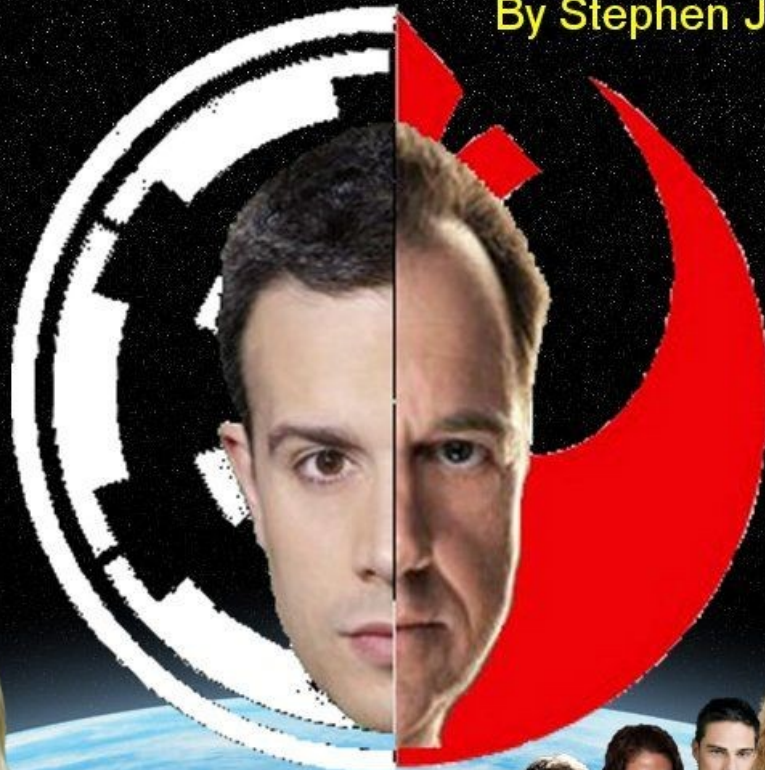


STAR WARS

7-07: School's Out

By Stephen J Dutton



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Civil war turns father against son

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

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

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

SCHOOL'S OUT

DOCTOR JENESSA DRAME HAS HELD REBEL SYMPATHIES FOR SOME TIME. BUT WHEN SHE IS WITNESSED MEETING WITH A KNOWN REBEL AGENT THE CONSEQUENCES ARE LIFE CHANGING FOR MORE THAN JUST HER...

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

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1.

Xenoarchaelolgy had sounded like a fun course to take when Jaynie Horbid had unexpectedly received a full scholarship to the University of Estran and she had signed up to the class quickly. However, had she taken the time to ask around first then she would have discovered that the lecturer who was in charge of the department, Doctor Jenessa Drame, was exacting in her requirements from both post and undergraduate students to the extent that she had acquired the nickname 'Darth Drame'. So it was with a sense of trepidation that Jaynie approached the doctor's office to speak with her about a deadline for an assignment. "Come in." a male voice said when Jaynie knocked and opening the office door revealed a male devaronian sat behind Jenessa's desk rummaging through datapads. This was Doctor Drame's assistant Grenick.

"I was looking for Doctor Drame." Jaynie said, "I need to ask her about-"

"She's not here." Grenick interrupted, "I think she headed out to lunch with a friend. Another of you humans that I've seen hanging round here a lot. Then she's got classes all afternoon. Is it urgent?"

"Kind of. The assignment's due tomorrow." Jaynie replied and Grenick drew in breath sharply.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." he said, "The doc's not going to like you leaving things this late. But she tends to go to a cantina down by the river. You may be able to catch her there but it'll mean interrupting her lunch."

"She's not going to like that is she?" Jaynie asked, "But on the other hand if I don't get an extension she's going to fail my paper and I swear that she's failed me for the last time. No more make up classes."

"Then I suggest you get a move on." Grenick said and Jaynie smiled.

"Thanks." she replied before leaving the office. Jaynie then headed off campus in the direction of the river.

This part of Estran's capital city was known for its shady dealings and Jaynie was curious as to why Jenessa would choose to go here instead of any of the far more numerous and superior quality cantinas that were all around the university in addition to the sources of food on campus. Her best guess was that the doctor was trying to avoid students by coming here. Normally the only time that students ventured into this part of the city was when they were looking for something not generally available legally.

The cantina was easy enough for Jaynie to find though. A wide footpath led alongside the river and as she followed it she saw where tables had been set up outside the cantina to take advantage of the good weather. Then she saw Jenessa emerge from inside the cantina in the company of a second woman who looked to be not much older than Jaynie, though she did not recognise this other woman from university. Of course Jaynie's entry to university had been delayed so it was quite possible that this other woman was a former student who had graduated before Jaynie enrolled. Jenessa and the other woman sat down at one of the tables and began to eat as Jaynie started towards them. But well before Jaynie reached the table where Jenessa and the other woman sat a third woman appeared that Jaynie certainly did recognise.

It was her older sister Jaysica.

Jaysica Horbid had been drafted into the militia of their home planet of Tarlen but been discharged pending court martial when she had defected to the rebel alliance and it was this single event that had caused the Horbid so much trouble since. This included having Jaynie accused of treason when she had tried and failed to lead Jaysica and her fellow band of rebels into an Imperial trap. Fortunately, the Imperial Security Bureau agent she had been dealing with had recognised Jaynie's innocence and offered her a deal in exchange for her freedom – go to university and act as an undercover informant for the ISB and in return she would receive a full scholarship as well as having her criminal record expunged. So far this had amounted to little more than reporting on students complaining about their freedom to spread their dissent, though on one occasion she had saved the life of a senior Imperial official. Now though it looked as if she had caught one of her own teachers in the act of conspiring with rebels.

Jaynie ducked behind an advertising board that had been vandalised, preventing the display from functioning properly and took her datapad from her bag. The model of datapad she owned was a top of the range model and included a recording system. Holding this up in front of her Jaynie leant around the sign and pointed it towards the cantina, activating the camera to record whatever Jenessa and the other two women were doing. Jaynie made sure to get the third woman, the one she did not recognise in the shot so that when she provided the footage to the ISB they would be more likely to be able to identify her than if they were relying on just Jaynie's description of her.

She waited until the three women got up to leave the table, recording the entire meeting as best she could. Unfortunately she had no way of recording what the women had said to one another but with just the video footage she knew that the ISB would be able to determine much of it anyway. Then she stuffed the datapad back into her bag and darted across the path into a small shop while Jenessa and the unknown woman walked past.

"Hey." a voice called out to her from the rear of the shop, "Are you here to buy anything or not?"

"Sorry." Jaynie replied, "I don't see what I need." and then she hurried back out of the shop again. Rather than go back to the university she headed for her room in the residence block instead, repeatedly checking to see if she was being followed by rebels who may have seen her recording the meeting. She had no real training in evading such pursuit but it made her feel better just trying. Reaching the residential block she headed directly for her room, apologising to those students who tried to engage her in conversation except for one male student she found particularly annoying who she outright insulted just as she reached her door and hurried inside. Once safe and alone in her room Jaynie hurried for the communicator she kept hidden inside a fake databook that had been given to her by the ISB. Unlike the communicator she normally carried around with her this one stored contact details for the nearest ISB station house and Imperial capital building where her handler was based. "Come on, pick up." she said to herself as the call placed to her handler's office continued to go unanswered until she eventually gave up without leaving a message. When Jaynie had been given the communicator there had also been one other number programmed into it, that of the home of her handler just in case she needed to contact him in an emergency. Jaynie decided that uncovering an actual Alliance cell operating in the university itself counted as just such an emergency and so she selected that number from the communicator. But once more the only response was the sound of the communicator at the other end sounding until Jaynie gave up and selected the option to leave a message instead. "It's Jaynie." she said, peering out of the window and half expecting to see a heavily armed rebel assault team preparing to storm the building at any moment to abduct her, "Look, I know you said to only use this number in an emergency but that's what this is. One of my lecturers is a rebel, I'm certain of it. I've got all the proof you'll need but I need you to come and get it quickly." Just then there was a banging on the door and Jaynie gasped as she turned around to look in its direction. "Come on Jaynie! We know you're in there. Get out here and watch this. Han's going to try and drink an entire bottle of lum without puking." "Just hurry." Jaynie said into the communicator quietly before turning it off and returning the device to its hiding place. Only then did she answer the knocking at her door.

