, a rather boisterous public house. Tavion had suggested a higher-end restaurant, but got immediately vetoed by Na'tak who claimed this place was more fun. The air in the restaurant was thick with the smoke of a dozen different pipes and cigarras and the band was blasting music. The lighting was dimmed to the point where Tavion found it difficult to see more than a few meters in any direction; though that didn't bother him too much. The three had a pitcher of ale sitting in the middle of the table, their mugs filled with the amber liquid. Next to the pitcher was a large plate of appetizers while they waited for their real meals to arrive. Tavion took a swig of the ale, shaking his head and laughing at the end of a string of banter between Na'tak and Lara.

“Well I have to say.” Tavion rolled his shoulders, placing his hands down on his lap. “This was definitely a good choice. Decent music, ale's good, though it could be a bit brighter.”

“Eh, they tried that once, didn't go well with the 'less savory' people that make this place interesting later on.” Na'tak took a sip of her ale before setting her mug down, her perpetual grin plastered over her face.

“Yeah, explains the weapons check.” They had been forced to surrender their weapons upon entering, surrendering them to a booth just outside the entrance.

“Yep. Makes sure it doesn't get too bad, and Goddess knows I could use the entertainment.” She rubbed the back of her head, taking another swig of ale.

“What's up?” Lara nudged Na'tak with her elbow. “Still feeling under the weather after your bacta dip?”

“No, it's what the Admiral's asked me to do, I've been on my communicator since I got back and running around to a few places around here. I'm going to need a vacation after all of this.”

“Oh? What's he got you doing?”

Na'tak blinked, glancing around shiftily. Lara laughed aloud, poking her in the side and causing the blue female to swat at her hand.

“Oh c'mon, tell us. Unless he told you specifically not to, spill your guts,” she said playfully, poking Na'tak again.

“Okay, okay.” She leaned in close, both Tavion and Lara followed suit. “He wants me to get a bunch of explosives, and mercenaries in a forty-eight hour time span. It seems to be random, but he insisted on them. He's offering me a pretty penny for my time too.”

“Huh, weird.” Tavion's brow furrowed, and Lara shot him a look of confusion as well.

“What's wrong?” Na'tak whispered just loudly enough to be heard over all of the action in the bar.

“Eh, I can't remember the last time we worked with mercenaries, must have been what? Four, five years ago?” Lara looked toward Tavion for confirmation.

“Yeah, unless you count the zombies,” he said, taking a swig of ale.

“...Zombies?” Na'tak's eyes darted between the two of them.

“Long story, inside joke; kinda. And no, they don't count.” Lara giggled.

“Well then yeah, five years ago. Last time would have been when we were hitting the Republic Ytterbium storage facilities while the Allegiance fellows were stuck on Firma.”

“Ah, yeah, that.” Lara nodded as her memory returned to her..

“Yeaaaah... I still do business with them, are you guys still pissed at them and/or want them dead?” Na'tak asked, biting her lower lip.

“No.” Tavion shook his head vigorously. “I mean, the only reason we raided Bethlamore was...” Tavion was interrupted by a gleam out of the corner of his eye which drew his gaze over Na'tak's right shoulder. He nudged Lara under the table with his foot, motioning with a subtle move of his head. Lara turned toward Na'tak, wrapping her arms around the Twi'lek.

“You're great! Thanks for bringing us here.” Her eyes were focused where Tavion was indicating. After a couple more seconds, she released Na'tak, leaning forward. Na'tak, a bit confused yet again, leaned forward with her. Lara spoke quietly, in hushed tones.

“There are four men at the table behind us, one's got a knife. How'd he get that in here?”

Na'tak shrugged, rolling her eyes. “It's a bar, pay the guy? Don't declare it? Walk in? Who knows, what does it matter?” Her rapid fire questions betrayed her nervousness.

“Probably doesn't, but we should keep an eye on them. If they got a weapon in, there's probably a reason.” Tavion straightened back up. “Here, why don't you get us another round, your choice.” Tavion tossed a credit chit onto the table, it slid over in front of Na'tak.

“All right!” She bounced to her feet, glancing at Lara. “I should get him something girly.”

“Do it! He may enjoy it too much, I want to see it.” Lara chuckled, and as Na'tak bounded toward the bar, she leaned back. She watched Tavion, who kept glancing over her shoulder.

“So did you ever take care of those six reports you needed to put through?” Tavion asked.

“Nah, I only had the time to do four of them.” Lara grinned, she loved this part.

“Eh, yeah, there were two more behind the first pile that you needed to take care of.” Tavion drummed his fingers on the table, glancing over at Na'tak who was chatting up the bartender.

“Damn. I must have completely missed them.”

“Yeah, I swear sometimes headquarters bends us over a barrel to take care of all of this paperwork.” Lara cringed, Tavion just subtly nodded, rolling his eyes.

“Well, we get to enjoy it when they aren't on our asses about something, I suppose it comes and goes,” she said.

“Yeah, but they're on ours right now. Remember that meeting we had yesterday?” Tavion let his hands drift under the table.

“What about it?”

“Well the commander kept picking on Na'tak since she was a hired consultant, didn't really make anyone feel good, did it?” He asked.

Lara glanced over at Na'tak, who was on her way back with three glasses full of a bright yellow liquid. She grinned widely at the sight, masking her utter disappointment with the realization that the people behind them were here for them. Na'tak slid back into her seat, setting the drinks down, she made a show of handing Tavion his, which had a rather large purple umbrella sticking out of it.

“I told his to make yours extra fruity,” she giggled mischievously.

“Just how I like 'em.” He took a sip of it, immediately regretting the decision, it was far too sweet for his liking. “Mmm, delicious,” he lied.

“They're my favorite!” Na'tak squealed, attacking her drink with vigor. She took a long pull of it before setting it down, drumming her fingers on the table. “I'm having a great time, thank you so much for coming out with me.”

“No problem, I'm having a blast.” Tavion nodded toward Lara, and shifted slightly in his seat so that his legs were off the left side of the chair. Lara stood up, touching Na'tak's shoulder gently.

“I need to hit the refresher, I'll be right back.” She turned around, walking past Na'tak, and toward the table a few meters back where the four men what Tavion had indicated was sitting. Approaching it, she could see that there were four humanoids sitting at the table, each drinking water. As she started to pass them, Tavion leaned forward.

“Hey, when you hear a loud thump, get under the table.” Na'tak blinked, but nodded in acceptance.

Lara stumbled, knocking herself into one of the seated men. Any semblance of doubt that these guys weren't after them was erased as the four immediately fixed their gaze onto her, and two sets of hands slipped under the table in a not-so-subtle movement. Lara laughed aloud, as the man moved to push her off of him.

“Heeeey! What's up? I'm sorry for bumpin' ya!” She giggled, looking at the man as he stood up, turning toward her. He roughly pushed her hand off of his body.

“Get off me, bitch.”

“Badmercsayswhat?”

“What?” He blinked, and in the time it took him to do that; Lara had her right hand around his neck, her left hand wrenching his hip toward her. She slammed him with such force into the table that his legs flopped out from under him and he gasped as the air in his lungs was forcibly evacuated. Before anyone had time to react, she released his neck, swinging her arm up and around. She brought a hammerfist down onto the man's face just as he regained his faculties enough to start raising his head. The blow shattered his nose, and slammed the back of his head into the table with a loud thunk. The other three men rushed to their feet, two of them drawing small vibrodaggers from their clothing.

“You're going to regret that, bitch.” The closest attacker swiped at her with the vibrodagger, only to have his forearm smacked away by a second figure coming up alongside him. The man turned to look at who else he had to deal with, only to meet Tavion's forehead as the latter head-butted him as hard as he could. Reeling back from the impact, he swiped the dagger at Tavion wildly, leaning forward in an attempt to get as much behind the attack as he could. Tavion grabbed the man's wrist, yanking him forward and sending the man's attack wide of his torso. Not giving up the opportunity, Tavion head-butted his attacker again. He felt the hand around the weapon

loosen up slightly as the man's head reeled backwards from the attack. Tavion slammed his free hand into the man's wrist, causing the dagger to drop from his hand, clattering against the ground.

The man yelped in pain, backing off a half step and clutching his wrist. Tavion kicked the hilt of the knife with his boot, sending it skittering away as movement out of the corner of his eye caught his attention. Dropping his right arm across his side, he deflected a punch meant for his kidneys from a new assailant. Unable to block a second attack, he took a hard jab to the stomach, his head finally turning fully toward the new opponent. A flurry of blows rained down on Tavion's body as he curled his arms inwards to defend himself. He took a half step back, dropping his guard a little, and allowed his eyes to droop as one of the man's blows impacted with the side of his head. His opponent thrust an arm forward, and Tavion seized the opportunity to smack his arm to the side, stepping forward and slamming his right fist into the man's face with such force that he heard a sickening crack, followed by a howl of pain.

To his left, Lara was locked in combat with the fourth man who had been sitting at the table. Each of them had a vibrodagger in hand, Tavion realized he'd kicked the dagger in her direction subconsciously, and she had snatched it up. The two were fighting furiously; with Lara mainly on the defensive as she yanked her body out of the way of the scything blade, smacking the dagger away with her own from time to time. She was bleeding from a pair of shallow cuts on her abdomen and arm where the man had managed to land strikes against her, and she was backing up a little quickly. Without her opponent noticing, she flipped the dagger in her hand, grasping the blade with a few fingers, and took two large steps backwards. When her opponent came in to attack her she raised the dagger up, and threw it directly at him, the blade spinning end over end. The man's eyes widened as his momentum took him straight into the dagger's path, the blade burying itself deep into the man's neck. He collapsed to the ground, gurgling as blood oozed from the wound and began to pool in his mouth. Lara was reaching down to grab the knife when a sudden blaster shot silenced the entire area.

The two men that had been sitting at the rear table, which Tavion had indicated to Lara, stepped forward. They leveled their blasters at the two commandos, with every eye in the bar fixated on the two of them. Smoke poured from the impact point in the ceiling where one of them had fired a warning shot; the only sound was that of the gurgling man on the floor, choking on his own blood and convulsing. The three attackers slid back, forming up with the two blaster wielding men.

"Well, I think that's enough now. Don't you two?" One of the men spoke, taking a half step forward with his weapon leveled with Tavion's chest.

"Eh, I was just starting to have some fun." Tavion managed to speak between heavy breaths, his eyes fixated on the barrel of the blaster.

"Well, that's too bad, isn't it? I'm sure the three of you will have fun in the afterlife." He raised the blaster, pointing it between Spectre's eyes, his finger tightening on the trigger. A loud 'KA-CHCH' broke the silence of the bar and eyes turned toward the bartender, who had an oblong slugthrower barrel pressed against the head of one of the two blaster wielders.

"They might, but not today." The bartender's voice was gruff, going right along with his rugged appearance.

"Stay out of this, it doesn't concern you," the assailant said.

"It's in my bar, it concerns me. Besides, you're outnumbered." The bartender turned one of the attacker's heads with the barrel of the gun, pointing it at the main entrance where a team of men had entered wearing station security uniforms, holding rifles and pointing them at the two armed attackers.

"Hrmph. Fine." He nodded toward Tavion. "The three of you are dead." The team walked toward the station security officers, having their weapons confiscated immediately. They were led out of the establishment, and no sooner had they set foot outside did the action, music, and noise continue.

"Hey, thanks." Tavion nodded his appreciation to the bartender, who was just grinning. The bartender made a show of pointing the weapon at Tavion and pulling the trigger; which caused the weapon to make a loud 'click'.

"They don't even make ammunition for this thing anymore. I love when they're not from around here. C'mere. Round's on the house for the three of ya. That was as entertaining a fight as I've seen in years now." The bartender turned around to choose the drinks for the trio. Na'tak crawled out from under the table, looking around nervously.

"But didn't you hear them? Station security won't do anything to them, probably a fine and then they'll be let g..."

"You didn't actually look at 'em, did you?" The bartender grinned. "They weren't station security. They wouldn't have left a body here. Those boys won't be killin' anyone today, or ever for that matter."

"Ha. Yeah... about that round." Na'tak, flustered, plopped down on a stool, almost regretting her decision to come to dinner. The bartender turned around with a large mug, sliding it over to Na'tak.

"That'll calm ya, lass."

"It's Na'tak." She raised the glass, saluting the bartender.

"The regulars here call me Ben." He slid glasses over toward Lara and Tavion, who were standing near the now-corpse. "Security'll be here in about two standard, just for your information." He winked at the two of them, who got the message. They both patted the man down, recovering an identification card, credit chit, a couple pieces of flimsiplast, and a dock access card before the real security officers showed up. One of them walked up to Ben, who simply pointed at the ceiling where the blaster burn was.

"It's all on tape. I'll send a copy down," he said without being asked.

The armored man nodded. "Thanks. Were there any others?"

"Five others, they were taken out by our security." Ben grinned, and everyone nearby could tell the armored individual was cringing under his helmet.

"...Ah. We'll get them eventually, right?" He asked with uncertainty in his voice.

"Just like always." Ben clasped the security officer on the shoulder. "Have a nice day, officer."

"You too, Ben. We still on for tomorrow?"

"Of course, wouldn't miss it; tell the family I said hi." The security officer nodded before turning and moving to leave the establishment. He stepped around a cleaning droid which was already attending to the blood on the ground, and waved over his shoulder toward Ben.

Tavion shook his head, laughing as he took a sip of the ale that Ben had provided. "Of all the places for this to happen, I'm glad it was here. They were obviously after us, how long had they been waiting?"

"They came in about five minutes before you did. Amateurs, ordered six waters. Who orders six waters in this place? Idiots and mercenaries lookin' for a hit, that's who." Ben shook his head, leaning down to the three of them. "Any idea who they are."

"Not yet." Lara was going through the deceased man's things. "Obviously forged ID, bout two hundred credits on him, the flimsi's got directions written on it; to here... might be able to backtrack where they came from. The only thing really interesting is this dock pass." She set it down on the table, it was a gold medallion with a dock number written on it, and a port on one side to be used with the various dock computers.

"You don't see those very often." Ben leaned back, rubbing his chin. He turned around, looking about the bar before selecting a bottle of whiskey and setting it on the table, along with four glasses. He poured a bit of the amber liquid into each one, handing one to each of them before taking the last for himself. He set the bottle down amongst them. "That's a Priority dock pass. Whoever that belongs to paid enough for a private dock, storage, and probably a bit of a 'kicker' to one of the higher-ups."

Na'tak's eyes widened. "Wow. Yeah. Even I don't have one of those, they're like fifty thousand credits a month. Whoever hired those guys has a lot of money to blow."

"Hrmph. They usually do. How can we figure out which dock it accesses?" Lara ran the device over in her hands.

"Well, you could go plug it into a bunch of docks and see which one it opens, but that'd log all of the accesses and it'd probably get locked out after two or three. Station Administration is really strict about the use and abuse of those passes. Orrrr...." He trailed off. "...I know a guy who could tell you which dock it accesses. It'll cost you a bit." The man shrugged, pointing at the other

objects they'd collected from the dead man. "The credits and the forged ID would probably meet his price."

"Why are you being so helpful?" Lara eyed the man cautiously, while Tavion was just grinning and enjoying the interactions, and Na'tak was ogling the pass.

"Easy! You've given me something to talk about and advertise. I let a couple seconds of the footage leak of you and him beatin' the ugly out of those guys and I get more business from people who want to get drunk and get into fights. And believe me, there are a lot of them on this station. It's the least I can do for that kind of publicity," he said with a toothy smile.

Tavion laughed, shaking his head with a grin on his face. "Well we're not supposed to have the stuff anyway, why not?" He glanced at Lara, who shrugged, apparently content with the answer as well. She slid the credits and the ID across the bar, and Ben snatched them up with one swoop of his hand, before canting his head over his right shoulder.

"Hey! Bolts! Get out here," he yelled.

"I'm busy! Leave me alone!" A voice from a back room in the bar spoke up.

"Yeah yeah. Stop 'servicing' the serving droid's socket or whatever the hell you're doing and get out here, it's business related." The overt conversation did nothing to rouse the nearby drunks, it was standard banter for them.

"Hey, I'm not doing that right now. What kind of business?"

"Paying business." Those two words were enough to get a reaction, there was a clattering; a loud 'bang', and a serving droid whipped out of the room that Ben was yelling into. It was followed a moment later by a droid which looked like one of the old IG-series droids, though his chassis was new.

"Paying business, where?" The droid asked, his multiple photoreceptors looking about the area.

Ben motioned toward Lara, Na'tak and Tavion. "Right here. They paid me already." He pointed at the things on the counter, the droid glanced down at them and nodded.

"Sufficient for most things, what's the task?"

"They just need you to read this and tell them who it belongs to." Ben picked up the dock pass and handed it to the droid.

"Easy enough." The droid took the pass, looking it over, his photoreceptors changed color multiple times over the course of a few seconds. "Well at least it's legit. Hopefully it doesn't give me a virus like that skank over at Nalta the Hutt's place." He plugged it into a port in his chest cavity.

"Let's see here... Oh." The droid paused, glancing at the money and the forged identification. "You should have charged more," he said.

“Why?” Lara eyed the droid.

“Because it belongs to someone important, a-duh.” The droid wagged a metallic finger at her.

“Eh. They paid, Bolts, fair and square. Tell em who it belongs to,” Ben scolded the droid.

“Figg Excavations.”

“No. Kriffin. Way.” Lara's jaw dropped, Na'tak's eyes widened, and Tavion shifted uncomfortably in his seat. “How the hell could they have known?!”

“They couldn't have.” Tavion said flatly, frowning. “The op was perfect. In and out, no problems.”

“Ughhhh!” Lara groaned, rubbing her eyes with her hands. “The hell. Really? Are you sure?”

“Oh gee. Let me just double check my calculations. Oh dear, it seems I forgot to carry a one. How delightfully un-droid-like of me. It really belongs to your dumb face. Your dumb face owns it, and those who are allowed to use it are your dumb mouth and your dumb questions. Of course I am sure.” It was in that moment that Lara wanted to leap over the table and smash the droid, but Tavion interrupted her with a light tap to the shin.

