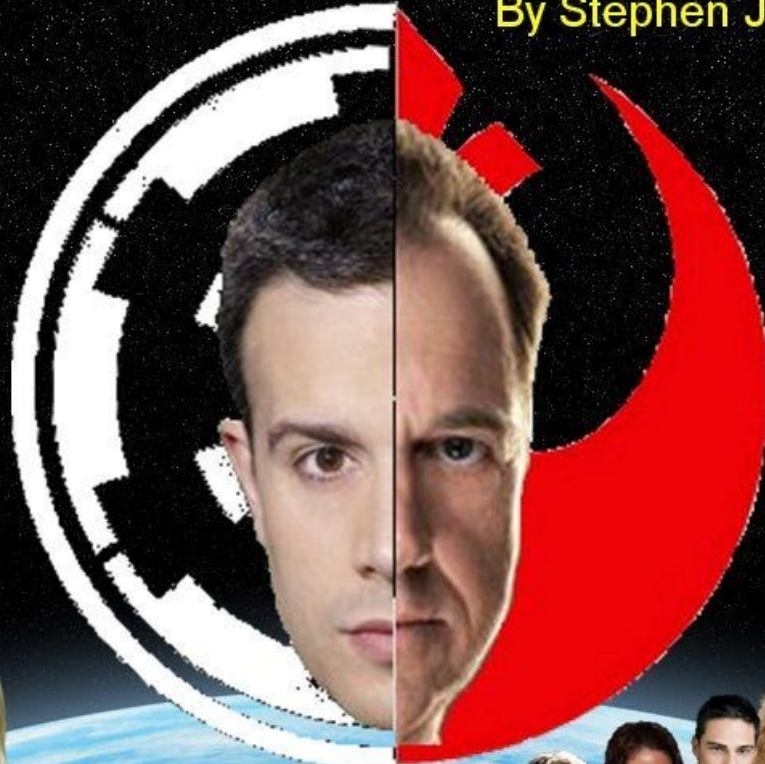


# STAR WARS

## 8-01: Take the Forge

By Stephen J Dutton



*Handwritten signature*



Civil war turns father against son

IT IS A TIME OF CRISIS. REBEL FORCES FIGHTING AGAINST THE EVIL GALACTIC EMPIRE ARE OUTNUMBERED AND OUTGUNNED BY THEIR FOES. THEY MUST INSTEAD RELY ON GUERILLA WARFARE AND HIT AND FADE STRIKES BY SMALL GROUPS AGAINST STRONGER FORCES.

ONE SUCH GROUP IS LEAD BY THE EXILED NOBLEMAN VORN LARCUS III WHO, WITH THE HELP OF THE SMUGGLER MACE GRAYLE, CAPTAIN OF THE FREIGHTER THE *SILVER HAWK* TAKE THE FIGHT TO THE EMPIRE.

FACING THEM ARE A MULTITUDE OF ENEMIES, BOTH SEEN AND UNSEEN AS THE EMPIRE PLOTS TO BRING DOWN THE REBEL ALLIANCE AND FOREVER EXTINGUISH HOPE AND FREEDOM IN THE GALAXY...

## TAKE THE FORGE

ON ESTRAN, IBRAM KELLESEN MOVES TO CEMENT HIS AUTHORITY. MEANWHILE UNAWARE OF THIS THE IMPERIAL FLEET MOVES TO ATTACK THE RAKATA STAR FORGE, INTENDING TO SEIZE CONTROL OF WHAT COULD BECOME THE MOST POWERFUL WEAPON IN THE GALAXY...

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

Star Wars is the intellectual property of Lucasfilm Ltd. This story is unofficial and Lucasfilm has not approved any of it.

# 1.

Major Dayle Kramm of COMPForce, the paramilitary wing of the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order was riding in the turret of an armoured transport that was one vehicle in a convoy bringing his company back from where they had just finished putting down a civil disturbance in a town not far from the capital of Estran. The number of these disturbances had been steadily growing since the death of the Emperor just a few weeks earlier and COMPForce's particular brand of heavy handed tactics were failing to quell them. Major Kramm did not have much of a problem with this however, as far as he was concerned it was just another excuse for his men to be deployed and do what they did best. Estran City itself was just about visible in the distance when the transport's communicator activated on a high security channel.

"Major Kramm are you there?" a familiar voice asked.

"Right here Mister Vett." Kramm replied.

The Mister Vett he was referring to was a senior member of COMPNOR in the sector and he was responsible for overseeing many of the actions Major Kramm's company took. A fierce loyalist to the ideals of the late Emperor Palpatine the man often cared much less about how results were achieved than that they were the desired ones and he had a high tolerance for collateral damage in favour of the bigger galactic picture.

"Kramm we've got a problem. That treasonous witch Kellesen is taking over. He waited until our forces were gone and now he's arrested the moff, Rodge Larrs and Director-" Vett began before he was interrupted by another voice that Kramm did not recognise.

"Step away from the console!"

"Kramm you have to keep your men away. They rounding up all of-"

"I said get away from there!" the other voice yelled and all of a sudden there was the sound of a blaster shot and the channel went dead.

"What's going on?" another of the transport's passengers asked. This was Captain Kyle Layne, Major Kramm's second in command.

"I'm not sure." Kramm replied, "That sounded like blaster fire before Vett was cut off. Let me see if I can find a civilian channel on this thing." and he reached forwards to adjust the setting of the communication system. The communication carried by the transport was designed to be able to scan a wide range of frequencies not only for the purpose of distributing orders to subordinates but also so that it could be used to listen in on non-standard channels that could be being used by an enemy to gather intelligence. Kramm adjusted the frequency setting well beyond the standard military frequencies into the civilian band where all of a sudden he picked up another message being broadcast by a voice he knew well.

"My name is Ibram Kellesen and I am an inquisitor, an agent appointed to act with the authority of the Emperor himself. It is a difficult time for both our sector and the Empire. Across the galaxy we are seeing outbreaks of sedition, treason and uprisings by those who would replace our New Order with the chaos of the old Republic that was swept away by Emperor Palpatine with the defeat of the Confederacy and the Jedi at the end of the Clone Wars. I had hoped that the overwhelmingly loyal citizens of this sector would be spared from the worst of this but alas I was wrong and it is my sad duty to inform you all that I have uncovered evidence of gross dereliction of duty at the highest level of the Imperial administration in this sector. Moff Gregor Horatian has ignored a threat to our security for so long that it is now only being dealt with by criminally weakening the defences of our worlds. Other senior members of his administration have also been complicit in this dereliction of duty and therefore, I have been left with no alternative but to remove not only Moff Horatian but also several other high ranking members of the Imperial sector authorities from their posts. News of this transition of power has been communicated directly to the Imperial capital on Coruscant and until they determine an alternative individual to take over the position I will personally be acting as Imperial governor for this sector.

"But the task of routing out this malignancy at the heart of our own sector is not yet complete and I must warn you to expect further actions to be taken over the coming few days to guarantee the efficient running of the sector. Be assured that the actions I am ordering are being done on your behalf and for your own good to guarantee the safe and secure society that Emperor Palpatine promised us all at the beginning of his New Order. Thank you and goodbye."

Kramm snarled at the sound of this.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." he said to himself. Just as he had claimed in his broadcast, Ibram Kellesen was an inquisitor and he had taken over as the head of Imperial Intelligence for the sector after its previous head had been found incompetent and dismissed. Now though it seemed that he had set his sights somewhat higher and decided to replace Moff Gregor Horatian himself. Kramm knew that the inquisitor

would not have ordinarily been able to accomplish such a thing, the Imperial Security Bureau as well as both the heads of the army and navy for the sector would never support such a move. However, right now the bulk of the navy as well as key army units including the top echelon of officers was absent from Estran on a mission to destroy an alien threat to the sector and from Vett's transmission it seemed that the ISB had been taken by surprise if their director had been arrested. For all Kramm knew, his company was the only force on the whole of Estran that was loyal to the moff still at large.

"Is he serious?" Layne asked from inside the transport.