ISB Agent Garm Larcus woke suddenly to find himself lay on his bed fully dressed in the uniform that he had been wearing when he blacked out. The last thing he remembered was being sat in a holding cell that belonged to the galactic criminal organisation known as Black Sun and tied to a chair when all of a sudden a group of masked beings had broken in and shot him. Evidently the blaster that had been used to shoot him had been set to stun or he would not have just woken up in his own. But who those beings were or why they had brought him back home was a mystery to him.

Then Garm noticed the communicator beside his bed flashing to indicate that there were new messages on it and he reached out to press the play button before getting off the bed and heading to the bathroom.

"Garm you should have been here hours ago to pick up Cayla." the voice of his father in law said in the first message. Since the death of Garm's wife Jennay he had relied on his in laws to look after his young daughter often and she had been with them when he had been abducted. Obviously it had taken some time for the news of his capture to be delivered to them, "You know we're happy to look after her, she's our grand daughter after all. But you need to let us know if you're going to be late."

The next message was left by a female voice and Garm peered out of the bathroom when he heard it.

"Garm it's Vay. I need you to come and pick me up urgently. I'm in a town called Restok in the Nevantor province. I'll be at the south entrance to town. Hurry, I mean it."

Garm frowned, wondering what could have caused Vay, his partner in the ISB and also the woman he was currently involved in a romantic relationship with, to leave such an odd message. He also wondered why she was in the Nevantor province, about five hundred kilometres from the capital but leaving messages for him to pick her up instead of just making use of requisitioned transport or calling for a shuttle to pick her up.

"It's Jaynie." the third message began, "Look, I know you said to only use this number in an emergency but that's what this is. One of my lecturers is a rebel I'm certain of it. I've got all the proof you'll need but I need you to come and get it quickly." then there was a banging sound in the background, "Just hurry."

Garm sighed. All three messages seemed to need his immediate attention and he decided that he would deal with them in the order they had been received just as soon as he had cleaned up and contacted his office.

WELCOME TO RESTOCK.

Garm brought his speeder to a halt just by the sign and looked around. He was right where Vay had asked him to meet her but there was no sign of her at all and that was most unlike the young woman. Getting out of the speeder Garm looked around again, hoping that he would catch sight of her when all of a sudden he heard movement in the bushes nearby and on instinct his hand reached for his blaster. But rather than some terrorist launching an ambush it was Vay that emerged and Garm gasped when he realised that she was

wearing nothing but a sheet of plastic wrapped around her body that she held in place with her hands as she rushed to the speeder and jumped into the passenger seat.

"Can we go home now?" she asked as Garm stared at her.

"Vay I'm not sure where to start." he said, "What happened to your clothes?"

"They're right where I left them. At your house. Or at least I hope they are, I'd hate to think that your father's rebel cell stole them when they kidnapped me." Vay replied.

"Kidnapped you?" Garm asked as he got back into the speeder, "Vay I think you better start from the beginning. We've got a long drive back home so you can tell me on the way. But then we've got to go to the university."

"Oh let me guess," Vay said, frowning, "that girl's found something."

"A rebel cell on campus apparently." Garm answered, "So we better check it out."

"Can we at least get me something to wear first?" Vay asked.

2.

Jaynie waited most of the night to hear from Garm, giving up only when tiredness forced her to go to bed. The next morning she was uncertain of what to do. Her first scheduled lecture was with Jenessa and she was scared that even something minor that she said or did could give away the fact that she had been spying on her. Especially since Grenick was likely to have told Jenessa that Jaynie had been looking for her. So rather than risk a confrontation Jaynie headed for the campus library well before the lecture was due to begin and here she simply found a desk in a quiet spot and sat down to study. Engrossed in her study she barely noticed as someone else sat down at the same desk until they spoke to her.

"So how do these glasses make me look?" Vay asked, "I'm going for the whole sexy college student thing." and Jaynie looked up to see Vay sat opposite her. Thankfully she was not wearing an ISB uniform or the bodygloves she often favoured when out of uniform, instead having settled for something more casual along with a pair of spectacles.

"Like a nerd." Jaynie replied, staring at Vay.

"But a sexy nerd right?" Vay said.

"I wouldn't know. You're not my type." Jaynie said, "Now what do you want?"

"What do I want? What do you want? Garm tells me you left a message on his home communicator yesterday for us to come and meet with you."

"I did. But when I said it was urgent I didn't expect it to take almost twenty hours for you to turn up. Where is Garm anyway?" Jaynie said and she looked around.

"Garm doesn't look much like a student." Vay said, "So he sent me."

"Whatever. Can we get out of here? I need him to see this." Jaynie said and she held up her datapad.

"Fine. Follow me." Vay told her and after pausing just long enough for Jaynie to gather up her belongings she led the other woman out of the library and off the campus to a nearby parking lot where Garm waited inside an unmarked speeder.

"Hi Garm." Jaynie said as she got into the front of the vehicle and slid along the seat so that she was directly beside him, provoking a frown as Vay was then forced to sit on the opposite side of Jaynie.

"What do you have?" Garm asked, "Your call suggested rebel activity by a member of university staff."

"That's right." Jaynie said, nodding, "Alliance."

"The Alliance?" Vay asked, "How do you know?"

"Because I saw Doctor Drame meeting with my sister." Jaynie answered, "Watch this." and she took to her datapad and set it to replay the footage she had shot the day before.

"Zoom in closer." Garm said and Jaynie adjusted the image, magnifying the faces of the three women sat at the cantina table.

"See, that's my sister and that's-" Jaynie began.

"Doctor Jenessa Drame. Senior lecturer in xenoarchaeology at the University of Estran." Garm interrupted.

"You know her then?" Jaynie asked.

"Yes we know her." Vay replied, "We've met her. In fact we even took her on an assignment once. Of course we didn't know that she'd be reporting all our movements to the rebels as soon as she could."

"I don't know who this third woman is though." Jaynie said before pausing the video footage just as the third woman looked around and more of her face became visible.

"I do." Garm said.

"Isn't that that serving girl?" Vay asked.

"That's right. She works for Lady Sharva." Garm agreed.

Maybe she was just there because Lady Sharva is sponsoring an event at the university.

The suggestion came to Vay from within the Force. Its source was the spirit of a long dead ancestor of Vay's called Lara who had been a jedi almost four thousand years earlier. Now her spirit appeared to be obsessed with convincing Vay to adopt the ways of the jedi instead of continuing to serve the Empire. Vay just found this annoying.

"I doubt Lady Sharva's the type to sponsor university events." Vay said.

"No she's not." Garm agreed, "Nor is she the type to knowingly harbour a rebel spy." then he smiled, "Of course even though she probably doesn't know ignorance is no defence against us searching her home."

"You're enjoying this aren't you Garm?" Vay commented.

"What?" Jaynie asked, "Am I missing something here?"