“What bay is it in?” He asked, to break the tension.

“Well, that'll cost you ext...” The droid was whacked upside the head by Ben. “...Dock Three. South section, you can access the main entrance via a lift in that area. Would you also like me to fondle your genitals while you do it or are we through with giving out free things?”

“That'll do, Bolts.”

The droid snatched up the credits and the forged ID, placing the pass on the table, and vacated the premises; returning to the back room.

“Ugh, Figg.” Na'tak shook her head, frowning. “I wonder how they found out.”

“Don't know, let's investigate it, bash some heads, and find out.” Tavion shrugged, picking up the pass.

“Sounds good, I need to vent some anger.” Lara stared at Bolts as he walked away.

“Right. Lara and I can check out the dock. Na'tak, you should probably go back to your shop and hole up for a bit, you can lock it up, right?” Na'tak nodded. “Good. We'll meet you back there later, might want to head that way now, the way is probably clear.”

Ben shook his head. “Doubt it. He probably has another guy watchin'. Don't worry though... BOLTS! Get out here!” He yelled again.

“What now?!”

“Escort the pretty lady home and I'll stop reprogramming all of our electronics to say 'No Bad Touching' when you're within a meter of them,” Ben said, and within a second the droid was half carrying, half leading Na'tak out the door.

“Right. Well.” Tavion rubbed the back of his head. “I'll send a comm to the Admiral, I'm sure he'll want to hear this, suit up and meet near the dock in an hour?”

“It's a date.” Lara nodded, standing up and making her way out of the pub.

“Good luck, son.” Ben grinned, sliding a final shot across the table for Tavion. He picked it up, downing it in one gulp before nodding his appreciation.

“Thanks, we'll need it.”

“So that's where we're at. I'm suiting up now and Two and I are going to see if we can figure anything out. In the meantime, Na'tak is chilling in her shop until we get back; if you can spare a few soldiers it'd be nice if you could have them cover her, sir.”

The Admiral sat in his quarters, having listened intently to Tavion as he relayed all of the details about the information they'd uncovered. He grinned, though nobody could see it, and leaned back in his chair.

“I am sorry, Spectre.” The Admiral's cold voice did not betray the grin on his face. “But we are understaffed from allowing so many of the crew to take leave; I cannot spare any soldiers at the moment.”

“But sir, can't we re...”

“Spectre. I am sorry.” The Admiral interrupted Tavion mid-sentence. Tavion was silent for ten seconds or so before speaking. “All right. Fine. If something happens to her then it's on you. Do you need any more information, sir?”

“No. That will be all Spectre. Termination out.” The Admiral cut the communication line with a quick tap of his datapad, before rubbing his hands together.

“This is delightful,” he said to nobody in particular.

“What is, Admiral?” Aysa spoke up, her soft voice bringing a wider grin to the Admiral's face.

“I am having a wonderful day. A first, I do believe.” The Admiral stood up, pacing about his quarters.

“Affirmative, this is the first time you have categorized a day as wonderful, do you require anything?”

“Yes, actually. Open a communication channel with Lieutenant Drolin. He should be on the station at the moment.” The Admiral stopped pacing, picking up a datapad and opening a blank file.

“One moment, Admiral.” There was a five second pause while Aysa made the requested connection. “Channel open.”

“This is the Termination to Lieutenant Drolin, do you read?” The Admiral asked.

“Yes sir, what can I do for you?”

“We are having difficulties with our long range communications array and holonet transmitter. It is not an issue that will require you to forgo your leave, so you may relax instead of being tense as I continue.” There was an audible sigh of relief on the other end of the COMM, the Admiral smiled. “Unfortunately the Gem is about as far out as we can get a signal, and we are stationed only a few hundred kilometers from it. I would like you to get in touch with the station's communications officer, and send a message to Vice Admiral Gaunt as soon as possible.”

“I am recording now, sir, what is the message?”

“Vice Admiral, due to damage to our long range communication's array, the Termination will be unable to make the rendezvous point for Operation Prophet. Hold station at Aurora until further notice so that we may complete repairs upon arrival with the materials on board the Majestic. Due to our inability to make the Prophet timetable, the Termination will be returning to Aurora from here in forty-four hours. Do not bother attempting to return this communication, as it is being sent from the Gem due to the damage to our communications array. Termination out,” the Admiral recited his message.

“I see. Very well, sir. I will get on this immediately.”

“See that you do, Lieutenant, Termination out.” The Admiral cut the communication again, glancing down at the datapad before Aysa's voice filled his ears again.

“Admiral. I am compelled to inform you that there is no damage to our communications array.”

The Admiral sat down, leaning back in his favorite chair. He propped his boots up on a nearby table, and adjusted his officer's cap with a smile.

“I am well aware, Aysa. However, it will be unusable which shall suit my needs just as well. Lock down the long range transmitter and receiver, I would like us to be deaf for a while. Throw a general error code into the consoles on the bridge. Make one up if you feel like it.”

“Authorization code and biometric scanning required to execute that order.” The Admiral heard the familiar hum of internal sensor systems coming online. “Biometric scanning complete, please state your authorization code, Admiral.”

“Authorization code: Lambda alpha rho iota mu delta alpha epsilon eta tau,” he recited.

“Authorization accepted, long range communications are now offline. Sir, I am receiving multiple reports from the bridge and communications teams about the problem.”

The Admiral chuckled, taking a seat. “Inform them that I am busy, and to deal with it themselves. In the meantime, contact Ten, tell him to hand pick three other commandos in person and have them report to the Gem to guard Na'tak. I would like them incognito, except for Ten; he can do whatever it is that he likes. Use his personal AI as the communication interface. Do not use normal communication channels for this or any further communications from me.”

“It will be done, sir.”

The Admiral closed his eyes, allowing his mind to drift. He had just made a play against what he had come to believe was a cunning opponent. All of the pieces were fitting together in his mind, and while his men and his opponent did not know it yet...

He was always in control.

Chapter 5 - Phantom Dancer

Tavion remained motionless behind the large stack of storage containers littering the oversized hallway which led to the Figg's dock. His hearing, enhanced by the Multi-Frequency Target Acquisition System (MFTAS) in his helmet, cued him in on the two technicians hauling more crates from the dock and into the hallway. He mostly ignored their conversation, focusing on observing the security in the area. He had noticed a pair of cameras, older visual models, tied into what he figured was the station's security grid. Above the hangar doors themselves was a twin set of detectors, much more modern than the cameras, that he chalked up to the Figg's own security. There were no guards in the hallway, though Tavion could just barely pick up the sounds of armor plating moving on the other side of the door. Though he couldn't see her, he was aware that Lara was doing the same thing that he was; both were deathly quiet. They'd been waiting for a half hour thus far, and were prepared to wait as long as it took for an opportunity to present itself.

"Ugh, how much more of this crap to we have to lug around?" One of the technicians was pushing a repulsor sled with a couple crates on it out of the dock area.

"A lot. We still have to move all of this stuff to the cargo area for sorting and distribution." The other technician was scanning a crate with some sort of inventory scanner.

"You're kidding, right?"

"As if. We're getting Eli and Akala in about an hour or so, that'll make things go a bit faster," the technician with the scanner said.

"I guess. Wanna burn some of that hour and get a cup of caf?" The technician slid the repulsor sled next to the wall, leaning on the crate while looking over at his compatriot.

"Eh. I'd have to reactivate the security system, it'd be a pain. Here." He reached into his pocket, fishing out a couple credit chits, which he tossed in the air at the other man. "Grab me a cup and something sweet. I'll keep going here; it'll give me some time to catch up to you. Damned network is slower than a Hutt today."

"A'ight. I'll be back in fifteen or so." He waved, taking the other's money and walked off. The technician returned to his scanning duties, so intent on watching the device that he didn't notice the white armored individual sliding out from behind a crate down the hallway. Tavion wrapped an arm around the man's face, clamping his mouth down. His other hand pressed the barrel of a silenced slugthrower into the small of the man's back, the barrel digging into him. Tavion spoke quickly, the dull click of his vocoder echoing in the man's ear as the technician instinctively froze.

"Listen carefully. If you do what I say, you will live as you have been. If you do not, or attempt to flee, or yell out for help, I will not kill you. I will paralyze you from the neck down. Nod if you understand," he said coldly.

Tavion could feel the man beginning to shake, his armor's sensors told him that his target's heart rate was drastically accelerating, but he nodded slowly. Tavion, testing him, slowly released his hand from the man's mouth. He did not scream.

"Good. First, I want information." Tavion allowed his free hand to go to his utility belt. He unclasped one of the pouches and pulled out a syringe filled with a green liquid; etched on the side was 'UM 3000, CV'. "How many guards are inside the bay?"

"F...Four." The man couldn't bring himself to raise his voice above a whisper, he was shaking with nervousness.

"Is is monitored?"

"Y-Yes. S-sensors register any blaster shots, or forced entries. There's a team of thirty soldiers nearby which would res-respond."

"Motion sensors?" Tavion glanced around, making sure nobody was nearby or approaching.

"D-Disabled while we un-unload this st-stuff."

"Good, good. Any ships in the hangar right now?"

"Just a S-Sentinel." The man braced himself on the crate he was standing in front of, his knees starting to betray him.

"Easy now. You're doing fine. So far I am very happy. I'd like to get past the guards, or for the guards to go away. How would I go about doing that?"

The technician seized up for a moment, thinking. "I-I-I could c-call them away."

"No. That would be suspicious, try again." Tavion was aware that Lara was moving closer, though he couldn't see her as he was focusing on the technician.

"W-What if I put you in a crate an..."

"And locked me inside, handing me to the soldiers? Or jettison me into space? I think not. You're starting to disappoint me. " He made a point of shoving the slugthrower into the man's back a little harder.

"Wait, wait." He spoke quickly, raising his voice just a little bit. "There's a temporary s-storage area down the hall. I have a key card for it. Here."

He slowly stuck his hand into one of his pockets, pulling out a white card, Lara reached past Tavion, plucking the card from his hand. "That c-can get you in-inside. From there I don't know. Please don't kill me."

"Now why would I do that? You've been such a help. I'm going to inject you with a little thing. It won't hurt you, it'll just knock you out for awhile. Where can I put you that will be safe." The technician raised a shaky hand, pointing at a clutch of crates along the far wall.

"S-Spares. Please don't l-lock it. It's air tight."

Tavion nodded while placing the syringe applicator on the man's neck and depressing the plunger. He dropped like a rock, forcing Tavion to kneel down as he fell to cushion the landing.

"You're such a softy sometimes, Spectre." Lara poked him in the side, moving over to open the crate for him. Tavion deposited the unconscious technician inside, using the man's scanning device to prop the lid open. He then quickly maneuvered a nearby repulsor sled in front of it to hide the partially opened crate.

"Yeah, I have a thing for people just doing their jobs, let's go." The two of them moved down the hallway like ghosts, silently spanning the hundred and fifty meters to the door that the technician had indicated. Sliding the keycard in, a red light on the control panel blinked once, then turned to green; and three audible 'clicks' resonated down the hallway. Lara pushed the door open, slipping inside with Tavion directly behind her. She guided the door shut to make certain it did not make any unnecessary noise.

The room they found themselves in was fairly large for what the technician had called 'temporary storage', the room was easily fifty meters wide, and nearly double that in depth. It was filled with racks containing various pieces of equipment, foodstuffs, armor, weapons, and a few palettes of assorted construction materials. Droids buzzed around the area in a chaotic manner, scanning various items and moving them about; they paid

no heed to either of the two commandos. A quick scan of the area showed a decided lack of biological life, a fact which the two were relieved to discover.

"If only my room on the Termination was this big." Lara's voice filled Tavion's helmet as she utilized their tactical communication frequency to talk to him.

"Definitely. Do you see another way out?" The two split up, taking stock of the contents of the room. Tavion passed a collection of vials on one shelf with a familiar amber content, shaking his head.

"There's a door along the right wall, probably leads to the hangar, one in the back, on the left wall. Did you know they have a rack of disruptors here? I'm looking at a couple of the newer MSD-32 models, just sittin' here. Aren't these like thirty grand a piece and very illegal?" Lara continued walking after pausing to look at them for a few moments.

"Yeah. There's spice over here, Andris I thi..."

"Woah, Spectre. Get over here. You need to take a look at this." Tavion paused, he didn't normally get interrupted by Lara like that. He backtracked, making his way across the room to the pair of racks she had been walking between, and spotted her standing in front of a work bench situated along the right wall. Tavion stopped next to her, blinking at the contents of the workbench. Sitting on the table was a pristine stormtrooper helmet, with the Task Force's insignia emblazoned on the side. The armor itself was in pieces on the table, brand new polished components were strewn about, with the armor's internal resonators hooked up to a datapad which was currently offline.

"How the hell did they get this?" Tavion gawked at the armor. The standard stormtrooper corps of the Task Force had a few units of specialized stormtroopers. These troopers, who were nearly commandos themselves, wore armor with the Task Force insignia on the right side of their helmets to differentiate them from the every-day trooper. While it was not uncommon for a suit from a deceased trooper to potentially fall into enemy hands, systems on board would destroy the armor's resonator components and MFTAS visor to prevent them from being disassembled to learn the Task Force's secrets. In this case, however, the armor's sensitive components were on display for both Tavion and Lara.

"No idea. It's new. Aren't all of these suits individually assigned?" Lara asked.

"They should be. I'm glad we don't use the same frequencies for our tac channel or we'd probably be in deep poodoo right now."

"Seriously." Lara subconsciously rubbed the back of her head, even though it was helmeted.

"I really don't want to touch it, those droids may finally notice us, but we should inform the Termination as soon as we get out of here." Tavion sighed, shaking his head. It

would take weeks to change the codes on everything that could have been compromised by this event.

"Yeah. I call not it. I don't feel like dealing with the Admiral today," she said.

"Ugh. Fine. I'll do it. But you owe me." Lara just nodded as the two of them walked away from the workbench in disgust.

Looping around the warehouse, they came to the door on the opposite end of the hangar unceremoniously. Tavion slowly opened the door after examining it for any obvious alarm system and finding none. The slight 'kssht' of a pressurization equalization filled the pair's ears as the door's seal broke. They paid it no mind. Tavion poked his head through the door, finding himself in a hallway rather than another room as he expected. He slid into the well-lit hallway, followed closely by Lara who shut the door behind him, ensuring it was secured. There were few doors lining either side of the hallway, the entire area was rather scarce. Aurebesh markings on the walls indicated that they were near a computer core, a control station was marked as being further down the hall.

"I feel like we're in some sort of base." Tavion slowly walked down the hallway toward the door marked 'Computer Core'.

"Yeah. A bit creepy that it's so empty." Lara was silent as she stalked next to him, save her voice in his helmet.

Something about this place didn't sit right with the two of them as they reached the door to the core, which was barred with a mechanical lock. Tavion popped one of his belt pouches open, pulling a small lock picking kit from inside. He set to work on the lock, bending over and leaning in close so that his MFTAS enhanced hearing could pick up the minute clicks of the various tumblers being forced into place. It took him nearly a minute, but he was rewarded for his time with a satisfying final 'click', and twisted the knob to open the door. Immediately, the two commandos saw that the term 'computer core' was being used very loosely here. There was a single mainframe against the back wall, with a pair of consoles slaved to it. The area was littered with papers, empty drinks, discarded food wrappers, and there was a single chair situated amongst the mess. A thin layer of dust was spread across most of the normally untouched surfaces, it was like someone hadn't cleaned this place in weeks.

"This looks more like an office than anything." Tavion shut the door behind them.

"A dirty one." Lara avoided trash as she maneuvered to get into a better standing position in the room.

Tavion shook his head, walking forward and planting himself in the chair. He scooted close to the two consoles, looking them over while Lara started rifling through nearby stacks of paper.

"Console's secured. Password protection and it looks like a one-time authentication key. No way I'm getting in this."

"You wouldn't have been able to if it was just a password, you were hoping that the guy was dumb and left it unlocked, Weren't you?" Lara opened a nearby filing cabinet, rifling through the contents.

"...Maybe. Shut up." Tavion responded, sheepishly.

"This stuff is all useless. It's just shipping ledgers. Hypermatter, ore, foodstuffs, weapons..." She trailed off. "...Huh. Consultants." She pulled out one of the folders, setting it down on the table and opening it up.

"Looks like they've been getting a lot of defensive help recently." She flipped through a few of the files. "Arraykd, BlasTech, KDY, CEC, and Na'tak... Huh."

"What is it?" Tavion stood up, walking over toward her and glancing down at the papers.

"Look at this." Lara pointed at the file's listed contract dates. "According to this, she's been working with them for over a year now, and these payments are pretty hefty. Didn't she say she'd just started working for them a short time before we arrived?"

"...Woah." Tavion blinked, reading over the information presented to him. "Are you sure?"

"That's what it says. We need to tell the Admiral, now. No wonder he was suspicious. She's completely on their payroll." Lara took the entire folder, tucking it under her arm.

"I think you're jumping to a conclusion. Something doesn't sit right with me." Lara scoffed, rolling her eyes under her helmet.

"You and your feelings, this is iron clad."

"No it isn't. Look, when we were on Burnin Konn, Na'tak could have screwed us at any time. She didn't. She watched me kill that Super and didn't try to help him, at all. And doesn't it bother you a little that with all of this sensitive, proprietary information lying around, that we haven't actually seen a single guard?" He stared at Lara as he spoke.

"Well, yeah, but..."

"But nothing." Tavion shook his head. "Something's not right. Look. Let's head back to the ship, lock up, sleep on it, and just confront her about it in the morning. It can't hurt."

"Fine, but we should call it in. Gotta still follow procedure," she said.

Tavion opened his mouth to say something, but closed it again. Instead, he just nodded and toggled his communicator to the frequency that he knew Lara was about to use.

"This is Two to the Termination." Fortunately they were within a hundred kilometers of their mother ship, their normal tactical communicators were able to easily span that distance. "Priority Alpha communication for the Admiral. Please patch me through."