"It sounds like it." Kramm replied and then he looked down at the vehicle's driver, "Driver! Pull over here." he ordered. Behind the transport carrying Kramm and his command section the other vehicles in the company also pulled over to the side of the highway, "Disembark and form up." Kramm ordered, using the comlink built into his own armour to broadcast the instruction to his entire company on a secure network rather than relying on the equipment in the army vehicle.

From the various vehicles in the column just over a hundred and eighty troops in blast reflective white armour disembarked and lined up in squads and platoons ready for inspection.

"Company ready major." Layne announced and Kramm looked at his men.

"Men, I have just received word that while the bulk of our forces were deployed to attack an external threat and we were fighting the forces of disorder elsewhere on Estran the vile traitor Ibram Kelleesen has seized his opportunity to commit a betrayal of the worst kind and sought to usurp the power of Moff Horatian. It appears that he has either arrested or killed a number of loyal Imperial servants in order to grab power for himself and we may be all that is left of the forces loyal to the moff on the planet. Now I'm under no illusions that we can overthrow this traitor on our own and I've no intention of throwing away all our lives by having you follow me on some damned fool crusade but there are still massive forces out there that can help us and by the Gods I swear that we'll find a way to get word to them. Now we can't take these transports with us, they'll be spotted in a second from the air and we won't last an hour after that. So I want each of you ready to march with full kit in five minutes. We'll head back into the woods and set up camp there." then he looked around at where the army crewmen of the transports were gathered, "And you," he told them, "put these vehicles out of action. I'm not leaving anything for Kelleesen and you're coming with us as well. I've got a plan to take this planet back."

"This is why our enemies fear star destroyers."

It had been just two minutes since Fleet admiral Praus Vretan had spoken those words to ISB Agents Garm Larcus and Vay Udra aboard the bridge of his ship, the *Iron Warrior*, and already they could see what he meant.

Ahead of the massed Imperial fleet lay a monstrous space station that consisted of a large spherical core section and three evenly spaced vertical fins that extended both upwards and downwards from this, also known as a Star Forge, that had been built by the alien rakata here in the middle of a nebula where they had hoped it would remain hidden. The Star Forge was in essence a gigantic factory that was capable of drawing matter from the nebula itself and turning it into whatever the rakata desired. In this case that meant weapons and a fleet of capital ships copied from the designs used by the Separatist Confederation during the Clone Wars that lay at anchor around it. But during the brief period of time between Admiral Vretan uttering his words and now, seven of the enemy warships had been reduced to nothing but clouds of debris by a missile barrage launched by the victory-class star destroyers while another that had been on the outer edge of the formation was now burning along much of its length after being struck by a volley of turbolaser blasts from three of the state of the art imperial-class vessels like the *Iron Warrior*. The largest Imperial ship in the task force was the two thousand two hundred metre long allegiance-class battlecruiser *Pride of the Empire* and even this ship was smaller than the numerous lucrehulk-class dreadnoughts that dominated the rakata fleet and the even bigger Star Forge. But the Imperial fleet had caught the rakata by surprise and the gathered star destroyers and cruisers flew directly towards the forces of their enemy, seeking to bring more of them into range of their turbolasers.

"Admiral I'm picking up launches and energy build ups from the enemy vessels." one of the bridge crew called out from the nearby crew pit.

"That was only to be expected ensign." Admiral Vretan responded, "In war the enemy tends not to sit idly by while you shoot them all. Send to all ships, advance in lines and launch fighters. There will be plenty of vulture droids for them to engage shortly."

Sure enough as the rakata manufactured capital ship began to pick up speed and came to bear on the Imperial task force their hangars opened to release swarms of vulture droids. These automated fighter craft were of limited capability when compared to the more modern manned TIE fighters, bombers and interceptors that were at the same time swarming out of the Imperial warships but they made up for their theoretical inferiority with their vast numbers.

"We need a screen." Admiral Vretan announced, "TIE fighters and light cruisers to the front. Heavier ships to the rear. Signal all interceptor squadron leaders to clear a path through to their capital ships for our

bombers.”

*Don't forget why you're here Vay.*

Vay frowned briefly when the voice of her distant ancestor Lara Udra spoke to her through the Force.

“What's wrong?” Garm asked from beside her.

“Nothing.” Vay replied, “I was just wondering how we're going to get aboard that thing.” and she pointed through the viewports at the front of the star destroyer's bridge towards the Star Forge.

“Admiral,” Garm called out, looking at Fleet Admiral Vretan, “how long do you estimate it will be before we can carry out a boarding action against the primary target?”

“A good question.” General Dern, the army commander who had accompanied the fleet as well to take charge of the boarding action to seize the Star Forge as well as invading the rakata colony that was suspected to exist somewhere within the nebula as well while Fleet Admiral Vretan concentrated his efforts on destroying the fleet that the rakata had built, “The longer we delay the more chance the rakata have to sabotage their Star Forge.”

“Yes general, I am aware of that.” Admiral Vretan replied, “But launching assault shuttles from here would be suicide for anyone aboard them. Let our bombers do their job first and then we ought to be able to maintain a relatively safe corridor while our capital ships deal with theirs.”

The vulture droids opened fire before the Imperial fighters as the two sides rushed headlong towards each other, releasing salvos of missiles. Packed not with explosives, but designed to release clusters of buzz droids equipped to tear apart a spacecraft, the missiles sped towards the Imperial TIE fighters. In response the Imperial pilots let loose with rapid volleys of laser blasts to destroy the missiles while they still held their deadly cargo inside and when the remaining missiles drew too close for comfort the pilots of the TIE fighter threw their craft into a succession of sudden rolls that sent most of the missiles flying past without bursting open. Only a handful released the droids they carried and a large portion of these failed to make contact with any of the TIE fighters. But those that were struck were doomed, there was no way for the pilots to remove the droids and all they could do was watch as their craft were taken apart around them. Even for the other fighters the passing of the missiles was only a temporary reprieve however, as the guidance systems in the missiles brought them back around in a tight circle for a second attempt. Given the speed of the modern Imperial fighters, the TIE interceptors in particular, the buzz droid filled missiles were too slow to be able to overtake them and spread their cargo into their path. On the other hand the slower TIE bombers were unable to outrun the missiles and clouds of them burst open in the space between the bombers and fighters. Laden with ordnance intended to be used against the rakata capital ships, the affected bombers exploded violently as without any concern for their own continued existence the buzz droid burrowed through their hulls and trigger the explosives they carried within their own magazines.

But although this reduced the number of TIE bombers flying towards the rakata ships the sheer number of them meant that many hundreds still remained and before the vulture droids could launch a second salvo of missiles they suddenly found themselves in range of the TIE interceptors' guns.

The squadrons of interceptors now split apart into separate flights that boxed in clusters of the vulture droids before firing their quad mounted laser cannons at the automated fighters. Designed to be capable of destroying the durable starfighters used by the Rebel Alliance, the cannons of the TIE interceptors were more than capable of ripping apart vulture droids with even a glancing hit and in under a minute the interceptors had created a hole through which the surviving bombers could fly.

By this point the rakata capital ships were ready for battle and they fired in support of their fighters. The drawback was that most of their weapons were intended for engaging other capital ships and the nimble TIE interceptors and bombers were able to avoid the worst of their fire as they flew between the heavily armoured warships. Some of the interceptors fired at the capital ships as they passed, but their pilots understood that their weapons would cause no damage to the shielded warships. What they were able to do however, was provide the pilots of the bombers following behind them with information on the fields of fire of the capital ships' defensive turrets and they exploited this to the fullest, diving down and releasing their bombs and missiles where the rakata vessels were least able to protect themselves.

The first vessel to feel the wrath of the bombers was a munificent-class star frigate. At eight hundred and twenty five metres long the ship was among the smallest of the rakata's capital ships and as more than fifty TIE bombers launched a co-ordinated attack against its port side the ship was rocked by explosions all along its length. This was followed by secondary explosions as fires raged out of control and all of a sudden the ship was snapped in two by a massive blast that came from deep within its structure.