"Only that Lady Sharva hates Garm because of his father. She'd love to see Vorn Larcus put up against a wall and shot for what he and your sister have done." Vay said. Garm's father Lord Vorn Larcus III was the leader of the rebel field team that Jaynie's sister Jaysica was a member of and prior to defecting to the rebellion had been a member of Estran's Parliament, representing the same constituency that Lady Sharva

now represented. Then Vay looked at Garm, "You know that searching the home of a Member of Parliament is going to require special authority." she pointed out. Normally the ISB could search wherever they wished whenever they wished. But there remained certain individuals who had influence with senior Imperial officials that made investigating either them personally or those close to them difficult.

But not impossible.

"But we can get it." Garm replied as he started the engine of his speeder, "We can take this information to Director Helieos and he can get us permission to search Lady Sharva's residence."

Director Helieos looked at the video footage and then looked up at Garm, Jaynie and Vay as they stood waiting in his office.

"You're certain that this other woman is who you say she is?" he asked.

"Kay Laren." Garm replied, "And yes we're sure. We ran this video against the list of security passes for the Estranian Parliament building. Fortunately Lady Sharva likes to have her minions on hand even there it seems."

"Convenient for you isn't this Garm?" Director Helieos said, "She has tried to get you dismissed in the past and now you have an excuse to go after her."

"Not an excuse sir." Vay replied before Garm could respond, "Evidence."

"Very well." the director said and he put down Jaynie's datapad and turned to his computer before starting to type, "I'll issue a search warrant and you can take a team to search Lady Sharva's home for any signs of treason. I'd add her office as well but when Moff Horatian was an Imperial senator she was his aide and she served as senator herself for a while. For now we need to keep this an accusation against this handmaiden of hers. Of course if you should happen to discover any evidence of criminality on the part of Lady Sharva then you are free to follow up on it. Are we in agreement?"

"Yes sir." Garm replied.

Lady Lynn Sharva was at home when she heard the sound of the speeder approaching her house and she frowned. She was expecting no guests and hers was not the sort of residence that people could simply drop by on unannounced, with security gates to keep them out. Though Lady Sharva presented herself as a champion of the common people she had no wish to actually meet any of them. Getting out of her chair she was about to walk to the window to see who had just arrived when one of her servants suddenly burst in.

"I'm sorry your lady ship." the woman exclaimed, "But the ISB has just arrived."

"The ISB? What nonsense." Lady Sharva said, "I'll soon sort this out." and she stormed past the servant and headed for the front door where it was opened for her by another of her servants, allowing her to storm out onto the steps that led up to her house and stare at Garm and Vay as they got out of the speeder, both now in full ISB uniform, "You." she hissed, "What is the meaning of this Agent Larcus?"

"Lady Lynn Sharva." Garm called out from the bottom of the steps and he held up a datapad, "I am authorised to search these premises for evidence of treason by persons resident here."

Lady Sharva looked at the servant who had opened the front door for her and nodded in the direction of Garm.

"Yes my lady." he said before hurrying down the steps to take the datapad that Garm held out to him and he began to study the data page shown on the display. As he did so Garm noticed that the servant was armed, a compact hold out blaster concealed under his jacket and just in case Garm moved his hand towards the larger military blaster pistol he had holstered at his waist.

"This is an authorisation to search the residence my lady." the man called out.

"No." Lady Sharva said, "I'm not letting you inside, You have no right. Don't you know who I am?"

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Vay whispered as Garm smiled.

"You know I was kind of hoping you'd say that." he said and he took out his comlink and activated it, "Now." he said before shutting it off again.

Then before he could return the device to its pouch on his belt there was an almighty 'Crash!' from the end of the driveway followed by a low rumbling as an Imperial personnel carrier glided into view. Unlike Garm, who had waited for the guard on the gate to open it before coming up the drive the driver of the carrier had simply smashed through it. But the troop transport was not the only vehicle approaching, behind it came several more landspeeders and in each of them were visible four more ISB agents.

The armoured vehicle came to a halt just behind Garm's speeder before the rear hatch dropped open and a squad of armoured troopers disembarked to form a line either side of Garm, one of them shoving the armed servant and removing his blaster from its holster.

"This is outrageous!" Lady Sharva yelled as she found herself facing more than a dozen ISB agents plus a squad of armoured COMPForce assault troopers, the military force of the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order or COMPNOR, of which the ISB was a part, "Say goodbye to your career Agent Larcus, there's no way that Gregor Horatian will stand for this." and she turned and looked inside, "I need to speak with the moff right now." she said.

"Here let me." Vay said suddenly, "He's been listening." and she held up her comlink and tossed it Lady Sharva who despite being surprised caught it and held it up.

"Hello?" she said into the device.

"Lynn." the voice of Moff Gregor Horatian, the sector's Imperial governor said, "Be a good girl and just let them in."

"But, but-" she responded.

"Just do it Lynn." Moff Horatian told her, "This isn't about you personally. Not yet at least."

Garm then looked at the now disarmed servant.

"I don't suppose there's any chance of a cup of caf while we take a look around is there?" he asked.

Kay Laren was walking towards the mansion of Lady Sharva where she lived and worked when she heard the sound of the personnel carrier breaking down the front gates and she broke into a run, hurrying to see what was happening. Lady Sharva had sent her out on an errand to deliver a message in person to another Member of Parliament who lived nearby and so she had not been in the building when Garm and Vay arrived. But as she got closer to the end of the driveway she could see that something was definitely amiss. The twisted remains of the gate lay on the drive the guard stationed there was just staring in the direction of the house even though it was not visible from the gate.

"What happened?" Kay called out to him as she ran up to the gateway.

"The ISB just turned up." he replied, "I let two agents up to the house while the rest waited here to stop me calling ahead. Then all of a sudden they just crashed a tank through the gate and all followed it up the drive."

"The ISB? What did they want?" Kay asked.

"It didn't make any sense. They said something about harbouring rebels. But her lady ship wouldn't have rebels in the house. There must be some mistake."

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Kay muttered.

"What was that?" the guard asked.

"I said, yes, someone's made a mistake alright. A very big mistake." Kay said before she turned around and started to run as fast as she could.

"Kay? Kay where are you going?" the guard called out after her but she did not reply.

Jenessa had just got home from the university when her communicator sounded and she hurried to answer it.

"Hello?" she said as she activated the device and then she smiled when she saw Kay's face on the screen,

"Kay, what can I do for you?"

"You need to get out." Kay exclaimed.

"Wait slow down. Now what's wrong?"

"I just got back to Lady Sharva's and the ISB were there searching the place. For harbouring rebels I was told. That must mean me."

Jenessa frowned.

"But that can't be." she said, "Lady Sharva's protected isn't she? Her relationship with Moff Horatian-"

"Obviously we thought wrong." Kay interrupted, "And if the ISB search my room then they're bound to find all the recordings and notes from my practice sessions with you and Criston. That means they'll be after you next. Assuming they aren't already."

"Okay. I'll grab some stuff and meet you. Where are you now?"

"In a com booth in the cantina by the river."

"Okay I'll be there in half an hour." Jenessa said before shutting off the communicator. Then she exhaled loudly and placed her head in her hands, "Oh kriff no." she said to herself. From the moment she had discovered that people she had associated with were members of the Alliance to Restore the Republic Jenessa had feared the moment that she was discovered by the Empire and targeted for arrest. But she knew that time was off the essence and she needed to act quickly. Therefore, she rushed into her bedroom where she went to her closet to grab a lightweight holdall. Then she headed to the drawers beside her bed and opened the top one. Inside this was a slug thrower pistol that she carried on field expeditions, finding the obsolete weapon useful for scaring off wildlife thanks to the incredibly loud noise it produced when fired. There had been occasions on which she had been required to use the weapon to defend herself as well though and seeing the possibility of this happening again she picked up one of the speed loaders she kept in the same drawer and inserted it into the cylinder of the handgun. She then tucked the weapon under her jacket before loading the rest of the ammunition along with a few other belongings that she considered could come in useful into the bag.

