**What If…Andrelious grew up in a galaxy still ruled by the Emperor?**

Due to no Battle of Yavin taking place in this timeline, all dates are After Formation of the Empire (AFE). To convert to BBY/ABY, simply subtract 19 from the AFE year.

**Jedha System**

**19 AFE**

The newly finished Death Star began to power up its superlaser. Such a weapon had never been tested before, but Director Orson Krennic, the battlestation’s commander, was confident that his work of the last two decades would prove an effective weapon. Grand Moff Tarkin, one of Krennic’s few superiors within the Empire’s hierarchy, initially wanted to test the superlaser with only a single reactor’s worth of power, but a sudden and unexpected communique from the Emperor himself made it clear that the test was to be at full power. The moon of Jedha had been chosen due to a defecting cargo pilot who was in the process of relaying the true nature of the Death Star to a band of rebels.

The test went without a hitch. The superlaser obliterated Jedha, totally destroying everything on its surface. The defector, Bodhi Rook, was killed whilst still in the custody of Saw Garrera and his band of rebels. Among the dead was Jyn Erso, whose father Galen had been instrumental in the completion of the Death Star’s superlaser. Unbeknown to anyone, Galen was secretly a rebel sympathiser and had deliberately built a fatal flaw into the Death Star.

**Two Weeks Later**

With the Death Star fully functional, the Emperor announced that he was dissolving the Imperial Senate, sweeping away the last vestiges of the former Republic. The Rebel Alliance, hidden on a base in the Yavin system, began plans for a desperate attack against the Death Star, hoping that they could somehow inflict damage on the seemingly invulnerable battle station. However, with no access to a copy of the Death Star’s plans, they were unable to discover the deliberate weakness in the design.

During an analysis, an Imperial Ensign, Jude Edivon, discovered Erso’s deliberate flaw: a thermal exhaust port that provided direct access to part of the reactor. Whilst unlikely, it was possible that a proton torpedo or similar projectile would be able to trigger a chain reaction that would destroy the entire battlestation. The Death Star was swiftly taken to a quiet sector of the galaxy to deal with the flaw; whilst Galen Erso and his team were executed.

**Imperial Plaza**

**Coruscant**

The sun was setting as the Imperial Plaza entered evening. The area had once been known as Senate Plaza, but, like the rest of the Imperial capital, had been renamed shortly after the founding of the Empire. An enormous statue of the Emperor left little doubt as to who was truly in charge of the galaxy, but the Emperor himself was very rarely seen in public.

Suddenly, large holograms of the Emperor appeared throughout Imperial Plaza.

“Citizens of my Empire. I am delighted to announce that the Rebellion has surrendered. Their leadership, including former senators Mon Mothma and Bail Organa, have been taken into custody and will face appropriate charges. Let it be known that all who oppose the safety and security that the Empire has brought to the galaxy will be hunted down and defeated!” the Emperor announced in the raspy tone that had come to be associated with the ruler of the galaxy.

“Well. That’s it then,” an onlooker stated as the holograms powered down.

“Don’t be so sure. The Rebellion are zealots. They will find a way to continue the fight,” another answered.

**27 AFE**

**Imperial Recruitment Centre**

**Coronet City**

**Corellia**

The short young man moved silently towards a processing desk. As had become standard throughout the core worlds, able bodied Humans were required to enter Imperial service on the Victory Day immediately after their 16th birthday. With the Rebellion having long been defeated there was a question as to why the Imperial military kept on growing, but local governors always seemed to find postings for the majority of youngsters.

“Name?” the man at the desk demanded tonelessly.

“Inahj, sir. Andrelious Jongstram Inahj,” the teenager answered.

The processing officer peered over his desk.

“You must be close to the minimum for regulation height. You should be thankful that Imperial High Command has relaxed such things,” the officer stated.

“I will do what is asked of me, sir. My father owes his safety to the Imperial Navy,” Andrelious declared.

“Save the life story for the medical, Inahj. Your operating number is Aurek-Jenth-Isk-102781653,”

*That’s a rather long number*, the young man thought to himself.

“Now move! We’ve got another eighty thousand to get through!” the processing officer commanded.

**Inahj Homestead**

**Outskirts of Coronet City**

“You need to stop worrying! There was nothing that we could have done. Imperial law is clear. All sixteen year olds must go through processing. But only the top ten percent are even *CONSIDERED* for military service. Andrel will be home before the victory parade,” Parck Inahj declared.

“And part of that processing is a full medical. Not only will Andrel get through the physical parts of that, but they will take a sample of his blood. They’re going to find out that he can touch the Force. They will take him, Parck. They will find a way to use him,” Licon answered.

