The hand on the armrest looked perfectly serene, despite the shaking of the cabin around it. It was perhaps a little large for a human hand. A scar ran across the index finger, looking like a burn. Whatever had caused it was long in the past, and clearly no sign of concern. The person controlling it was another matter entirely.

Dard Lenner had to keep his fingers from tightening on the armrest as the chair shuddered. Atmospheric entries are always a little bumpy, he thought. Nothing to worry about. Of course his nervousness had something to do with the fact that he was about to land on the second most heavily fortified world in the galaxy. He leaned forward to converse quietly with the pilot. "Have we been spotted yet?"

The pilot snorted. "Like we wouldn't know in a matter of seconds. Have you happened to look outside recently? No? I'd suggest you do so."

Hiding his annoyance, Lenner glanced outside and was immediately sorry he'd done so. Hapan fighters- hundreds of them- were rising through the atmosphere towards the trio of Imperial Star Destroyers in orbit. In the distance, Lenner saw a Battle Dragon slowly rising as well. Almost as an afterthought, he checked its trajectory through the atmosphere.

The conflict between the Empire and the Hapan Consortium had been going on for nearly a year now. As fellow humans, the Hapans had put up a terrific fight right from the start. At least as much as could be expected from a female-dominated society; many of Lenner's fellow officers had expected the war to be much shorter because of that. While their technology wasn't quite as advanced, the Consortium had been practicing war for nearly its entire existence. Their Battle Dragon warships weren't quite the equal of a Star Destroyer, but they still packed a punch, and the Hapans were never afraid to fight to the death. Above, Lenner could see the Imperial ships reorienting to face this oncoming threat.

Their shuttle, full of Imperial commandos and disguised as a damaged Hapan transport, had so far gone unnoticed in the battle. There were two ships in tandem with them, all three heading towards the Chavahen metropolis spaceport. With luck, they could set down quietly and take out the Chavahen shield generator. With the shield gone, the Hapan Queen Mother would be in substantial danger from the orbiting Star Destroyers. In theory, the battle might come to a quick end, saving a lot of trouble on both ends. Like there's a Sith's chance in a Jedi Council of that happening, Lenner mused. The Queen Mother was proud, and her people would obey her until they were all dead.

The speaker suddenly hissed with static, followed by a female voice speaking Hapan. "Ta valesia, aet terrest." The mechanical translator gave it, moments later, in Basic: "Give clearance for landing."

The pilot looked nervously at Lenner. Smiling weakly, he said, "Here goes nothing." Then into the speaker, he said, "Giving clearance now." The translator sent out the message and code in Hapan, and then there was nothing to do but wait. The clearance code had been intercepted by Imperial Intelligence a week ago and had been later verified by surface spies as being valid. Whether it still was or not was anyone's guess.

Suddenly, the pilot swore and checked his board again. Looking at Lenner, he said, "I can't find groups one and three!"

Lenner's gut turned cold and he started to say, "Take us evasive!" He was halfway through the first word when the shuttle shook violently and sparks exploded through the cockpit. The pilot's sudden scream ended when a large portion of the transparisteel canopy took his head off. If Lenner hadn't been seated it would have done the same to him! The shuttle, devoid of any control, accelerated downwards towards outer Chavahen, and as the ground rushed up at him, Lenner realized he could no longer keep his hand from gripping the armrest.

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Te'Kren looked up just in time to see the flaming Hapan transport smash into an open walkway above her, collapsing it and continuing into a large factory building. On the reflexes her security training had given her, she jumped back to avoid the pieces of ferrocrete raining down and started climbing the nearby ladder up towards safety. Then her mind caught up with her. A damaged Hapan transport, underneath the planetary shield? The shield isn't down yet! In the distance, she could still hear the battle alarms, and then realization dawned on her. It has to be an insertion team! But if they got shot down...

She let go of the ladder, dropping to the catwalk below. There she waited, thinking. The only reason the Imperials would bother to sneak a team under the shield is to kill the Queen Mother. To them, we're like hive animals: kill the queen and we all die or give up. She paled at her next thought. If they kill her, they will have a planetful of suicidal Hapans on their hands. All of us will die, just trying to kill them. If any of them survived, I have to stop them, and with my history, I'll be doing it without help. Her face tightening with determination, she descended two more levels and then entered a side door to the factory, following the swath of destruction.

-.-

Lenner woke up and immediately groaned in pain. He opened his eyes slowly and pushed himself out of the position his broken seat had forced on him. His restraints had snapped with the pressure his chair had received. At least I'm still alive. I'm lucky I didn't break any vertebrae.

He forced himself to stand up and walk, ignoring the pain from any number of small cuts he'd received when the canopy had shattered. He glanced at the ship's displays, broken, of course, like everything else on board. He paused. And everyone. Panicked, he got up and went back into the passenger room, checking for his team. One glance showed him that the back half of the ship had been completely crushed by debris from the building they had hit. No chance of survivors there. *The charges back there were probably crushed, too.*

Thankfully the closer portion was mostly intact, and inside were five gray-clad commandos including his commanding officer, Major Himron. All of them were down, probably wounded, maybe dead. Himron was bleeding from a nasty-looking wound in his left leg, but he was slowly regaining consciousness.

Lenner felt his feet cooling and looked down. A thick white mist was pouring from a hole in the ventral engine compartment, carpeting the ground completely and rising fast. Cloak of Vader! A coolant leak! "Wake up, all of you. We need to get out of here, *now!"* He grabbed a man and began dragging him up towards the higher end of the ship, near what was left of the cockpit.

When he got back, Himron had woken up and begun to open the side door. He looked up at Lenner. "The mechanism's jammed. I can't get it open."

"The cockpit's gone, sir; you can get out this way." They both set to evacuating the wrecked shuttle.

Two minutes later, the shuttle was completely full and overflowing with super-cooled gas. The shattered cockpit was the only way for the excess gas to get out and being heavier than air, it flowed downhill into what used to be a production plant of some kind. Fortunately, Lenner and Himron had gotten all four survivors out alive and retrieved their weapons and field supplies. All six of them were on higher ground, safe from the coolant gases, and Lenner had just started a positional scan when he remembered. The beacon! Those ships in orbit! he turned and ran back towards ~~into~~ the shuttle.