While they waited to be re-routed, Tavion set himself down next to the filing cabinet, taking a few pictures with his battle-cam. Lara ignored him, rolling her eyes again.

"Termination here." The Admiral's icy voice filled both their ears. "I certainly hope this is important, I was busy."

"Yes sir, it is." Lara opened the folder again. "I'm transmitting battle-cam footage of some information we have found in a Figg area on board the Gem. It shows that Na'tak has been on the Figg payroll for approximately one year, and details some of her interactions with them."

"I am seeing it now. This is most disturbing. It seems my impressions have been verified. Very well. I would like you two to remain with her as much as possible as shadows; and I want her on board my ship when we leave the area. Do I make myself clear?" The Admiral's icy voice pierced Tavion's ears like a needle.

"Yes sir," Lara said, curtly.

"Very well. Termination out." The line was abruptly cut.

"Happy now?" Tavion motioned toward the door. "Can we leave?"

"Why are you in such a rush, we have at least five more minutes before that tech gets back, and there's a bunch of files littered across the floor we could go through."

Tavion bent down, picking up one of those files, and a writing utensil from the desk. He scribbled a note on it while speaking. "Eh. I'm worried about those guards finding him and coming down on us. Better take our cake and go home." He showed the note to Lara.

There is nothing useful here. Trust me.

Though she was confused, Lara nodded, Tavion had never led her astray before, and they'd been friends a very long time. She motioned toward the door extravagantly.

"After you, your majesty."

"Life is like chess to me." The Admiral released his hand from the black piece, removing his knight from a particularly precarious situation. "There is a period of set-up, the action, and the aftermath. Eventually, there is a winner, and a loser."

"Processing. If that is the case, sir, your life must not be very fulfilling. I believe that our current standing record between each other is three hundred and five matches to zero; in my favor. Bishop to F4." The mechanized voice brought a smile to the Admiral's face as he moved the piece to the requisite square.

"Ah, but these games are only a small part of a larger life. Yes, it is disappointing when I lose a match, but it is made up for in other ways like this conversation, the Admiral said, advancing his king side pawn. "I find them enlightening. Yours is a unique perspective, it gives me something to think about."

"May I speak candidly, sir?" The Admiral nodded. "I find these conversations expensive, as my logic circuitry is rather pricey to replace and you seem to cause it to overload. However, I do... processing... enjoy... the conversations that do not cause me physical harm. Were I capable of feeling pain, I believe I would find conversation with you quite agonizing. Knight captures Pawn on D4," the mechanized voice said.

The Admiral laughed aloud, smiling broadly as he moved yet another piece for his opponent, removing his own from the board. "Agonizing? What a wonderful way to describe it. Such colorful words." The Admiral, only taking a few moments to think of his move, captured one of his opponent's pawns along the left flank.

"I was not aware that words had a color. Rook captures Knight on G5."

"A simple figure of speech. Ah. This is my favorite part of life." The Admiral moved his queen to capture the rook which had just taken his knight.

"What might that be, sir? Knight captures Queen on G5," the voice said without hesitation.

"Watching a plan come to fruition. Check." The Admiral moved a bishop forward into a position previously guarded by his opponent's knight. "Your move, Predator. Checkmate in three."

The droid's triple photoreceptors blinked rapidly as he looked across the board. Predator's head drooped. "Checkmate in three. I resign. It seems you have taken advantage of a bad subroutine which prioritized your queen and a potential checkmate-in-two for me in exchange for protection of my King. I have purged the bad routine. It seems you have finally beaten me."

"Not exactly. I have finally chosen to beat you, to prove a point." The Admiral began calmly replacing the pieces on the chess board.

"What might that point be, sir?" Predator skittered about for a moment as if he wanted to loosen up a little.

"That sometimes you need to allow your opponent to win or believe he has won, before you can claim victory for yourself," the Admiral said simply, beginning their next game by advancing his queen side pawn.

After another nine games, all of which were won by the Admiral, Predator left the Admiral's quarters to head to the maintenance bay. Black smoke plumed from his head, and he skittered erratically down the hallway toward his destination; his processors hung up on asking one question over and over:

"Has he let me win this entire time?"

Na'tak, Lara, and Tavion were eating their meals silently at a secluded table. Na'tak had again invited them to lunch, but had been surprised when they had accepted sans their normal excitement. She could tell that something was bothering them. Periodically, the two commandos' eyes would dart around the establishment from their corner; their backs firmly against the wall as if they were fearing some sort of monster. Na'tak's eyes kept themselves focused on her food, she knew something was wrong but was hesitant to say anything.

She was worried. She still did not know why Ten had entered her shop yesterday, fully armored, and made himself an immobile fixture against the wall. She did not know why her two friends weren't speaking with her at all, and kept looking around at an empty establishment. And she did not know why it felt as if she was being watched around every turn, by everyone. She fidgeted nervously, noticing that Lara's eyes watched her every minute gyration with fixed intent.

"Okay, this is really creeping me out. What is wrong?" Na'tak tossed her fork on the plate, allowing it to fall with an audible clatter. She balled her little blue hands into fists, before releasing them and staring at the two commandos seated in front of her. Lara shifted uncomfortably, reaching into one of her pockets and pulling out a wad of flimsiplast. She tossed it on the table.

"Explain that," she said roughly.

Na'tak snatched the wad up, unfolding it. Her angry expression turned to a confused one, and then finally a surprised one. "Thi-this can't be right. Where did you get this?"

"That's not important right now. Explain it." Lara glared daggers at Na'tak, while Tavion sat passively, fiddling with something hidden in his own hands.

"I can't. Well I mean, this can't be real. I've never worked for them before the job on Burnin Konn, and these amounts are insane; if I had this kind of cash flow I'd be on vacation right now at the most expensive place I could find." She set the flimsi down on the table. "You think I'm helping them, don't you?!" Her voice raised a bit, squeaking with surprise as she looked toward the two of them. Lara subtly nodded, while Tavion shook his head.

"I don't have anything to gain by screwing you over." Na'tak huffed, pointing at the paper. "I mean hell, what the Admiral's paying me for this one job is three times this amount. What good would it do aside from get me killed."

Lara opened her mouth to speak, but Tavion interrupted her. "I believe you. Relax, please. Here, take a look at these," he said, spreading a few pictures out on the table, taken from his helmet's battle camera. "Notice anything weird?"

"Aside from the mess, no?" As Na'tak answered, Lara's eyes widened as she looked at the pictures.

"The dust." Lara spoke, reaching out to grab one of the pictures. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I figured we were being listened to. It was elaborate, but it explains the lack of guards. I just don't think they anticipated the mess." Tavion shrugged, while Na'tak was left to wonder what they were talking about. He noticed her confusion, and pointed at one of the pictures.

"Look at the dust. There's a clean area larger than this filing cabinet. Something was there and had been moved recently. In addition, there's a filing cabinet, perfectly labeled and organized, in the middle of this mess? I don't think so. Someone tipped them off that we'd found out they owned the dock, and set this up to look good. That's why we didn't see any guards while we were there, and had such an easy time finding this." Tavion pointed at the expenditure ledger. "It was planted. Why? I don't have a clue."

Na'tak rubbed her eyes. "Well, what do you normally do when you find someone's double crossed you?"

"Eliminate them." Lara responded immediately, before blinking. "Oh. Duh. Wow. Whoosh." She brought her hand back and over her head. "They do not like you."

"No, I guess they don't." Na'tak sighed, glancing back at the piece of paper. "I guess I could see why at first glance you'd think it was me, that's really close to my account number." She pointed at the ledger.

"Wait, what?" Tavion leaned forward, looking at the paper.

"Well, yeah. It looks like a legitimate account number, and I assume you got mine to compare," she said with a shrug.

"Er. No. Not exactly." Tavion rubbed the back of his head sheepishly. He felt as if he did that quite often.

"Oh. Wonderful. So you accuse me without... ugh. Nevermind. I'll accept your apologies later. Here, look. Bank identification." She pointed at part of the account number listed on the ledger. "Account type. Individual account number."

"Well, wait, can't we just contact them and get the actual name on the account?" Tavion asked, stupidly.

"You're silly." Lara shook her head, answering for Na'tak. "I recognize that bank number, I have an account there too. Best thing about most of the Coruscanti banks is that they don't answer questions, they don't ask questions, they just take your money and enjoy it."

"Well. We could try to get the information anyway." Na'tak shrugged. "Remember Bolts? He got us the name of who owned the dock pass."

"Eh. What makes you think he'd have that same information for a bank?" Tavion looked at the paper, examining it as if expecting some new revelation to jump out at him.

"He might not, but I'd bet he'd know someone who could get it," Na'tak said.

"And that's assuming they were sloppy enough to put an actual account number on something like this," Tavion didn't seem convinced, at all.

"They were sloppy enough to throw this little thing together for us to find." Lara brushed a lock of hair out of her eyes. "I think it's worth a shot."

"A'ight." Tavion raised his hands defensively. "I'm not opposed to it. I'm just saying that I don't expect anything. There's another thing we should consider. Do we want to make them look like their little plan is working?"

"What do you mean?" Na'tak's brow furrowed.

"Well. I'm sure we were watched when we came in here. They could be watching us now but I doubt it. They'd have done something to us if they were, and this place is empty; they'd be obvious. If we leave normally they'll know we're on to them and may take steps to protect whatever information we could find from this." Lara nodded, taking up the conversation when Tavion stopped speaking.

"Yeah. We should make it look good. Can you get Bolts to come by your shop soon?" Na'tak nodded. "All right. Here's what we'll do. You should take off through the back of this place, run back to your shop. Lock up. We'll follow you in about... thirty seconds? Yeah. And move off once we see you've locked up. We'll come back tonight, hopefully after Bolts has arrived, and 'break in', and go from there," Lara said.

"Eh. I don't know if you'll be able to break in to my shop, I mean the security system I have installed i... oh." She giggled, noticing the looks that she was getting from the other two. "...Right. I'll make it easy."

"Thanks," Tavion said, half in jest, half sarcastically.

"Right, so, you should probably get moving." Lara waved her hands at Na'tak, shoos her away. "Also... sorry."

"It's fine. You owe me a dinner as your apology. Fair?" Na'tak smiled warmly.

"Fair." Lara nodded. Na'tak scurried off, disappearing into the back of the restaurant. "What isn't fair, is why you didn't tell me sooner. You made me look like a real bitch."

"I figured they might be listening to us while we were in there. And you were pissed off enough on the way back to the shuttle that if they were watching us, they'd believe we'd bought it. Sorry. I just didn't want to endanger her," Tavion explained, looking into her eyes.

"Gotcha. Well, you're lucky I understand what you were going for and that I like you. Otherwise I may have had to punch you in the face and break that pretty nose of yours." She smiled, truly understanding.

"That would ruin my modeling career! Trooper Monthly would lose their biggest star!" Tavion screeched in mock protest.

Lara rolled her eyes, before motioning for Tavion to follow her. She stood up, after paying their tab by placing a few credit chits on the table, and walked toward the rear of the establishment. Tavion obediently fell in line behind her, and the two of them broke out into a run as they emerged from the rear exit; heading along the fastest route possible to Na'tak's shop. They burst through a loading area and into the main promenade, Tavion allowed his head to track from left to right, and was rewarded when he saw a group of men standing around one of the station's consoles look over in his direction.

As the two of them continued toward their destination, the trio situated around the console abruptly stood, blending in to the crowd and following the commandos. Upon arriving at Na'tak's shop, which as expected was locked up tight, they stood in front of the door. Tavion made a point of standing opposite of Lara, and caught sight of one of the three men ducking behind a nearby stand in an attempt to avoid being seen.

"Well what the hell do we do now?!" He yelled, loud enough for the benefit of their shadows.

"Easy, Spectre. We get our gear, we come back tonight, we get her." Lara pushed her hair out of her face before planting her hands on her hips and taking deep breaths.

"Fine. Fine. We'll call it in when we get back to the shuttle. Let's go," he said abruptly.

He turned about, walking with Lara at a brisk pace toward the bay that their Sentinel was located.

"Dead on. Three of them following us. Caught them looking over when we left, nobody else cared... they did. Saw one of them when I turned around. They're probably hired mercs," Tavion spoke very quietly as they walked.

"Ugh. What I wouldn't give to get my hands on one of them," Lara said, disgusted.

"I was thinking that too. I may have an idea on how to do it too, I'll tell you in the shuttle."

Lara didn't respond, her mind was drifting now as she wondered what they were getting themselves into.

Chapter 6 - Check

That night, when the station had mostly settled down for the evening, Tavion and Lara made their way back to Na'tak's shop equipped in their combat gear. They made sure to be stealthy on their approach, yet were purposefully not employing their best practices as to ensure they were spotted by Figg lookouts. When they arrived at the shop, Tavion set to work on the lock while Lara kept a careful eye out for anyone nearby. Even with the lock made 'easy', it took Tavion a few minutes to finally get the lock to toggle, and the two of them slipped inside the shop. When the door closed, they were surprised to see Ten standing in front of them with the barrels of his dual sub machine guns pointed directly at their heads. He poked them both in the face with the barrels.

"Yeah, yeah, you got us. What the hell are you doing here?" Tavion shook his head, looking around.

"He's been here the whole time." Na'tak's voice echoed from behind the counter at the far end of the store. The trio at the door walked through the shop's rows of display cases and racks to reach the counter. Na'tak popped up from underneath the counter, smiling. "It took you guys long enough. C'mon, Bolts is in the back waiting for us."

She led them through a door behind the counter, and into what was her storage room and workshop. Crates labeled with the insignias of dozens of weapons companies littered the walls, racks of armor and explosives were spread across the area, and a workbench in the back was covered with components that probably didn't have a decipherable name. Sitting in front of a portable console was Bolts, whose photoreceptors focused on the four humanoids as they entered.

"It's about time. I was starting to rust," he said with disdain.

"Oh stow it. Tell them what you told me." Na'tak bounced over to the workbench, hopping up on it and planting her rump on the edge.

"Fine, but remember our deal," Na'tak stuck her tongue out at the droid, who continued, "anyway. I can't get you the information that you want. I'd have about a snowball's chance on Mustafar of getting past their security systems. However, I know someone who can."

“Who?” Tavion found a nearby rack to lean on, crossing his arms impatiently.

“I just know his handle, but he goes by ‘Koah’. He’s done some work for me in the past, breaking into a few less-than-secure systems and playing a few practical jokes. One time I had him...” Bolts was interrupted by Tavion throwing a fusion cutter at him, which ricocheted off his head and onto the floor. “...That was completely necessary,” he quipped, sarcastically.

“I know the name, actually, we provided him with a few mainframes in exchange for some help not too long ago. Can you get in touch with him easily? We really do not have that much time and we need to start this now. Right now.” Tavion frowned under his helmet, glancing around shiftily as if the walls were watching him. Part of him thought that at any moment, the walls would explode inwards and they would be assailed by Figg’s men. He didn’t want to be here any longer than he had to, as to avoid that particular fate.

“For an organic, you’re really impatient, I thought it was just us droids that got bored waiting. Yeah, I can get in touch with him. The real question becomes: What are you going to give me in exchange for getting in touch with him?” The droid was cocky.

“Oh come on. We don’t have time for this.” Lara threw her hands up in frustration, pacing back and forth as she stared at the droid. “You’re really going to pull this poodoo?”

“This is the best time for me to pull it,” the droid said flatly, shrugging its metallic shoulders. “I mean, I’m holding an Idiot’s Array here, so I’m going to push my luck. And I saw that twitch toward your weapon; you shoot me and you can’t get in touch with him so neener-neener.” The droid raised his hands to his head, and if he had a tongue, it would be fully extended toward Lara as he waved his hands back and forth mockingly.

“Actually...” Tavion raised his voice, pushing himself off of the rack he was leaning on and over toward Bolts. “...As I said, we’ve dealt with him before, we could get in touch with him. We just want you to do it. So here’s the deal, and it’s the only deal you’re going to get. I know you accept money, so fine. A hundred credits, not a decicred more; and you simply make the communication for us. If you refuse, then I’ll just get her to do it, and you can sod off.” He motioned with one hand to the blue skinned female sitting on her workbench.

Bolts paused for only a moment before shrugging again, throwing his hands up into the air in frustration. “Fine. This is the last time I am doing a favor for any of you, you’re all cheap, and you smell like meat.”

“You don’t even have a nose.” Na’tak nudged him with one of her boots.

“I am assuming. Deal with it.” Extending one of his hands, he snatched the credit chit out of Tavion’s hand, placing it into a pouch he carried on his side. A dull static filled the air as the droid routed his communication through the station’s systems. The static cleared at random intervals as it bounced off of dozens of deep space arrays toward its final, unknown destination.

There was a dull click, and the sounds of shuffling on the other end of the line could be heard; followed by a loud crash and a string of curses.

“For the last time, no I will not remove the camera in the girl’s shower!” Both Lara and Na’tak blinked simultaneously at the flustered voice on the other end of the comm.

“Uh. Wrong person calling, Koah. It’s Bolts,” the droid said, bemused.

“Oh. Well hi. Did you install that camera like I asked?” The voice on the other end was excited. “I really want to open the ‘exotic’ link on the site as soon as possible.”

“Er. Not really the time to be talking about that, there are other people here. They’ve got a job they’d like you to do,” Bolts looked around shiftily, before speaking quietly, “but yeah, I did.”

Giggling, Koah shuffled on the other end of the comm. “What kind of job? And who are we talking about? If it’s NRI or some crap like that then they can kiss my white ass and enjoy it.”

“Hi, Koah,” Tavion spoke up, “it’s your friends from the Termination. How are our mainframes doing?”

Koah paused on the other end. His interactions with the task force had always been favorable for him. More importantly, they tended to do things that were quite illegal, dangerous, and challenging. In his mind, this could only mean one thing: Fun. “My day just got a lot better, this is Spectre, right?”

“Yep. It’s me. We need information from somewhere.”