“Excellent.” Admiral Vretan said when he saw the star frigate become a brilliant flare against the backdrop of the nebula. The vessel was neither the first enemy capital ship, nor the biggest to have been destroyed so far but it signalled the fact that the fleet's fighters had broken through the lines of vulture droids intended to protect the more powerful vessels. Then he turned towards the crew pits, “Send to our cruiser lines, make for that gap. I want it made big enough to take our entire fleet.”



## 2.

Aboard the *Star Forge* itself the mood was frantic. The rakata had believed themselves safely hidden within the nebula that had protected them for thousands of years but now they were coming under direct attack from a fleet much more powerful than their own.

"Report!" the rakata commander snapped as he entered the command centre, having been roused from his sleep by the alarm.

"My lord, a fleet of more than three hundred capital ships has dropped out of hyperspace and is attacking."

"And what are our ships doing?" the commander asked.

"Responding. But they were not prepared for-"

"I do not care about excuses. Order those ships into action." the commander yelled. Then he turned towards the centre of the room where a group of rakata in uniforms that marked them out as scientific personnel were stood around an object shaped like a bulky coffin that was connected to the *Star Forge's* control systems by bundles of pipes and cables, "What is the status of the core?" he asked.

"Nominal." one of the rakata scientists replied, "Stress levels are twenty percent higher than they have been on average but that is nothing to be worried about. A breakdown would-"

"I don't care about that right now." the commander interrupted, "Can you initiate a construction cycle?"

"Of course lord. What would you have us create?"

"We need something that can be made rapidly but useful against those star destroyers." the rakata commander said.

"Ah yes." the chief scientist replied, "There is an alternative version of the droid fighters we have made many of. It is a-"

"Just give me something that I can use to defend this facility!" the rakata commander snapped.

"Of course my lord." the scientist said, bowing his head before turning to a nearby control console.

On the bridge of the *Iron Warrior* Vay gasped and reached out to steady herself against Garm as she felt a powerful disturbance in the Force.

"Vay what's wrong?" Garm asked as he grabbed hold of her in return.

"Is this something to do with the Force?" General Dern asked as he too stepped forwards to help her. Vay's ability to use the Force had been a closely guarded secret until Ibram had revealed it to the sector's military leadership during a staff meeting in which the *Star Forge* had been discussed. Neither General Dern nor Fleet Admiral Vretan had been pleased to learn that such an asset had existed with the sector for several years without their being informed but so far their treatment of Vay had not changed.

"The *Star Forge*." Vay said, nodding as she struggled to breathe, "I think the rakata are turning it on."

Looking out of the viewports at the monstrous space station the Imperial crew saw a ball of light larger than an Imperial-class star destroyer appear between the vertical fins at the very bottom of the station.

"What the hell is that?" Admiral Vretan exclaimed, "Is it a weapon?"

*It's much worse than that.*

"No admiral." Vay said to let him know of Lara's warning without having to explain the existence of the Force spirit to anyone, "The rakata are about to use the *Star Forge* to create something."

"Can we stop it?" Garm asked but Vay shook her head.

"I don't think so." she said, "At least not without getting aboard."

"look at that." Garm said, watching in amazement as a plume of gas was suddenly drawn out of the nebula towards the light where it promptly vanished, the mass consumed by the *Star Forge* to be used to create more weapons.

Using a set of macrobinoculars Major Kramm studied the COMPForce barracks where his company had been heading for when they received word of the coup by Ibram Kellesen. Under normal circumstances there would be armoured COMPForce sentries on the main gate but the sentries standing there now were stormtroopers while a group of regular army troops were visible outside an armoury loading crates onto transports.

"Looks like they're cleaning the place out." Layne commented as he too studied the barracks from their vantage point at the top of a hill.

"Yeah, doesn't look like we'll be getting any more help from there." Kramm replied, "No matter, that's not the sort of help we need."

"Then what is?" Layne asked, "We need more men if we're going to attack the capital."

"Of course we do. Far more than we'd get from one barracks. I was just hoping that we could gather up enough troops to hit a few targets other than the one I've got in mind while we get hold of the forces we really

need.”

“Which are?” Layne said and Kramm smiled.

“What do you think? I intend to bring that fleet back here. A few hundred warships filled with troops ought to be able to put the moff back where he belongs and Kellesen where he belongs as well.”

“So how do we get word to them?”

“Easy, we grab a transmission centre.” Kramm explained, “Then we send a subspace signal to recall the fleet.”

“Easy?” Layne replied, “How can we be certain that the crew of the transmission centre to help us? If there were any still in loyal hands then they’d have already signalled the fleet.”

“I’m not planning on getting the crew to help us. I’ve got another idea in mind.” Kramm replied, “But we need to ditch these uniforms and grab something a little less conspicuous. We’re heading into the capital.”

Lieutenant Mirri Cordall of the Space Rescue Corps yawned as she walked down the hallway towards her apartment in Estran City. Ordinarily her shifts were characterised by long periods of inactivity and rest punctuated by short periods of hectic activity as her rescue tender was called upon to rush to the rescue of a stricken craft. But since the death of Emperor Palpatine the SRC had been drafted in to help maintain order and now the down time between rescues was filled with tactical briefings and combat exercises that left her worn out by the time she got home.

Nearing the door to her apartment Mirri became aware of someone else in the hallway hiding just out of sight and she sighed as her hand went for the blaster pistol holstered on her hip.

“Whoever you are I have a blaster.” she called out, “I know how to use it as well.”

“Glad to hear that lieutenant.” Layne said suddenly as he appeared behind her and Mirri spun around, drawing the weapon before she realised who it was. But Layne reacted quickly and he knocked the weapon from her hand and sent it flying across the hallway where it landed close to Kramm’s hiding place.

“Now, now lieutenant.” Kramm said as he emerged and picked up the weapon, “Is that any way to treat guests?”

“You.” Mirri said, scowling.

“Aren’t you going to invite us in lieutenant?” Layne said, “I’d hate for anyone to see us out here and get the wrong impression about us.”

“what, that you’re civilised?” Mirri said before she opened the door to her apartment, “Come on in then. I can’t wait to hear what’s brought you to my door.”

Kramm and Layne followed Mirri into her apartment and while she headed for a chair in the lounge area Layne instead made for the kitchen and started to prepare himself a drink.

“Just help yourself why don’t you?” Mirri commented.

“Thanks very much.” Layne replied.

“Training lieutenant.” Kramm said as he sat down opposite Mirri, “Always take advantage of resources.”

“Just tell me why you’re here major.” Mirri said.

“I take it that you’ve heard that old wizard Kellesen’s had the moff arrested?” Kramm asked.

“Of course and half of COMPNOR by the sounds of it. I’m guessing that means you two are now out of a job. How ever will you get away with beating people up now?” Mirri replied.

“Now, now. What we do is vital for the preservation of the New Order lieutenant.” Layne commented as he exited the kitchen with two mugs in his hands, one of which he kept hold of while he placed the other down on the table in front of Kramm.

“Thanks.” Kramm said as he picked up the drink and took a sip. Then all of a sudden he winced as he lowered the mug, “Gods that tastes like piss!” he exclaimed.

“Don’t blame me, it’s her caf.” Layne said, looking at Mirri.

“What do you call this?” Kramm said, glaring at her as well.

“Tella nut honey spice blend.” Mirri told him.

“Well you can have this. It’s poodoo.” Kramm said and he set the mug down and slid it across the table towards Mirri.

“I kind of like it.” Layne said and Kramm glared at him briefly before turning back towards Mirri.

“The inquisitor waited for our forces to be away before he made his move.” he said, “He’d never have tried this while General Dern was around.”

“Well he’s got a lot of what’s left under his control.” Mirri replied, “Admiral Trent’s had marines going around arresting people before the take over was even announced. But then he always was jealous of a lot of the other senior staff who had warship commands instead of a station.”

“What would you say if I told you that I had an idea to restore peace and justice to Estran?” Kramm said, leaning forwards and staring at Mirri.

“With my help I’m, guessing?” she said and he smiled.

“Join with me and together we can end this destructive conflict.” he said.

“Me? Seriously?” Mirri asked.