Himron stood, ignoring his wounded leg. "What are you doing?"

Lenner tore open a supply case and grabbed the breathmask inside. He ripped his jacket in two and wrapped parts of it around his bare forearms and hands. Looking at the Major, he said, "The crash cut power to the cockpit, which shut off our locator beacon, sir! Those ships in orbit don't know that we're still alive. If they don't find out soon, they'll call in reinforcements and fight it out here. We need time to hit the shields first." He pulled his hood on, covering his ears and neck and secured his breathmask.

Himron started hobbling towards him, grimacing. "It's not worth the risk. We don't know how cold it is in there. If you don't get in and out fast enough, you'll freeze." He shook his head. "We can find a transmitter and send it the normal way."

Lenner smiled. "Not enough time, sir. Besides, I stand a better chance of getting out alive than you do in your condition." Without another word, he turned and started forward into the white mist.

"Stop, Lenner. Don't go in there! That's an or-" His voice was muted by the hissing noise of the gas venting into the cabin.

The breathmask he wore had been designed to counter toxic and acidic gases, so it covered his whole face, not just nose and mouth. A good thing, too, considering the gas it really was up against. The coolant gas mithrin was white, like the korfiase gas it was sometimes mistaken as, but unlike korfiase, mithrin wasn't poisonous. Still, it was far too cold to breathe and Lenner was hoping the breathmask would recognize that danger and filter it out.

As he entered the ship, he immediately felt the cold seeping in through his clothes. Resolute, he continued through the cockpit to the passenger space. *If I remember right, the beacon's backup power supply is in one of these cases.* It was becoming more and more difficult to breathe as the concentration of gases increased. Suddenly he saw the case, stuck under one of his dead comrades. When he tried to move the soldier, the frozen man shattered, coming apart as easily as a glass sculpture.

Horrified, Lenner grabbed the case and ran back, towards the warmth outside. The air in the mask was very cold now, and Lenner's clothes had taken on a decidedly brittle texture. He came out of the gas cloud barely able to feel anything, and shivering with such force that it was rattling his brain.

Himron was ready for him and had him in a thermal blanket almost before he left the cloud. He gently lowered Lenner down and injected him with something from the med kit. "There. That will help you warm up." He moved away, opened the case and started tapping at the beacon. "I should shoot you, you know, but I'd have to fill out all those bureaucratic nonsense forms about you disobeying orders and all that-" he was cut off again as Lenner fainted.

-.-

Te'Kren ducked behind the hulking ore hauler, hiding well out of sight of the Imperial strike team. Only six of them? There must be others. Six men, no matter how well trained, don't stand a chance of reaching and killing the Ereneda. She snarled cursing herself for thinking that word, even out of habit. Ereneda was a Hapan word meaning "she who has no equal". Over the centuries it had become almost a nickname for the Queen Mother. After what she did to me, it is obvious that Ereneda is not the word to use for her.

She considered momentarily. No, they have to be here for some other reason. If not to kill her, then perhaps to capture or threaten her; force her to give up or die. And the only way for Imperial forces to do that is... Her breath caught in her throat as she realized what the nearest government facility was. The shields! They're going to hit the shield generators!

Moving slowly, she edged her way under the hauler and saw a man thirty paces away- an officer by the tag on his uniform- sitting down and bandaging his leg. Next to him was an open case that blinked with a few electronic lights. Two others were on the ground, clearly either unconscious or dead. Two more were standing near the ship, weapons up and eyes wary.

Te'Kren froze. She couldn't see the last one. Scrambling out from under the hauler, she stood and turned, almost bumping into last man. he stood there, with an amused expression and a blaster pointed at her face.

Stepping back half a step, he said something in his language. Te'Kren had never learned nay other languages, but she assumed he was speaking Basic, the outsiders' tongue. She raised her hands slowly and shrugged. Understanding, the man smiled and gestured towards the others with the barrel of his gun. In the split second his gun was turned, she slammed her right fist into his neck, where it met the shoulder. His eyes rolled back in his head and he went out like a light. She caught him before he could fall and lowered him to the ground. She snorted. Amateur. He should have kept his distance.

Moving the hapless soldier behind the lowest part of the ore hauler, she took another look at the Imperial camp to find the other two guards and the officer with his gun out, looking around. Swearing under her breath, she jumped behind a processing belt and started moving as quietly as she could towards the catwalk she'd come in on. It would only be moments before they found their comrade and started searching for her. She hurriedly activated her wristband transmitter and set it to blare a non-directional call for help if she touched it again.

A voice shouted in Basic, and Te'Kren glanced up to see one of the sentries standing on top of the fan belt, bringing his weapon to bear on her. She somersaulted up and backwards, looking for cover, as the first blaster shot lanced at her. The blasts were silenced, but ~~they were~~ still very deadly, and a near miss heated the air above her left shoulder to uncomfortable levels.

Suddenly another voice shouted and the blaster fire ceased. She turned, ready to jump away at any time, and looked up. Next to the sentry was a tall man in black, not gray like the others. Te'Kren recognized him as one of the soldiers she had seen lying on the ground earlier. He closed his eyes for a second in concentration, and then opened them and looked at her. "Where is the man you encountered first?"

Te'Kren did an admirable job of covering her surprise. The man spoke Hapan flawlessly, although heavily accented. She considered his question for a moment before answering. "Unconscious, behind that ore hauler." She gestured with her left arm.

He thought for a moment. "You've called for reinforcements?"

"No," she smiled. "Though I still might. I could give my position away before you can kill me, and then your mission will end in failure." Raising her arm to show her wristband transmitter, she put as much certainty into her voice as she could.

His expression darkened. "What do you know about our mission?"

"Enough to know you don't stand a chance. Not without my help, at least."

-.-

Fully recovered, Lenner sat at their short-term camp, staring across at the beautiful Hapan woman who at least pretended to be their new ally. He turned his head to look at Himron. "Is the beacon online, sir?"

Himron nodded. "Yes, thanks to you, lieutenant."

"The fleet?"

"Gone, just like expected. My chrono shows we have twenty hours before they return with a few more teeth in their bite."

"What will we do with her, in the mean time?" Lenner stated carefully, as to avoid her understanding them.