“Somewhere fun, I hope,” Koah said, the anticipation in his voice growing.

“An intergalactic bank,” Tavion quipped, almost idly, as if to entice Koah.

“Very fun. Go on.”

Tavion grinned under his helmet, walking over to Bolts and handing him the transmittal ledger that they had found during their foray into Figg holdings. “Bolts will transfer you the routing number of the bank and the account number. We need to know precisely who owns the account.”

“And then transfer all of their money to the Save the Ewoks foundation?!” The voice on the other end was overly excited. Off to the side, Na’tak leaned over toward Lara.

“Sounds like he and Fifty would get along well together,” she said to the female commando.

“Tell me about it...” Lara rolled her eyes.

Tavion motioned for the two of them to quiet down as he continued his conversation with Koah. “Honestly, I don’t care what you do with the money. Just don’t get caught, and at least tell me

what I want to know. I'd consider it a favor, and I'll throw you an upgrade for those mainframes if it goes well. Sound good to you?"

"Mhm. I like it. When do you need this information by?"

"Oh, about an hour from now," Tavion said, imagining Koah's look of stupor on the other side of the comm. He was surprised with the overly excited response he got.

"Awesome! This will be fun." The sound of furious typing came over the comm as Bolts uploaded the information the Koah needed. "Got what you sent me. All right, time for me to work my voodoo." The rattle of fingertips against a keyboard echoed through the back of Na'tak's shop, and it wasn't long before Koah began talking to himself.

"Okay, so this is the place. First Bank of Coruscant, huh? Doesn't seem like a bad place to keep your money; their system seems to be up to date. No obvious security holes. That makes me sad. Can I brute force you?" He asked nobody in particular as the individuals on the Gem hung on his words and actions. More typing followed, and the hum of various mainframes powering up and beginning their processing algorithms filled the room as if they were there as well.

After a few seconds, Koah made a loud 'tisk' with his tongue and teeth, shuffling around. "Oooh. They're smart. They locked me out after a couple hundred tries. Oh well, let's reconnect with a clean proxy and, okay." He said, poking at the system to determine if it had any sort of vulnerability. "This would be so much easier if I could just plug in to their system. I guess I need to put actual effort into this."

A few minutes passed where the only steady sound coming out of the communicator was the noise of Koah's finger's tapping at his console's keys. For some reason he kept breaking the silence at random intervals, repeating: 'I'm focusing, el oh el.' to himself. After nearly four minutes, there was a loud noise on the other end of the comm as he smacked his 'enter' button, and the entire room seemed to roar as the mainframes fired up.

"Let's see what that gets us," he said.

"What'd you do?" Tavion inquired, sheepishly rubbing the back of his head. He was never good with computers, and preferred to leave this kind of work to Fifty or another one of the stormtrooper technicians. While he could work his way around a basic computer system he was completely out of his element when it came to slicing. Koah, obviously, was a professional.

"Well, I like the brute-force method against systems like this. You just try a bunch of standard login and password combinations over and over and see if you get in that way. It works well for a lot of corporations. Most of their logins are last name and first initial; so I wrote a quick program to scan the holonet for major administrator's names, and then their family information. Sometimes the hot-shots will make their password something simple, like a kid's name or a pet name or whatever. So I'm trying as many as I can find, and just hopping to a new proxy when they lock me out. I think I'm good for about five million attempts before I start running out of proxies to use." When Koah had finished talking, Tavion felt his eyes uncross, his brain

struggling to keep up. Lara, Na'tak, Bolts, and One were all nodding, having understood everything he had said. Tavion quickly nodded as well, as to not look stupid.

"Ah. Of course," he said.

"I like trying all of the doors to see if they're unlocked before defaulting to going through a window, or a wall, or blowing something up," Koah quipped.

"I take it that's a talent that you've learned from those Allegiance folks?" Tavion chuckled, they'd had many run-ins with the 'Allegiance Battle Group'. It was ironic that Koah was a member of an organization that the Admiral had been waging war with for years yet was willingly helping them here.

"Yes," he said flatly. "We never blow things up unnecessarily and always try the obvious routes first."

"I'm surprised you said that without choking," Tavion said.

"Me too, I think th... Ooooooh." He interrupted himself, following it up with a symphony of clicks and rapping keystrokes. "Ha! See? Found a stupid one. I'm in. Kinda low-level, but I should be able to open things up from here. Let's see who you are. Okay. I'm in as a teller admin. Oh I could have some fun with this, what should I do," he trailed off.

"Our information first," Tavion reminded him, "and then you can do anything you want."

"Right, right. Well that should be easy as I'm in as a teller. Account number is," there was a shuffling as Koah glanced around for where he had written the number down, "right there. It says it belongs to someone by the name of Irilia Maetti." Nobody recognized the name.

"Who is that?" Na'tak glanced between Tavion and Lara, adjusting her dangling lekku so that they would be out of her way. They shrugged in way of response.

"Can you get us any information on her, Koah?" Tavion was already wracking his brain to figure out where this name came from.

"I'm already working on it. Let me pull up her account information here. Oh, look at me, I sound like a teller." The rapid tapping on the other end of the comm betrayed the enjoyment Koah was having. "Got it. Home address, company she works for, age, height, weight, might as well have nude pictures with the information I've got here."

Tavion slid off of the ledge he was seated on, moving over to stand with Lara and Na'tak. "Who does she work for? That'll give us a pretty good indication of how she's got interactions with the Figgs."

"It says here she works for Anoa Heavy Shipping, Inc. that sound familiar?" Both Tavion and Lara reeled backwards, before staring at each other. Professional decorum went completely out

of the room as a string of expletives left their mouths. On the other end of the comm, Koah busied himself with poking around more of her personal information, giggling at the account balance which he was already setting up for a sudden depreciation. "Something wrong?" he said, his words accented by the clunking of his typing.

"Anoat Heavy Shipping is one of the Task Force's proxies." Tavion said soberly, frowning heavily under his helmet. "They're sending money to one of us. I don't like what that means. We'll need to report this, and figure out what's going on."

"You're damned right we are. I'm going to find whoever it is who is selling us out and rip their kriffing throat out through their ass. Really? Are we sure." Lara was fuming.

"Would I lie to you when you know where I live? And when you've shot at me before?" Koah asked bemusedly.

"Point. Fine." Lara threw her hands up in the air out of frustration.

"Ummm, and we're sure about this one, not like you were sure about me not being legitimate?" Na'tak joined into the conversation in her normal timid manner. She was a bit worried that Lara still believed that she was part of this conspiracy that they seemed to be uncovering. Whatever they were talking about right now seemed to disturb them all greatly; she had even noticed Ten shifting uncomfortably when it had been mentioned.

"Koah?" Tavion asked, expecting the other to answer for them.

"Absolutely sure. This data was input years ago, it hasn't been touched since. Trust me, I can tell. I am a hundred percent sure about this. Is all of that clear to you guys, because it seems like you didn't hear me the first time." His tone carried a hint of annoyance with it as he wasn't used to being asked to verify his work repeatedly.

"This is insane. I can't believe that someone in the task force is getting paid by the Figs. It would explain why they knew we were coming and all; but who could it be?" Lara was pacing back and forth now, her armor clanking as she moved.

"I can't think of anyone off the top of my head. I mean we haven't heard of any discontent since we stopped working with the zombies." He intercepted Na'tak's question with a wag of his finger. "Don't ask, long story, later. I can't fathom that someone would betray us like this."

"Well look, as crappy as that is for you, what does that mean for me? Also as a random aside: thank you for not working with the zombies anymore. They smelled. And they were creepy. And what the hell do you want me to do in this system before I get myself caught and have to lie my way out of another felony or four." Koah reintroduced himself to the conversation.

"Er. Sorry, Koah." Tavion sighed as he removed his helmet and set it to the side. His hair was disheveled and his brow was furrowed, raising high into his forehead. His mouth was curled into a disgusted sneer, and his eyes were heavy both with worry and with tiredness. Tavion took care

of himself, aesthetically, both for his own personal enjoyment and for use during infiltration. Right now, however, he looked as if he had aged thirty years in a manner of minutes, the gravity of the information he was hearing wore on him heavily. “How much is in the account? Like, it’s a proxy, how much of the funds in the account haven’t been transferred in by the Figgs?”

Tapping followed the request, and the answer came within seconds. “From the looks of it, this account hasn’t been touched since it was made. There’s a baseline deposit of five thousand in there from when the account was opened, and then nothing for a few years. Not too long ago funds start coming in from various Figg accounts, and start going out to other banks. From what I can see here, it looks like whoever is using the account is just using it to collect the payments and then is funneling the funds outwards across the galaxy. There are about eight different accounts that money seems to be flowing to from this one. I just sent the list to Bolts.” Bolts raised his head, nodding. He had chosen not to talk, and was instead using this time to take notes on Koah’s methods so that he could do some ‘side work’ of his own.

“So there’s nothing we can do about anything, and we’re pretty much stuck here just looking at it?!” Lara screamed, slamming her fist into Na’tak’s workbench. The petite Twi’lek jumped, staring at her. “...Sorry.” Lara lowered her head sheepishly. Na’tak just waved her hand dismissively; trying to get her breathing under control as her other hand touched the top of her chest.

“Not exactly,” Koah explained, “as a teller, I can flag all of these as fraudulent withdrawals. It’ll immediately lock the associated accounts, as well as this one, and prevent whoever it is from accessing the money for a short time. I figure it will probably only work for a couple days until they figure out what I’ve done and unlock the accounts, but it’ll do something. That, and there was a payment made yesterday for a cool hundred thousand, that’s still sitting in the main account. I can do something to that.”

“Hrm. That could spook him into making a mistake,” Tavion mused, rubbing his chin with a gloved hand. “Do it; and you can do anything you want to the money in the account. I don’t care what you do with it.”

“Weeee!” The squeal of delight from Koah brought a moment of humor to an otherwise somber affair. More rapid typing followed the exclamation, followed by a triumphant giggle. “The ‘Save the Ewoks Foundation’ will enjoy the hundred thousand credit donation. Also I flagged all of the other transfers that have been made as fraudulent, so that should get the funds locked up here in a minute or so. There anything else you need?” He asked, fingers poised to do more.

“No. That’s it. Thanks Koah. You can do whatever else you want with their system, but we’re all set.” Tavion moved over toward Bolts, who had written down records of the conversation for their reference. “I really appreciate this, and I’ll take care of you when it’s all finished,” he said through the comm to Koah.

“I hope that means giving me things, I’m not going to ask for fear of the answer though. Anyway, I have got some more fun things to do in this system before they figure out that I’m in it. Good luck.” Koah disconnected the communication, leaving those in the back of Na’tak’s

shop standing in silence for a few minutes. It was only broke when Lara smacked her fist into the workbench again.

“Damn it! This sucks.” She exclaimed in frustration.

“Yes, yes it does. But at least we have something to go off of; we can talk to the Admiral when we get back to the Termination about the account being used. In the meantime, I have a plan to get Na’tak off this station with us.” Na’tak blinked at Tavion’s words.

“Uh, what are you doing with me?” She asked, timidly.

Tavion was already looking around for the vessel that he required to fulfill the plan he’d come up with. He didn’t answer Na’tak until he found it, dragging a repulsor sled with a large crate over toward her. “There are a bunch of men following us, most likely, and they’ll come in here after we leave to make sure you’re dead. We’re going to take you with us. We’ll cart you out in this, and Ten will stay here to take care of whoever checks up on you to make sure they don’t report back. By the time they realize you’re not dead and are off the station, we’ll be safely on board the Termination. Win, right?”

“Wrong.” Lara said, flatly, which brought Tavion pause. “Remember the helmet? The armor? The Figgs knowing what we’re up to? What if our comms are compromised? They would know that the Admiral told us to bring her on board the Termination. We do all of this elaborate crap and they’d know something’s up. Let’s just walk her out of the front door with blasters drawn. Easy.”

Tavion blinked, staring at her like a wild animal looking into the floodlamps of a speeder. He smacked his forehead with the heel of his palm so hard that it left an immediate red mark and slid the sled back to its previous position. “Wow. Yeah. Good idea. I’m tired, sorry,” he admitted.

Na’tak, through all of this, just nodded. She wasn’t fully in the loop, but was fairly certain she understood what was going on. There was a traitor in the task force. He or she had made their lives a living hell starting from the moment they were finished with the mission on Burnin Konn, and was wreaking havoc with the task force’s personnel. She knew it was bad because of how they were acting, and how Tavion’s mind was obviously not in the right place right now but she was determined to help them. They’d helped her before, and it was the least that she could do.

“All right.” Na’tak stepped forward, drawing her blaster and handing it, barrel first, to Tavion. “You’ll want this then.”

He nodded, taking the weapon in his right hand and leveling it at the floor. His other hand grabbed his helmet, affixing it on the top of his head. The hermetic autoseal clicked as it fell into place, pressurizing his armor. He turned toward Ten, who had drawn his dual slugthrower pistols and was standing there in a statuesque manner. “Ten, do you mind sticking around here and blowing the brains out of anyone who tries to ‘check in’?”

Ten shook his head vigorously, taking position near the door. Someone could say many things about Ten, the ones that mattered most to Tavion were his unquestioning loyalty, his dedication to duty, and his desire to fire high caliber weapons. Tavion nodded approvingly to the commando, technically his superior, and motioned toward the others.

“Bolts you might want to stay here for a little bit until the surveillance stops. I’d hate for you to get in trouble or damaged because of this,” Tavion said.

Bolts made a noise that sounded like a hearty laugh. “I fully intended to. For you to think that I would put myself in harm’s way for anyone, let alone you, is silly. Also you wouldn’t really hate for either of those things to happen to me. Don’t lie.”

“Fine,” Tavion admitted. “You’re a jackass, I don’t like you, but you do good work and therefore I’d like to hire you again sometimes to do some more illegal things. Happy?”

“Very, it warms my circuits when you organics are honest with yourselves. You’re welcome, by the way.” Bolts crossed his arms over his chest in a mock human expression of disapproval and annoyance. Tavion ignored it.

“Let’s go.” He motioned for Na’tak to lead the way. She obliged, and Tavion fell in behind her with Lara taking up the rear a few steps back. The trio walked right out of the front entrance of Na’tak’s shop, and while Na’tak looked around nervously, the two commandos stared straight ahead. They quickly moved across the empty promenade; finding it a bit strange that it was entirely vacant of people. On a station such as the Gem, there was always someone nearby, no matter the place or the time. The reason why became obvious as Tavion scanned the area with his helmet, no less than six thermal signatures popped up over his visor in various places. They weren’t moving, but it was obvious that the hidden men were tracking the trio.

They encountered no resistance, leaving the main promenade area and entering the hangar bay which housed their shuttle. It was at that point that they heard loud weapon discharges and screams from the promenade area behind them. They were quickly followed by an internal siren to alert the station’s security forces. Tavion stole a glance behind him, and saw Ten bounding out of Na’tak’s shop, firing his dual repulsor pistols at the hiding men. The barrels of his weapons lit up as the heavy caliber slugs pierced the thin cover that was being used, striking flesh and armor. Watching Ten bound across the promenade in his green power armor brought a smile to Tavion’s face as they walked up the loading ramp to their Sentinel. Once they had boarded, the loading ramp of the shuttle began to raise. As it did so, Tavion toggled his communicator to contact the Termination.

“This is Spectre to the Termination. We have the package and will be on board tomorrow as scheduled. Also, Ten may need to be bailed out of the holding cells on the Gem. Don’t ask.”

The next day, Tavion found himself back at the hotel where his misadventure on the Gem had started. He zipped up his large pack, having shoved all of his belongings inside over the past few minutes; as well as a few of the towels from the refresher. He grinned at his little indiscretion,

not feeling bad in the least. He had arrived early in the morning, after spending the night guarding Na'tak on board the Sentinel. It had proven unnecessary, as One's little foray into the promenade area had dissuaded any further attempts by the Figg mercenaries to do anything. Three corpses and three other injured men tended to stop someone from messing with you.

The one thing he would miss here would be the refresher. He had taken a long hot shower, and enjoyed every moment of it. Mentally, he made a note to come back here in the future, but only so long as it was on the task force's tab. He picked his pack up and threw it across his shoulder; looking at his reflection in a nearby full length mirror. Tavion looked much better than he had yesterday; a shower and shave did wonders for a man's appearance. His combat fatigues, boots, and white T-shirt made the man look almost simple; but he preferred that. Taking one last look at the room that he had barely been able to enjoy he stepped out and into the hotel's spacious hallways. He took the turbolift down to the first floor, and was greeted with a screaming man in an officer's uniform pointing a finger at the posh man behind the counter.

"Now run it again, damnit! Don't tell me it's denied, it can't be denied!" Lieutenant Drolin was red in the face, screaming and hollering at the man. From the looks that he was being given from throughout the lobby, he had been at this for a while. Tavion, curious as to what was going on, walked over.

"Something wrong?" he said, removing his pack from his shoulder and setting it on the ground.

"Nothing. It's fine." The lieutenant spoke immediately, interrupting the man behind the counter who had begun to open his mouth. "Remember when you offered to pay for my room? I'd like to take you up on that. I'm having problems with my credit chit right now."

Tavion's eyes fell onto the man's hands, where three different chits were being held. He suppressed any look which could come across his face, and turned toward the counter. "Yeah, sure," he said, pulling out his own credit chit. "I'll take care of his expenses, but would you mind giving me a piece of flimsi and something to write with? I've gotta note the amount or I'll get reamed for it." Tavion smiled widely.

The frustrated and obviously annoyed clerk nodded, taking Tavion's credit chit and running it through his machine. While it was processing he grabbed a piece of flimsy and a pen, handing them to Tavion. Tavion looked over at the Lieutenant, who had his arms behind his head, his exasperated breathing very loud in the otherwise silent lobby. He scribbled a note on the piece of flimsiplast, handing it back to the clerk. The clerk's eyes scanned the note.

'This is worth 1000c to you. Was his chit denied for locked funds?'