"We need someone who's familiar with long range communication equipment." Kramm answered, "My men can take a communication station but we can't access secured communications and send a signal without it being picked up by Imperial Intelligence. They're in Kellesen's pocket so anything they know, he'll know within a minute. I'm betting that you know how to get around all of that."

"You're right, I do." Mirri said, "But what happens if I'm not interested in this little revolution of yours?"

"Technically it's a counter revolution." Layne pointed out.

"Whatever." Mirri said, "Will I become another casualty?"

"Of course not." Kramm said, "What do you take us for? Monsters?"

"I was thinking thugs." Mirri said.

"Well we're just men doing an unpleasant job and if we have to either find someone else who's willing to help us or figure things out for ourselves then we'll do just that. Of course if you're with us then we need to assume that you're against us and we'll have to take steps to ensure that you can't warn anyone about what we're planning. That could get somewhat uncomfortable for you." Kramm said.

"Especially after a day or so without being able to get to a refresher." Layne added.

"Plus," Kramm went on, "if we fail then who'd come back here to untie you?"

Mirri sighed.

"Fine. I'm in." she said, "But just remember that I don't work for you so that means you don't get to give me orders. Understood?"

Kramm grinned.

"Glad to have you on board lieutenant." he said.



### 3.

The first capital ship from the Imperial fleet to be lost was a gladiator-class heavy cruiser from Fleet Admiral Vretan's own squadron. The five hundred metre long cruiser had attempted to force its way through the gap in the rakata's droid fighter screen so that it could engage the capital ships behind it more directly with its missiles. But just as it was passing through the gap a pair of munificent-class star frigates turned directly towards it and unleashed a volley from their forward ion cannons. These hit the cruiser head on and lightning danced across its hull as its control systems failed. Continuing to drift onwards in a straight line the lone cruiser was an easy target for the heavy guns of the nearby rakata capital ships and the lightning from the ion cannons was replaced by explosions from multiple turbolaser strikes before the cruiser's main reactor went critical and it vanished in a massive explosion that forced the other two ships in its line to veer off even as they were being raked with fire from a nearby dreadnought.

"Get me Admirals Sayer and Hall." Fleet Admiral Vretan ordered as he marched towards the rear of the bridge and as he got there a pair of holographic figures in admiral's uniforms appeared, "That gap isn't opening. Our smaller cruisers can't repel firepower of that magnitude." the fleet admiral told them, "Sayer, I need you to take the *Pride of the Empire* through and show the rakata some real firepower."

"Will I have support?" Admiral Sayer asked in response and Fleet Admiral Vretan nodded.

"Admiral Hall I want you to detach your venator line to provide Admiral Sayer with cover." he said.

"Of course fleet admiral. My ships are at your disposal."

As a result of the fleet admiral's orders four star destroyers and several hundred TIE fighters from the three venator-class ships broke away from their positions in the fleet and powered ahead of it, all making directly for the gap in the rakata's fighter screen. This was beginning to narrow now as the sheer number of vulture droids made it impossible for the TIE interceptors to hold them all back. But on the bridge of the venator-class star destroyer *Falchion*, Captain Yay smiled when she saw this.

"Shields double front." she ordered, "Shut down our turbolasers but leave the laser cannons and torpedo launchers online. Flank speed, take us right through. The others can eat our wake."

The kilometre long star destroyer pulled ahead of the other three ships as it ceased fire with its heavy guns, instead using the power saved to increase its thrust and aboard the command ship of the line, the *Firebrand*, Line Captain Naje sighed as she watched this.

"Damn you Louisa." she muttered.

"Captain I have Captain Celtis on the *Ferocious* for you." one of the bridge crew called out.

"Put her through." Captain Naje replied and a hologram of another female captain appeared beside her.

"What's Yay doing?" Captain Celtis asked.

"The same thing she always does." Captain Naje answered, "Rushing on ahead."

"Do we follow?"

"No. She can handle herself. We need to stick with the *Pride of the Empire*." Captain Naje told her.

"Understood." Captain Celtis replied and then her image faded away.

Leaving the *Falchion* to lead the way the *Firebrand* and *Ferocious*, along with their fighter compliment remained alongside the *Pride of the Empire* as the massive battlecruiser headed for what remained of the gap in the rakata fighter screen. The rakata had almost finished closing it when all of a sudden the *Falchion* flew right into it with its point defence laser cannons firing all around. These tore through the vulture droids while the star destroyer itself scattered many hundreds more and left them so disorganised that they became easy targets for the *Falchion's* fighters.

The same two star frigates that had destroyed the first cruiser to try and break through the fighter screen moved towards the *Falchion*, intending to disable it with their ion cannons and leave it at the mercy of the other nearby rakata capital ships but Captain Yay had counted on this and was ready for them.

"Do we have a firing solution?" she asked as she watched the two ships heading straight for her.

"Firing solution plotted and set captain."

"Good." Captain Yay said, "Fire torpedoes."

Four proton torpedoes shot out of the *Falchion's* tubes and hurtled towards the two enemy ships, two of them aimed at each one. Lining up to attack with their ion cannons meant that the rakata ships had positioned themselves so that most of their own point defences were aimed away from the star destroyer and they could not target the torpedoes in time to prevent them from slamming right into the prows of the star frigates. Just one of the multi-megaton warheads was enough to inflict severe damage on a target and two of them exploding together blew apart the entire forward and mid sections of the two ships to leave just the drive sections at the rear tumbling through space.

"I don't believe it." Admiral Sayer said as he watched this from the bridge of the *Pride of the Empire*.

"Admiral I have enemy ships in sector fourteen." one of the comscan operators called out and Admiral Sayer

turned to see a group of rakata vessels closing in on the *Falchion*.

"Full speed ahead." he ordered, "I want to reach the *Falchion* before those ships do."

The *Pride of the Empire* sped through the hole that Captain Yay had reopened in the rakata fighter screen. The vulture droids were rushing to fill this once more but the two venator-class star destroyers either side of the larger battlecruiser opened fire with their laser cannons to drive them back. The larger battlecruiser burst through the fighter screen completely undamaged just as the rakata were closing to within weapon range of the *Falchion*. But in their focus on the older star destroyer the rakata commanders had ignored the *Pride of the Empire*.

"All weapons open fire." Admiral Sayer ordered, "I want those ships out of my sky."

Carrying half as many weapons again as an imperial-class star destroyer, the *Pride of the Empire* could level continent spanning cities with a single salvo and that firepower was turned on the rakata vessels. The first vessel to feel the battlecruiser's wrath was a lucrehulk-class dreadnought and the mix of ion cannons and turbolaser fire rapidly overwhelmed its shields before the spherical core section exploded and left the ring shaped hangar drifting through space as the *Pride of the Empire's* gunners moved onto the next vessel in the formation, a light destroyer that was blasted apart in just a few seconds.

"He's done it!" Fleet Admiral Vretan exclaimed as he watched the rakata ships vanish one by one from the *Iron Warrior's* sensors, "Signal all ships, we've broken through and we need to exploit that."

"I won't be too confident admiral." Vay said as she saw a light appear on the Star Forge itself and a swarm of newly built bombers raced out into space, "The rakata have built themselves some reinforcements."

Fleet Admiral Vretan took a deep breath.

"Get me Admiral Trell." he said and moments later the hologram of a female admiral appeared in front of him.

"Yes fleet admiral?" she asked.

"Admiral Trell, have you seen those new ships emerging from the primary target?" Admiral Vretan responded.

"Yes admiral. Comscan has identified them as hyena-class bombers. If they get close to our star destroyers-"

"I know." the fleet admiral interrupted, "Admiral Trell how are your missile reserves looking?"

"Good. Seventy percent."

"Then I want you to engage the primary target directly." Fleet Admiral Vretan ordered and Admiral Trell frowned.

"Are we no longer trying to capture the Star Forge sir?" she said.

"Our mission remains the same." Fleet Admiral Vretan replied, "I want you to lock onto the hangar those bombers came out of and command detonate your missiles a hundred kilometres short."

"Ah." Admiral Trell said, a smile spreading across her face, "You're hoping the shrapnel will put the hangar out of action without permanently damaging the station."