The final item that Jenessa picked up to take with her was also the one that she regarded as the most important. Many years earlier she had found the crystalline cube on a dig and recognised it as a holocron, an advanced data storage device. The holocron had refused to function however, until Kay had handled it. It was after this that the holocron had been revealed to be not just a normal data storage device, but a jedi

holocron that had been created by the Jedi knight Criston Harsis thousands of years earlier. Triggered by Kay's sensitivity to the Force the holocron's guardian, an artificial intelligence based up the long dead Jedi himself had begun trying to train Kay in how to harness her latent abilities. Jenessa then left the house. For a moment she was about to head for the garage where her landspeeder was kept but then she thought better of it. If the Empire was hunting her then it would not take much effort to track her using traffic monitoring cameras programmed to search for her speeder's licence plate. Therefore, although the cantina by the river was a considerable distance away from her home Jenessa started her journey on foot believing it better to be late than arrested.

3.

Lady Sharva glared at the ISB personnel as they searched through her home. Thankfully, although they apparently had permission to search any areas they wanted they had so far restricted their intrusion to the areas used by the serving staff, especially Kay.

"You're enjoying this aren't you Agent Larcus?" she said.

"I approach every case with the same dispassionate attitude." Garm replied.

Deceit.

Vay smiled as she approached Garm with a datapad she had just discovered concealed in Kay's quarters and sensed him lying.

Vay you don't have to do this.

Ignoring the voice in the Force that belonged to the spirit of a long dead ancestor of hers, a jedi called Lara, Vay walked right up to Garm and held out the datapad.

"I think you should see this." she said, "It's cued up and ready to go."

Garm looked at the display and saw that it had been set to replay a video clip. He held the datapad so that it was angled to allow Lady Sharva to see the screen as well without it being obvious that that was what he was doing and started the clip.

Two people were visible in the frame, Kay and Jenessa, and in addition to this there was a male voice speaking.

"Concentrate." it said, "Focus your thoughts on the glass."

"I'm trying." Kay replied.

"There is no try. There is only do or do not." the off camera voice said.

"That's a jedi saying." Vay commented, "Now watch carefully." and as Garm continued to watch the video while Lady Sharva peered past him he saw that the glass of water shown on a table in the video began to rise up into the air without any indication of anyone being responsible.

"I did it!" Kay called out in the video and Jenessa was shown to flinch as Kay's concentration broke and caused the glass to drop, spilling its contents over the table before then falling to the floor and smashing.

"That's enough for today I think." Jenessa said, "I think we should take a break while I still have some glassware left." and the video showed her getting up and walking out of shot.

"Now wait for this." Vay said and then when Jenessa reappeared in shot she was holding a small crystalline cube that fit neatly in her hand, "There." Vay exclaimed, reaching out to pause the video, "Right there in her hand. That's a holocron. When we've spoken with Doctor Drame in the past she's had that on her desk. She said it was just a damaged data holocron but its obviously much, much more."

Garm looked at Lady Sharva who was staring at the datapad still in shock.

"Well Lady Sharva," he said, "it appears that your handmaiden is not only a rebel terrorist but a jedi as well. Can you tell us where she is?"

"I – I sent her on an errand." Lady Sharva replied, "I needed her to deliver a message for me."

"I hope it wasn't anything classified." Vay commented, "Passing secrets to the rebellion really wouldn't look good for you right now."

"I had no idea about any of this." Lady Sharva protested loudly.

"Of course you didn't." Garm said, "We can often be blind to the crimes of those closest to us and it would be unreasonable to hold people legally responsible for what someone else did. Wouldn't you agree Lady Sharva?"

Pleasure.

Garm smiled and Vay knew that he had chosen his words very carefully. She had repeatedly attempted to make the case that Garm must have known about his father's rebel sympathies and that he should be removed from duty as a result of this. Now the shoe was on the other foot though and Garm was well within his rights to arrest every member of the household on the spot as suspected rebels. But Vay sensed that he did not intend to do this, instead he intended to hold this over Lady Sharva for as long as he could.

"Put out an alert for Kay Laren, handmaiden to Lady Lynn Sharva of the Estranian Parliament." Garm said to Vay, making the statement sound as formal as possible, "Make sure that the fugitive is listed as being wanted for treason against the Empire and that she is possibly a jedi who should be treated as incredibly dangerous."

Lady Sharva scowled as Vay took out her own datapad and began to input what Garm was saying word for word. By the time this bulletin was distributed to every single Imperial and Estranian law enforcement and military body on the planet her name would be on permanent record as being associated with a traitor and suspected jedi.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Lady Sharva muttered as she considered the implications when her

term in Parliament expired and she sought re-election.

"What was that?" Garm asked, "Something you'd like to add Lady Sharva?"

"No." Lady Sharva replied, "Nothing at all."

"Then I suggest that you tell us exactly where it was you sent your handmaiden with this message." Garm said, "If you're lucky we may be able to intercept her quickly."

"We need to hurry." Garm said when the guard at the now ruined gate told him and Vay that Kay had fled when he had explained the destruction of the gate to her, "If she warns Doctor Drame before we can reach her then we'll lose them both."

"Do we search her home or office?" Vay asked.

"We'll take her office. Send another unit to her home." Garm replied as he accelerated their speeder away from Lady Sharva's home, heading for the university.

Given that they were wearing their ISB uniforms on this occasion as they arrived on campus and headed for the historical studies unit that included the xenoarchaeology department Garm and Vay attracted a number of nervous stares from both students and staff as well as several muttered insults from some of the more foolhardy ones.

"May I help you?" a diminutive avian being asked as he hurried towards the two agents.

Fear.

Vay sensed that the individual was afraid. However, there was little unusual about this, most people were when unexpectedly confronted by the ISB.

"Who are you?" Garm asked. He knew that the being was one of the mrisi species but did not know the individual.

"I believe this is Professor Pawecki." Vay said, "We've met before."

"That is correct." the professor replied, "Professor Nerak Pawecki. I head the historical studies unit here at the university."

"We are here to see Doctor Jenessa Drame." Garm told him.

"Then you are too late." the professor replied, "She has already gone home for the day."

Time for you to leave as well then. No sense in looking for someone that isn't here.

"We'll just take a look at her office then." Vay said, guessing that Lara did not want her and Garm to be successful in this case.

"I'm not sure that-" Professor Pawecki began before Garm interrupted him.

"How exactly did someone such as yourself get the position you now hold professor?" he asked and Professor Pawecki knew exactly what Garm really meant – why was an alien the head of a department when the Empire favoured humans so strongly.

Fear.

The implied threat to the professor's position was clear and Vay sensed that he knew it as well.

"If you'd like to come with me." Professor Pawecki said, "I'll show you the way." and he turned around to lead the two agents to Jenessa's office despite both of them already knowing the direction to take, having been there before when seeking her assistance.

The office was empty when they arrived and Professor Pawecki let them in using his master pass code.

"I need to see what's on her computer." Garm said, pointing to the terminal on Jenessa's desk, "Then I'll have to ask you to wait here. Just to make certain you can't tell anyone about what we're doing you understand."

The professor nodded nervously, activating the computer using his personal access code that now gave Garm and Vay access to all of Jenessa's files.

"I'll do it." Vay said, sitting down in front of the computer and she started by accessing the messaging system.

Most of the messages that Jenessa had received were from other members of staff or students and for now Vay ignored them, it would have taken far too long to search through them all. But there were messages that had arrived from outside the university as well. Unsurprisingly a large number of these came from Kay but there were also a considerable number from an individual named Thracken Grammel and Vay turned her attention to these.

"Professor do you know a Thracken Grammel?" she asked.

"I'm afraid I do." Professor Pawecki replied, "He's just a crazy old man."

"Explain." Garm said.