Tavion was taking a gamble. He thought that maybe it was his paranoia that had caused him to ask the question. Taking a moment to think, another part of him figured that he might as well eliminate another potential suspect, but the largest part of him was dwelling on the conversation that he had had with the lieutenant the first time they encountered each other here. It didn't make sense that he had initially turned down his offer to pay for what was an exquisite hotel, and he

didn't know many people who carried at least three different credit chits on their person. The clerk looked up from the note, eyeing the lieutenant.

"Yes sir, that seems right to me," he said. Tavion's eyes widened momentarily before he erased the look from his face and just nodded.

"That's perfect then, thanks. I just verify it here?" He motioned to the chit scanner. The clerk nodded, and when he did Tavion gladly input a value a full thousand credits over what the total had come to. Money well spent, in his opinion.

"Thank you sir. Thank you very much, sir." The clerk had a blinding grin on his face.

"No problem, thank you." Tavion emphasized the 'you', nodding again. He turned toward the lieutenant, steeling himself again. He didn't want to assume anything more, he did not want to accuse a man of something as poignant as treason; but the evidence was beginning to mount. "So lieutenant... what made you change your mind?"

"Huh?" He turned toward Tavion, a look of sheer confusion mixed with rage on his face. He was still calming down from his encounter with the clerk.

"Well I had offered to pay before, and I was under the impression that you had accepted. Why'd you change your mind and try to pay for yourself?" Tavion asked with a grin. Drolin balked at the question for a moment.

"Oh. I just wanted to get out of here. A couple days here is all I can really stand, honestly. I thought it was going to be relaxing but between this credit chit problem and a personal matter; I'm going to need a vacation to recover from the vacation." He rubbed his face with one hand, looking at Tavion with tired eyes.

"Wow. Must have been worth a lot to you to get out of here fast then, that bill was not cheap." Tavion again faked a smile as he spoke.

"Like I said; there's a personal matter. Once we get back on board the Termination I'll be taking a few days of leave to go take care of it. I spoke with the Admiral earlier today and he's already approved it." Tavion thought that the lieutenant had spoken that sentence with a bit of a smile on his face, but he was still trying to give the man the benefit of the doubt.

"Well I hope whatever it is; you can take care of it soon. We definitely need you on board the ship," he lied.

"Me too, I am looking forward to the trip though. It should be a good time. Anyway, I've gotta run, my shuttle to the Termination is leaving in twenty minutes, take care." The lieutenant picked up his bag, walking away briskly from Tavion without waiting for a response. Tavion frowned, turning toward the clerk.

"Hey, got a comm?" he asked.

“For you, sir? Absolutely.” He motioned to a unit behind the counter. Tavion nodded, reaching over and picking up the receiver. He input a very specific frequency into the unit and hit the ‘transmit’ button.

“This is Spectre to the Admiral, come in please,” he began. “I have a bit of information that you may want to hear. I think we have new information about...”

“Spectre.” The Admiral’s ice cold voice interrupted Tavion mid-sentence. He waited in an annoyed stupor for his superior to continue speaking.

“How wonderful, I was just about to get in contact with you. I have already read your report on the new information you have which implicates Miss Na’tak. It is my desire to have information extracted from her as soon as possible. As such I am accelerating our timetables. All but a few shuttles have returned to the Termination. I would like yours to depart in twenty minutes with the final group. Anything more you have to say can wait until you are on board and can be debriefed, as I am very, very busy.” There was a long pause from the Admiral before he spoke again. “Ah yes, there is one more thing. We have nearly determined the problem with our long range communication array. I will inform you when it is repaired. Are my orders clear?”

“Crystal, sir.” Tavion was grinning widely. Somehow, he knew, the Admiral had figured out part of what was going on. If he was making the entirety of the Termination’s crew return to the ship a few hours in advance, something big was happening.

“Very good. I knew I could count on you,” the praise from the Admiral would have been much more enjoyable for Tavion had it not come in the same cold tone as everything else, “Termination out.”

With the communication line cut, Tavion put the receiver back in place and nodded his thanks to the clerk one final time before breaking out in a flat run to the hotel’s main exit. His arms pumped at a feverish pitch as he burst through the hotel’s front door, sprinting through the promenade en route to the hangars. His trained eyes caught a bobbing officer’s cap through the crowds which could only belong to the Lieutenant. Tavion narrowed his eyes, taking off down a side corridor that he knew to be a shortcut. Not willing to let the Lieutenant leave without one final glance, he threw himself forward, springing himself off of the wall and leaping clear over a dumpster which was blocking his path. He slammed into the ground in a crouch, ignoring the sudden ache in his ankles and knees, and pushed forward. Tavion burst out of the alleyway, looking around rapidly for his target, and was rewarded as the man was himself running through the promenade which made him a rather easy thing to spot.

Tavion narrowed his eyes as he saw the man squawking into a communicator, listening to the replies on a headset. He frowned, wondering who he was talking to, and immediately wished that he had some way to listen in on the communication. If only he had the Lieutenant’s access codes, he would be able to listen to every word that was being said between him and whomever he was talking to. With the sudden realization that the thought brought to him, he walked face first into a sign indicating the direction of various popular shops. Tavion reeled backwards, raising his hands to his face as he yelped in pain.

That son of a... It IS him, it HAS to be him. Tavion thought.

As the Termination's communication officer, his access codes could tap into any sort of transmission throughout the Task Force. It made perfect sense to Tavion now, why they had been foiled at every turn, the set up, and the ease of the mission on Burnin Konn. It was all a set up. He wasn't sure what was being set up, but he knew it couldn't be good. Regaining his senses, he cursed loudly as he realized that the Lieutenant was now out of sight. Redoubling his efforts, he made it to the hangar within minutes, rumbling up the loading ramp to the Sentinel that had initially brought him here.

"Lara!" He panted with exertion, and was doubled over when Lara came to him, followed by Na'tak and Ten. Ten had been released from the Gem's holding cells only a few minutes before with a hefty bribe to the station's administrator.

"What's wrong? You look like hell." Lara bent down next to him, taking his bag. "Are you okay?"

"We h-have," he was panting. "To get back to the ship, right now. It-it's Drolin. I think." He was gasping for air, having sprinted a good few hundred meters.

"What? Drolin? Comms?" Lara was confused, her eyes widening slightly. Tavion nodded.

"I'm pretty sure." He breathed in deeply, his heart slowly starting to settle. "We have to tell the Admiral. No comms. Go. NOW!" He screamed, startling Lara. She nodded, though, and rushed to the cockpit to get them off of the station. Ten's fists flexed as he stared at Tavion, canting his armored head to the side.

Na'tak, for her part, gasped, her hands lancing to her lips and holding there. She parted her fingers, speaking through the gaps in her blue digits. "But, isn't he a bridge officer? Why would he betray you? Are you sure?" She had a million questions, those were but three.

Tavion nodded solemnly. "Yeah. His rank is only Lieutenant, but his position puts him on par with any of the other bridge crew. He runs the entire communication array's compliment. Why? I have no idea. I intend to beat that information out of him. And am I sure? No. Not enough to just go off him, but enough that we need to go and tell the Admiral right now."

Na'tak nodded, biting her lower lip. "If you need anything, ask." Ten nodded in agreement, patting one of his SMGs. "If it's any consolation," Na'tak continued, "I was able to do everything that the Admiral asked, I don't know what they're for, but I have a pretty good fleet of transport craft and starfighters at his command."

"Well, that's something." Tavion forced a smile as he felt the shuttle lurch, the engines whined loudly as they had been denied their pre-flight warm-ups and checks, and the vessel whipped out of the hangar of the Gem. The main reactor on the shuttle roared loudly as Lara commanded all

of its power from the cockpit, sending the shuttle screaming toward their waiting command ship. In the loading area, Tavion slumped against the ground.

Tavion looked up at the other two, frowning. "I just hope that we're not too late to stop whatever is going on here."

Chapter 7 – The End Game

The Admiral stood at the prow viewport on the Termination as action occurred all around him. The vessel was preparing for its hyperspace jump back to the safety of Aurora, and the bridge was in a flurry as the officers coordinated the arrival of the last few shuttles along with the execution of the vessel's departure procedures. The Admiral only turned from his perch when he heard the large blast doors leading into the bridge open, a few officers trickling in. One of them walked directly up to him. The man's uniform was disheveled, and he was sweating as if he had just run a short marathon; he likely had if he had ran to the bridge. The Admiral frowned, disappointed, as the stench of the man wafted over toward him. There was an imminent reprimand in this man's future, even though he had the courtesy to salute.

"Lieutenant Drolin. I see that the rather expensive hotel room that one of my commandos was so gracious in compensating you for on the task force's decided was not equipped with a shower. Next time you decide to spend a few thousand credits, do be sure to spring for the extra few credits for a bucket of water or something to rid you of the stench of dead Bantha which has just invaded my bridge." The Admiral breathed in deeply of the lieutenant's stink, if for no other reason than to rile his temper more.

"I'm sorry sir," the lieutenant stammered, but quickly regained his bearings. "Sir I was told by the deck officer in the hangar that you're holding my shuttle. I thought we had worked out my leave due to the the personal business which I have to attend to," he said.

"Ah yes, that. There is a situation which unfortunately requires your expertise and I must rescind my authorization. It should not take more than six hours or so, we can emerge from hyperspace while en route to Aurora and allow you to take your leave then. Of course if you can tell me how your personal business will be impacted by a six hour delay then I will be more than happy to allow you to go should the reason be appropriate." The Admiral smiled coolly, his icy blue eyes staring into the Lieutenant's. For his part, the Lieutenant could not return the stare and bowed his head in defeat.

"I see. Very well sir. What do you need me to do?" The man said in an exasperated manner.

The Admiral's smile widened as he breathed in deeply, this time he did not mind the stench. This time, it was fear radiating off of the man. He enjoyed that smell. "Take your station, I will be with you shortly to inform you of your task."

The Lieutenant nodded, saluting the Admiral. "As you wish, sir." He turned, walking off to take up his post at the communications console. The Admiral looked around the bridge at his officers, before returning his gaze to the prow viewport. He figured that the last few shuttles would be secure any moment.

"Sir. The last shuttles are secure." The flight control officer verified the Admiral's mental calculations, much to his amusement.

"Excellent. Helm, bring us about to one nine five mark zero zero two. Maneuvering thrusters only. Communications, inform the Gem that we will be departing momentarily. Broadcast on all channels that they utilize." The Admiral turned back toward his bridge crew to watch them work, his cold eyes looking down into the crew pit, as well as the myriad of stations on the same level as he.

"Yes sir, coming about to one nine five mark zero zero two. Maneuvering thrusters engaged." The response from both the helmsman and the ship was crisp; the vessel smoothly began moving to the helmsman's whim.

Lieutenant Drolin carried out his orders, rolling his eyes to nobody but himself; they didn't need to transmit this along all of the Gem's channels, dozens of passing ships would hear it. It was worthless. "Done, sir." He managed to spit out after completing his task.

"Very good. Charge hyperdrive, engines to one quarter. Once we are clear of the station's sublight restricted area, engage the hyperdrive." The Admiral's eyes were fixed on the still-open blast door at the back of the bridge.

"Yes si-sir." The hesitation in the helmsman's voice was due solely to the rumbling footsteps that echoed through the bridge. The Admiral suppressed a smile as he watched Ten, Tavion, Lara, and Na'tak running toward the entrance to the bridge. Guards at the blast door moved to stop Na'tak from entering, but they backed off when Ten simply pointed a pistol at each of them – it was his way of saying she was 'okay'.

Only the Admiral noticed Drolin tracking Na'tak intently, with hatred in his eyes, as they rumbled in. The remainder of the bridge crew focused intently on their work, ignoring the spectacle. The quartet stopped in front of the Admiral, most of them breathless – except Ten. He looked as if he was almost bored, though he had his repulsor pistols in hand.

"Sir!" Tavion managed to blurt out, attempting to catch his breath for the second time in less than twenty minutes.

"Yes, Spectre?" The Admiral smiled, waiting patiently for the commando to catch his breath.

"Si-sir," he gasped for air again, collecting himself. "I have critical information that I need to pass on to you." His eyes glared directly into the Admiral's eyes as he powered through the stare which greeted him. "It is urgent. Your ears only."

"And Ten's, and Two's, and Na'tak's, it seems, by the looks on your faces. Now what could be so important that you would run onto the bridge with this motley group of yours. I believe that any information that can be shared amongst you four can be shared amongst anyone who can hear this conversation." The Admiral spoke softly, it was difficult for the four to hear him, let alone anyone else nearby.

"Sir, please," Lara pleaded with him, "can we please go to a conference room and talk?"

"No," the Admiral said in a very chipper tone, smiling broadly. "Aysa."

"Yes Admiral?" The disembodied voice filled the bridge, startling a few of the officers with its sudden arrival.

"Lock down all bridge access. Close the blast doors." The Admiral smiled broadly as a series of clicks filled the air, the enormous blast doors leading into the bridge sliding shut. A few officers looked up in confusion; Lieutenant Drolin stood up abruptly, looking around.

"Now that nobody can leave," the Admiral continued with a large smile on his face, "everyone should give you their undisturbed attention. Tavion, tell us of the traitor in our midst. Loud enough so that everyone can hear you, if you would." The entire bridge stopped everything they were doing. Most of them stood, looking at the Admiral in awe, disgust, and surprise. Nobody spoke.

Tavion, Lara, and Na'tak blinked in tandem, astonished. Tavion was the first to recover, looking directly into the Admiral's eyes with a single question on his mind. That question was answered as the Admiral looked right back at him, smiled warmly, and nodded.

"Well," Tavion began, speaking loudly enough so that the bridge crew could hear.

"Here's the short version, sir: First, we discovered that the Figgs have an intact suit of our stormtrooper armor, including resonators and communications equipment. Someone is actively reverse engineering it and likely has our access codes. This was discovered during an infiltration mission that was met with no resistance; which we found strange. During that infiltration, we found a ledger that implicated Miss Na'tak as a spy. However, actually investigating it, we found that someone is using one of our proxy companies to accept payments from the Figg conglomerates, specifically Figg Excavation. During our entire operation, the Figgs sent mercenaries against us in an attempt to kill or capture us. We figure they're somehow listening in on our communications," he said, relaying most of the information he knew.

"Very interesting." The Admiral smiled, amused by the short report. The rest of the bridge crew was silent, looking back and forth at each other. "It did strike me as odd that

our operation on Burnin Konn was so easy to accomplish, it also struck me as odd that there were impurities in the captured hypermatter which, should they have been allowed to fester in our reactor, would have corroded our containment and made us prone to a reactor failure. Fortunately, Doctor Ibble's extraction methods detected the impurities and they were able to be purged before causing permanent damage."

At his station, Lieutenant Drolin's eyes widened, he looked around; and knowing that nobody was paying attention to him, slowly drew his blaster.

The Admiral continued calmly. "They have indeed been listening to our communications for quite some time now. I would say ever since just before our operation against the Allegiance Battle Group. Money is quite a motivating factor, enough of it can sway the loyalties of those you would otherwise rely on to save your life. In any case, yes, we do indeed have a traitor in our midst."

Lieutenant Drolin's face hardened, as he put his blaster on his lap, slowly rising to get a clear shot at the people standing at the front of the bridge.

The Admiral was undaunted, and continued in his icy cold tone. "However, he can rest easy, knowing that he has been used as an unwitting double agent. Thank you, very much, for your services to the task force. I do believe that they will no longer be needed. Miss Na'tak, would you be so kind as to do me a favor?" Hiding his blaster from the view of others around him, Lieutenant Drolin raised it. His face was cold, his expression blank. He knew he was as good as dead, and steeled himself for one last act.

"Y-yes, Admiral?" Na'tak chittered nervously.

"Duck." The Admiral smiled, as Na'tak suddenly dropped to the ground.

What happened next took place in the blink of an eye. Lieutenant Drolin fired, his blaster bolt slamming into the transparasteel viewport instead of the back of Na'tak's head as was its intended target, missing her by a mere centimeter. Before Tavion, Lara, or Ten even had the thought to turn around toward the shooter the Admiral had drawn the blaster at his hip and was raising it. He depressed the trigger; a single blue bolt seared out of the barrel. It passed so close to Tavion's head that he could feel the roiling heat wash over him. The Admiral's shot smacked directly into Lieutenant Drolin's forehead and his body collapsed to the ground in a heap.

The Admiral holstered his blaster. "Lieutenant Drolin has been working for the Figgs for quite some time. Unfortunately for him, I know everything that goes on in my ship. Guards." He motioned toward a pair of Stormtroopers still standing by the blast door, their weapons leveled. "Take him to the brig. I want him prepared for processing." The two stormtroopers rushed forward, picking up the Lieutenant's limp body and carrying him toward the still closed blast door.

"Aysa. Release the bridge lockdown and the lockdown on long range communications. Oh, and delete all of Lieutenant Drolin's access privileges," he said almost as an afterthought.

"Done, Admiral. All requests have been completed." Aysa interrupted the Admiral before he could say anything more.

The Admiral breathed in deeply. Na'tak was grinning widely, having found it exciting. Tavion and Lara were speechless, and Ten was standing there stoically as he always did. "Do not feel used," The Admiral spoke up, reading their faces, "your information was vital to the operation, you have all done very well."

"What's next though, sir?" Lara was confused, again.

"We are going to spring the trap. This entire sequence of events was designed to deliver this vessel for its destruction or capture, this much is obvious. Their hopes were likely to contaminate our hypermatter and cause us to go from here directly back to Aurora for repairs, alone. However, thanks to Miss Na'tak, we will have starfighter cover and if Vice Admiral Gaunt understood my coded message, which I am sure he did, we will have reinforcements in approximately two hours. However, we should not keep the Figg fleet waiting until then." The Admiral responded in a very matter-of-fact manner.

The Admiral turned back toward the front of the bridge. "Tactical. Red alert, battle stations. I want shields on standby and raised the moment we exit hyperspace. Anti-boarding teams are to be dispatched to their designated areas. You three, I want you armored and ready for offensive boarding operations in five minutes. Miss Na'tak, what do you know of Figg tactics and their capabilities?"