"Exactly. How soon can your squadron be ready?"

"Give me five minutes to get a firing solution. Then we'll take care of our bomber problem."

Admiral Trell's twelve victory-class star destroyers had no need to adjust their headings to target the Star Forge with the vast banks of concussion missile launchers they carried. Once ejected from their tubes the missiles could be sent in any direction and so while Admiral Trell's missile guidance operators were plotting a course for their missiles the star destroyers were able to maintain their barrage of turbolaser fire against the rakata lucrehulk-class ships that were of designs even older than the victory-class ships were.

"Firing solution plotted admiral. All ships reporting flight path successfully slaved to their guidance systems." one of the gunnery staff called out across the bridge of Admiral Trell's flagship.

"Then open fire." she replied, "One launch per tube."

Moments later fire blossomed from every one of the star destroyers of Admiral Trell's squadron as they launched a full salvo of concussion missiles, nine hundred and sixty in total. All of these swung towards the Star Forge, homing in on the Star Forge and in particular on its hangars. The total yield of these weapons was enormous, enough to depopulate many planets in the Empire if fired correctly. But this power was useless if it could not first penetrate the screen of warships and fighters between the victory-class star destroyers and their target.

"My lord! The humans fire their missiles at us." one of the rakata command crew warned.

"Then command our ships to shoot them down." the rakata commander ordered, "The Star Forge must remain operational. What is the rest of their fleet doing?"

"Attempting to exploit the gap they have created in our screen my lord. Their ships move towards it while their fighters attempt to shoot down our first wave of bombers."

"Show me." the rakata commander said and he turned to a nearby tactical display that now focused on Admiral Sayer's battlecruiser and the three venator-class ships escorting it along with their fighters. So far the hyena bombers had been unable to get close enough to engage the *Pride of the Empire*, but more

vulture droids were closing in to engage the TIE fighters protecting the larger Imperial ships so that the bombers could pass through them.

The rakata commander reached out and swiped a hand across the touch sensitive display so that it began to zoom back out and he noticed that not all of the Imperial ships were on a course for the opening in the rakata lines. A force led by an Imperial-class star destroyer had circled around the rakata fleet early on in the engagement and now it and six smaller vessels were positioned on the rakata's flank and firing their turbo lasers from extreme range.

"What are these ships doing?" he asked.

"They appear to be positioned to prevent a withdrawal my lord. The smaller ships are creating gravitational disturbances that would prevent a hyperdrive from functioning anywhere in close proximity to them."

"They expect us to flee?" the rakata commander said to himself, "Excellent. Withdraw our bombers. Send them all to attack these ships."

"Those ships do not threaten us." the commander's second in command commented quietly.

"Quite. But when we attack them the humans will believe they have us beaten and send ships to reinforce this squadron. That will take the pressure off our fleet and this station." then he turned towards the rakata clustered around the coffin at the centre of the command centre, "When will our next wave of bombers be ready for deployment?" he asked.

"Soon my lord. The core is inefficient but such repetitive tasks are not difficult."

"See?" the rakata commander said to his subordinate, "We will soon have all the bombers we need to make up for the loss of this first wave."

Vulture droids swarmed around the concussion missiles speeding towards the Star Forge. Many used their laser cannons to try shooting them down, but others made suicidal runs into the paths of the missiles and rammed them while nearby capital ships also tried to target the rapidly moving missiles. But the sheer number of missiles meant that some of them, just under a hundred in total, got through the fighter screen and defensive fire from the warships. These homed in on the Star Forge's hangars, their progress monitored carefully by Admiral Trell.

"Stand by." she announced as she focused on the remaining distance between the missiles and the Star Forge. Then when the distance dropped to one hundred kilometres she suddenly exclaimed, "Abort!"

The gunner sat beside Admiral Trell activated the abort system, sending a signal from the star destroyer to the missiles that told them to detonate where they were and every last one of them exploded in an instant. Some of the vulture droids had followed the missiles, attempting to shoot down the remainder before they could hit the Star Forge and the unexpected detonation caught many of them in the blast radius. But the destruction of a few squadrons of vulture droids was of little consequence compared to the effect on the Star Forge. The debris from the missiles continued on its previous heading and slammed into the Star Forge. The space station's particle shields absorbed the energy of the impact against the hull itself but the opening of the hangar was protected only by a magnetic field designed to maintain the atmospheric pressure inside and the shrapnel that struck this was able to pass through unimpeded. Inside the hangar the effect of this was devastating, with refuelling and loading equipment smashed to pieces and the lifts used to move craft into launch positions jammed and destroyed.

## 4.

"Report!" the rakata commander yelled as the station shook.

"Main factory hangar destroyed my lord."

"Can we launch another wave of bombers?" the commander asked.

"No my lord, not until the damage is repaired. Best estimate is half a day for full operation."

"Never mind full, what about minimum capacity?"

"Four hours my lord."

"It could be reduced to two my lord." one of the rakata scientists said, "But it would mean diverting the effort of the core."

"There is no point in having the hangar available if we have no bombers available to launch from them." the commander said, "Is our first wave close enough to call back?"

"Negative commander. It is about to engage the human's blocking formation."

The hyena-class bombers were met by the TIE fighters launched by the Imperial squadron but even though the fighters were faster and more manoeuvrable, there were far more of the bombers and some inevitably slipped past. Ahead of them lay six interdicator cruisers, all generating artificial gravity wells to block hyperspace travel. The drawback was that the disturbances also limited the manoeuvrability of starships in real space and the interdicator cruisers were practically immobilised themselves.

The interdicators opened fire on the approaching bombers and more of them exploded, but more still released the missiles they carried. These were not only of the type that carried buzz droids but also more conventional explosives and the cruisers were heavily hit, the massive globes housing their gravity well projectors proving especially vulnerable targets.

Aboard the star destroyer serving as the squadron's flagship Admiral Hadwell recoiled at the sight of the explosions rocking the smaller cruisers.

"Helm, move us closer so our gunners can engage those bombers. We have to maintain the blockade."

"Admiral we have enemy craft closing from ahead!" one of the bridge crew called out.

"Intensify forward firepower! I don't want anything to get through." Admiral Hadwell ordered as he looked towards the swarm of bombers heading for his ship. Flashes of green leapt from the turbolaser batteries mounted on the star destroyer's upper hull and bombers exploded as they were caught in the energy bolts' paths. But from among the swarm two bombers made it through the barrage.

"I said intensify forward firepower!" Admiral Hadwell yelled as he backed away from the viewports at the front of the bridge. Then another volley of turbolaser fire struck the bombers and Hadwell saw them fly apart and Admiral Hadwell smiled as he saw and heard the pieces of the bombers bouncing off the heavily armoured hull of his star destroyer.

But then movement at the very edge of his vision caught his attention and he looked around to see a single buzz droid that had survived the destruction of the bomber that had transporting it and was now crawling along the hull of the star destroyer on the ledge at the bottom of the bridge viewports. The admiral gasped when he saw the droid deploy a small spinning drill bit from beneath its body and begin to drill into the transparisteel of the viewport.

"Evacuate!" he shouted, "Everybody get out of-" but then the viewport shattered and the admiral along with the entire bridge crew were blown out into space.

"Can you get me Admiral Hadwell?" Fleet Admiral Vretan demanded of his comscan staff, "I need to know what's going on over there."

"There's no response from the *Legion of Coruscant* sir." one of them responded.

"Order the *Horrific* to-" Admiral Vretan began before Vay suddenly heard the voice of Lara again.

*Remember why you're here.*

"Wait!" Vay called out in response to this and admiral Vretan turned towards her.

"I hope you know what you're doing Vay." Garm said softly.

"You have something to say Agent Udra? Some insight from the Force perhaps?" the fleet admiral asked.

"I do." Vay replied, "Look at the Star Forge fleet admiral, by pulling their bombers away the rakata have left us a path open."

"Stang she's right." Fleet Admiral Vretan said as he looked at a nearby tactical display and saw that only two light destroyers lay between the *Iron Warrior* and the Star Forge, "Helm, full speed ahead. Order the hangar to launch our assault shuttles." then he looked at General Dern, "General, my spacetroopers will get you a beachhead. Be ready to exploit it."