"Whatever she did to us." He looked at the other commandos. "Lieutenant, how is Mr. Leeds there, anyway?"

The sour-faced Leeds was massaging his injured neck and glaring pointedly at Te'Kren. She just as pointedly ignored him. The medic spoke up. "No broken vertebrae or major tissue damage. One ruptured blood vessel, but that's easy to fix. He should be fine."

"Well, we can't leave her here; she might call for help. In fact, I'm surprised she hasn't already. Did she say why not?"

Lenner shook his head, still not sure what to make of her actions. "All she would say is that she knew we were going after the shields, wanted to keep more of her people from dying, and thought our way was the best way to do that. She knows what will happen if His Highness decides to take this world the traditional way." Both men shuddered. Butchering animals for food or aliens for space to live in was one thing, but killing a planetful of human beings was too barbaric, even for the Empire.

"Do you think we can trust her?"

"If you mean do I think she's lying, sir, I'd have to say no."

"That's not what I said. Can we trust her?"

"I honestly don't know, sir."

Himron thought about it for a moment. "I guess we don't have a choice for now. See if you can find out more about her, and how far she's willing to go to help us. If all else fails, we can kill her now and hide the body in the shuttle."

"I'll see what I can find out, sir." Lenner turned towards the Hapan woman, concentrating on his cranial implant.

Four years ago, Lenner had volunteered for a radical new surgical enhancement of his brain. The bioengineered tissue implant had been designed to augment his thought process alone, but for some unknown reason, its effect on Lenner's mind had been unique. Lenner's implant allowed him to memorize a substantial amount of information- such as the Hapan language- via a flash-learning session. He had the ability to erase that information at any time, making him the perfect data transfer agent. If he was captured, it took only moments for him to forget whatever he'd been told. He had only recently assimilated Hapan though, so he still had to concentrate to form words in the language.

"What is your name?"

The woman looked startled, and answered hesitantly. "Te'Kren."

"My name is Dard Lenner." He added, "I'm the only Imperial here who can speak Hapan."

"What will you do with me, now that I am here?" She did not sound fearful or resentful: merely curious.

"I don't know. You said you wanted to help us, but how can we trust you?"

"I didn't call for help. I could have warned my people, and scuttled your whole mission."

Lenner crossed his arms. "All right. Tell me why you didn't. Convince me you're an ally, and I might be able to convince the others."

The Hapan woman grimaced slightly. "I wasn't always a lowly security officer. Before I was exiled to this post, I had access to Intelligence reports from the highest levels of my government. I know very well the kind of resources the Old Republic had at its disposal. The number of ships and troops the Empire now has available to throw at us. We are... vastly outnumbered. We can't win in an all-out war, despite the toll we've taken on your forces so far.

"There's no chance we can negotiate to stay independent, either. Your Emperor won't rest until the whole galaxy- no, *all* galaxies- are his to control. The Empire has no allies: anyone who thinks that they are your friends, are merely targets the Empire hasn't attacked yet. In the end, Hapes will serve the Empire. The only question is how many of us have to die first. If we were aliens I'd say most of us, but we're human. If your team works with me, we can arrange a Hapan surrender soon. Perhaps in the next few days! If not, the war will continue for years. The Queen Mother is proud and defiant, and you know how zealously my people worship her."

Lenner fidgeted slightly. It was a highly slanted viewpoint, naturally. The Empire wanted to civilize the known galaxy, not conquer it. They were the good guys; not that someone born and raised as a Hapan could be expected to understand that. "How do I know you're not just using us? Calling in troops to hunt us down wouldn't have gotten you much credit, but going with us? Gaining intel on us from the inside? That might be worth a reinstatement to that top post you used to have."

He expected her to react angrily, but she just smiled faintly. "I have no way to prove my intentions to you, and I'm not going to try. But based on what I saw earlier, your mission is in serious trouble. The only reason you were headed here instead of deeper into the city was because of the shield generator complex, to try and take down a section of our planetary shields before your fleet returns. Your ship wasn't the only one incoming, but you are the only survivors. Your equipment must have been damaged or lost, because I didn't see any explosives, heavy weapons, or scanning equipment. Unless I missed something."

Again, Lenner hid his annoyance. Her assessment was perfectly right. They didn't have the intel or equipment to mount a successful attack on the shield generator complex right now. The Major had been talking about raiding a Hapan armory to get what they needed, before she'd shown up. "And you can help us with that? Let me guess- with what you know from your previous job."

Te'Kren nodded. "I helped arrange the planetary defenses. I know where to hit them. *If* your commander doesn't choose to just gun me down and try to go it alone, that is."

They locked gazes for a few more moments, as Lenner tried to get past that glass-still sabaac face of hers. Eventually, he nodded. "I'll talk to the others, but don't expect any miracles. If they do let you come along, I don't need to say what they'll do to you if this is a trap."

-.-

Shortly later, all seven of them moved out of the factory building, following the hole their shuttle had made on its way in. Te'Kren explained that the building was empty because of the evacuation protocols held by the Hapan populace. Since the building was considered an adequately important place to bomb to pieces, everyone was moved out at the first sign of danger. Lenner translated to the best of his abilities for the others, who didn't speak a word of Hapan.

Some of the other commandos were content that Himron and Lenner trusted her, but Leeds kept his hand on the butt of his blaster; eyes wary. Himron had asked her earlier to shut off her wristband transmitter for the time being. With a promise of safety from him, she had agreed. Te'Kren led them down towards the lower levels of the Chavahen Spaceport, where she said the chatu ved, or safe house, was. They stopped at a sealed door, where Te'Kren turned. "There is a safety mechanism that allows only three or four people through at a time, and then only with my personal passcode. Have you a slicer among you?"

Lenner translated, and then responded for the group. "He was killed in the crash, but I have some skills in that area. What do you need?"

"A friend once told me that he'd found a way to delay the timing mechanism, to avoid inconvenience, but he never told me how. Perhaps you could-" She broke off as she heard voices coming from the corridor behind them. "A patrol!" She hissed.

Himron turned to Lenner. "Can you open that door without her code?" He asked quietly.

"Probably, sir. It looks like a standard inter-system lock. But we'll have the same time limits she has." The voices were growing louder.