Na'tak pondered this for a moment as klaxons began ringing, pulsing red lights flashing across the bridge. As she did, Ten turned around and silently marched from the bridge. Tavion and Lara just stood there, the latter's mouth slightly agape. The two of them worked through the entire situation in their heads, slowly coming to the realization that the events fit perfectly into place.

"I know a bit about their tactics from when I was working with them as a contractor, and I know they have a pretty sizable fleet of mid-level ships. Only a few Star Destroyers though. Their flagship is the *Tenacity*, an Imperial II class," she admitted, much to the Admiral's pleasure.

"Very well," he said, motioning for her to step to his side. "Congratulations, you are my executive officer for this operation. I would like you here on the bridge with me. You will be compensated for your time, but I will not take 'no' for an answer."

Na'tak blinked, looking at Tavion and Lara. Tavion motioned toward the Admiral. "You heard what he said, SIR." He grinned at his newly appointed superior. She took her place to the Admiral's right, her lekku twitching nervously.

"You have questions. I will gladly answer them in private when this operation is complete. Right now, I am expecting my helmsman to tell me that we are ready for hyperspace, and I will need you both for a special operation that I am sure you will both enjoy." The Admiral did not turn back toward them, choosing instead to speak indirectly to them.

"I'll remember that, sir." Tavion shook his head before the two of them turned, rushing out of the bridge to get their gear.

"Ready for hyperspace, sir." The helmsman looked up from his console. The Admiral nodded in way of response, folding his hands behind his back. As he did so, Na'tak looked over at him, chewing on her lower lip.

"So," Na'tak paused. "I'm your executive officer. What am I supposed to do?" She asked of the Admiral, timidly.

"The same thing that Vice Admiral Larkin Gaunt does, my dear." The Admiral answered as the ship ripped into hyperspace, the chaotic blue-white swirls of the extradimensional space filling his vision. "Simply stand there, look pretty, and warn me before I do something stupid."

Sitting in deep space between the Gem in the Darkness and the Termination's destination, a myriad of vessels sat in waiting for their target to arrive. Spearheaded by the Imperial II-class Star Destroyer *Tenacity*, the Figg fleet waited for their unsuspecting prey to arrive. Flanked by two additional Imperial Star Destroyers, with two Interdictors far behind them to prevent their target from escaping, the fleet was large enough to subjugate a small planet. Hundreds of fighters swarmed around the three ships, nearly all of them Y-wings or TIE Bombers, their pilots waiting impatiently to begin their attack. On board the bridge of the *Tenacity*, Thaddeus Figg waited patiently, unlike the remainder of his men. He was a man that had everything under control. His fleet was more than enough to destroy this one vessel; and if the opportunity presented itself, he intended to capture the vessel and use it as his new flagship. He pushed away the slight concern in the back of his mind about the operation; his agent had not checked in for some time, but these things were to be expected from time to time.

"Mister Figg," the man sitting at the communications console spoke up, "Agent Nori reports that the target has entered hyperspace along this vector. We should have contact within a few minutes."

Thaddeus nodded, turning toward a woman who was standing beside him. She was wearing a stark white laboratory coat, black boots, and had on thick glasses which made her face look much smaller than it actually was. She was focused intently on a datapad, tapping away at it.

“Was that enough time?” Thaddeus said, turning toward her. She did not answer him for a long time, so he nudged her none-too-gently with his arm. “Doctor?”

“W-what?!” She jumped, turning to look at him. “Er. I mean. Yes, Mister Figg?”

Thaddeus sighed, rolling his eyes. “Was this enough time for your contaminants to their hypermatter to take effect?” He asked, slightly annoyed.

“Oh. That. Yes, yes it was. When they are pulled from hyperspace they should be having major containment problems. I doubt they'll even be able to raise their shields. Weapons fire should be significantly underpowered as well. I wouldn't be terribly surprised if they were forced to just power down due to the extra strain the Interdictors will put on their hull.” Lianna Vess, the lead research scientist for Figg Excavations stated all of this while referencing her calculations. Her voice was timid, but certain when it came to these sorts of things.

Thaddeus smiled. “Well it looks like you'll be getting that research grant after all, Doctor.” Doctor Vess bounced on her heels at that. She didn't particularly enjoy working for the Figgs, but they paid well and allowed her to do her research.

“Mister Figg, incoming contact!” The sensor operator yelled, and moments later the 'contact' he was speaking of appeared. Ripped from hyperspace due to the Interdictors, the Termination appeared a mere few hundred kilometers in front of the Figg fleet, its wedged shaped hull pointed directly at the *Tenacity*.

“Hail them.” Thaddeus smiled as a connection was made between the two ships. “My my my... well hello there, 'Admiral'.”

“Uh, sir,” the sensor officer spoke up, looking up toward Thaddeus.

“QUIET!” Thaddeus barked, not wanting to be interrupted.

“Good afternoon, Mister Figg,” the icy voice of the Admiral filled the bridge of the *Tenacity*.

“You've angered us one too many times, Admiral. Your vessel is in a hopeless position, as I'm sure you've now realized that the hypermatter you so desperately needed isn't quite up to par.” As Thaddeus spoke the sensor officer was attempting to get his attention in vain. “I will be a gentleman, and offer you the chance to surrender. I'll drop you off on some planet somewhere and let you live out the rest of your days as a hermit, and your crew will be free to go home. If you refuse, I will simply take your crippled vessel, kill everyone on board, and parade around with your head on a stick.”

There was a pause on the other end, Thaddeus smiled as he knew the Admiral was considering his options, yet there was really only one – surrender. “My, that does sound like a wonderful deal considering the circumstances. I am beaten. If only I knew how

you accomplished this amazing trap.” Thaddeus was too oblivious to detect the searing sarcasm in the Admiral's voice.

“Your men aren't all you think they are! One of them, the one that you so foolishly allowed to leave your ship to attend to 'personal business' has been on my payroll for months. Now Admiral, just surrender, and we'll get this dirty business over with.” The sensor officer was nearly leaping out of his chair now as Thaddeus gloated.

“Oh. No. A. Traitor.” The Admiral spoke in a very pausing manner, mocking Thaddeus. “Oh wait, you mean Lieutenant Drolin, who is sitting in the brig right now awaiting interrogation?” Thaddeus balked, his eyes widening. “Here is the 'deal', Mister Figg. You are going to die, alone, crying, in my brig, under my personal ministrations. Let me show you how helpless my ship is. All forward batteries...” The Admiral said, with the communication channel still active. Thaddeus' eyes widened. “...Fire.”

The barrage of weapons fire that came from the Termination was blinding, and Thaddeus was forced to look away. His vessel shook under the impact of heavy turbolaser cannons, energy rippling over the front of his ship as the Termination opened fire. A few gunners on his vessel took the liberty of returning fire, and his jaw dropped agape as he saw the Termination's shields shrug off the blasts.

“SIR THEIR SHIELDS ARE UP!” The Sensor officer finally blurted what he wanted to say as he grabbed his console for stability.

“Shields at ninety-two percent!” Another man yelled, as Thaddeus turned toward the doctor in a rage.

“YOU! I will deal with you later! Signal the fleet! Return fire! Return fire!” He screamed.

The Figg Fleet opened fire as the Termination's batteries pounded the *Tenacity's* shields, the three destroyers able to focus solely on the much larger vessel. Their bombers lanced forward with only a few fighters amongst the swarm to provide close support. Even with the ship having somehow ignored the effects of the hypermatter sabotage, the Figg's bombers would make short work of the warship. Thaddeus growled in rage as he watched the bombers begin to unleash their payloads at the Imperial ship. As the first torpedos raced toward their targets, additional unexpected flashes caused many of the bomber pilots to pull away from their runs and brought a bubbling roar of rage to Thaddeus' throat.

Dozens of transport craft and nearly a hundred starfighters emerged from hyperspace around the Termination, racing forward to engage the bombers. The mercenary craft tore into the slower ships, dozens of them erupting into flames in the first few barrages. The limited Figg fighter support dove in to try to cover the bombers, but it wasn't nearly enough. They had expected to only face a single capital ship, and now they were faced with a medley of smaller ships. A few broke through the sudden Imperial screen, closing on the Termination to launch proton bombs at the enormous craft. Quad laser batteries

and point defense blaster cannons lining the hull of the ship introduced themselves to the Figg bombers, swatting down both starfighters and projectiles. Many still slammed into her forward shields, but the major Figg advantage had been equalized by the sudden reinforcements.

On the bridge of the Termination, the Admiral's right hand was clasped on Na'tak's shoulder, and he was beaming a smile at her. "Excellent work, Miss Na'tak, this will do nicely."

She smiled back at him, nodding in appreciation of the praise.

"Tactical," the Admiral said, feeling his vessel shake under the impacts of the torpedos and bombs that impacted against his shields. His eyes were fixed on a holographic display in front of him, watching the Termination's shield grids start to drop under the concentrated attack. "We need to buy some more time. Redirect ion cannon fire to the flanking destroyer's weapon targeting arrays; all turbolasers continue to focus on their command ship. I want Thaddeus sweating. Also, lower shield grid four. I want it offline."

"Sir?" The tactical officer looked over at him, then back at his console. "We're losing shields rapidly, we'll need everything we ha..." He was interrupted by the Admiral shooting him a glare. "...yes sir. Shield grid four offline."

The Admiral nodded as he returned to watching the deadly dance outside of his prow viewport. He had positioned all of his pieces, and was making his final moves. It was only a question now of his opponent falling into the trap he'd set.

The battle raged for over ninety minutes, the Figg forces slowly whittling down the Termination's powerful shield grids. Barrages of green turbolaser fire exchanged between the various vessels, with blue ion cannon fire streaming from the Termination like a torrent of water. The long battle had been taking its toll on both sides. The starfighter battle had ended long ago, with the Termination's mercenary assistance destroying every last Figg starfighter while sustaining heavy losses of their own. The Figg bombers had dealt tremendous damage to the Termination's shields before they had been destroyed, more than a few ramming the vessel with their payloads armed to cause as much damage as possible. The mercenaries were now skirting between the three Star Destroyers, harassing the Interdictors behind the main line as best they could. The Termination herself was marred with black scorch marks, her outer armor breached in multiple locations across the ship as her shields had finally failed a few minutes ago. Each new turbolaser blast seared into her armor plating; tearing new holes in the vessel's outer shell. She was wounded, but still fighting furiously.

Remarkably nimble for a ship of her size, the Termination twisted about in space to confound the Figg gunners as much as possible, but she was slowing as repeated ion cannon blasts sent rippling blue waves of energy across her stern. Turbolaser fire from

the remaining Figg ships raked across her unshielded hull as the Figg gunners tried to disable her major systems. The Tenacity pushed forward from her escort, pouring fire into the vessel haphazardly. An impact from the Tenacity's deck guns blew a large chunk out of the prow of the vessel's armor, an explosion sending shards of quadanium laced armor plating careening into the dark void of space.

While the battle was assuredly in the Figg's favor, the Termination had dealt massive damage to their fleet. One of their Star Destroyers was floating idly in space, adrift. Her hull was pristine, save for a vacant area where the vessel's command tower had resided. In its place there was a smoldering hole in the dorsal hull where the Termination's gunners had pounded the vessel into submission after dropping her shields with concentrated ion cannon fire. The other destroyer was firing blindly. She had been unscathed by the Termination's turbolasers unlike her sister ship; but the Termination's ion cannons had disabled her weapon targeting arrays, and many of the individual emplacements, which left her gunners firing blindly at the larger ship as it twisted through space. Still effective, however, she was scoring steady damage against the Termination. The Tenacity, for her part, was still fighting strong. Her shield grids barely held up under the Termination's attacks, and a few blasts were making it through to her hull, but her weapons were unabated; tearing into her target like a rabid wolf.

The bridge of the Termination was showing signs of the heavy fighting, sparks flew from a damaged conduit overhead and many of the bridge crew had small cuts and scrapes from falling pieces of debris. A security console had exploded from a power surge and a small fire raged near the back of the bridge. The female officer at the console had survived the blast, carried off to the vessel's medical bay for treatment. While the flurry of activity raged across the bridge, the Admiral had been standing at the prow viewport unmoving the entire time. He relayed his orders with the cool, collected attitude he always had, directing the vessel's attacks to stave off the assault as best he could. The blue Twi'lek beside him had been significantly less collected, gripping a console for stability and squeaking each time the ship shook. The Admiral watched a new barrage of turbolaser fire race toward his vessel from the Tenacity, his vessel rumbling. His ears picked up a distant explosion, and a red plume erupted from the dorsal hull of his ship.

"Damage report, be brief." He said coldly.

"Shield grids one through three are out, four is still on standby as ordered," the tactical officer began, emphasizing the last part as if willing the Admiral to order the grid raised, "outer armor has been compromised, integrity down to eleven percent. Hull breaches across decks six, seven, eleven, fourteen, fifteen and twenty. Damage control teams are responding to the breaches. System integrity down to sixty two percent. Engine output down forty six percent. Overall hull integrity down to eighty two percent." The report was grim, but the Admiral seemed to not be bothered by it.

"And the enemy fleet?" He inquired, watching an explosion light up the hull of the Tenacity.

"Tenacity's shields are failing, we're dealing damage to her hull. Star Destroyer marked Alpha is adrift, sensors show her reactor output is zero. Star Destroyer marked Beta is still active, shields at full, but her targeting arrays are offline. Intensity of fire from that vessel is increasing as our engine output drops, sir." The tactical officer braced himself against his console as another violent impact rocked the ship.

The Admiral extended one hand, touching the bulkhead in front of him. Na'tak thought she heard the Admiral say 'easy', but was distracted by holding onto her console for dear life. The Admiral absorbed the information around him, before nodding.

"I believe it is time to even the playing field a little. Tactical, launch escape pods one-two-five through two-two-five. Send them along a hyper vector which will pass between the Tenacity and the active Destroyer. Helm. Cut engines, abruptly. I want us coasting." The Admiral watched as his orders were carried out, a hundred escape pods ripping out of the vessel's hull, tearing through space toward the two massive destroyers in what was seen as an attempt to run past them and escape. Invisible hands reached out toward them. The two vessel's tractor beams grabbed them in an unbreakable clasp, pulling them toward their hulls. Na'tak's eyes widened as she looked toward the Admiral.

"Uh, sir. What about the crew?" The alarm in her voice was clear.

"Do not worry. We will not need the pods. Besides, I wish for you to see the harvest from the other half of your work." The Admiral motioned toward the escape pods, drawn ever closer to the two Star Destroyers. Na'tak was confused for only a half second before those wide eyes expanded even further with dawning realization.

"Precisely," the Admiral quipped even as the Termination shook yet again. "Tactical, detonate the payloads."

Na'tak's eyes swiveled to look at the two Destroyers as the swarming escape pods exploded in a chorus of fireballs, filled with the explosives she had purchased for the Admiral. Those closest to the Tenacity's hull blew gaping holes in the vessel, the entire ship being pushed slightly off course by the force of the explosions. The vacuum of space swallowed the detonations within the blink of an eye, and when they had receded the effects brought a smile to the Admiral's face. The attacks from the Tenacity nearly stopped entirely as the weapon emplacements closest to the tractor beams were utterly destroyed by the explosive pods, many others damaged or knocked out of service. The other destroyer's shields took the explosions, and that vessel was mostly undaunted by the attack, continuing to fire without any hesitation, though her commander sorely regretted the decision to order the pods captured.

Thaddeus Figg was cursing his decision as well. He paid the price for being overzealous in ordering the pods captured, in hopes of getting his hands on the Admiral. He stood up slowly, having been knocked to the floor by the force of the impacts. He

raised a hand to his forehead, and felt blood seeping from a fresh wound. Looking around his bridge, he cursed again. Bulkheads were strewn about as the Termination's gunners seemed to enjoy throwing heavy weapons fire toward the command tower. Three men were dead, slumped over their consoles, a dozen more were injured. He growled, glaring at the vessel which had caused him so many problems. He knew that she was in trouble, her hull was glowing red and her engines were now dead. He would win. He had to win.

"Why aren't we firing?!" He bellowed, smacking the transparasteel viewport with his hand.

"The explosions took out many of our remaining weapons, techs are working on fighting fires across all decks!" Someone yelled, Thaddeus was too angry to see who it was that spoke.

"Damn them! Helm, dock with them!" He screamed.

"What?" The helmsman was taken aback.

"I said dock with them!" He roared, drawing his blaster and pointing it at the man sitting at the console. Without further hesitation, the Tenacity pushed forward, through the Termination's fire, and raced toward the larger vessel, twisting about to get in a position to dock with the larger destroyer.

"Prepare all boarding parties." Thaddeus said flatly, frowning. He had over fifteen thousand mercenaries on board, more than half again what a normal Destroyer would carry for a troop compliment. He had anticipated needing to board his opponent's ship, it seemed as if it was the only thing he had successfully anticipated thus far. The Termination grew larger in his viewport as his ship drew closer. Special boarding tubes, installed just for this engagement extended from the ventral hull of his ship, reaching out toward their target's hull. He knew that nearly three thousand of the best men he'd hired were waiting to be part of the first wave of invaders. The thought removed the frown from his face momentarily.

"One hundred meters." The helmsman said as the ship slowed, matching the Termination's speed. Fire between the two ships stopped abruptly, their gunners realizing that at this range, debris from any attacks could damage their own vessel. The second Star Destroyer even ceased its attacks, not willing to risk harm to its own command ship and began to turn to deal with the transports harassing the fleet's two Interdictors.

"Twenty five meters," the helmsman reported.

He kept a close eye on his console, watching the range indicator tick down. Thaddeus's face curled into a wicked grin as it dropped to under five meters. In the crew pit, the

sensor operator blinked twice as the destroyer's sensors picked up a power reading from the Termination. The ship was shielded. He opened his mouth, screaming.

"THEIR SHIELDS ARE U..."