"Admiral." General Dern responded, nodding before he marched off the bridge.

"We better go with him Vay." Garm added.

Dropping out of the *Iron Warrior's* hangar, the gamma-class assault shuttle carrying the star destroyer's platoon of spacetroopers accelerated rapidly towards the Star Forge. Heavily armoured and shielded for a ship of its size, the assault shuttle flew beneath one of the light destroyers as its gun crews attempted to lock onto it without success. The shuttle did not slow as it neared the Star Forge, instead forty hatches in the vessel's upper hull swung open just before it made an abrupt course change. The sudden turn helped to hurl the troopers beneath the open hatchways out of their shuttle before they ignited the propulsion units built into their bulky armoured suits to carry them the rest of the way. Using their magnetic coupler to latch onto the hull of the Star Forge they immediately set to work using the laser cutter built into their armour to burrow a spacetrooper sized hole through it.

"My lord! Decompression alarm on level four sixty three. We're being boarded." one of the rakata crew called out.

"Outrageous!" the rakata commander replied, "Activate every security and battle droid we have aboard and deploy them to key locations."

"Are we going to wait for the intruders to reach them?" the commander's second in command asked.

"Of course not. Deploy droidekas to level four sixty three now."

To avoid decompressing every section they entered and forcing all follow up forces to fight in environment suits, the spacetroopers repaired the breach they had used to enter the Star Forge before proceeding in the approximate direction of a hangar detected by the *Iron Warrior's* scans. However, as the platoon of bulky armoured figures advanced along a major corridor towards a blast door it suddenly slid open to reveal a group of hunched battle droids surrounded by the pail blue glow of energy shields.

"Destroyers!" one of the spacetrooper exclaimed, "Open fire!"

Spacetroopers and droidekas opened fire at the same time and the corridor was filled with criss crossing blaster bolts. Initially two of the spacetroopers fell while in return their own blaster fire just bounced off the destroyer droids' shields but then one of the spacetroopers employed his shoulder mounted grenade launchers to send a pair of explosive projectiles down the corridor. These penetrated the shields of one of the droids before detonating simultaneously and blowing the droid apart. The other space troopers followed suit and a volley of grenades demolished several more of the droids before their self preservation routines cut in to force them to withdraw to a superior position.

The spacetroopers followed them, switching back to their blaster cannons now that the droidekas' shields had shut down while they moved and several more of the machines fell for the loss of another spacetrooper.

Back aboard the *Iron Warrior* several platoons of marines from the ship's stormtrooper contingent as well as a platoon of fleet troopers and several officers were boarding a row of kappa-class shuttles that would carry them to the Star Forge.

"Got any of those for us general?" Garm asked as he and Vay boarded their assigned shuttle to find General Dern just donning an armoured vest.

"Of course, over there." the general responded and he nodded towards another pair of sets of body armour leant up against the backs of two seats.

"General, the advanced force reports they have secured the hangar." the pilot of the shuttle announced over the intercom.

"Then launch as soon as we have clearance from the tower." General Dern replied, "We can't give the rakata the chance to take it back."

## 5.

The communication station consisted of several low buildings that were all that was visible of structures that existed primarily underground plus a number of large antenna arrays that pointed skywards.

"There are IntSec guards on the gates." Mirri commented as the unmarked repulsortruck that Major Kramm's men had stolen approached the main entrance through the power fence that surrounded the facility.

"Don't worry lieutenant." Layne replied as he loaded his rifle, "IntSec are just glorified security guards. COMPForce is a real combat unit. You'll see."

The driver of the repulsor truck, one of the army drivers to accompany Kramm's COMPForce company lowered his window as he drove right up to the gate and slowed to a halt as one of the guards stepped out of the guardhouse to meet the vehicle.

"Delivery." the driver announced.

"There are no deliveries scheduled. You have the wrong place." the guard replied.

"No, this is the right place." the driver said, "Talk to the guy in the back." and the guard frowned.

"The guy in the back?" he said and all of a sudden the main side door of the repulsortruck slid open and Kramm leant out.

"That would be me." he said before he calmly shot the guard in the chest.

More COMPForce trooper spilled out of the repulsortruck on both sides and opened fire on fully automatic while the driver put his foot down on the accelerator pedal and sent the repulsortruck crashing through the lightweight gate. Taken totally by surprise, the guards had no chance to defend themselves and the gate gave way in a shower of sparks as it discharged into the repulsortruck. This disrupted the repulsorlift field keeping the vehicle aloft and it promptly ploughed into the ground before coming to a halt but the gate was now wide open and Major Kramm's men came rushing through.

In the back of the repulsortruck Mirri picked herself up and leapt out of the nearest open hatchway with her blaster in her hand.

"The comm tower! The comm tower! Don't let them send for help!" she yelled waving at one of the antenna arrays and from a nearby COMPForce trooper there was a 'pop' sound as he discharged his grenade launcher and sent an explosive round into the base of the tower that brought it crashing down onto one of the buildings. The impact was not enough to collapse the building but it did produce sparks as the power contained within the tower was discharged into the building.

But the facility's security forces were already alerted to the presence of the COMPForce troops and more IntSec guards emerged from the buildings ahead of them. One of these fired at the repulsortruck where Mirri was standing and she was only saved from being hit when the armoured form of Captain Layne tackled her and pushed her to the ground.

"Careful lieutenant." he said, "Being shot in the head is even less comfortable than being left bound and gagged in your apartment for days on end."

"Will you get off me?" Mirri exclaimed as she tried to wriggle out from under the captain.

"Hey, no need to get excited lieutenant." he replied.

"Captain, being held by you isn't quite enough to get me excited."

"Sorry, there isn't enough time for anything else." Layne said.

"Will you two knock it off?" Kramm exclaimed as he shot another of the station's guards, "We've got a job to do here."

There were already two platoons of stormtroopers and the spacetrooper platoon in the Star Forge's hangar when Garm and Vay joined General Dern's command section in exiting their kappa-class troop transport shuttle.

"Look sir! An access port." a stormtrooper called out, waving towards the general.

"Get that droid over there." he responded and an R3 astromech rolled out of the shuttle, chirping as it headed for the computer access port. Meanwhile General Dern turned to Garm and Vay, "If the rakata built this place using our technology then that droid ought to be able to slice into their network get us a deck plan we can use to find the key areas of this place.

You don't need a machine to tell you that Vay. You know that.

"General I think I can find the command centre on my own." Vay said as she realised what Lara was telling her.

"How?" General Dern asked.

"Of course." Garm said before Vay could answer, "There's a Force user at the heart of this station general. Vay can track him through the Force."

"That's right general." Vay said, "If we can disable the core even temporarily then perhaps we can stop the

rakata building any more droids to throw at us.”

“Go.” General Dern said simply, “Take a marine platoon with you as well and send back whatever information you can about the layout of this place.”

“Yes general.” Garm replied.

“Follow me.” Vay added and she reached for her belt. For a moment she was about to draw the compact holdout blaster she carried but then she remembered that her ability to use the Force was no longer a secret and she drew her lightsaber instead.

Accompanied by a platoon of stormtroopers, the two ISB agents exited the hangar, following the route that Vay picked out for them. There was more to this than just travelling in a direct route towards the Star Forge's command centre where its Force sensitive core was located in the central sphere of the station. Vay could sense the direction in which the core was located, but she did not have a route map of the turns that needed to be followed to reach it. Therefore, there was a certain degree of trial and error as corridors turned into dead ends in chambers of no interest to the platoon. In addition to this, the fact that a smaller force had left the hangar and was making its way up the station did not go unnoticed to the rakata.

*Danger.*

Vay was just about to rush headlong around a corner when she felt the disturbance in the Force warning her of something wrong. She could not sense any living presence around the corner but she knew that the rakata were primarily using droids to make up for their lack of numbers and as she rounded the corner she activated her lightsaber. The bright red blade ignited just in time for her to have it raised to parry the volley of blaster bolts that flew towards her from the squad of old B1 battle droids that lay in wait.