"He harassed Doctor Drame for some time, even turning up at the university yelling about bizarre things going on in the nebula. Then for some reason she suddenly stopped ignoring his messages and as I heard she began to meet with him.

"Well she's also set up a filter to collect his messages together." Vay commented, "And not so they can be auto-deleted either."

"What's in them?" Garm asked.

"Looks like co-ordinates." Vay answered, "Spatial co-ordinates I'd say. Out in the Spire Worlds and the nebula itself."

"Just where the rebellion would be hiding." Garm said and he looked at Professor Pawecki again, "Professor, do you happen to know if this Mister Grammel owns a starship?"

"I believe he does. A rather old model mind you, but I do recall someone mentioning that he had one."

Garm looked back towards Vay.

"I think we just found another member of this rebel cell." he told her.

Kay had acquired a hooded cloak and was using it to conceal her features as she sat in a shadowy corner of the cantina and watched the entrance. She had expected Jenessa to arrive well before now but so far there was no sign of her and Kay was starting to worry that the Empire had caught up with her already.

"You going to just sit there all night with that same drink?" one of the cantina staff asked as she walked over to Kay's table. The staff were used to people waiting for someone else and not wanting to be recognised but most tended to at least order drinks regularly.

"I'm fine thanks." Kay replied.

"Yeah, well my manager isn't." the woman replied, "Buy something or get out."

Kay considered getting the cheapest drink she could, but on the other hand she did not want to risk spending any more of the meagre amount of money she had been able to escape with. So instead she got to her feet and headed for the exit. Even if she could not wait for Jenessa inside Kay decided that there was nothing to stop her from waiting for her on the street outside instead. However, as it happened there did turn out to be a downside after all.

It was starting to get dark when Kay left the cantina and standing on the street waiting for Jenessa she found herself being approached by beings mistaking her for one of the prostitutes that frequented the area. Most of these went away quickly when Kay turned down their often crude offers, many of them responding with obscenities, but after about an hour Kay was approached by a group of young men who had just exited the same cantina Kay had been forced to leave who were not impressed by her rejection of them and she turned to leave, reasoning that she could come back to find Jenessa later.

"Hey! Where do you think you're going?" one of the men called out and Kay saw that they were beginning to follow her. In most areas of the city she would have been confident that the presence of a crowd would guarantee her safety, but no here and she picked up her pace.

"Come back here!" another of the men called out as they started to follow her.

"Just leave me alone." Kay responded but the group continued to get closer.

All of a sudden she felt a hand on her shoulder that turned her around to find herself staring into the face of one of the group and she flinched at the smell of his breath. But before he could even speak there was an almighty 'Boom!' and the group turned to see Jenessa turning her slug thrower away from the river she had discharged it into and aiming it at them instead.

"I believe the lady said 'No.'" she said, "Now back off." and she motioned with the muzzle of the weapon for them to move. Startled by the sound of the firearm, something few people ever heard on modern worlds, and not wanting to challenge a woman carrying a weapon while they were unarmed the men released Kay and backed away. Jenessa then beckoned Kay towards her, "Come on, let's get out of here." she said, "Even around here I think firing a slugthrower into the river is going to attract the attention of the police." and Kay nodded in agreement before they both started to hurry away, looking back over their shoulders at the group of men that appeared to have decided against pursuing them further.

"What took you so long?" Kay asked as they ran.

"I couldn't risk taking my speeder. The Empire could track it so I had to walk." Jenessa replied, "So I hope we find somewhere we can stop for a rest soon because I'm already exhausted after all that."

4.

Thracken woke to the sound of his ship's communication system activating. Rather than go the expense of obtaining a residence on Estran or any of the other worlds in the sector, Thracken preserved his meagre finances by living aboard the scout ship, an obsolete Vangaard Industries pathfinder-class vessel. In addition to this he never docked his ship at any of the major starports, preferring the smaller independent facilities that although lacking in many amenities charged much lower fees. Fortunately he was skilled enough to be able to keep his ship just about flyable without needing to hire others to do the work for him.

"H-Hello?" he stammered, not yet fully awake as he answered the call. The call was audio only so for the time being he had no idea who was on the other end of the channel. For anyone to be calling him at all was unusual in itself.

"Thracken it's me." Jenessa said.

"A-ha!" he exclaimed, smiling, "Yes, yes it is."

"Look Thracken, Kay and I need your help getting off world. The Empire's after us and we can't risk taking any public transport. Can you hire a speeder and come get us?"

"A speeder? Yes a speeder. I can do that." Thracken replied, "In fact I can do that right now. No wait."

"What's wrong?" Jenessa asked.

"I don't know where you are." Thracken replied.

"Still in the capital." Jenessa told him, "We're right outside the main monorail terminal but we need to move. There are too many cameras around here. Do you know the club district just next to the university campus?"

"Yes. Wait no. No I never go there."

"But you know where it is?" Jenessa asked.

"Yes, I know."

"Good. Then we'll meet you there. Just drive around until you find us."

Thracken smiled.

"Yes, yes. I'll see you there." and then he shut off the communication channel.

Meanwhile outside the main monorail terminal in the capital Kay looked at Jenessa.

"Really?" she said, "We're trusting him to save us?"

"If not for him you'd still be plugged into an alien space station's control system. Just remember that." Jenessa replied.

"Maybe so. But I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"Garm we've found him!" Vay exclaimed and Garm turned towards her. After identifying Thracken as a suspect the pair had returned to ISB headquarters to directly oversee the search for him and now it seemed that their search had had the results they wanted.

"Where?" Garm asked, leaping out of his chair.

"His ship is currently at a landing field six hundred kilometres from here." Vay told him, passing him a datapad that showed the official landing record and customs approval.

"No home address?" Garm said and Vay shook her head.

"Seven hundred or so male humans named Thracken Grammel on Estran but our target's description doesn't appear to have a registered address. I guess he must live aboard that ship of his." she told him.

"Or he lives on a rebel safe world and only comes here to cause mischief." Garm suggested, "Okay we'll need a tactical team and a shuttle. We can be at that landing field in thirty minutes."

The tactical team consisted of a platoon of COMPForce Assault troopers drawn from the pool available in the capital building and Garm was easily able to requisition the use of a standard lambda-class shuttle. Though not intended as an assault shuttle it was still well armed and Garm doubted that they would need anything more powerful.

The quickest way to reach the landing field where Thracken's vessel was located was for the pilot to take the shuttle out of Estran's atmosphere into space where he could engage the main ion drive, taking the vessel around the planet until it was in position to re-enter the atmosphere and descend directly to the landing field. Garm sat in the cockpit as the shuttle descended and using its external cameras he soon spotted Thracken's pathfinder on the ground below.

"Looks like it's powered down." he said, noting the absence of any lights coming from the interior, "Take us down over it to make sure he can't take off."

"Yes sir." the pilot replied and Garm got up and headed into the passenger compartment behind the cockpit where Vay and the troopers waited.

"Platoon ready to deploy." the captain in charge of the troopers said, snapping to attention.

"Excellent Captain Layne." Garm replied, "We won't be setting down though. Your men will have to deploy from the air."

"Yes sir." Layne said and he looked at his men, "Okay you heard the agent. Stand by with descent cables." The shuttle descended over the landing field, lights underneath the hull illuminating the ground below as it hovered directly above Thracken's ship, its large wings folding up against the hull and tail. Then instead of the access ramp normally used for personnel to embark and disembark from the shuttle a series of cargo hatches in the underside opened up and syntherope lines dropped down from each of them.

It was then that the white armoured COMPForce Assault troopers emerged, sliding down the lines that they grasped with one hand while holding their compact blaster rifles with their stocks folded in the other. Some of the troopers landed on top of the scout ship while others landed beside it and they all swiftly moved to block the hatches. Only then did Garm and Vay appear, wearing blast vests over their tunics and sliding down lines to land beside the scout ship.