Himron gestured Te'Kren to open the door. To Leeds, he said, "You're in charge, Lieutenant. Take the others with her and wait at the safe house for us. If you aren't sure what she's saying, use the translator in your pack. Go, now!"

The door hissed open and all five rushed through, the last commando nearly getting his pack caught in the closing door. Lenner and Himron moved slowly and quietly towards the numerous packages and crates in the area of the loading dock. Lenner hid behind one of them and Himron moved behind another just as the patrol entered the loading dock. Lenner heard three male voices discussing the recent attack in Hapan.

"No, they won't be back. Not anytime soon. Did you see how quickly we crushed their last attack? They didn't even damage the shields any. I do not think we have anything to fear from the Empire."

"That Emperor though, he is powerful. I heard he has the powers of a Jedi, though that could be just a rumor. I doubt he'll give up easily."

The voices moved over to the west end of the dock, when suddenly a light shined in Himron's direction. "What was that?"

A bored sounding voice responded. "What was what?"

"I saw something over there." Himron scurried over to another crate, but a light followed his progress. "You, stop!"

Lenner looked out, and saw three men advancing on Himron's crate, weapons ready. Lenner pulled out his blaster, sighted it in on the lead man's head and turned the safety off. He started to pull the trigger when Himron came out, behind the crate, with his hands up. The guards immediately stun-cuffed him and took his weapon. Lenner's mind raced, even as he pushed himself back into the shadows. Why did he give himself up? We could have taken all three quietly.

The lead man looked around. "Check the other crates. He may have accomplices."

Backing away, Lenner bumped into the wall. He turned and saw a door, probably to a storeroom or something, to his left. Quickly stepping in, he noticed more boxes and crates inside. He locked the door and hid behind a crate anyway, in case they had a key. In the back of his mind the truth came to him. Himron had known they couldn't take all three without one of them getting a signal off. He'd sacrificed himself for the mission, knowing that the Hapans would torture him savagely before executing him.

The handle rattled once as a hand tried to open it, but the guard must have assumed it had started out locked and continued on. Lenner let out a breath and waited. The Major knows the original plan of attack. If they force that out of him, we won't be able to take the shield down. I have to get him back, and quickly. The thought of an interrogation droid picking Himron's brain clean of information was enough to send a shiver down Lenner's back.

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The walls of the safe house did anything but imply safety. They were made of cheap plasteel, riddled with holes, and possessing any number of other structural problems. Lieutenant Diar Leeds made no assumption that it was safe, either. He and the other three took turns patrolling the outer perimeter and guarding the Hapan woman, despite her protests that neither action was necessary. Precisely eighteen hours before the fleet was scheduled to arrive, Lieutenant Lanis Trent, the medic, reported that someone was coming through the door they had entered by. They all took cover, but soon identified the intruder as Lenner. Alone.

As he approached, Te'Kren jumped up and started jabbering at him in Hapan. He responded, and then turned to the others. "The Major was captured by Hapan security. I got away without being seen. Te'Kren looked at him again and asked him a question. He thought a bit and answered. She smiled and began jabbering again, at full speed.

"What's she saying?" Leeds demanded.

"Apparently their uniforms were indicative of spaceport security, not planetary. She said that he wouldn't be taken far, probably to an interrogation room in the port itself."

Leeds considered. "We could probably get him back in time to complete the mission. He does have the full plan, after all."

Te'Kren looked at him and said something. Lenner smiled. "Before you ask, she said if you're going after him, she's coming, too."

Leeds scowled. "Absolutely not. For all we know, this safe house is nothing more than a trap itself. She's one of them; a liability to the mission. Trent, you're coming with us, in case the Major's been hurt. You," he gestured at the other commandos, "keep an eye on her."

"Hold on a second, there." Lenner interrupted. "She can get into the room without having to shoot it up. What are the chances of getting Major Himron out alive if we have to do it the old-fashioned way? I don't entirely trust her myself, but we don't have a chance at our mission *or* getting the Major back without her help."

"How do you know she can get inside? And don't tell me it's because she told you so."

"I know because it makes sense. Women rule on this planet. She was found in a security officer's uniform with an authority badge on her. It's obvious that she didn't expect to be found, so why would she have those unless they belonged to her to start with? As a female security officer, she'd be the first person they'd expect to be called in to interrogate a suspected Imperial spy.

"You can bluff your way in there, too, right?"

Lenner shook his head. "Not with my accent. They'd be suspicious the moment I started speaking. We have to take her to get inside. The longer we wait and argue about it, the further away the Major could be taken. We have to go, now."

Leeds grudgingly nodded. "Agreed. But you keep a close eye on her before she goes in, you hear? If she does anything fishy, I'll kill her myself." He started for the exit.

Trent grabbed his medkit and blaster and followed him. Lenner turned towards the remaining two commandos. "Stay here until at least one of the returns with the Major. If you don't hear anything after two hours, consider Omega to be in effect."

They both saluted, immediately accepting the loss of their lives for the glory of the Empire. Lenner returned the salute and ran after Leeds and Trent.

-.-

Bleeding profusely from a broken nose and smashed mouth, Himron maintained his defiant glare at the two black-uniformed Hapans pacing around him. He was stun-cuffed to a chair in what he could only assume was a spaceport interrogation room of some sort. They had set up a room-specific translator so that, after a split second, whatever was said in Hapan was translated into Basic and vice versa. He'd said nothing to show his ignorance of their language and his gear was made to look Hapan, but something in his appearance must have given them an Imperial impression. One of them suddenly backhanded him in the face, rocking him and his chair into a painful landing on his back. Someone- the shorter man- grabbed him and hoisted him back up into a sitting position.

"Where is the rest of your unit?"

The translator gave out a completely inflectionless voice. Himron found it interesting to listen to. He laughed on impulse. "Good question. I don't know."

"You find this funny, Imperial?" The taller man leaned forward, as though studying the damage he'd done to Himron's face.

Himron snorted. "No, not really. I do find you pathetic, however."

"And why is that?"

"Because you people have worked and fought for decades, conquered over sixty inhabited systems, and finally created this impressive Hapan society, but you still can't conduct a good interrogation. If our situations were reversed, I would have both of you pleading for death by now. You'd sell your children for a chance to end it all. You'd even-" He was cut off as the short one struck him in the face again.