“Jedi! Blast her!” one of the machines that was marked with coloured bands to indicate that it was the command unit for the squad.

“Roger roger.” another of the skeletal droids responded before emitting an electronic squeal as one of its comrade's blaster shots was deflected by Vay at it and it was hit in the chest.

“Battle droids.” Vay exclaimed as she held her ground and continued to deflect the blaster fire aimed towards her.

“Vay get out of the way.” Garm said as he leant around the corner and fired his blaster towards the battle droids. Although Vay was preventing the droids' shots from reaching her or getting past to Garm and the stormtroopers, her movements also presented a barrier to allowing more than one or two to return fire at once.

Shutting off her lightsaber, Vay ducked back behind Garm as a trio of stormtroopers hurried around the corner, dropped into kneeling positions and fired sustained bursts from their blaster rifles. The droids had attempted to track Vay as she retreated and the presence of the stormtroopers did not initially register with their basic processing systems before they opened fire and half a dozen of the droids exploded as they collapsed before they could react. One of the stormtroopers was hit before the other two rolled out of the way.

“Grenade.” Vay said, looking at one of the other stormtroopers and the armoured soldier nodded before handing her a concussion grenade, “Fire in the hole!” she yelled as she hurled the grenade around the corner, bouncing it off a wall and using the Force to give it an extra push.

The detonation of the grenade echoed back down the corridor and then there was silence. Garm peered around to determine the damage that Vay had caused and saw that all of the battle droids had been reduced to scrap. But more importantly he saw what they had been protecting. Beyond their position lay a turbolift cluster.

“Turbolifts.” he said, smiling, “We can use the shafts to get to the command centre.”

“My lord the sentries on the hangar level have been disabled.” a rakata announced.

“What? Have the turbolifts been accessed?” the rakata commander responded as he rushed over to the security station.

“No my lord. In fact I cannot find any trace of the intruders who attacked the droids on any of my monitors.”

The rakata commander looked at the monitors for himself. The cameras around the turbolift cluster had been disabled soon after the droids and so there was no footage coming from them. It seemed unlikely however, that a platoon of stormtroopers would leave the hangar only to advance as far as the turbolifts and then stop.

“Are the turbolifts locked down?” the commander said.

“Yes my lord. No attempt has been made to try and override this.”

The rakata commander thought about this. The turbolifts were the primary means of moving between decks and control of them meant being able to deploy forces quickly from one end of the massive station to another. The other alternative was to use the emergency stairs but the access points to those were all being monitored and there were no signs of intrusion there either,

But then another possibility occurred to the rakata commander.

“They're using the shafts!” he exclaimed, “They're climbing the turbolift shafts to reach us. Quickly, engage the turbolifts and send them all the way up and down the shafts. We'll crush them against the walls.”



"That sound." Garm said as he scaled the inside of the turbolift shaft.

"It sounds like the rakata have figured out where we are." Vay replied as she looked up towards the source of the turbolift heading down the shaft towards them.

"Sure you can do this?" Garm asked and Vay nodded, "Good. Any time you're ready then."

Keeping hold of the track she was using to get a grip on the turbolift shaft wall Vay reached out towards the track on the opposite side of the shaft and let the Force flow through her before suddenly closing her hand as if grabbing hold of something and pulling it back towards her. At that exact moment there was a tearing sound as the track bent and came free of the wall to jut out at an angle a few metres above where the two agents and the accompanying stormtroopers were located in the shaft. It stuck out less than half a metre but it was enough that it would prevent the approaching turbolift car from descending any further.

"Okay get ready." Garm said and he looked downwards to protect his face.

The turbolift came hurtling down the shaft until all of a sudden it ran into the bent section of track and was brought to an abrupt halt that created a 'crash!' that echoed down the shaft and slowly Garm and Vay looked upwards again to see the car right above them.

"Quickly." Garm said and Vay drew her lightsaber as she hurried up the shaft to the car. Using the weapon to cut a hole in the floor of the car she climbed through it and then reached down to Garm.

"Give me your hand." she said before helping him to climb through the hole after her.

"My lord turbolift seven is jammed." the rakata at the security console said.

"At what level?" the rakata commander asked.

"Seven levels above the hangar my lord."

"The car must have hit one of them. Something is caught in the track and preventing it from continuing.

Recall the car."

"Yes my lord."

## 6.

Garm and Vay were helping a second stormtrooper through the hole in the floor of the turbolift car when all of a sudden it lurched into motion and started to ascend.

"Looks like they noticed that the car stopped." Garm said as they finished helping the stormtrooper into the car.

"Well let's just hope that they're planning to take it back to the command centre." Vay said.

"At least we're going in the right direction. I'll take what we can get." Garm replied as he drew his blaster.

When the turbolift car came to a halt again Garm and the two stormtroopers aimed their blasters at the doorway while Vay raised her lightsaber, keeping it inactive in the confined space. Then the doors slid open automatically and a room filled with rakata was revealed beyond them. A pair of B2 super battle droids were positioned just outside the turbolift and as soon as they saw who was inside they raised their arms with their built in blaster cannons. But Vay reacted quickly and leapt out of the turbolift, igniting her lightsaber as she flew through the air so that she impaled one of the droids before she even landed and then sliced the second droid in half as it attempted to track her.

Behind Vay, Garm and the stormtroopers charged out of the turbolift and started shooting. Aware of the risk of damaging the Star Forge's critical systems they limited their fire to single aimed shots that were directed at the rakata crew.

"Security!" the rakata commander yelled as he took cover behind a console moments before the operator was hit.

There were four further super battle droids in the command centre and they began to react before the commander even called out for them to. The first droid fired a stream of blaster bolts towards the turbolift where one of the stormtroopers was covering the others and he fell backwards as he was hit. Garm saw this and turned towards the droid, firing his blaster pistol at it. His shot hit the droid but in its arm rather than the armoured body. This blew off the limb but the droid remained operational and it charged towards the turbolift. The remaining stormtrooper fired at the droid repeatedly as it headed directly for him and the droid staggered before it collapsed. But as the stormtrooper then turned to search for another target he was struck by a burst of blaster fire from a second droid.

"Vay! I'll deal with the droids." Garm shouted as he rushed to the side of the dead stormtrooper while Vay continued to shop her way through the command staff, "You deal with the rakata."

Scooping up the stormtrooper's rifle, Garm unfolded the weapon's stock and pressed it to his shoulder before he fired at the battle droid that had killed the stormtrooper. The powerful bolt punched through the droid's armoured torso and flames shot back through the holes created as the machine toppled over. Despite having told Vay that he would concentrate on the battle droids Garm then turned his weapon on a pair of rakata he saw heading for the turbolifts at the side of the command centre, not wanting them to escape. That was when he heard the sound of something metal hitting the floor close by and he dived aside just as a metal fist came down where he had been. Garm fired his rifle again and the shot blew off one of the battle droid's legs at the knee, causing it to collapse as it raised its arm to take aim with the built in blaster cannon. But Garm already had his weapon trained on the droid and before it could take a shot at him he fired first. The bolt hit the droid right between its eyes and the entire head exploded within the armoured mounting.

The final droid had ignored Garm in favour of going after Vay just as she was about to charge the final group of rakata gathered around the coffin in the centre of the command centre and it opened fire.

*Danger.*

A last minute tremor in the Force alerted Vay to the threat and she dived out of the way, causing the stream of blaster bolts to instead cut down two of the rakata scientists. The droid turned to follow Vay and she positioned herself to parry a further attack. But before the droid could fire there was the sound of a blaster shot and the droid staggered before turning to face Garm and exposing a smoking hole in its back. The droid levelled its blaster arm but there was nothing but a spark from the weapon as it failed to function thanks to the damage inflicted to the droid's power supply. Then before it could take any further action Vay charged right up behind it and plunged her lightsaber into it the blade coming out through its head. At the same time Garm turned his attention to the two rakata cowering beside the coffin and shot each one in turn before lowering his blaster.

"Command centre secured." he said to Vay with a smile.