"Move in." Garm ordered as he unhooked himself from the line and drew his blaster.

Immediately two of the COMPForce troopers rushed to the primary hatch and quickly fixed a flexible shaped charge strip to the edge of the hatch before standing back and triggering it. There was a sudden flash as the explosive went off, its entire stored energy directed into the hatch and burning through it in moments. Then there was a sudden 'Crash!' as the hatch fell inwards and a squad of the troopers swarmed into the scout ship, spreading out to search every compartment while their comrades remained outside to ensure that no one was able to escape through any other hatches and also to keep any onlookers back. Though given that the assault was taking place in the middle of the night there were precious few of those around.

"The ship is empty captain." one of the troopers announced as he exited Thracken's ship, "We missed him."

"Could he have known we were coming?" Vay asked, looking at Garm.

"We didn't know ourselves until about half an hour ago." he replied. Then he turned to Captain Layne, "Captain I want you and your men to remain here just in case Mister Grammel returns. If he does then I want him arrested. In the meantime Agent Udra and myself will return to headquarters."

5.

The club district had grown up from a handful of small cantinas to become an area packed with places to go for entertainment aimed primarily at the local student population. On any night of the week the area would be crowded with frequently intoxicated students and the number of occasions on which public surveillance cameras had been vandalised had led the authorities to simply stop replacing them. Few of the crimes that were committed here were deterred or solved because of the cameras so they were seen as an unnecessary expenditure.

Jenessa especially looked out of place here though, considering that she was far older than the students who visited the area while Kay was not dressed like a young person out to have a good time. But apart from a few odd looks the club goers did not bother them as they waited for Thracken to arrive.

When he did finally reach the club district his arrival was not exactly inconspicuous and Jenessa and Kay heard the sound of jeering along with an exceptionally noisy repulsorlift engine.

"Kay, remember that bad feeling you had about relying on Thracken?" Jenessa said, "Well I've got it as well now." and then around the corner Thracken appeared at the controls of a landspeeder that had clearly seen better days. The housing for one of the engine pods was missing and smoke could be seen coming out of the engine itself in regular spurts, leaving a trail in the air behind it.

"Jenessa!" Thracken called out when he saw her and Kay standing on the kerb and he waved towards them.

"Oh why did he have to do that?" Kay muttered.

"It's not like anyone will remember." Jenessa replied as Thracken pulled up alongside them.

"I found you at last." he said, smiling, "Quick, get in."

"You came in this?" Kay commented, "It's a piece of junk."

"But it was cheap." Thracken replied, "Not the sort of thing to attract attention."

"Not unless we're being pursued by the Imperial hygiene police." Kay replied.

"Oh just get in." Jenessa responded as she tossed her bag into the back of the landspeeder before getting into the front beside Thracken while Kay climbed into the back.

"Can we just get out of here?" Kay asked.

"Hang on while I adjust this seat." Jenessa said as she hunted for the control to make the seat more comfortable. But there was a sudden 'Snap!' and all of a sudden it dropped, "Oh just go." she said and Thracken accelerated. Immediately there was a loud growling sound, accompanied by a rattle from somewhere inside one of the engine pods.

"So how long until we reach your ship?" Jenessa shouted over the noise of the engines.

"About four or five hours depending." Thracken replied.

"On traffic?" Kay commented.

"No, whether we break down." Thracken said and his two passengers exchanged nervous glances.

"Didn't you think about getting a speeder with a roof Thracken?" Jenessa asked, "What if we're spotted on cameras?"

"Or what if it rains?" Kay added.

"Oh, it has a roof." Thracken replied, "Or at least it had one. I'll point it out when drive past the spot where it fell off on the way."

"Oh I really do have a bad feeling about this." Kay commented.

The sun had risen by the time Thracken's speeder neared the landing field and he saw a figure waving at him from the roadside.

"What are you doing?" Jenessa asked as he started to pull over.

"Don't worry. He's my friend." Thracken replied.

"Well you can waste time with your friends later. We need to get out of here." Jenessa said.

"Thracken!" the figure called out. The man was an elderly looking bith.

"Zeddan." Thracken replied, "How are you?"

"Better than you." his bith friend answered and Thracken frowned.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"The Empire is here because of you." Zeddan said, "I watched from my window last night as they hovered over the landing field and raided your ship. You best get out of here Thracken, there are still some around waiting for you."

"Oh." Thracken responded and his face fell.

"So now what do we do?" Kay asked.

"We need to find another way off Estran." Jenessa said, "For all three of us now. Thracken do you know anyone else with a ship?" but Thracken just shook his head.

"So who else can help us?" Kay asked.

"There's a guy that helped Vorn out when he was looking for the people that killed his first wife." Jenessa said, "But he's a criminal and I doubt we could afford what he'd charge and the last thing we need is to be in debt to him. Vorn had another contact as well, but he's pretty high up in local society and I don't think he or Vorn would appreciate us leading the Empire to his door."

"So who else is there?" Kay asked, "We need someone who can either get us travel passes off world or can find us a ship." and Jenessa smiled.

"I think I know just the person." she said, "She doesn't have a ship but if anyone can find one then it's her. Thracken we need to get back to the capital. Then we have a meeting with someone at Kurrad Industries."

Kurrad Industries was the largest multi-planetary corporation based in the sector, built from scratch by Edvars Kurrad. But it was not the multi-trillionaire that the trio of renegades had come to see. In fact both Jenessa and Kay were keen to avoid being seen by him just in case he recognised either of them from the handful of occasions when he had met them at university fundraisers or in meetings between himself and Lady Sharva. Instead they waited close by the headquarters of Kurrad Industries for one of the technical staff to leave at the end of her shift.

"There." Jenessa said when she saw a particular blonde human woman exit the building and head for the closest monorail terminal, "Thracken, follow the monorail so we can see where she gets off." and Thracken nodded before riving off

"Who is she?" Kay asked from the back seat.

"Emissi Caysa." Jenessa replied, "Technical support specialist by day and data-thief by night. Vorn wanted me to pay her for some information once but the deal went sour."

"Why?" Kay said.

"Because she won't work for governments or the Alliance. She thought I was working for someone close to the planetary government so she sent me away. Now though, if we can find out where she lives then I'm sure we can get the information we need from her."

"But won't she want paying?" Kay asked.

"I don't have much money left." Thracken commented, "My savings were in my ship."

"Oh don't worry about that." Jenessa said, "I'm planning on offering to pay her by offering to withhold something that she doesn't want."

"What?" Kay asked.

"A beating." Jenessa replied.

When Emissi arrived at her apartment block she went inside unaware that she had been followed all the way home.

"Are you ready?" Jenessa asked and Thracken nodded.

"Oh wait." he said suddenly, "What if the comm isn't labelled?"

"Then come back here and we'll figure something out." Jenessa told him.

"Okay. Fine." Thracken replied and he headed for the entrance to the apartment building.

Beside the main door he saw an intercom and listed beside each button was an apartment number and a name. Thracken read down the list until he came to one that just said 'Caysa' and pushed the button bedside it.

"Hang on." a voice said suddenly from the intercom unit. Then after a short pause Emissi continued with,

"Okay you got me. I just got back from work. What do you want?"

"Odras Balve said I should see you." Thracken said.

"I don't know who you're talking about." Emissi replied, "I'm hanging up now and-"

"I have cash." Thracken said, reaching into his pocket.

"Step back and hold it up." Emissi told him and Thracken did as he as told. As he held up what cash he had on him he looked up and saw the security camera looking down at him, "Okay come on up." Emissi told him and there was a buzzing sound before the door slid open.

Thracken stepped into the doorway and placed his hand over the proximity sensor to hold it open while Jenessa and Kay both hurried from the speeder into the lobby of the apartment block before he released it and the door dropped shut.