The door hissed open, and closed again. Himron looked up and had to work hard to hide his surprise. Te'Kren, the traitor and turncoat, had just entered the room. She sized up the two men, and then spoke imperiously at them. "Who is this?

They both saluted. "An intruder found in the loading dock. His accent is Imperial, and he's definitely got their attitude problems."

Ouch. Again, a simple mistake I should have seen coming. Of course their gear would be the same kind the Hapans used.

"I'll take care of this. You are relieved."

"Are you sure, Commander? He was armed, but he could have martial skills."

"I know what I'm doing. Go, now." They nodded and began to leave.

As they filed out, she pulled a blaster and stunned the rearmost one. The other barely managed a twitch before being stunned as well. In another three seconds, both unconscious men were inside the room and Te'Kren had sliced Himron's stun-cuffs open with one of the guards' vibroblades. Himron looked up. "It might be too late to mention this, but this room is probably monitored." Hapans liked to hide recording devices in the walls, especially in government-run facilities.

"Dard has taken care of that. The other one, Leeds, is covering the entrance. Are you fit to travel?"

Himron smiled. "Not much sympathy for the recently injured, eh? Yeah, I can move fine, but my face will need some time in bacta to fix up."

"We must go, now. Remember, we won't understand each other outside of this room."

He nodded. "I understand."

As they passed through the door again, a soft tone sounded on her wristband. She looked at it, paled, and started running through the passageway, abandoning all caution. Playing along, Himron stayed with her the whole way, pausing only for a moment when the alarms started blaring through the facility, signaling a security breach.

-.-

The Hapan sniper kept his field of view steady, startled only a little by the sudden alarm. The officer behind him immediately began requesting information on the situation. He gave up, frustrated, after a few minutes of refusals over the comm. The sniper smiled sardonically. They were in a lowly tower outpost on the spaceport fringes: no one paid attention to someone in those conditions.

Suddenly, the sniper had movement on his scope. He centered on the target only to see another officer, a woman in security colors, moving towards the base of their tower. She arrived and climbed the base ladder into the tower. Maintaining his vigil, he tried to listen behind him to his own lieutenant and the security woman conversing.

"... been relieved, immediately..."

"... tower position. ...ential for security!"

"...sn't matter. Orders... now."

Suddenly there was more movement. He scoped in to see a man, bleeding from the face and all in gray, crawling through a gap in the security field. Smiling grimly, the sniper got a target lock and called to the officers. He heard footsteps coming towards him, followed by a surprised noise from his commander and the whispering sound of silenced blasterfire.

In an instant, the sniper knew he was a dead man. There was no chance he'd be able to pull his blaster pistol, turn, and fire before being shot. However there was still one thing he could do. Before the blackness hit him, he pulled the trigger on his rifle, striking one last blow for his *Ereneda*.

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Te'Kren was still cursing under her breath even after she'd shot the sniper. He had gotten a shot off, and it had likely hit Major Himron. Dragging the unconscious man away from his weapon, she took a second to look through the scope. Himron was dead, all right.

Spaceport guards had already found his body and were reporting the death of the escaped prisoner. We need to leave, she laboriously typed into her wrist communicator.

A moment later, Lenner sent back: No kidding. The Major?

She grimaced. this wouldn't be pleasant. Dead.

A few seconds passed. Oh. Another pause. I've contacted Leeds and sent a false position into the enemies' search plans. There is a gap you can get through, if you leave now.

She was already on her way out.

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In the safe house two hours later, they all tried to figure out what had gone wrong. Lenner's vocal cords got a workout as he tried to translate for two angry parties and himself as well. More than once he spoke Hapan to Leeds and Basic to Te'Kren on accident. Leeds eventually calmed down and ceased blaming Te'Kren for every single mishap they'd had since their crash landing.

Their reactions were to be expected. The whole team had worked with the Major for several missions now, and some had known him for years. This was a raw nerve, and the fact that they were still on task meant they didn't have time to grieve.

The topic eventually reached what they would do now. Leeds insisted that they lay low until Imperial reinforcements could arrive, take the planet, and rescue them. Te'Kren was naturally completely against that, due to the high body count it would entail. Not being a superior officer, all Lenner could do was try to convince the rest that they could still pull it off.

While they bickered, Te'Kren surreptitiously placed a message but didn't send it. Suddenly she raised her arm. "Vareni sa luki deena, ka ta saito."

Lenner half-smiled and translated for her. "She says if we don't continue, she'll call Hapan authorities." He peered at the band on her wrist. "She's not making idle threats, either."

Leeds swore under his breath. "I knew she'd betray us. I should've shot her on sight."

"But you didn't, and now we have no choice but go for it. I have a plan anyway." As he proceeded to tell them what he had in mind, the smile never left his face at what Te'Kren's 'threat' message had actually said.

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The plan was simple in its own way. The Nergon-14 charges they'd brought had either been crushed or frozen in their shuttle, but Te'Kren knew a nearby armory where they could steal some replacements. She didn't have the authority to just walk in there and take them, but she knew all the security procedures, so it wouldn't be a problem.

Exactly twenty minutes before the fleet was scheduled to return, the real work would begin. First, Te'Kren and Lenner would bluff their way into the generator complex as an authority and her bodyguard. Once in the control room, Te'Kren would insist on a security diagnostic to ensure the facility's safety. While the holocams and sensors blinked on and off, Leeds and the rest would sneak in and take one of the power transfer centers. After taking it, Jarvis the demolitions expert would place the charges throughout the room, set to go off at the same instant the fleet returned.

The loss in power could be routed around, but with no knowledge in advance it would take the enemy at least a half-hour to do so, giving the invading forces a substantial time lee-way. In case the Queen Mother escaped, they would need to be able to defend the planet against a possible counterstrike after having taken it.

From there, it was Lenner's job alone. The ion cannon was placed near enough to the generator to defend it, but far away enough to avoid being hit along with it by an orbital attack. Lenner would have to get into the southern structure, find a control terminal, and slice into the targeting systems of the ion cannon. The basic idea was to plant a systems computer virus into the defensive computer. The virus was designed to randomize the cannon's targeting system, making it completely unreliable if fired.