Nearly two thousand men died instantly as the boarding tubes vaporized against the Termination's shields as they snapped to life. Another few hundred were sucked out into the void via the sudden decompression. The shields shattered under the physical impact of the two Destroyers as the Tenacity rammed the Termination unexpectedly. Every officer on the bridge was thrown from their station as the vessel's momentum was suddenly halted. Consoles exploded across the bridge, and a loud grinding noise echoed throughout the ship. The hull continued to groan as the helmsman scrambled to his station, securing the two ships with what few boarding tubes survived the impact. Thaddeus was forced to haul himself to his feet again, his left arm throbbing. He had no words to describe what he was feeling.

The only emotion he knew was the burning hatred that consumed his entire being.

Comparatively, his counterpart on the Termination was a ball of joy. The Admiral's vessel had emerged from the exchange the victor. While the impact had further damaged his ship, the shields had absorbed the brunt of the force of the impact before collapsing. His celebration was short lived, as the red lights pulsating across the bridge were joined by yellow ones; the intercom on the bridge came to life.

"Interior hull breached, intruder alert," the computerized voice reported without emotion.

"Security. I want stormtroopers there, now. Inform Spectre that his commandos are to fight off the attackers and board that ship. I want Thaddeus Figg, alive. Have them take Predator and a squad of the assault droids for the operation." The Admiral turned to look at his bridge crew. "In the mean time, I want any repairs possible performed on the shield generator and weapon systems. They will not fire on us while that ship is docked, let us use this time wisely."

"Sir," the security officer frowned at what he was seeing on his console as the yellow lights suddenly stopped. "Internal sensors just started registering them as friendlies. Our internal security systems think they're Task Force personnel." The Admiral nodded by way of reply.

"They paid well for this ability. No doubt they are using the resonator frequencies from that suit of armor they acquired. No matter. Do what you can manually." The security officer nodded to the Admiral after he spoke.

"Sir," Na'tak said timidly, "what about the other Destroyer, if there is a problem, they will just come back and destroy us." She was looking at a nearby damage control board, which showed the entire outer hull surrounded by a red hue -- their armor was

completely gone. The hull itself was splotted with yellow, orange, and red, indicating various sections of damaged hull. Only a few parts of the ship were green, indicating light damage, and nothing was blue; the color for an undamaged area.

The Admiral looked at his wrist, bringing his other hand over to adjust the chronometer he was wearing. "They will have difficulty with that."

"Why?" She asked.

"Because it has nearly been two hours since we left the Gem, my dear." He answered as if she should know the answer to her own question. She didn't, and the confused look she gave the Admiral made him smile. "I have one final move to make in this game." He motioned with one hand toward the remaining destroyer and the two Interdictors. "I do believe they are lonely. Perhaps we could introduce them to some new friends right about..." The Admiral watched his chronometer tick. "...Now."

As the word left his lips, a dozen flashes of bright light signaled the arrival of new ships. Spearheaded by the Manticore, the remainder of the Task Force ripped out of hyperspace behind the Figg Interdictors. Dozens of starfighters screamed out of their hangars as the Task Force's own Interdictors, the Widow's Web, Retainer, and Restrainer raised their gravity wells to trap the remaining Figg capital ships. The Termination's intercom flared to life again, but this time it was laughter that came through the speakers.

"It looks like you started the party without me! Wow, sir, you've really let your ship go, it looks like you've put on a few kilograms of extra ship there." The voice of Vice Admiral Gaunt was far more jovial than the situation would call for.

"Indeed. Right on time, Vice Admiral. It seems in your old age you have not forgotten our recall code. Good. We are being boarded. Once you have dealt with the Interdictors and the Destroyer, dispatch whatever troops the fleet can spare." The Admiral folded his arms behind his back again.

"Yes sir, any special orders for the troops?" The intercom was flooded with chatter from the Manticore's bridge crew as they began engaging their targets.

"Yes. I want the bridge crew of that ship, alive... kill everything else." The Admiral responded with a sinister expression on his face.

"As you wish." The Vice Admiral's tone was serious now, as he prepared to direct his ship. "Manticore out."

As the intercom cut, the Admiral watched the remainder of his fleet tear into the three Figg capital ships, which desperately tried to fight back against far superior numbers. Carrack cruisers zipped around the two Interdictors, pounding them with heavy turbolaser fire as waves of bombers unleashed proton torpedos at the craft. Without any fighter cover, the Figg ships were

nearly defenseless against the Task Force's smaller elements, and simply did not have the firepower to deal with the larger capital ships. The battle in space was over, the arrival of the remainder of Task Force Whispering Death spelled doom for the rest of the Figg fleet. The war, however, was far from over.

Chapter 8 - Checkmate

Tavion's back pressed up hard against the wall, his weapon raised up toward his chin. Red bolts screamed through the intersection he was standing beside, having been pinned down there by a group of Figg mercenaries. He had been trying to reinforce another group of commandos before running into the small party of men. He figured there couldn't be more than four of them, but four-on-one was not a fight he thought he could win right now. His armor was dented and scratched from the fighting that had gone on already, neither side seemed to be gaining ground yet, but more and more soldiers were pushing into the Termination from the Tenacity. With their opponents bypassing the ship's formidable internal defenses; the onus fell on the troopers to push back the attackers.

Tavion had called for backup some time ago, the area of the ship that he had come from – near one of the Figg's initial boarding sites, was now swarming with enemy soldiers. Tavion cursed loudly, his only attempt at trying to peek around the corner at his opponents had been responded to with a blaster bolt missing his head by a centimeter. His head perked as his ears picked up a faint skittering noise from the hallway across from him, through the deadly intersection. The source of the skittering became obvious as a tri-legged droid with a blue hue surrounding it turned a corner, approaching him. The droids quad blaster cannons were raised at him, but he knew the droid was a friendly – the skittering was unmistakable.

“About time, Predator!” Tavion yelled over the sound of the blaster fire.

“I was not aware that I am late. You did not set a time frame for your request for back-up,” the droid stated plainly.

“Next time I'll set a time limit. Can you give me some help?” Tavion chuckled as he checked the charge on his power pack.

“Affirmative. I can. Do you wish for me to do so? Is it within your required time frame?” Predator stood up a little straighter, the droid was a unique individual in the Task Force. A modern combat droid, he had been gifted with a personality, much to the amusement of his peers. He was still working on his sense of humor.

“Ha... Not very good, Predator. Whenever you're ready.” Tavion crouched down, his armor clicking as he dropped to a knee.

Predator raised the volume on his external vocoder to deafening levels, Tavion was grateful for the hearing protection embedded in his helmet as the droid yelled; “Surprise!” and whipped around the corner. Predator's quad blaster cannons unleashed a hail of fire down the hallway into

the Figg mercenaries, gunning one down before he even had time to recover from the piercing yell. Tavion came about, using Predator as cover and fired two kill bolts from his E-11 into the neck and face of a second assailant. He fell to the ground, his head smoldering. Return fire from the two remaining soldiers splashed against Predator's blue shielding, three bolts slamming into it before the protective shell failed, dissipating around the droid. A fourth bolt slammed into the droid's armor, scorching it but dealing no permanent damage.

“Ow. That hurt.”

The droid's flat voice did not fit the statement at all, which was punctuated by his cannons swiveling to the man who had scored a hit against him. They stared down at each other for only a half second before the mercenary's mind caught up to his arrogance. He was gunned down in the next half second, four smoldering holes in his chest. The last man, gaining his senses, turned and ran from the pair. He took two steps before being shot in the back by Tavion.

“Are you all right? Your shield went down very quickly.” Tavion had genuine concern for the droid.

“My systems are operating at ninety seven point five nine percent of optimal. I would say that I am doing quite well. Processing. Oh. One moment. I am okay.” The droid skittered about as Tavion moved down the hallway that Predator had come from. Predator fell in behind him.

“The hit wasn't that bad?” Tavion ejected his power pack, tossing it on the ground and slamming a new one into the weapon.

“Negative. I have been in four fire fights in the past fifteen minutes. I have been lowering my shield to prevent burn-out. My outer armor is slightly compromised, so I may have to cease... stop doing that,” he said. Tavion smirked, it was always funny to listen to the droid try to speak with human mannerisms.

“How's the fighting going where you came from?” The two of them passed an area that had obviously been the scene of a heavy firefight. Stormtroopers were strewn about the hallway, along with a half dozen Figg men. The walls were blackened from explosives and weapon impacts.

“Unfortunately, it seems as if the attackers have very detailed knowledge about the interior of the ship. They are attempting to secure the areas around engineering and our ventral computer core. I was part of a team that just repulsed a heavy attack from core three.” Tavion frowned under his helmet as Predator spoke. The traitor had done far more damage than he would have liked. While the Termination had many redundant systems, the loss of engineering and one of the cores would be a very tough thing to fight against.

“Damn it. Well at least you fought them off. That's where I was heading when I got intercepted.” They passed more corpses on the ground, doing their best to respect the dead by moving around them.

Predator made a hard turn, skittering down a hallway which was more armored than those nearby, commandos were standing at the end of it, sheltered behind a makeshift barricade. "I am aware," he said, as the two stepped past the barricade and into what was a makeshift command center. With the internal security systems of the ship compromised, the defending troops had set up small command centers to relay orders and redirect reinforcements. Tavion and Predator moved over toward a small table where Ten and a few other commandos were pointing at a map of the interior of the Termination. Ten raised his head, nodding toward Tavion.

"Yo, Spectre." Fifty raised his head, clad in his custom armor. The man had forgone protection for gadgets and gismos – ancillary things in Tavion's mind. Right now he was fiddling with a fusion cutter that refused to retract back into his gauntlet. "Trouble getting here?"

"Ran into a few friends of ours, had to stop and introduce them to my buddy here." He patted the blaster at his hip. Fifty nodded, knowingly.

"They're everywhere, and they're organized too. They took one of the power relay nodes, and aft environmental controls. They're working their way here, we lost continuous contact with Engineering about thirty minutes ago. We know its still ours though because every so often Lara yells at me for checking in on her." He chuckled somberly. Things were going worse than Tavion had thought.

"How many?" He asked.

"Fifteen thousand or so." Fifty motioned behind him. One of the Figg mercenaries was unconscious against the wall, still bleeding from untreated wounds. It was remarkable that the man was still alive with the amount of blood pooling below him. "He decided to cooperate after Ten broke his arm, twice." Tavion winced, finally noticing that his arm was bent utterly opposite to the way his elbow was supposed to go.

"Jeez. They must have removed a bunch of their long term personnel to fit this many soldiers on board. What've we got?" His ears picked up distant explosions and blaster fire.

"Nine point six. Maybe? The droids were removed for their upgrade. So we're a bit short. We're killing more of them than they are of us, but without our internal defenses they're slowly gaining ground. There is some good news." Fifty picked up a datapad that was wired into his armor.

"Picked this off one of their techs; he was trying to tap into environmental. Before it got cut off, I found a little network they'd set up. Long story short, they've got a central command area set up here." He moved his hand over the map, planting his index finger on one of the ventral damage control bays, it was the largest single room in the area.

"Tough to get to." Tavion rubbed his chin.

"From the inside." Fifty grinned under his helmet, bringing up a layout of exterior access hatches. He pointed, true to being a full service bay; the room had a series of hatches which led directly to the outer hull of the ship. "Up for a space walk?"

Tavion groaned, he was not. "You know my armor can only take vacuum for ten minutes, max, before I do that thing... what is it? Oh yeah, run out of air." He hated zero-g and hard vacuum, it was utterly unnatural to him.

"It's a two minute walk. Three if you're slow. Look, not to be mean, but Ten's already counting on you to go," he said, motioning toward the green armored individual standing to his left. Tavion's eyes fixed on him, pleading under his helmet. His hopes were dashed as Ten just nodded. "Besides," Fifty continued. "Once we take care of that, we're boarding their ship. You, me, Ten, Seven, and Nineteen, to capture that Figg fellow." Tavion nodded in defeat.

"Fine. Fine. I get it." He bowed his head in defeat. "Let's get this over with." Fifty nodded, motioning for him to follow. He led Tavion and the three other commandos through the massive room behind them containing one of the Termination's four computer cores. Catwalks spiraled around the core, easily twenty meters tall by itself, with dozens of consoles arrayed around it. Enormous cooling pipes snaked around the core to transfer heat away and dissipate it into space. Fifty led the group into a small attached maintenance room, inside was a hatch which connected to one of the cooling pipes. He pointed at it.

"Through there, it'll lead us to external access, and we go from there." Tavion grumbled, he'd need a hot cup of caf and a long warm shower after this. Fifty wasted no time, opening the hatch to the enormous coolant tube – it was large enough for an armored person to crawl through it. Tavion felt a rush of frigid air before his armor's hermetic seal kicked in and his suit regulated the temperature to a bearable mark. Fifty was the first in, Tavion reluctantly followed him.

The crawl through the tube was uneventful, full of twists and turns, but ultimately safe. The sounds of the raging battle were muted by the metal of the tube, but the sounds of death were unmistakable. Eventually, they made it to the location that Fifty had indicated was their destination. Tavion checked his armor one final time before Fifty led them into a pressurization chamber, and then toggled it. The air was forcibly sucked from the room, and Tavion's armor beeped at him, informing him of the vacuum outside. A yellow timer began ticking down from ten minutes – the maximum safe time his suit could handle the environment.

"Opening the outer hatch." Fifty's voice rang in his ears as they switched to one of their secure tactical frequencies. Moments later, he opened the hatch, the grey hull of the Tenacity looming overhead. Climbing out of the Termination, they stood in awe for a moment at the damage done to both vessels. The Tenacity's hull was gouged where it had rammed the larger ship, enormous chunks drifting close to the vessel. Bodies floated aimlessly around the two ships, and small pieces of debris were everywhere. A half dozen large tubes connected the two ships, with another dozen more having been destroyed in the maneuver. Fifty began to lead the way toward the external hatch a few hundred meters away. Tavion followed, his steps heavy as magnetic field generators in his boots kept him fairly firmly latched to the hull.

"Looks like we're going to be in drydock for awhile, again," Fifty said, surveying the damage to their ship as he walked.

"Well, that'll be boring," Seven quipped, walking alongside Tavion.

“After this, I'm okay with boring.” Tavion joined the conversation as he walked past a spinning piece of debris, avoiding it.

“Yeahhhhh,” Seven said, trailing off. The commandos were silent for the remainder of their trip. When they'd reached the hatch, Fifty bent down, tapping in a series of commands onto an external control panel before grabbing the latch with both hands and wrenching it open. He waited until everyone had entered before slipping in himself. Tavion was grateful as he toggled the compression sequence, and though they'd never actually been in danger, felt tremendous relief as normal atmosphere filled the chamber.

“This is going to dump us right behind their little command center. I'll go for their computer systems,” Fifty said, readying his weapon, “Ten's going after their commander, the rest of you should just cover us and do what you do best. Once we're done here, we'll link up with a few additional squads and storm the Tenacity's bridge.”

The group nodded, approving of the plan. As they readied their weapons, Fifty planted a heavy breaching charge directly in the center of the hatch, chuckling. “Never thought I'd breach a door on our own ship. Going in three... two... one...”

The explosion, yelling, and sounds of weapons fire that filled his ears erased the uneasiness that Tavion had felt. To him, it was calming.

“Sir, the enemy fleet has destroyed the remainder of our fleet, they're starting to launch transports toward us!” The report from the Tenacity's sensor officer brought a deeper frown to Thaddeus' face. The deep creased lines of his brow furrowed in a cold fury as his hands gripped a nearby rail to the point where his knuckles were white.

“If we capture the target, we can still make it out of here,” he said, quietly, the only encouragement he had right now were the positive reports from his boarding parties.

“Mister Figg.” The soft voice of Lianna Vess made Thaddeus turn to look at the bloodied, injured doctor. “Shouldn't we consider abandoning the ship?”

“To fly directly into their tractor beams and fighters? No. That's pointless now. We've got two choices. Either capture the Admiral and sue for our safe escape, or, if things are lost, scuttle the ship and try to take them with us,” he said soberly. Doctor Vess was taken aback by the statement, blinking as she tried to brush a bloodied mat of hair out of her eyes.

“I... I see,” she said, shallowly.

“Oh don't be so sad,” he said with a disapproving look, “if we have to scuttle the ship, it will disrupt their interdictors. We kept shuttles on board and can escape that way. We have at least twenty minutes before their transports get here, that's plenty of time.”

Doctor Vess did not relax at that, with their plans having been foiled at nearly every step, she had a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach that there was something wrong here as well. She shifted uncomfortably, her head swimming from what she figured was a mild concussion.

“Well, I mean,” she tripped over her own words, “maybe I should go to the hangar and wait for yo-”

She was interrupted as the communication officer looked up from his sparking console. “Sir! We’ve lost contact with our forward base on the enemy ship.”

“What?” Thaddeus looked down into the ruined crew pit, looking over a large support beam that was strewn across it. “When?!”

“I don’t know, sir. It looks like there was some sort of fake signal keeping our link active, it just went dead now. If I had to guess it’s been down for about ten minutes now,” the officer said, working at his console to figure out what was going on.

As he did, Thaddeus frowned, grasping to figure out what that might mean in his head. The sound of blaster retorts snapped him back to reality. Trying to find the source, his eyes fell upon a group of soldiers, his soldiers, running toward the bridge. For a moment, he wondered why they were running toward him, when they began to fall forward nearly in tandem with the sounds of approaching blaster fire.

“Seal the bridge! Arm yourselves!” Thaddeus roared, wrenching his own blaster from his hip as others across the bridge tried to do the same. The titanic blast doors leading into the bridge of the Tenacity began to close at an absurdly slow rate.

It was too late. Strangely armored individuals, with a droid in front, rushed onto the bridge through the closing blast doors under light fire from the quickest individuals to draw their weapons. The sounds of blaster retorts was joined by slugthrower weapons and the flash of vibroblades as the enemy soldiers struck back at those closest to them, quickly overwhelming the few individuals closest to the blast door. Thaddeus dove for cover behind the support beam which had been in his way moments earlier. An unsettling silence permeated the area as the remainder of the bridge crew took cover from their attackers, the weapons fire abruptly stopping.