“The Empire are not the Jedi. It’s not like they turned up and abducted Andrel when he was a baby,” Parck said. “Besides, I’ve met a few Imperial officers. According to them, the Force was all a myth invented by the Jedi to control the general public. I know that’s not entirely true, but they won’t know the first thing of what to do with a Force sensitive teenage boy.”

“You’re not going to convince me that things will be fine, Parck. The Imperials will find his gift. They will exploit it. There isn’t a Rebellion anymore, or at least not one that can pose a threat, but the Imperial war machine has kept on growing,” the female replied ruefully.

Parck handed his wife a glass of Corellian brandy.

“All we can do is wait. Whatever the Empire has in mind for our son, we will find out,” he soothed, hoping that Licon couldn’t sense his own growing concern for Andrelious.

“We shall see,” Licon answered, eyeing one of her plantpots. “We shall see.”

**One Week Later**

**Corellian Sector Headquarters**

**Coronet City**

“We have a full analysis of the latest intake, sir,” Lieutenant Orgabis announced, handing his superior a datapad.

“Given you’ve come straight to me, I’m going to guess that you’ve found something interesting,” General Bastik replied.

“Two blood tests came back with a positive result for the Force, sir. We’re going to have to inform Imperial Centre,”

“I see them. Inahj and Xieliff? Do you know anything else about them,” Bastik questioned.

“Inahj has clearly been given some training with the Force. He’s set three new records in the flight sims. Xieliff seems unaware that she has such abilities,” Orgabis explained.

Bastik nodded. “They should be thankful for the Empire. If the Jedi were still around, they’d have both been abducted and enslaved before they could even say ‘mama’. With the Emperor in charge, they’ll probably be our superiors by the time they’re twenty, Lieutenant,”

“Unless they are unfortunate enough to cross Lord Vader, sir. Very few survive an encounter with him these days. He gives me the creeps, if I’m honest. If we have to endure another of his inspections..”

“Enough, Lieutenant. Inform Imperial Centre about our two special recruits. I want them on the next flight!” Bastik ordered.

***Lambda*-class T-4a shuttle *Special Delivery***

**En route to Imperial Centre**

Xurleen Xieliff and Andrelious Inahj had been quickly escorted to an Imperial shuttle that was surprisingly roomy inside. Its standard interior had been swapped for one that allowed two passengers to sit in relative comfort for what would be a fairly short journey to Imperial Centre.

“Do you have any idea what we’re supposed to have done?” Xurleen queried, finally breaking the awkward silence between the pair.

“I’ve not done anything wrong. From the way we’re being treated, I’m going to assume we’re being transferred to the Royal Imperial. That’s where a lot of the best were trained,” Andrelious answered.

“That would make sense. Every physical exercise I’ve done, I’ve come top of my class. You wouldn’t believe how many of you boys hate being outperformed by a girl,” Xurleen declared, smirking.

Andrelious felt himself blushing slightly. “You’ve not met my parents. My father’s definitely not the brawn of that operation. Don’t ever play him at Sabacc, though,”

“Makes sense for me, then. But I’ve met most of the other supposedly exceptional Cadets. I don’t think I’m familiar with you, what did you say your name was?” the female questioned.

“I don’t think I did. I’m Cadet Ina-Andrelious. I was in the Imperial Naval training program, so unless you were in the sims with us, we won’t have crossed paths,” Inahj responded.

“I actually tried those sims a couple of times. Some of the Naval staff were apparently disappointed I wasn’t being processed as a TIE pilot,” Xurleen declared with a smirk.

There was something about his companion that Andrelious wasn’t entirely comfortable about. He supposed it was her confidence, unusual in a fresh-faced Imperial Cadet, but if she was telling the truth about her own performance, perhaps not entirely unexpected. The male didn’t like to boast about his own achievements, but he was aware that he was frequently the most dominant pilot in the various simulated exercises that he had faced. He was also notorious for earning high grades in his other classes, and had fast earned a reputation for being among the most patriotic young men on Corellia. Some teachers had even began recommending the young Inahj for a role in COMPNOR, but Andrelious was determined that he would remain in training as a TIE pilot.

“I didn’t expect to be getting transferred in such relative comfort, either. Usually I’m cramped in the back of a troop transport. Well, a model one, anyway,” Xieliff announced.

“We’re bound for the Royal Imperial. Perhaps they look after their best prospects a little better,” Andrelious suggested.