Leeds frowned at the many risks involved, but having no better ideas, nodded his assent. The others, most concerned about taking the control room, deemed the risk acceptable as well. Te'Kren nodded at Lenner respectfully, and he felt a reciprocal appreciation of her. She really did value lives above nations- she'd shown that when trying to save an enemy from torture and death.

It was time to finish this.

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Lenner and Te'Kren stepped into a suborbital transport pod that had been set up with voice access. Te'Kren had programmed it with coordinates for the safe house, in case a quick getaway was needed. Te'Kren leaned forward and said in Hapan, "Chavahen primary shield generator."

The pod immediately accelerated. As Te'Kren leaned back, Lenner spoke up. "When I asked you earlier why you were helping us, you said it was because you believed ours is the quickest and least bloody way to take the planet. Why don't you want to fight the Empire like everyone else?"

Te'Kren looked at him seriously. "Maybe it's because of my history. My people are fanatically devoted to the Queen Mother, but I've seen her fallibility. Keeping her pride satiated isn't worth even one life, much less millions. I don't consider myself to be a traitor, if that's what you think. I'm going to save these people, even if they think I am."

"Are there any others that feel the same way you do?"

"A few, but none of them will talk to me, so I couldn't ask them for help in this plan."

"Why don't they trust you?"

"They do, but if they contact me, the Queen Mother will be angry with them." Te'Kren hesitated, and then looked down. "My mother was Intelligence chief to Ta'a Chume's mother, the last Queen Mother. I followed in her footsteps, and as a young attaché to the department, I noticed an error in the security arrangements for one of the old Queen Mother's trips. Not knowing any better, I told her directly- a serious breach of protocol on my part. It was actually part of an assassination attempt, though, and my error ended up saving her life. She was very impressed."

Te'Kren looked down. "I was about the same age as Ta'a Chume. She and her mother disagreed often, and many times the Queen Mother would tell her daughter to be more like me. Me! An inexperienced, unrefined Intelligence neophyte! It was never my fault, I know that well enough, but Ta'a Chume blamed me regardless. When she became Queen Mother, she made sure I was removed from any matters of importance." She sighed deeply. "To this day I wonder if I could have done something to mend things between us. I viewed duty and honor as sacred, and followed the rules strictly and diligently. I never tried to see things her way, and in the end I paid the price for it."

Te'Kren noticed Lenner's right hand twitch when she mentioned a price. "Looking closer, she saw a long, thin scar on his index finger. She gestured at it. "How did you get that?"

Lenner looked rueful, and then explained. "For the past six years, I've been in advanced military training. I got this scar during my first live-fire exercise, five years ago. The exercise was meant to teach teamwork, but I advanced too quickly when the fighting started, and one of my teammate's shots grazed my hand. The officials stunned me and pronounced me dead to friendly fire.

"When the exercise was over, I was declared a menace to teamwork and punished accordingly. This scar is a reminder of that failure."

Te'Kren heard the pain in his voice. "But you are part of a team now, and you've done well, from what I've observed." Suddenly the console began to beep softly. "We're here."

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They looked very Hapan indeed, as they strode through the generator complex main doors. Security personnel stopped them and checked Te'Kren's ID. No one would bother with Lenner's. If he was with her and she was genuine, then so was he. Lenner had gone through numerous infiltration-training courses, but when the courses were put together, there was little to no practical information on Hapan society. They were a very isolationist people, and enforced their borders to a point.

They passed through more than thirty separate levels of the building before finally approaching the control room. Security checkpoints had become more and more frequent, but the two of them had managed to avoid suspicion. when they found a point where no one could see them, Te'Kren turned and whispered into Lenner's ear.

"The security holocam controls for the south entrance are on the other side of the control room. Once I start the diagnostic, you need to systematically shut down the holocams in the team's path. You must do it quickly, or they'll notice the order. I will do what I can to cover your tracks, but we must do it at exactly the right moment or the rest of the team will be caught."

Lenner nodded, "I understand." Te'Kren moved to the door and entered a security code. The door hissed open.

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At that moment, fourteen floors down and about half a kilometer to the south, Leeds was leading the rest of the group through a back-street alley near the back entrance to the generator complex. Jarvis moved to the lower section of the wall and started spraying one of his increasingly unique explosives in a curve over the wall. Not even an explosive, the solvent was an ultra-concentrated acid, mixed in a lab back on Corulag. It was impossible to contain, save for the reinforced container Jarvis carried, and it had the unique property of evaporation on contact, allowing it to cut through even reinforced substances when sprayed. With it, Jarvis managed to cut a circle in the wall and drag a single chunk of ferrocrete out of it.

Leeds signaled the rest forward and peeked through the hole. Just as expected, the guards were on rotation and out of sight for the time being. He slid through and signaled the others to come, single file, after him. Shortly, they'd passed the guard rotation and entered one of the anterooms in the south entrance. Almost miraculously, they hadn't been seen by anyone.

Leeds sighed. "Well done. I guess all we have to do now is wait for the cams to shut down."

Jarvis moved nearer. "Sir, if we're seen and shooting starts, the best I can do with these is blind them for a while, and I've only got two spare charges to do so."

Leeds hefted his silenced blaster, a special model designed for range as well as silence. "I'll take care of that possibility, Jarvis. All you need to do is plant those ion bombs near the transfer generators and I'll make sure you've got the time you need."

"Yes, lieutenant."

Suddenly outside the anteroom, someone started shouting in Hapan. Leeds silently reached forward and locked the door. Looking to the others, he said, "looks like our friends have arrived. I just hope they take a little time getting here."

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Pandemonium erupted in the control center as the moons' sensor arrays showed the incoming fleet's arrival. Ten Star Destroyers had jumped into the system, surrounded by over thirty support vessels ranging from Carrack-class cruisers to the older-style Venators. Two of the original three Star Destroyers, Monarch and Aducator, formed the center of the line. Together, they slid into geo-synchronous orbits and began to disgorge fighters as the rest of the fleet engaged the defending Battle Dragons.