"Or not quite." Vay replied and she stared across the room to where she could still sense a living presence. The two agents advanced on the console where Vay pointed out the presence and there was the sound of movement.

"Come out from behind there." Garm called out but there was no response.

"I don't think he can understand us." Vay said, "Let me try." and she reached out with the Force to drag the

rakata commander from his hiding place.

"Well, well, what do we have here?" Garm said, "From the looks of that uniform I'd say we've found the Star Forge's commanding officer."

"You are wrong." the rakata said suddenly in basic as he got to his feet, "Not about who I am, but that I cannot understand you. It is often useful to have knowledge of the ways of the lesser species."

"Lesser?" Vay asked, "From what I hear, you need us to run your technology."

"A temporary drawback only. Just as your seizure of this chamber is. Our security forces will soon be here to take it back and-" the rakata commander boasted but before he could finish Garm simply shot him in the head.

"Boring conversation anyway." he said. Then he looked at Vay, "Okay so how do we take control of this place?" he asked.

"This is the core." Vay replied as she stood beside the coffin, "I can sense the person inside. Anger. Hatred. Fear."

"So they aren't happy about being stuck inside ." Garm said, "Tough."

*You know that sooner or later your superiors will want to find a better core. Who do you suppose they'll look to then Vay?*

Vay stared at the coffin. She could sense the familiar human presence within and she knew that although he was Force sensitive his power was nowhere near as developed as her own was. For all his ability to operate the Star Forge, Vay would be able to do so far more effectively and sooner or later the Empire would figure that out.

"Vay, are you okay?" Garm asked.

"Garm," she said, "Would you let them put me in this thing?"

"Vay what are you talking about. There's already someone in there. Why would anyone want to put you in instead?"

"Because I'm more powerful than they are." Vay said, "Garm, the Empire is going to use this place to build weapons to fight the rebellion. What happens when they need more weapons faster? They'll want to find someone stronger with the Force to do it and I'm the obvious choice."

"Vay what are you saying?" Garm asked.

You know what has to be done Vay. This place cannot be allowed to exist. It's an abomination.

"We need to destroy the Star Forge." Vay said.

"Destroy it? Are you insane?" Garm exclaimed, "We came here to capture it."

"I know. But I also know what will happen to me if the Empire takes control of it." Vay replied.

Garm smiled.

"What you're suggesting is treason." he said.

"I know. I was hoping that you'd do it for me."

"So how do we do blow this place up then?" Garm asked, looking around, "I don't see a big red button labelled 'Self destruct' anywhere."

"I'm hoping he'll know how to do it." Vay said and she looked down at the coffin in front of her, "Help me get this open."

The two ISB agent studied the coffin closely, looking for some indication of how to open it.

"There's definitely a seam here." Garm said, "But I don't see any obvious way of getting it to open."

"Stand back." Vay said as she raised her lightsaber and there was a 'snap-hiss' as she activated it and Garm took a step back. Vay then dragged the tip of the blade along the side of the coffin, cutting through it. As the blade pierced the housing of the coffin the foul smelling liquid that it held spilled out onto the floor and Garm leapt further back to avoid getting any of it on his boots. Vay slid her hand in between the body of the coffin and the lid, then lifted the lid upwards. Hinged at one end, the lid tilted and remained in place as Vay and Garm peered inside. There they saw more of the liquid and a humanoid shape at the bottom.

"We need to drain the tank." Vay said before using her lightsaber to pierce the coffin at the bottom and Garm retreated again to avoid the rest of the liquid as it drained out to reveal the man strapped into the bottom of the coffin, assorted tubes and cables running into the bodyglove he wore to keep him alive. Most significant of these was a large tube running down his throat that as well as supplying oxygen and nutrients gagged him and Vay reached down to yank this out of him.

"Foran Fallir." she said, "We meet again."

Foran Fallir had been the leader of a terrorist organisation on Estran before his sudden disappearance caused by his abduction by the rakata.

"You." he hissed, his voice hoarse after having the tube down his throat for so long.

"Us." Garm replied as he stepped forwards.

"Come to finally execute me for your Empire?" Foran asked.

"Actually we've got a favour to ask you." Garm replied and Foran scowled.

"Why would I help you?" he asked.

"Because you hate the Empire more than us personally." Vay said.

"Can you blow up this station?" Garm asked, "Before the Empire takes control of it completely?"

Foran frowned.

"Why would you want that?" he asked.

"Because I don't want to end up where you are," Vay told him, "and eventually I will if the Empire takes control of this place."

Foran's frown turned to a smile.

"So now it falls to me to achieve what you cannot." he said, "Supposing I refuse?"

"Then you get to spend your last months in there knowing that you're helping to produce weapons for the Empire to expand its power." Garm said.

"Or you can spend your last minutes knowing that you kept this place out of the Empire's hands altogether." Vay added.

Foran just lay back in silence and closed his eyes, prompting Garm and Vay to exchange glances.

"He's not going for it." Garm said, "We need to-"

"The reactors are set to overload." Foran said suddenly, "I suggest you move quickly if you want to avoid the explosion. I've shut down the droids as well. I couldn't isolate the shut down command to the droids aboard the station alone so all of the droid fighters and bombers under its control will have shut down as well."

"Thank you." Vay said.

"Oh don't thank me." Foran replied, "Just remember that at the end of the day you needed me to save you."

"Come on, let's get out of here." Garm said, taking hold of Vay's arm as he started to move towards the turbolift. At the same time he took out his comlink and activated it, "This is Agent Larcus to all units. We were unable to secure the command centre before the rakata activated the self destruct mechanism. We have just a few minutes to evacuate."

The door to the main transmission suite opened suddenly as its lock was overridden and a stun grenade was hurled through. The blast disorientated the Imperial Intelligence agents present as Kramm and his men charged in, firing short bursts at each of them before they could come to their senses.

"Okay lieutenant." Kramm said as he pulled a body from a chair in front of the main control console, "You're up."

"Was it really necessary to kill them all?" Mirri asked as she sat down.

"It was either that or risk one of them killing you before you could send the signal." Layne told her.

"But after is okay?" Mirri commented, "Okay, so what do you want me to send?"

Most of the rakata fleet had been disabled when Foran had shut down the battle droids and the Imperial ships were pounding them remorselessly as they pulled away from the Star Forge. Garm and Vay just stared at one another on the shuttle ride back to the *Iron Warrior*, knowing that they had violated orders and were responsible for what was about to happen.

When the shuttle landed in the star destroyer's hangar Garm, Vay and General Dern were met by a naval lieutenant.

"Fleet Admiral Vretan's compliments." he said, "He invites you to join him on the bridge."

"Lead the way lieutenant." General Dern replied.

Reaching the bridge they found Fleet Admiral Vretan standing at one of the comscan stations near the back of the room.

"Agent Larcus," he said when he saw Garm and Vay, "I hope you realise that there will be a lot of questions asked about your failure to take the Star Forge."

"Garm secured the command centre admiral." General Dern responded before Garm could speak, "It's just unfortunate that he was unable to do so before the rakata set the reactor to overload."

"Well if our scans are correct then we are already beyond the danger area. Though I can't say the same for most of the rakata fleet. I'd say that the Star Forge exploding is going to deal with most of those we didn't take out on our way out."

"Energy levels approaching critical admiral." the nearby comscan operator announced and moments later there was a sudden bright flare from outside the bridge viewports as the Star Forge's fusion reactors passed their critical threshold and all of the energy they had built up was released in one fell swoop.

"It's over." Vay said, smiling as she looked at Garm.

"There's still the rakata colony to locate." General Dern pointed out.

"Oh I'm sure we can locate that soon enough with all the probe droids we brought along." Fleet Admiral Vretan replied but then there was a call from in one of the crew pits.

"Admiral, we're picking up an emergency signal coming from Estran and being relayed by the probes droids we left behind. It's from a Lieutenant Mirri Cordall of the Space Rescue Corps."

"Mirri?" Garm said in surprise, "Why is she signalling an emergency?"

"Sir, it seems that Moff Horatian has been arrested. Inquisitor Kellesen has staged a coup." the officer in the pit replied.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this Vay." Garm said.