“If I’m honest, I don’t even fully understand why the Empire insists on maintaining such a large military. I have a cousin assigned to a Star Destroyer in the mid-rim. He’s not seen any real action since he graduated, and that was two years ago. All he’s had to deal with is a few pirate incursions. At least when the Rebellion was around there were things to do. Now I think we’ll do little more than spend most of our adult lives staring at some durasteel,” Xurleen stated.

Inahj shrugged. “Reducing military spending would invite fresh troublemakers. Then we’d just have to increase spending again and we’d be right back where we started. We’re better off preparing for a full-scale galactic conflict in case the Rebellion’s been rebuilding in secret,”

“With how much Imperial Intelligence and COMPNOR were monitoring everything at the academy, I’d have to think they’re even more vigilant elsewhere. One of my fellow Cadets made a joke about the Jedi. COMPNOR were on him in a flash. Thankfully he realised his mistake, but if you attract heat just for making a joke? I’d hate to think what happens to anyone who fails those loyalty tests we did,” the female commented.

“The Jedi were no laughing matter. Haven’t you read your history holos? They tried to assassinate the Emperor. All part of their Rebellion. Thankfully, his Majesty survived. I hate to think what the Jedi would have done if they’d succeeded,” Andrelious replied.

With a slight lurch, the shuttle de-hypered.

The two Cadets peered out of the viewport, both immediately enamoured by the sheer size of the Imperial fleet present. A single *Imperial-II* class Star Destroyer was frequently touted to be enough to completely defeat a single star system, but here, at Imperial Centre, there were dozens of such vessels. Despite that, they were not even the largest ship present; a much larger spacecraft almost dominated the horizon.

“That’s the *Executor?”* Xurleen questioned.

“The *Executor* is merely one ship from that class. That one is probably the *Eclipse*. That’s the Emperor’s personal flagship. Very rarely does it leave Imperial Centre,” Inahj explained.

The female nodded. “That’s not a surprise, given the Emperor’s rumoured never to be seen in public. Ever since he’s become Emperor he’s been in seclusion.”

“I don’t really like to discuss that. Perhaps one day, when I know you better, I’ll share my views on the subject. For now we’ve got the rest of our training to consider. Think about it, Xurleen. We’re going to be two of the Emperor’s finest,” Andrelious announced with genuine pride.

“You’d best not let anyone hear you call me that,” Xurleen responded, winking.

“Ah yes. Cadet Xieliff, then,” the male said a little more humbly.

“All passengers please prepare for landing,” a voice announced over the shuttle’s commsystem.

**Royal Imperial Academy**

**Coruscant**

The Royal Imperial Academy enjoyed a reputation as being the best among the Galactic Empire’s many academies, and it had only enhanced this since the surrender of the Rebellion. Even without a real threat to the Empire’s ever-growing power base, the Imperial military continued to expand and so the demand for fresh recruits continued to be high. Nevertheless, being transferred to the Royal Imperial from another academy indicated that a Cadet was considered to have great potential.

Andrelious and Xurleen had disembarked from their shuttle and were quickly greeted by one of the senior teaching staff, but it was still not clear as to what the two Corellia based Cadets had done to earn the transfer. Unbeknown to them, of course, was the fact that they had been flagged as being Force sensitive and would therefore be of great interest to the Emperor. All Force sensitive Cadets were immediately transferred to the Royal Imperial, regardless of test scores or standing, but what would happen after that was unclear even to most of the academy’s senior staff.

“Looks like we got here just in time for lunch,” Xurleen observed as she spotted large numbers of Cadets filing into a large room that seemed to serve as a food hall.

“Let’s hope the food here is a little better than those horrible ration packs they fed us on back at Corellia,” Andrelious replied.

“I suppose there’s only one way we’ll find out,” the female stated as she moved towards the throng of people making their way towards the dining area.

**-x-**

Andrelious quickly found that new arrivals were viewed with an air of suspicion by their fellow Cadets. Once he’d collected his food he’d lost sight of Xurleen, but he quickly found a seat at one of the many tables. Inahj wasn’t at all surprised that virtually every Cadet present was Human; there was still a deep mistrust of aliens due to the fact that the leaders of both the Separatists in the Clone Wars, and the later Rebellion, were largely aliens. Andrelious had thought he would find a few members of the mysterious Chiss species at the Royal Imperial, having learned about the career of Grand Admiral Thrawn, one of few non-Humans in the upper echelons of the Imperial military.

Inahj tried his best to converse with his fellow Cadets, but was fast finding out that many of them were sons and daughters of important figures within the Empire. Most of them seemed to believe that having a prestigious parent was enough for them to be entitled to a berth in the Royal Imperial, and even sneered when they found out that Andrelious came from more humble roots.