The arrival was precisely on schedule, as Lenner had predicted. Timed to help Te'Kren distract those who might be watching him, their arrival was more than effective. Remaining completely unnoticed, Lenner severed holocam connections and silenced their alarms quickly and effectively. When he was done, he faked receiving a comlink call to allay suspicion and moved over to Te'Kren. They then made their way out of the room, avoiding the officials near the entrance. Only after they were gone did a surveillance officer notice the small metal canister that Lenner had left behind. He approached it cautiously, and as he neared, a light on it began to flash rapidly. Eyes widening, he backed away quickly, just in time to avoid the explosion.

The muffled thump of the canister going off sounded through the door, and Te'Kren looked back.

"What was that?"

Lenner pulled out his blaster and handed the second one he had kept to her. "It's a little something that Jarvis thought I could use. I just vaporized the console that I'd used to disable the holocams. There's no way they can trace us now."

Anger immediately darkened her features. "You said you wouldn't kill anyone!"

"I didn't," he countered calmly. "The explosive was short-range, just enough to take care of the console, and give everyone else a jump. Now we need to get out of here before they lock down the entire place."

"And we need to find the others before they shut down the generators." Te'Kren looked at her wristband. "We have four minutes before the bombardment pattern reaches Chavahen. I'd suggest you find that terminal." Even as she looked up at him, he was already gone.

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Sprinting down the corridor to the hangar deck, Lenner skidded to a stop near the Southern vehicle enclosure. Stepping into a transportation pod, he selected Chavahen Defensive Matrix, level 2 as his destination and held on as the vehicle accelerated.

Seconds later the pod was slowing at an entrance to the defensive control center. Lenner jumped out and affected a military stance while walking to the control station. The center was heavily guarded- even more so since the arrival of the Imperial fleet- and even acting a little strangely would likely get him shot.

Suddenly he was there. The console was just where Te'Kren had said it would be, in a dead-end corridor with doors on each side. He locked both doors and sat down in front of the terminal.

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Leeds' wristband gave a small tone. "It's time." As once, the commandos flattened themselves against the western wall of the room. Jarvis pulled out a small device and, at Leeds' signal, pressed two points on it. The lights flashed briefly and then died all at once. The battle alarms outside suddenly ceased, and a few shouts from guards filtered through the walls and door.

Jarvis' explosives had done their job, ionizing the main power transfer room completely. Now the main base and shield generators were without power and therefore inoperable.

Looking at Jarvis, Leeds smiled. "Good work, Jarvis. You've definitely got my recommendation."

Jarvis nodded, his face expressionless. "Thank me when we're out of here safely, sir."

The door suddenly rocked as someone tried to get in. Hissing under his breath, Leeds pulled his blaster and pointed it at the center of the door. His finger had begun to squeeze the trigger when he heard a whisper of noise through the door. He leaned close to listen.

"Te'Kren... Te'Kren..."

Cursing, he unlocked the door and yanked it open. In an instant Te'Kren was inside, having closed and locked the door. Jarvis pulled his translator out of his pack and gave it to her. She nodded her thanks and tried to catch her breath for a moment.

Then the orbital bombardment began.

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The thick, multilayered defensive systems set up over the firing controls fell before the intruder like butter before a hot knife. System after system tried to stop his commands, but each of them failed in turn. Whatever he was after, it seemed he was closing in on it. Little did he know that someone was slowly and quietly picking the lock to one of the doors.

That someone, a security guard from the spaceport, had seen him in the shield generator's control room and suspected that he was responsible for placing the explosive there. Because he'd been escorting a high-ranking security officer, the guard had decided to get proof of his guilt before turning him in, and had followed the intruder's pod to the ion cannon. The door's lock silently clicked open. The guard slowly swung the door open, looked up- and found himself staring down the barrel casing of a blaster trained on his head.

"Step back now and you won't eat a blaster bolt." The voice, heavily accented, was cold and humorless.

The guard obliged him. "The sound of that bolt would attract half of the security forces in the city, you know."

"I know, but no one will hear this one. It's silenced." The man's voice took on a wry tone.

Verifying this, the guard asked one more question. "How did you know I was behind you?"

At this, the man's face definitely matched his tone. He gestured back towards the terminal he'd come from. "Flat-screen terminals are helpful in seeing someone sneaking up on you. I'd love to discuss the topic at length with you, but right now, I have a security system to disable." The man fired his weapon.

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Lenner turned back immediately to the terminal and continued working at it. Suddenly the ground began to shake in a pattern similar to an orbital bombardment. He froze in shock. They wouldn't.

Obviously, they were. Shaking off his disbelief, Lenner pulled an orbital picture up and saw the Imperial fleet ~~just~~ beginning to pound Chavahen into dust. The hole in the shields up there wasn't big, due to the massive numbers of overlapping shield generators on the rest of the continent.Still, it was big enough to put turbolaser fire through, and the Destroyers were happily blasting away.

There was no need for an orbital bombardment! Just the threat of one would have been enough, or so he and the entire team had been assured before starting this mission! Anger coursed through Lenner like a firestorm. Hardly even thinking, he hacked into the ion cannon's control, targeted the Monarch's starboard guns, and let fly.

The ion blast lanced through the fleet, striking Monarch and sending electric storms over her starboard half. Her engines caught a second blast from another cannon, not controlled by Lenner, and half of them flared dark. Monarch began to break orbit, while Aducator adjusted its orbit to move under and protect Monarch.

Mindlessly, furiously, Lenner kept firing, hearing blaring alarms all around him. How dare they? He fired, disabling one of the supporting cruisers, and again tried to take out the Monarch. Suddenly he stopped dead. What am I doing? I just fired an ion cannon on my own fleet! They'll kill me! He simply breathed for a few moments. He could work through this. They didn't know it was him who fired on them. For all they knew, he wasn't even out of the shield generator complex yet!

His orbital view showed a Battle Dragon moving from below orbit to fill the hole in the shields. It didn't stop when it passed the shield perimeter, though. Instead it launched every fighter it had and a multitude of escape pods and then locked in a course towards the crippled Monarch. While smaller than the Imperial Destroyer, it was still large enough to destroy both ships in a fiery collision.

Thinking quickly, Lenner directed three random shots that spattered into the intact parts of the shield, and then targeted the Battle Dragon and fired three more shots. From an orbital point of view, it should look like the ion cannon had just been captured and used against its former owners. Its bridge awash with electricity, the ship continued on course before losing engines, while the Monarch was able to limp out of the way in time to avoid being hit.