"Apartment seventy-four." Thracken said.

"Okay now go on ahead. We'll follow." Jenessa replied and Thracken nodded before heading for the turbolift.

Thracken made his way up to Emissi's floor and quickly located her apartment where he found another intercom by the door and he pressed the buzzer.

"It's me." he said, "You told me to come up."

"You armed?" Emissi asked.

"Yes." Thracken answered.

"Place it on the floor and step back." Emissi told him and Thracken reached under his long coat to remove

his blaster pistol and carbine, laying both weapons on the floor by the door and stepping backwards. Then the door slid open to reveal Emissi with a compact pistol in her hand, pointed at Thracken.

"Don't shoot." Thracken said, raising his hands.

"A girl can't be too careful." Emissi said as she picked up the two blasters on the floor one at a time, ejected their power packs and placed them in a closet just inside her apartment, "And I'd say you like to be careful as well from the look of these." Then after closing and locking the closet she put her own weapon away, "Okay you can come in now." she said, turning around and beckoning Thracken to follow her into her apartment. Emissi led him to her living room where the most prominent piece of furniture was a desk with a computer terminal on it. Thracken also saw what looked like an R2 astromech droid beside the desk, its domed head turning to follow Thracken. The droid was more than just an astromech however, having been extensively refitted for infiltrating computer networks above all else. The modifications were completely illegal of course, but then so was everything else that Emissi offered.

"Don't mind Sneaky." Emissi said as she sat at the desk, "He doesn't bite." and the droid whistled.

"I'm looking for a ship." Thracken said.

"Straight to the point. Good." Emissi said, "So which ship do you want to find?"

"Any that I can use to get off world." Thracken told her, "I've run into some trouble."

"I don't care why you want it." Emissi said, "I just need to know what you want and I'll tell you how much it will cost." then she turned to her terminal, "I take it that you're not after a ship you can charter." she added and Thracken shook his head, "No. Didn't think so. So you need a ship with interstellar capability that you can take control of." she continued. Then she nodded, "Okay I think I can do this. Now to the price."

"I have two thousand credits." Thracken said.

"Two thousand? Are you kidding?" Emissi exclaimed, "You expect me to help you steal a ship that will probably worth more than a hundred thousand credits and you expect me to do it for a paltry two thousand. I tell you what though, I'll take that as a down payment. But I expect another ten thousand on completion. Deal?"

"Yes, yes of course. Deal." Thracken replied, and he put the money down on the desk beside Emissi. Before she got to her feet and looked at him.

"Okay now it's time for you to get going." she said, "Call me in twenty four hours and I'll let you know if I've got anything for you."

"Yes, yes of course." Thracken replied as Emissi led him back to the front door.

"I'll thank you not to load these until you're outside though." Emissi added as she unlocked the closet to remove Thracken's blasters. But while she was distracted doing this she failed to notice him step towards the front door and open it, "You? What the hell?" she exclaimed as the door slid open and she saw Jenessa and Kay standing right outside, recognising Jenessa. Having not activated the intercom the two women had also not activated the security camera that would have allowed Emissi to see them waiting in the hallway outside.

"Now!" Jenessa yelled.

Emissi was caught holding two useless blasters, their power packs still on a shelf in the closet and both Jenessa and Kay lunged towards her, pinning her to the wall as Thracken closed the door behind them.

"There's a droid." he said.

"Deal with it." Jenessa told him as his weapons were knocked from Emissi's hands. Picking up the carbine Thracken grabbed a power pack and loaded it as he rushed into the lounge and took aim at Sneaky.

"Don't move!" he snapped and the little droid shrieked as it saw the weapon pointed at it.

"Sneaky no!" Emissi called out.

"Unless you want him to fry your droid tell it shut down." Kay told Emissi.

"Just blast it." Jenessa added as she searched Emissi and found her hold out blaster, pulling it out and pointing it at the other woman.

"Sneaky close down." Emissi yelled, "Maximum power conservation." and the droid let out a low tone as it closed down.

"It's shut down." Thracken said, "Do I shoot it?"

"Yes." Jenessa replied.

"No!" Emissi replied, "Look, I'll find the data you want and you can have your money back. But don't hurt me and don't hurt Sneaky."

"Sounds like a good deal." Kay said, looking at Jenessa.

"Yeah, right up to the point when she leads us into a trap." Jenessa replied, "Thracken, what's shown on her computer monitor at the moment?"

"A list." Thracken replied, "A list of starships I think."

"Good. Then I ought to be able to do this myself." Jenessa said and she stared at Emissi, "All we need to do is keep you quiet for a while."

"How long has it been since you got any sleep?" Vay asked Garm as he studied the monitors on the wall.

"You should know." he replied, "You were there."

"Yes I was." Vay said, smiling, "But don't you think that you should take a break? This Thracken Grammel may have abandoned his ship for all we know."

"No." Garm said, "He'll be back for it I'm certain. Then we'll have him and he'll lead us to the other traitors."
He thinks they'll lead him to his father.

"Do you think that they'll lead you to your father?" Vay asked and Garm frowned.

"Are you reading my mind?" he asked her in return.

"No." Vay replied, "I just know you too well."

Oh so now it's you that figured that out is it?

6.

Jenessa studied the list of starships closely. Unfortunately Emissi had not narrowed down the parameters of her search before the fugitives had forced their way into her apartment and taken it over. At this moment Emissi herself sat on the couch, her body from the waist to the neck completely wrapped in tape while more had been used to bind her legs and seal her mouth. This was not stopping her from squirming but it was keeping her quiet and out of the way.

"Found anything yet?" Kay asked.

"Maybe." Jenessa said, "The problem is that although this list tells me a ship's registration details and where it's located it doesn't tell me anything about what sort of security the crew has in place."

"So what about a ship without a crew?" Kay suggested.

"Like what?" Jenessa asked.

"Well a brand new ship wouldn't have a crew yet would it?" Thracken suggested, "Something nice."

"Something nice? Really?" Jenessa commented, "How about a luxury yacht with a built in hot tub?"

"That would be nice." Kay said and Jenessa groaned. Then she smiled, "Wait a minute." she said and she turned back to the computer.

"What?" Kay asked.

"We're missing the obvious here." Jenessa replied and she looked at Emissi, "Her." and Emissi suddenly stopped struggling and let out a muffled grunt, "She works for Kurrad Industries right? And they have their own fleet of ships. Freighters, tankers, executive shuttles the works. So maybe we can use her access to see if there's one of their ships available and exactly how well guarded it is." then she turned back to the computer and closed down the list of starships at government and commercial landing sites and instead opened up the clearly marked area of the computer where Emissi had set up a permanent link to her employer's network, "Very nice." Jenessa said, "She's got all of the access details saved. I don't have to try and figure out her password." and Emissi shook her head and squealed, knowing that the unauthorised access could be traced right back to her home.

"There!" Thracken exclaimed as he looked over Jenessa's shoulder and he pointed to the display.

"What is it?" Kay said, taking a look for herself.

"A long range shuttle held on standby on the roof of Kurrad Industries headquarters." Jenessa said, "The pilot will be in the building not the shuttle, waiting to meet his next passengers."

"Which will be us right?" Kay asked.

"Sort of. Only we don't need a pilot because we have one of our own." Jenessa replied and she looked at Thracken and smiled at him.

"Oh yes. That's me." he said, also smiling.

"What about her?" Kay added, looking around at Emissi, "Do we just leave her here like this?" and upon hearing this Emissi shook her head again and tried to protest, knowing that in her current state it could be some time before she was freed.

"I'm not keen on the idea of leaving someone to potentially die of dehydration." Jenessa replied and Emissi shook her head again.

"So what if we remove her gag so she can call for help?" Kay suggested and Emissi nodded in agreement.