Unbeknown to Andrelious, and indeed to Xurleen, was that they had been transferred due to being Force sensitive. Such Cadets were of great interest to the Emperor, who insisted that any Cadet with even a hint of the ability to use the Force were re-assigned to the Royal Imperial and put into a special training program, regardless of their previous training.

Finishing his lunch, Inahj got up to leave the dining hall, ready to locate his first class.

“You, Inahj!” a deep voice called out.

Andrelious looked over to spot a dark skinned Human male with the rank insignia of a Colonel attached to his uniform tunic. Xurleen was stood next to the man. He moved over and saluted the man.

“Sir?” Inahj asked simply.

“Welcome to the Royal Imperial. As per the Emperor’s command, you are assigned to the Future Imperial Leaders program. I believe you already know Cadet Xieliff?” the Colonel questioned.

“Well, we were both transferred from the Corellian sector, but-“ Andrel began.

“Right now he’s the best friend I’ve got here,” Xurleen interrupted.

The older male smirked. “Good. I’m sure you’ll become firm friends with rest of your class. All of you are deemed very important for the Empire’s future,” he said tonelessly.

**-x-**

Andrelious quickly found the other members of the Future Imperial Leaders program to be far less elitist than the rest of the Royal Imperial, a fact he found ironic. He and the others were, for whatever reason, now slated for a much more important role within the Empire than the majority of Cadets, even the others that had managed to obtain a placement at the Royal Imperial.

Aside from Xurleen, Andrelious was quickly introduced to over a dozen other Cadets, all roughly his age. He’d not taken too much time to become immediately familiar with any of them, but one, an unusually tall and heavily built red headed female, had taken an immediate and very keen interest in him. Her name, he’d quickly learned, was Granta Prackx, apparently the daughter of an Imperial officer who commanded one of the many Star Destroyers that remained on permanent station over Imperial Centre. Andrelious did not know why but he found himself fearful of the large female, who was significantly taller and appeared to be a great deal physically stronger. Even growing up around a strong-minded female such as his mother did not do much to stem Inahj’s concern.

“Well, I think it’s obvious why *you’re* here, sweetie,” Prackx announced, gazing lustfully at Andrelious.

“Per the Emperor’s command. That’s all I’ve been told, just as I suspect you were,” the male replied nervously.

“My instructors ran out of exercises to put me through. Top scored on everything I’ve ever done. But you, I think they’ve brought you here for me. You’re simply the most *beautiful* thing I’ve seen here on Imperial Centre,” Granta purred.

A few of the other Cadets looked a little uncomfortable.

“Granta’s been a pest since she got here. Perhaps she’ll leave me alone now,” one of the females whispered, but just loudly enough for Andrelious to hear.

“I’m just saying..we’re the Future of this Empire. Surely it’s our job to help *MAKE* that future?” Prackx teased, actually daring to squeeze Andrelious’ inner thigh.

Andrelious was relieved to see several officers march into the room. What he did not expect was for them to be joined by a pair of cloaked figures, who strode in with an air of self confidence that stunned the murmuring Cadets into silence.

“Welcome to the Future Leaders program, Cadets,” one of the cloaked figures, female from her voice, began. She didn’t even seem to care that the Cadets were not sat at neat rows of desks.

“Now that we’ve gathered you all here, it’s time that we explained why you have been selected for this program. The Future Leaders program was once a purely military program. Many of today’s Admirals and Generals were put through it,” a man with the rank insignia of a General explained.

“But that was before. When the Empire was still young. When it needed to weed out the inefficiency of the Republic out. When the Emperor needed a strong military. Now that we’ve done that, the program’s been repurposed. Would one of you Cadets like to explain what the Force is?” the cloaked woman asked.

Xurleen raised her hand. “It’s nothing more than a myth, ma’am. People say it was fabricated by the Jedi to allow them to control the Republic,”

“One point for the propaganda answer, but I’m afraid that the truth is rather less exciting. The Force is real, Cadets. All of you are here because you’ve been found to be what the Jedi once called Force sensitive. Unlike the Jedi, however, you will not have your gift dulled into a shield to protect the useless,” the second cloaked figure, male but non-Human sounding, responded.

“So you’re telling us that we’ve been taught lies?” another Cadet questioned.

“Something I was taught very early on in the academy. If you tell a big enough lie, and tell it frequently enough, it will be believed,” Andrelious replied, before an instructor could say anything.

“Inelegant, perhaps, but effective enough. All of you are going to be taught how to use the Force. And not only the narrow-minded approach that the Jedi took. They denied themselves access to the true power of the Force when they shut themselves away from their emotions. You’ll all be learning how to make the most of your powers. And how best you can use to serve our Emperor,” the cloaked female explained.