Lenner pulled away from the terminal, sweating profusely. He took a long breath and stood up before realizing that the alarms he thought he'd heard earlier were real. Their reason dawned on him, slowly. I seized control of the iron cannon, fired multiple shots, and haven't' disconnected yet! They have to know where I am by now. Pulling out his datapad, he started the randomization code's upload into the terminal, pulled another explosive out of his pack, and primed it. Won't do for anyone to know who got into this system, after all of this is said and done. The upload beeped its completion. Lenner placed the charge on the terminal, turned, and ran as fast as he could manage towards the transport pad.

He'd planned his entry point so that if he was discovered, the enemy would converge from the opposite direction. When he finally reached it, after stunning the few guards who'd noticed him, he heaved himself inside. He closed the hatch, whispered chatu ved, and was immediately whisked away.

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Te'Kren was beside herself with rage. "How could you! You lied to me, and you never intended to let those people live! You were planning to butcher as many Hapans as you could, and I was stupid enough to believe you!"

Leeds had taken an instinctive step backwards, and was steadying himself against a wall. As Te'Kren continued jabbering angrily at them, the translator had more and more difficulty keeping up with her. It finally began emitting a continuous low tone, and Jarvis shut it off.

Then Te'Kren began quickly punching buttons on her wristband.

"Stop her; she's going to call them down on us!" Leeds shouted. Trent and Jarvis grabbed her arms, but her wristband had already begun flashing with a sent transmission. She smiled evilly at them.

"We need to leave right now, sir." Trent said. "They'll be here any minute." Abruptly the bombardment noise ceased, and Leeds' wristband began flashing. He looked at it.

This is Lenner. Mission completed. My tap into the House Ta'a Chume comm system shows that they are currently discussing the Queen Mother's surrender. I am headed to the safe house; recommend you join me as soon as possible.

Viciously, Leeds ripped Te'Kren's armband off, threw it on the floor, and shot it. "Now they can't track us. Come on. We have to meet Lenner at the safe house."

Jarvis motioned to Te'Kren. "Do we take her along?"

Leeds looked at her, and saw hatred in her eyes, but there was more than just loathing. She had to have recognized the words 'safe house'. She knew where they were going. "We have to. She knows where we're going and she'll tell if we don't. Now come on!"

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Five days later, the transfer of power from Hapes to Coruscant was complete. Lenner, Leeds and the rest of what was left of their team were standing at very strict attention in one of the very, very many corridors of the Imperial Palace on Coruscant. Te'Kren was standing further along the corridor, looking nervous and apprehensive. With due cause, of course. They were all about to see the most powerful man in the galaxy.

The details about the operation had come to light earlier that morning, and they had found out that the bombardment had been ordered by Admiral Alima, in hopes of intimidating the Queen Mother further. He had been demoted to Captain and subsequently shipped out to the Outer Rim to do mapping duty.

Lenner had said that he took control of the ion cannon just in time to shoot the Battle Dragon, and his story had been believed. He'd even been promoted to Captain, to take Himron's place in his new unit. Te'Kren had been deemed justified in betraying the team, as she had warned them what she would do if they double-crossed her. In fact, it was extremely rare for a woman to be judged as an equal in the Imperial military, let alone redeemed from betrayal. However, TeKren remained the most relieved that the bombardment hadn't lasted very long. The Hapans would be allowed to retain their Queen Mother, hated though she was by Te'Kren. Without her, there would undoubtedly be numerous riots and killings throughout former Hapan space.

Suddenly he was there. A powerful, overwhelming presence in a simple dark robe. The most powerful man in known space. His Highness: the Emperor Palpatine.

He walked slowly down the corridor, pausing only when he reached Lenner. He turned to face Lenner, and spoke quietly to him. Lenner listened intently, and then the Emperor reached out for the medal. One of his lackeys immediately put it in his hand, whereupon the Emperor placed it around Lenner's neck. The Kendu Star, for clear thinking and valor in combat.

The Emperor continued down the line one by one, giving each one a lesser medal. Then he reached Te'Kren. Her breath caught in her throat. His eyes were a sickly yellow, and his pale face was stitched with black lines, like an old man's face.

"Do you enjoy your life as a security officer, Miss Te'Kren?" His voice was soft but powerful.

"Yes, Your Highness."

"Good. I had hoped for that answer. I've spoken to Ta'a Chume about this, and she has agreed that a promotion is in order for you. You are to head House Ta'a Chume's security. Do you accept this position?"

"I do, Your Highness."

"This is good as well. Protect Ta'a Chume well."

"As you say, Your Highness."

The Emperor walked slowly and sedately away, back up the corridor where he'd come from. It was only after he was gone that Te'Kren realized he shouldn't have been able to speak Hapan. And yet he understood me, and spoke understandably! The amazement on her face must have shown, because Lenner pointed it out to her in Hapan. The other commandos were awestruck, as well, but more with fear than amazement.

"Did you see his face-"

"All of those lines, he looked like an old man, but he can't be!"

"What about his eyes?"

Lenner and Te'Kren moved away from them.

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"You don't blame me for my betrayal of the others, do you?"

Lenner shook his head. "Even if I did, it wouldn't matter. We were both angry when Alima began shooting. I'm lucky no one knows I shot back. If they did, I'd probably be dead by now. But no, I don't blame you."

"Of that I am glad. What will happen now, Dard?"

Lenner sighed. "I will be sent off on more missions for the Empire, and you will have to devote your life to protecting a woman who hates you. We each have our duties, and denying those duties will help neither of us."

"This is a goodbye then, I guess."

Lenner nodded, mercifully silent.

"Goodbye, Dard."

"Goodbye, Te'Kren."

With that she turned and walked away, out of his life, probably forever. He watched her go and then returned to the rest of his team.

"Well, boss, what's next?" Jarvis grinned at him.

"We've been issued new orders. We're to join up with a new Intelligence unit set up within the month, but for now, we've got time off."

Leeds spoke up. "Te'Kren's going home, then?"

"Yes."

"I guess it's just about as well. You know, I kinda liked having her around, some of the time. Anyway, I don't know about you guys, but I'm hungry. Who wants to get something to eat?"

Lenner smiled. Some people are always surprising you. I'm lucky to know so many of them.