"No good." Jenessa said, "If she's freed before we can get away then she'll tip off the Empire to where we are."

"She knows how to get through Kurrad Industries security." Thracken commented.

"Yes she does." Jenessa agreed, "So she's coming with us. Bring the droid as well. We may need it to slice their system if things go bad."

It was dark again by the time the group reached the headquarters of Kurrad Industries. They left the speeder out of sight so that its condition would not attract the attention of the security staff on duty and approached the building on foot.

"Just remember that we're your friends." Jenessa whispered into Emissi's ears. The data thief was now wearing Kay's cloak though the hood was down so that her face was recognisable. This was so that the others could move her around in public without anyone noticing that her torso was still wrapped in tape. Meanwhile her Kurrad Industries identity card was pinned to the cloak so that it was clearly visible.

"Friends who are sticking my own blaster in my back." Emissi commented, acknowledging the presence of the weapon in Jenessa's hand that was pressed against the small of her back.

"Call it insurance to guarantee the good behaviour of you and your droid." Jenessa told her.

There was a security droid positioned outside the main door and as the group approached it immediately saw the identity card and scanned it.

"Good evening Miss Caysa. What is the purpose of your after hours visit?" the machine asked.

"I'm escorting contractors to the network hub on level five." Emissi replied.

"Negative." the droid replied, "I have no record of such access having been granted."

"The hub on level five is corrupted." Emissi said as she felt Jenessa press her blaster against her even harder, "It has affected the security database. Accept my override trill herf xesh one one three eight."

"Override accepted." the droid said and the door slid open.

Entering the lobby of the building the group was immediately confronted by a pair of organic security guards sat behind the reception desk. Both looked up lazily but did not react any further. As far as they were concerned the security droid outside had allowed them access so their presence here must be authorised and the group simply headed straight for the turbolift.

"How about you untie me now?" Emissi asked when they were inside and the turbolift was moving.

"What? And let you activate some hidden alarm we don't know anything about?" Jenessa asked, "Not likely."

"I need to pee." Emissi said.

"Nobody's stopping you." Jenessa said, "Just don't get any on my shoes. They're new." and Emissi scowled.

The turbolift opened onto a lavishly decorated waiting room that had one wall made entirely from transparent material. This offered anyone in the room a clear view of the landing pad outside and of the modified lambda-class shuttle that sat on it illuminated by spotlights pointing upwards. Unlike the standard Imperial version of the shuttle this example was unarmed, obviously intended only to carry its passengers into areas considered safe.

"There she is." Jenessa said, "Our way off planet."

"What's going on here?" a voice asked and the group all turned to see the shuttle's pilot, a man wearing a flight suit obviously designed to make him blend in with well dressed passengers.

"We're here to inspect the shuttle." Emissi said, "Someone reported a fault in-"

"Like kriff they did." the pilot exclaimed in language that he obviously would not use in front of his passengers, "There's nothing wrong with it."

"Go!" Jenessa snapped and she aimed the holdout blaster towards the pilot and fired. However, being used to her slugthrower instead of a blaster, combined with the hold out blaster's poor accuracy at anything other than point blank range meant that the energy blast sailed past the pilot to strike the wall behind him.

"Security!" the pilot yelled into his comlink as he dived for cover, "Emergency in the departure lounge."

Meanwhile the fugitives broke into a run, dragging Emissi along with them as they headed for the shuttle as quickly as they could. They were just racing up the access ramp when two armed guards appeared out of the turbolift and started to chase after them along with the pilot.

"Thracken get us in the air quick." Jenessa said as she closed the access ramp behind them and he rushed to the pilot's seat. However, as he sat down his face fell.

"Oh no." he said.

"What's wrong?" Kay asked.

"The controls are locked." Thracken replied.

"Stang." Jenessa hissed, "Can you bypass the lockout?" but Thracken shook his head as shots from blaster pistols struck the outside of the cockpit canopy.

"Untie me." Emissi said, "I can do it."

"What?" Jenessa exclaimed, "Why should we trust you?"

"Because thanks to you dragging me through the lobby and departure lounge my face is all over the security camera footage. Plus you accessed the network from my apartment without masking your location. That's going to lead the cops right to my front door and there's no way they won't figure out what I've been doing. Thanks to you three I'm as wanted as you are."

"Plus what choice do we have?" Kay added.

"Thracken give me your knife." Jenessa said and when he passed her his blade she quickly used it to remove the tape binding Emissi.

"Okay Sneaky we're up." Emissi said, rushing to the cockpit and sitting down beside Thracken while her droid rolled up to the control console and plugged in. Then with her droid's help Emissi located the section of computer memory where the security lockout was stored and reset it to its factory default condition, "Okay try now." she said and when Thracken tried to activate the engines there was a roar as they came on line instantly.

"It worked." he said.

"Okay now let's get out of here." Kay said excitedly and as Thracken pulled back on the control column the shuttle rose into the air.

"Sir we have reports of a shuttle being stolen from Kurrad Industries." the ISB agent who had appeared in the doorway to Garm's office said, "Security footage confirms the presence of all three suspects plus a fourth." Garm and Vay leapt up from their seats and followed the other agent to the control room where the shuttle was being tracked. Also prominently displayed on a monitor were images taken from the Kurrad Industries

security cameras that included Emissi along with personal details about her provided by Kurrad Industries' security division.

"Can the navy intercept it?" Garm asked.

"Two squadrons of TIEs are inbound now." one of the control room staff replied.

"Then we have you now." Garm said with a smile on his face.

"We've got company." Thracken said as he glanced at the sensor display.

"What sort of company?" Jenessa asked.

"Looks like TIE fighters." Thracken answered.

"Can't we just jump into hyperspace?" Kay said.

"No, we're still too close to Estran." Thracken replied.

"And this ship doesn't have any guns." Jenessa added.

"I can handle this." Emissi said suddenly.

"How?" Jenessa asked.

"Easy. Estran is orbited by thousands of satellites. Weather monitoring, communication, observation platforms and so on. But the most important are navigation satellites. Now a few years back I tried to get into the main Imperial network on Estran via the local government interfaces and failed. My attempt tipped them off to my having tried and although they never caught me they did close down the loophole I was using. But the Estranian government never did anything about it since I wasn't actually slicing their network."

"And they control the navigation satellites." Jenessa said.

"So what?" Kay asked.

"So if she can access the navigation satellites she can shut them down." Thracken responded, "Then no ships in Estran's orbital control zone will get navigational data. That'll mean that they can't be told to get out of the way of the TIE fighters."

"And that will slow them down enough for us to escape." Jenessa added, "Do it."

"Already on it." Emissi said, hurriedly working at the console to access Estran's navigation system.

"Weapons range in thirty seconds." one of the TIE squadron leaders reported as Garm and Vay waited. Behind the TIEs they knew was an Imperial cruiser that would hopefully be able to capture the shuttle with its tractor beam after the TIEs had disabled its engines. But first they had to get close enough to engage it.

"Twenty seconds to weapons -stang!" the squadron leader exclaimed.

"What's happening?" Garm demanded.

"I don't know sir." one of the controllers replied, "All of a sudden our instructions to clear the path of our fighters aren't being acknowledged by the navigation system."

"Lookout!" a pilot's voice yelled over the open communication channel, "Spacecraft in our flight path. Break off."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Vay muttered.

"It worked." Jenessa said as she looked at the sensor display and saw the chaos all around them as starships fought to be able to navigate the crowded space above Estran without the automated navigation system.

"We're clear of the gravity well." Thracken then said, "Jump co-ordinates programmed for a one light year decoy jump. Then I'll get us to Alliance headquarters."

"Alliance?" Emissi repeated.

"That's right." Jenessa said, "Congratulations, you just joined the rebellion." and then the shuttle vanished into hyperspace, leaving its Imperial pursuers far behind.