“So we’re basically going to be Jedi?” Prackx queried.

“Some would say our role is similar to that of the Jedi in the days of the Republic, but that is a very ignorant way of looking at things. We are part of the Empire, servants of the Emperor. We will help bring the Emperor’s vision of peace and security to the galaxy. And we do that as part of the Imperial war machine. Not as an independent group that makes its own decisions. That was always the problem with the Jedi. I’m sure you’re all familiar with how that ended,”

The Cadets all nodded. They were far too young to remember the Clone Wars, how they had ended and how the Emperor had ordered the Jedi exterminated. Even the later Galactic Civil War had wrapped up when the current crops of Cadets were children, ending with the complete surrender of the Rebellion.

“Now that we have explained what is expected of you, it’s time we got started,” the cloaked man ordered.

**29 AFE**

**DS-1 Orbital Battle Station**

**Alderaan Orbit**

The DS-1 Orbital Battle Station, as the Death Star had come to be officially known, hadn’t actually fired its superlaser in well over a year. Its mere presence in a star system was enough to put most of the local population on edge, such was the fear of reprisal after the destruction of Jedha. After that, the superlaser had only been used to reduce the flagship of the Rebellion, the *Profundity*, to molten slag after the Rebels surrendered. The Emperor himself was thought to have forbidden the destruction of any planets after what happened to Jedha, but such a vow was likely to be ignored should the Empire ever find itself at war again.

The Death Star and its escort fleet had arrived in the Alderaan system as part of its ongoing ‘patrol’ throughout the Core. Alderaan had been the homeworld of one of the leaders of the Rebellion, Bail Organa, and the resulting political fallout had resulted in the House of Organa, once rulers of the planet, to be stripped of their power. Whilst Bail and Queen Breha had both been arrested, tried and executed for their links to the Rebellion, their adopted daughter, Leia was believed to have fled into the Outer Rim and had not been seen since.

Among the thousands of Imperials aboard the Death Star were Senior Lieutenants Andrelious J. Inahj, Granta Prackx, and Xurleen Xieliff. The three of them, already at an advanced rank for their age, were fast rising up through the Imperial hierarchy. They were now all capable Force users, having faced intensive training since arriving at the Royal Imperial, but their other, more conventional skills had also been developed.

“Alderaan, eh?” Prackx stated as she studied the blue and green planet from a view window.

“That’s right. Some say that they’re lucky that the Rebellion folded when they did. Apparently Alderaan was once in the Grand Moff’s sights,” Andrelious replied.

“That wouldn’t have gone down well. Jedha was a remote backwater. Nobody really noticed when the Death Star blew it up. If it had actually been turned on a Core world, especially one like Alderaan? I think we’d have seen a much larger Rebellion. Perhaps even from within the Imperial military itself,” Xurleen added.

“I think the rest of the galaxy would have understood. Remember, the innocent have nothing to fear. As long as you do as you’re told…” Granta began.

“…you will not be harmed,” Andrelious finished.

“But punishing a whole planet for the crimes of a few? I don’t know. That seems like it would have had far reaching consequences,” Xurleen commented.

Major Dhrubmann entered the room flanked by two Stormtroopers. Dhrubmann was the latest officer who was in nominal command of the young trio, but it was clear he was little more than a career soldier who perhaps had no real interest in advancing through the ranks. Nevertheless Andrelious at least had developed a healthy respect for the man, even if his fellows on the Futures program did not.

“Good to see the three of you debating these things, but you haven’t been sent here to talk politics. We’ve heard word from the King of Alderaan that things aren’t all fun and games down there. Seems there’s a group of insurgents stupid enough to try and start something. Normally local security forces would deal with it, but there’s reports that the enemy are using the latest in Imperial equipment,” Dhrubmann began, as usual wasting no time with pleasantries.

“With all due respect, sir, it still feels as if that’s something for our men down on Alderaan to deal with. If they’re anything like the local defence forces we’ve met elsewhere, they’ll be *itching* to get involved…” Granta replied.

“I agree, Lieutenant. It’s certainly not normally something we’d send three FIL prospects into. But I’ve got my hands on some reports from Imperial Intelligence. An FIL prospect was already sent. He’s not been seen, since. A result is needed here, and fast,” the Major explained.

“What do we know about these insurgents? Apart from that they’re using Imperial equipment?” Andrelious questioned.

“Only that they don’t like to leave survivors. Like most local insurgencies, they’re about little more than violence. Now, report to Bay 327. A shuttle will fly you to the Imperial garrison in Aldera. You’ll be further briefed there by a Captain Jeralki,” Dhrubmann ordered.