The silence was broken a few moments later by a voice. Thaddeus recognized it immediately.

“Mister Figg, it’s over for you! Give up,” Tavion said as he crouched behind the security console at the back of the bridge, keeping an eye out for targets.

“It’s not over yet!” He screamed like a feral beast as the blast doors slammed shut behind the Imperial boarders.

“These men and women are naval officers, do you really think they’ll be able to do anything? Don’t make them suffer,” Tavion yelled, before lowering his voice, “Ten, flashes. Seven, give me frags into the crew pits.”

“Sir,” Predator spoke up quietly, skittering back and forth as if he were impatient, “there are four armored individuals which will be unaffected by the flashbang, perhaps it would be a more prudent course of action to –” Tavion interrupted him by raising one hand at the droid.

“All you, Predator.”

“Oh joy,” Tavion could have sworn that the droid bounced.

“Kill them!” The quiet conversation was interrupted by Thaddeus’ scream. Blaster fire rang out from various places as the braver bridge officers removed themselves from their consoles to open fire at the area that the commandos were using for cover.

Tavion just shook his head, and nodded at Ten and Seven. Two globular objects were thrown over the security console by Ten, the pair of flashbangs going off as they impacted the ground. Shielded from the effects by their polarized lenses and audio protection, the commandos came out of their cover, firing at any targets they could see. The few Figg soldiers who were still alive on the bridge laid out a wall of weapons fire. One bolt struck Sixteen in the chest as he came out from his cover, and he fell to the ground for a moment before trying to get back to his feet. Predator took a pair of hits, a plume of smoke erupting from his chassis as his shield generator failed completely. His return barrage silenced two of the enemy soldiers, and he moved to engage them.

Explosions rocked the bridge, and screams joined the chorus of weapons fire as Seven lobbed a pair of fragmentation grenades into the crew pits, turning his blaster down to fire at anyone who escaped the blasts. Tavion moved quickly to the front of the bridge, shooting Doctor Vess in the back with a pair of stun coils as she struggled to get to her feet, her ears bleeding from the effects of the flash bang. He turned toward Thaddeus, who was clawing at his eyes and his ears, trying to regain his senses. Tavion waited, patiently, for the few seconds it took Thaddeus to blink his eyes clear of the kaleidoscope of bright lights that confounded his vision. He let Thaddeus look directly at him as he fired a point blank stun coil into the man’s face. Thaddeus’ world changed from light to dark in an instant.

Thaddeus awoke some time later. For the first few seconds of consciousness, he wondered where he was. He was aware that he was seated, in some sort of room with dim lighting; definitely not his bridge. The steam of freshly prepared food tingled his nostrils, and as the feeling returned to his body, his mind began to catch up to the events that had occurred. His eyes were the last to fully recover, acclimating slowly to the light. A silhouette seated across from Thaddeus came into focus, along with another man who was standing next to the seated person with his eyes closed. Before he could form a coherent thought, the seated figure spoke.

“Good afternoon, Mister Figg. Welcome to the Termination,” the Admiral’s cold voice brought Thaddeus back to reality instantaneously. “I hope your nap was refreshing.”

“You!” Thaddeus’ voice was filled with venom, and his face contorted into a snarl. “You filthy piece of–”

The Admiral raised his hand to interrupt Thaddeus. "Please, Mister Figg. We are both civilized gentlemen, and at this moment I must say that you are not in a very favorable position. Insulting me will not get you anywhere at this point. Please, eat, drink." The Admiral motioned to the plate of food sitting in front of him.

"What's your game?" He said with disdain.

"Chess, if you must know," the Admiral responded with a soft smile on his face. "I wish to be fair, Mister Figg. Since you are likely still recovering from your ordeal I will ask and answer the correct question for you. The question is: Why not just kill me; what do you hope to gain from this? The answer to that question is: As I said, we are civilized gentlemen. Being civilized here will not hurt your chances for survival. I gain nothing by simply killing you. Right now, I merely wish to talk to you. However, if you prefer that I be barbaric and simply kill you, that can be arranged." The Admiral motioned to the man standing beside him. He was wearing an Imperial uniform, and his head was bowed and his eyes were closed, as if he were sleeping. Thaddeus recognized the rank insignia on his breast, he was a commander.

A voice in the back of Thaddeus head tried to object but was drowned out by the rest of his mind which focused on the Admiral's insinuation that he could survive this. Thaddeus remained still for what seemed like an eternity before visibly relaxing, and lowered his head to look at the food. His fingers reached for utensils. "What are we having?" He said, with a forced smile.

The Admiral's eyes brightened as a smile crossed his lips. He allowed his hands to fall to the sides of his own plate, picking up a fork and knife. "Dewback flank steak, mixed vegetables, some bread. I was informed by Doctor Vess that this is one of your favorite meals," he said. He began to meticulously carve the piece of meat in front of him. "In addition, if you would like anything to drink aside from water, I have a collection of rare vintage spirits and wine and the galley is stocked with more common beverages."

Thaddeus tore into the flank steak as the Admiral spoke, taking a large bite and swallowing it roughly. "Water's fine for now. How's the doctor?" He didn't really care about her, but he had to keep up appearances.

"She is well. We spoke a few hours ago in similar circumstances. She was quite cooperative. I plan to drop her off at a trading station once we leave this sector of space," the Admiral said, before tasting the flank steak for himself. His icy blue eyes never left Thaddeus' face, reading it.

Thaddeus tore into his plate of food, partly because he was legitimately hungry; but mostly to try to distract himself from the thoughts going through his head. The two were silent, until Thaddeus looked up at the ceiling for just a moment.

"Twenty two percent," the Admiral stated, plainly.

Thaddeus swallowed. "Excuse me?"

“You are wondering how close you were to me, how far your soldiers managed to get before being beaten. They secured twenty-two percent of my vessel; including two computer cores, ventral and aft environmental controls, and the entire area surrounding main engineering.” The Admiral closed his eyes momentarily, mentally envisioning the reports that had been given to him while the fighting was still going on. He opened them again, continuing. “Unfortunately, after your capture and the loss of your forward command post, your mercenaries fell into disarray. Some continued to advance, some tried to flee, eventually; they were all exterminated.”

“Exterminated?” Thaddeus blinked in surprise.

“Of course.” The matter-of-fact tone the Admiral used spoke made Thaddeus shiver, “They would have served no use to me had I let them live.”

“I see.” Thaddeus said quietly, setting his plate aside. He’d suddenly lost his appetite.

“No, you do not,” the Admiral said with a smile. “However, that is not important right now. What is important is that you still have use to me.”

Thaddeus swallowed, breathing in deeply in an attempt to calm himself. Between the Admiral’s intent stare and the stoic figure standing next to him, he was a nervous wreck. His right leg shook under the table, bobbing up and down with the motion of his foot. The Admiral chuckled, leaning back in his chair.

“Relax. I am going to tell you a story. All I ask is that you listen.” Thaddeus nodded as the Admiral continued. “Some time prior to our invasion and occupation of Bethlamore, you managed to buy Lieutenant Drolin’s loyalty. He passed you information in exchange for rather large sums of money, which you used to plot convoy routes and avoid our patrols.”

“How do you kn-“ Thaddeus was interrupted as the Admiral raised his hand.

“Please, do not think me a fool. If nothing else, I am the master of my domain, and my fleet is my domain,” he said, cryptically. He laughed as Thaddeus’ face scrunched in confusion. “He used one of the proxy corporations that had been set up to transfer funds. Do you not think that I would keep tabs on the credit flows of our operations? Please. You are a businessman, you would do the same.” Thaddeus sighed, nodding.

“He gave me information; I never claimed he was bright.” Thaddeus admitted, yielding the point.

“On the contrary, he was a moron. Obviously perfect for the post of communications officer,” the Admiral quipped, nonchalantly.

“Obviously,” Thaddeus lied.

“To be honest,” the Admiral said, bridging his fingers. “The arrangement was mutually beneficial for a while. You and I were both able to be aware of each other and generally avoid any unpleasant confrontations. Then, you got greedy. With our entire fleet blockading

Bethlamore, you attacked six hidden depots which the Lieutenant had made you aware of. You found scanning equipment, excavators, and drilling equipment; which you promptly shipped off to Figg Excavations, and wrote it off as a minor victory.” The Admiral’s face dropped, his eyes staring into Thaddeus’, and a drop of the Admiral’s rage seeped into his voice, sending an ice cold chill across Thaddeus’ body.

“You foiled my invasion.” The rage in his voice evaporated as he continued. “The loss of that equipment made set back my invasion timetable by weeks, and allowed the Rebel Squadrons and Allegiance Battle Group to regroup and begin striking back. Ultimately a series of events; most beyond my control...” He trailed off, looking at the figure beside him. “Caused us to be forced to abandon the planet, and retreat back to Aurora, our mission incomplete. At that point, you had my full, undivided attention.” If the Admiral’s voice carried venom, Thaddeus would have been dead. The seething rage behind the simple statement made the man next to the Admiral shift uncomfortably. Thaddeus’ mouth opened slightly as he found the will to take a sip of water. He hadn’t realized his throat was completely dry.

“Thus began the convoy raids.” The Admiral’s voice was now chipper, as he continued telling his story. “Of course, they were all precisely targeted against Figg Excavations, your company, to anger you to the point that you would want us completely out of the picture. Since I already knew that the Lieutenant was under your payroll, his intercepted communication about the operations at Burnin Konn was slightly suspicious. This suspicion was compounded by the fact that my teams met virtually no resistance on the surface of the planet and that you are a businessman. The fact that the planet was the setup of a trap was clear.”

“Wait.” Thaddeus shook his head, looking at the Admiral in confusion. “How does me being a businessman have to do with anything?”

The Admiral paused, furrowing his brow before steeping his fingers under his nose.

“Surprising...” He shook his head, speaking slowly as if he were speaking to a child. “You do not expect losses. Everything in your world is gain. Anything which is a loss is bad. A military mind understands that to gain, you may need to lose. To gain something of major value we expect to encounter resistance, and to lose something of ours; in this case lives. You set up a perfect business opportunity. What you gave us was exactly what we needed at the right time, for the right price. Situations like that do not exist in military operations, ever.”

Thaddeus frowned, wondering how everything had been picked apart so neatly. “Then what about everything else? The hypermatter? The fleet? The escape pods? Your shields? I don’t understand how I lost!” He yelled, slamming his fist on the table before managing to settle down. The Admiral grinned widely at the outburst, allowing his eyes to close as he took a deep breath.

“You lost because of your own ignorance, mostly.” The Admiral said with his mouth contorted into a mocking smile. “It is standard military procedure to check any sort of captured materials for sabotage or imperfections. Doctor Vess’ technique was technically sound, but tactically idiotic.” The Admiral leaned forward again.

“The fleet was you falling into my trap. I purposefully fed Lieutenant Drolin information that would lead you to believe your plan was working. Telling him that our long range communications were down would make you think that the hypermatter sabotage was taking hold. On top of that, you would only need bombers to take me down as you also knew the rest of the fleet was far away. You wouldn’t have to bother with starfighters either, since you know this ship has no fighter compliment. That was good for you, as starfighter pilots are more expensive, arrogant, and full of themselves...” Thaddeus’ eyes widened as he realized the Admiral was literally detailing out his thought process, and that he was right. “It was a perfect deal, for a businessman. The escape pods were the same thing. It is obvious that you did not want to risk my escape, so using them to further damage your ships was a logical decision. All I needed to do, once I started thinking like you,” the last word was punctuated with disgust, “was to arrange the appropriate countermeasures with Miss Na’tak.”

The Admiral allowed himself to pause for a long time as he basked in the look of sheer rage that Thaddeus was giving him. For his part, Thaddeus could not believe he had been led directly into whatever fate he was to be dealt. The Admiral did not give him a chance to gather his thoughts for a response, and continued.

“There are but two final answers. The first answer is that my ‘trick’ with the shields was in response to your overt desire to see me captured. You said that you would let me live out the rest of your days as a hermit, and that my crew would be allowed to go home. I typically find it silly to reveal my plans as I speak to an opponent. It is poor form,” he said, leaning forward. “The final answer is: As you can tell, I needed nothing from you. All I wanted was to see the looks on your face, hear your breath catch, and listen to your stammering as you came to the guided realization that you lost before you even began to play the game. Commander, take him away.”

Thaddeus’ voice caught in his throat as he began to speak, but couldn’t as the man to the Admiral’s right opened his eyes. Two blazing, purple spheres were where the man’s eyes should be, flames licking up from his sockets. Thaddeus stared into them as the man stepped forward, grabbing his arms with inhuman strength, and hoisted him from the chair.

“W-wait! WAIT! You sa-“ Thaddeus screamed as he began to be carried from the room.

“I said it would not hurt your chances. When your chances are non-existent, nothing can hurt them. I also don’t intend to simply kill you,” the Admiral said, emphasizing the word ‘simply’. He stared at Thaddeus, listening to the man’s screams, as he was carried away to his fate.

“I guess that’s that,” Tavion said, watching Thaddeus get removed from the interrogation room. He, Na’tak, Lara, and Ten were all standing behind polarized transparasteel, watching and listening to the events unfold. Tavion leaned back against the wall, glancing up at the others. Ten, as he expected, simply turned and left the room, his curiosity completely satisfied by the answers. Na’tak’s jaw was slack as she tried to comprehend everything that had been said. Lara, for her part, just shook her head with a scrunched nose.

“And of course he doesn’t tell us any of this,” she said, complaining.

“I’m sure it was so that we’d react naturally and not give the Figg forces any hints.” Tavion shrugged, brushing off the feeling that they’d been used.

“I suppose so. Still, I guess we figured most of it out on our own,” Lara said, drumming her fingers on the transparasteel viewport.

“You guys did,” Na’tak chimed in, chuckling, “I was just led along. What he hired me for makes sense now, at least. It was certainly interesting.”

“And profitable,” Tavion said, adding a thought to her sentence.

“Ha! Yes. Very. Also, I need to know, what’s with the Commander?” She asked, glancing between the two of them.

Tavion and Lara paused, both looking at her in silence for a few moments.

“A Herald of Raptus, the only one left. He was stationed on board the ship during the invasion of Bethlamore. Nasty fellows, those Heralds.” Tavion shuddered, before continuing. “The Admiral kept him under close watch for the entire invasion, and he had a lot of one-on-one time with that Herald. Once we were forced to retreat, we didn’t see him for a while... until one day the Herald showed up on the bridge in an officer’s uniform. He mostly helps Doctor Ibble with his projects, and periodically the Admiral has him do ‘special operations’. It’s weird to think of him as one of the crew.”

“...Very weird,” Na’tak admitted, nodding. She abruptly changed the subject, suddenly uncomfortable. “So, what now?”

“Well, I think Lara and I are going to fly you back to the Gem at some point today. We’d both like to apologize for what we put you through, so dinner’s on us. After that we’re heading back here.” He shrugged as he finished speaking, before adding another thought. “No idea after that.”

“Ahh, well. You know you don’t have to, but I won’t say no.” Na’tak smiled at the two of them, flashing her bright white teeth.

“In either case,” Lara said, motioning for Na’tak to follow as she walked toward the exit, “I’m looking forward to some real R&R after this.”

“Me too... Me too,” Tavion said, taking one last look down into the interrogation chamber, where the Admiral was still seated, calmly finishing his meal. The Admiral stopped, turned his head, and looked up at Tavion. Tavion knew he couldn’t actually see him, but somehow the Admiral’s eyes locked directly with his own. The Admiral’s lips curled into a sly smile. Tavion broke his stare a moment later, turning about and jogging to catch up with Lara and Na’tak. A single thought penetrated his mind as he followed them.

What’s next?

“I am ready to begin the procedure, sir.” The Herald removed his hand from Thaddeus’ forehead, revealing intricate red runes carved across it. Thaddeus’ face was contorted, his mouth agape as if screaming, his eyes wide in terror, but he did not move, or speak.

“Very well. Did he know the target locations and their defenses?” The Admiral stepped forward, looking down at Thaddeus’ useless body.

“Yes, sir. All of the information we require has been extracted,” the Herald said, his blazing purple eyes fixating on the Admiral. “I will need some time to prepare for the second part of the procedure.” The purple orbs died out as he closed his eyes.

“Very well,” the Admiral said, nodding. “I will relay our success.”

He reached into his right pocket, pulling out a small, red pyramid-shaped object. It looked to be carved out of obsidian, with tiny red etchings all around it. He placed it on the palm of his hand, and looked into it. Within moments, a small, blue figure appeared over the object, much like a hologram. The figure, in heavy black robes, looked up at the Admiral. His voice was powerful, full of purpose.

“I hope this disturbance is not pointless, Admiral,” the tiny figure said, crossing his arms.

“On the contrary, Lord Abaddon, I am contacting you to inform you that we are prepared to fulfill our end of the bargain. I will anxiously await the completion of your end,” the Admiral grinned as the figure nodded.

“I will. You will have your prize, Admiral. Now give me what I want.” The figure leaned forward, staring at the Admiral.

“Go ahead, Commander,” the Admiral said, undaunted by the figure. The Herald placed his own hand on the small object the Admiral was holding, and after a moment, removed it. The small figure stood still for a long few seconds, before nodding.

“Very good. Very good indeed,” he raised his hands, clapping. “I will be in touch when I have completed my end of the deal.”

“I look forward to it,” the Admiral said, lowering the object. The figure disappeared as he placed it back in his pocket.

“Once we are finished here,” he said as the Herald placed one hand on his forehead, “inform the helmsman to set a course for the Greeop sector.” The Herald nodded by way of response, not speaking as visible tendrils of dark side energy ran down his arm and into the Admiral’s forehead.

The Admiral grinned widely, his eyes flashing with dark intent.

“It is time we repaid the Rebel Squadrons for our defeat at Bethlamore.”

The End?