The trio saluted their superior.

It was time to go to work.

**Imperial Garrison**

**Aldera**

**Alderaan**

It was hard not to admire the beauty of Alderaan, especially the area around its capital, Aldera. Even the usually stoic Prackx was taken aback with just how picturesque it was. There was little time to admire the view, however.

On landing the trio were quickly ushered through the Imperial garrison.

Aldera was, like many Core world capitals, still largely as it would have been before the founding of the Empire, with locals going about their business with seemingly little bother from the patrolling Imperial Stormtroopers.

“Alderaan is one of the wealthiest planets in the Core. Even now they like to retain a certain level of independence, even if the King was installed by the Emperor after the Organa family were found to be in league with the Rebellion,” Xurleen explained.

“That explains why they’re all dressed like they’re about to go to some fancy dance,” Andrelious responded.

“I know someone who’d look *ravishing* in one of those gowns,” Prackx declared, gazing at Andrelious.

The male felt his face burning. “Granta, what is it with you and trying to dress me up? Can we get through just *ONE* mission where you don’t make a comment about how I’d look in some ridiculous outfit?” he snapped.

“I just tell it like I see it, sweetie. Who knows a mission might call for it one day. I don’t think *I* would pass as an elegant lady of leisure,” Prackx answered, flexing her large arm muscles as if to prove her point.

Xurleen stared at the ground. She was growing increasingly frustrated at the way conversation often turned into Granta making her feelings for Andrelious known, and at her male colleague’s seeming inability to notice how possessive Prackx was becoming. Imperial regulations did little to forbid fraternising with fellow officers, and their superiors even seemed to encourage the budding relationship between Granta and Andrelious, feeling that it stoked emotions and made them even more powerful with the Force.

“Let’s get to our briefing and see what’s what,” Andrelious declared.

**-x-**

“I understand you join me from the Death Star,” Captain Jeralki began. “I must say that feels like overkill. Even three FIL officers is a little too much for a local problem..”

“Our orders are clear. We’re to assist you with your insurgency problem. The Death Star’s hardly going to fire on a friendly planet,” Inahj responded.

“Alright..well, I’m afraid I can’t give you too much information. All I have are a couple of reports from some Stormtroopers who managed to drive off an attempted ambush. I’ve also received direction that I’m to allow you access to as many resources as you feel you need,” Jeralki explained. He was trying to hide the fact that the trio of young Lieutenants were leaving him feeling on edge, but they could easily feel his emotions through the Force.

“We’ll speak directly with the most senior troopers you have available,” Prackx responded. “I’d appreciate if we were left to our own devices,”

The Captain’s face fell. “Of course, Lieutenant…I’ll arrange for you to meet with them as soon as possible,”

­Prackx nodded in approval, inwardly smiling that a man so many years her senior and still her superior in rank was obviously uncomfortable around her assertiveness.

**-x-**

“So Xieliff will lead a group of a dozen Stormtroopers to these coordinates and begin a standard patrol of the area. The area is a hotspot for our insurgent friends. With luck they’ll jump us,” Prackx explained, pointing to an area marked out on the holotable in front of her.

“Is this us here?” Andrelious questioned, gesturing towards a second grouping of Stormtroopers, this group backed up by a pair of AT-ST walkers.

“Yes. If and when the ambush happens, we’ll immediately respond with the rest of our forces. I’ve already gone over the plan with Sergeant GR-691,” Granta replied.

“I really wish they’d stop insisting Stormtroopers use their designations all the time. It’s so impersonal. Feels like I’m talking to a droid,” Xurleen complained.

“Just be glad they’re not entirely a clone force anymore. Always used to give me the creeps, the idea of a whole army wearing the same man’s face,” Andrelious declared.

“Did you inform Captain Jeralki of our plan?” Xurleen questioned.

“I have not, and I don’t want either of you two to do so. I don’t entirely trust the Captain. I’m going to tell him about your part of the plan, but nothing beyond that. Just a hunch I’ve got, but I expect the two of you sensed that he’s feeling very on edge,” the larger woman declared.

**-x-**

Festor Brestak double checked his datapad. His contact from within the Imperial garrison, known to him only as ‘VJ’, had given him some coordinates and told him that there was an Imperial patrol coming. The notes mentioned that an ‘FIL’ was leading the group. This did not bother Brestak. His insurgents had already captured a member of the Future Imperial Leaders program, and a second prisoner would only bolster his group’s reputation.

Putting the call out, he assembled his men, mostly disgruntled Alderaanians, but with a few former Rebellion operatives in the mix. They could not do much, but even chipping away slightly at Imperial authority felt good. Besides, he reasoned, the more damage he could do, the more chance he had of re-igniting the flames of Rebellion. Even with Mon Mothma and her ilk gone, there were surely many beings throughout the galaxy who yearned for freedom from the Imperial yoke.

And it would be Festor Brestak who helped deliver that freedom.

**-x-**

Lieutenant Xurleen Xieliff led her group of Stormtroopers to the previously agreed coordinates. She was likely over a decade younger than some of the armoured men, but she could sense that the mental conditioning that they had faced throughout their training had left them mostly focused on obeying their orders rather than questioning the qualifications of their latest superior. Lately there had been rumours that some troopers, particularly those with longer service records, were starting to show greater streaks of independence, but Xieliff didn’t really care; she believed that too much mental conditioning was little better than the ‘brainwashing’ that the clone troopers were believed to have been subjected to.

“Alright. Let’s check this area. We’ll spread out into a three hundred metre radius. Keep your blasters ready. If these Rebels jump us they’re not going to mess around,” Xieliff ordered, cocking her own blaster rifle. She too was a fan of the E-11 model that was the go-to weapon of the Stormtrooper corps, finding it to be a most effective and accurate weapon.

Nearby, Festor Brestak, along with a dozen other well-equipped insurgents, spotted the Imperials.

“Wait until they fan out a bit more. Then we’ll hit them one-by-one. And remember, we need to stun their commander. I’ve been informed she’s another FIL prospect. If we have our hands on two of them, we’ve got one hell of a bargaining chip,” Brestak announced.

“What exactly do we need that for? We’re trying to get the Empire off Alderaan. Abducting their officers isn’t going to convince them to do that,” a Twi’lek insurgent stated crossly.

Brestak sighed. What he didn’t want the others to know was that he was in direct contact with agents of Leia Organa, the Princess of Alderaan who had fled into the Outer Rim when the Rebellion was dismantled. From there, Organa was in the process of forming a new Rebellion. Recruitment and procurement of arms were two large stumbling blocks in this process, and it did not help that the Princess was constantly having to move her base of operations to avoid any kind of attention from the Imperials. Brestak’s own plan was to use captured FIL officers as a trade for free passage from Alderaan, where he too could escape to the Outer Rim and assist Organa directly. The relatively small group he was leading on Alderaan had their own reasons for fighting the Empire, but ultimately, Brestak doubted whether any of them would have the skills to be useful once Organa had the assets to start something serious.

Xurleen glanced towards the horizon, looking for any kind of sign that the attack was imminent. She was sceptical as to if it was ever going to come; she did not share the distrust for Captain Jeralki that Prackx seemed to hold, but did agree that things weren’t quite right on Alderaan. During her time on the planet she’d sensed more than one person’s thoughts for the exiled Princess Leia, who seemed to attract a great deal of sympathy from her people despite her status as part of the Rebellion.

Andrelious and Granta were also now into position, backed up with two squads of Stormtroopers and a pair of AT-ST walkers.

“This could be overkill,” Andrelious stated.

“It’s best we finish this quickly, sweetie. The best way to do that is with overwhelming force,” Granta replied.

“That’s your answer to everything,” Inahj sighed.

“You never complain when I use my overwhelming force normally. In fact I think quite the opposite judging by how you normally react,” Prackx teased, moving uncomfortably close towards her companion.

Granta no longer bothered to hide her attraction towards Andrelious. Even before they graduated she had announced that they were officially a couple, and she did her best to show her affection, even ignoring his protests when she lavished attention on him in public. For his part, Andrelious certainly felt *something* towards Granta, but he was not sure he could identify exactly what that was.

Andrelious extricated himself from his lover’s grasp and reached for his macrobinoculars. He quickly scanned the ambush zone, but could only see Xurleen and her men.

“Still no sign of the enemy. What are they waiting for?” he mused.

“They’re just timing their ambush to ensure they get the best chance of success,” Prackx explained.

“Assuming that they’ve not got an informant who knows about what we’re planning here and they’ve withdrawn,” Andrelious replied.

Granta smirked. “Well we’ll just have to hope that’s not the case, won’t we? We’re on Alderaan until this insurgency is dealt with. Of course, I can think of worse places to be assigned. Perhaps we can have our wedding here?”

“Can we focus on the mission, please, Lieutenant Prackx?” Inahj asked.

“All formal all of a sudden! I guess you prefer to save my first name for when you’re screaming it,” Prackx teased with a wink.

Andrelious again felt his face burning.

Granta Prackx knew just how to embarrass him.

**-x-**

Festor Brestak’s trigger finger was beginning to itch. He was still waiting for the best moment to strike, and as the Imperials he was observing continued their patrols, still remaining fairly close together.

“Come on, Fest, if we wait here much longer the Imps will just pack up and go home,” one of the insurgents, a Human female puffing on a cigarillo, complained.

“We can’t afford to be too rash. Imperial Stormtroopers aren’t to be trifled with,” Brestak replied, but as he spoke, he started to see large gaps forming in the Imperials’ position.

“Right! It’s time to hit the Imps! Remember, stick together and take them out one-by-one!” Festor ordered.

The insurgents charged towards their Imperial enemies, some choosing to roar as they entered combat.

With the element of surprise on their side, the insurgents easily took out the first two Stormtroopers, but the third managed to cut one of their number down before succumbing to the onslaught.

“Don’t hold back now!” Brestak yelled, clearly enjoying himself.

Moments later, the noise of the fire fight was interrupted by footsteps. Loud, mechanical footsteps. Both insurgent and Imperial alike craned their necks to look at the source of the sound, finding a pair of AT-ST walkers, accompanied by two full squads of Stormtrooper.

“What have you done, Brestak? You’ve walked us into a trap!” a female voice complained.

The arrival of Imperial reinforcements quickly turned the tide. The insurgents seemed to be in two minds over whether it was better to stay to fight, or to flee and hope to live for another day.

*It’s no use. We’ve got no chance out here against those walkers. How in the name of the Force did they know we were coming?* Festor thought as he watched his men falter against the power of the Imperial war machine.

“That’s their leader, babe, stun him!” Prackx shouted at Andrelious.

Inahj wanted to point out that he and Granta were of the same rank and she had no business giving him an order, but there was no time. Instead, he did as he was asked, quickly setting his blaster to stun and aiming at Brestak, but not before the insurgent managed to kill another Stormtrooper. The blue rings of energy slammed into Festor’s body, immediately rendering him unconscious.

With their leader clearly about to become a prisoner of the Empire, Brestak’s remaining men decided the time was right to try to flee, but the two AT-STs quickly mopped them up.

It was another victory for the forces of the Galactic Empire.

**Interrogation Room Cresh**

**Imperial Garrison**

**Aldera**

The Imperials wasted no time in hauling the unconscious Festor Brestak back to their garrison. As he came to he found himself being strapped to an interrogation chair in the middle of a completely dark room. The air was musty and unpleasantly warm despite the darkness, leaving the insurgent uncomfortable even before anyone had started to talk to him. He’d heard rumours of the Imperials’ interrogation methods, and that many didn’t survive the process, but had hoped some aspects were little more than propaganda aimed at scaring the people into behaving.

“I am in charge of this garrison and I must insist that I lead the interrogation of this prisoner myself, Lieutenant Inahj,” a voice stated somewhere nearby.

“I checked with Major Dhrubmann. He’s given us the go ahead to get the information we need by any means necessary. We do not require your presence, sir. I’m sure you’ve got other things to do,” a second, younger voice responded.

“This goes against procedure. I can’t authorise you to proceed without me being present in the room, at least. You don’t have the seniority, let alone the experience, to handle a dangerous prisoner such as this one alone,” the first voice snapped, its owner clearly getting annoyed.

“You can speak to the Major yourself if you must, sir. But I assure you, my colleagues and have everything we need. Perhaps I should mention that Major Dhrubmann can speak directly to the Grand Moff?”

Just the mention of the title was enough to make Brestak’s toes curl. Grand Moff Tarkin was feared by many of the men he had lead into battle. Now those men were dead, and the possibility of the Grand Moff paying him a personal visit loomed large in his mind. At that moment he was glad that he didn’t have any information on the whereabouts of Leia Organa, for he suspected that he wasn’t going to last long once he was put through the process of an Imperial interrogation. All he had was the fact that he had a contact from somewhere within the garrison, and that he knew that contact only as ‘VJ’.

The two voices had ceased their arguing and the room was now in total silence, which combined with the darkness left for a horribly mind-numbing atmosphere. There was literally *nothing* for Festor to try and focus on, leaving him to replay his fears over and over in his mind.

After what seemed like an enternity, Brestak heard a door open and briefly saw some light from the corridor outside. Moments later, the room’s lighting was activated. He found that there were now two young Imperial officers in the room, a rather short male and a rather well-built female.

“Welcome to the Aldera garrison. After all of the trouble you and your little band of rebels has been causing, we thought we had to bring you here and find out more about you. Why don’t you start by telling us your name?” the female demanded.