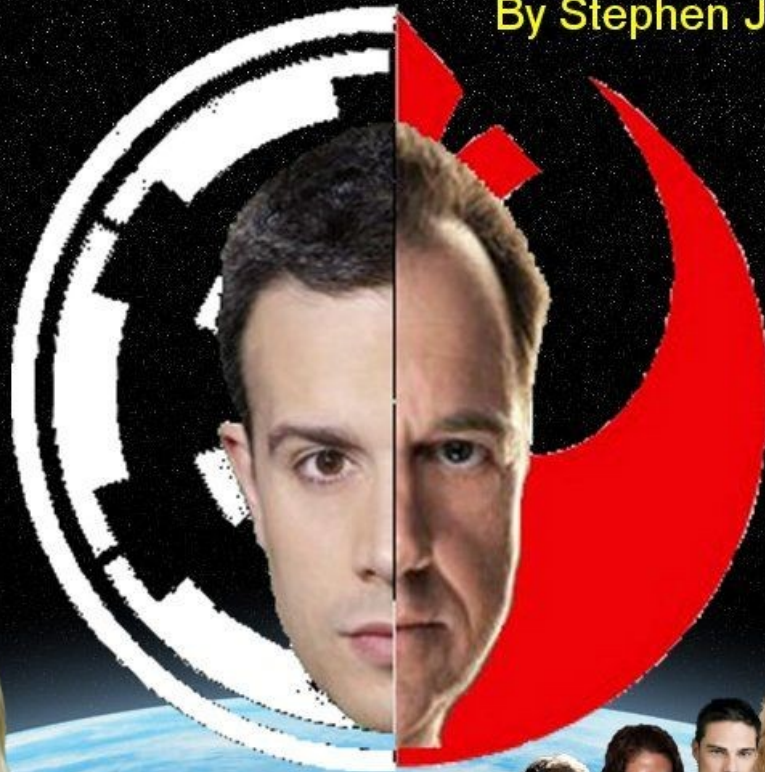


STAR WARS

4-04: 66

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...

66

WHEN A MYSTERIOUS STRANGER ARRIVES ON ESTRAN BOTH VORN LARCUS AND
HIS SON GARM FIND THEMSELVES CHASING THE SAME MAN FOR VERY DIFFERENT
REASONS. BUT IT IS VAY UDRA WHO HAS MOST TO DISCOVER...

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

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1.

A series of dull booms briefly made Kieran look up from his datapad, but as soon as he realised that the artillery barrage was outgoing he lowered his head once more.

"Getting some air Kieran?" a voice said from beside him and Kieran looked up again, slipping the datapad into his robes, "Too late. I saw."

"Master I-" Kieran said as he got to his feet, but the more senior jedi just raised his hand for quiet and looked out over the edge of the balcony set into the cliff side.

"Kieran you have served the jedi order for more than a decade as a jedi knight and your service during this war has been exemplary. But this," and he pulled Kieran's hand from inside his robes to expose the datapad, "goes against the Code."

"I love her." Kieran said.

"I know." The jedi master replied, "Everyone knows and you must know that you cannot continue to be a part of our order if you cannot operate by its rules. Attachment is forbidden. Had it not been for this war you would already have been expelled. As it is you are hereby ordered to return to Coruscant where you will-"

A sudden burst of blaster fire interrupted the jedi master and both he and Kieran heard screams.

"We're under attack!" the jedi master exclaimed as he drew his lightsaber, "The Separatists must have infiltrated a force through the caves." He turned to go back inside the base and he caught sight of a squad of clone troopers rushing towards him, "You there!" he called out, "What's happening? I heard no alert."

"There he is." The lead clone said to his men and the squad came to a halt and all raised their weapons. At the last moment the jedi master sensed the danger he was in and he raised his lightsaber. But before he could activate the weapon the clones opened fire, a barrage of blaster bolts cutting through him as he collapsed.

Shocked, Kieran pressed himself up against the wall, putting the datapad away and drawing his own lightsaber but keeping it deactivated for now. He knew that igniting it would give his presence away. He reached out through the Force but what he sensed confused him. The troopers who had just murdered the jedi master were genuine Republic clones; they had the same unanimity of thought that he had always sensed from the troops he had commanded. Then he heard them approaching the doorway.

"He's dead." A clone said, obviously referring to the jedi master at Kieran's feet, "There should be four more. We'll head down to level- Wait, there's another one here!"

Realising that he had been detected Kieran activated his lightsaber and spun into the doorway, slicing the nearest clone in half as he did.

"Open fire!" another clone yelled and Kieran ducked aside just before another volley of blaster bolts came through the door.

Kieran knew he was trapped out here on the balcony and he could sense the clones advancing. Then he noticed something odd about their thoughts. There was none of the hate or anger that he would have expected had they decided to mutiny. The killing of the jedi master had been clinical and precise, just as nearly every other action the clones had performed during the war had been. These troopers were not rogues, they were carrying out their duty and their duty now seemed to be to kill the jedi stationed here. He could try and fight them of course, but Kieran knew that even if he managed to defeat the squad now creeping towards him there were hundreds more elsewhere in the base that he could not take on even with the help of the other jedi still alive. That left only one way out.

The first clone to dive through the doorway did so just in time to see Kieran vault over the safety rail at the edge of the balcony and plunge downwards. Rushing to the rail themselves the clones looked down at the river flowing beneath them but saw no sign of the jedi.

"No one could survive a fall like that." One of them said, "Come on, there are more to be dealt with."

Beneath the balcony Kieran clung onto the support struts and waited for the clones to leave. Then he connected a grapple from his belt to one of the struts and began to unravel the synthrope from his dispenser. He looked down at the river once and then began to rappel down the cliff.

Twenty-two years later...

The crowds formed lines at the immigration checkpoints on the high altitude skyhook, all waiting to be given clearance to enter the turbolifts that would carry them down to the surface of Estran itself. As was fitting for a world largely loyal to Imperial doctrine humans and non-humans were separated into different lines, with non-humans being subjected to more checks. None complained of course, they knew that it would be futile to argue with heavily armed enforcement agents.

"Purpose of visit?" the agent asked the next man in his queue. This was a human line so most of his checks were routine and uneventful.

"Sightseeing." The man replied.

"Length of stay?"

"A month."

"Identification."

"You don't need to see my identification."

"I don't need to see your identification."

"Can I move along?"

"Move along. Move along. Next!"

Smiling Kieran walked past the desk, unnoticed by any of the guards and he made his way towards the nearest turbolift where he took a seat and avoided eye contact with anyone else.

Agent Garm Larcus of the Imperial Security Bureau was stuck in traffic. Technically he could have just increased the power to his speeder's repulsorlift engines to increase his altitude and fly above the jam, but this was a controlled flight zone where private vehicles were limited to ground level operations. He had just dropped his daughter off at school and was now attempting to get to the capital building where he worked. However, there had been an accident between what looked like two other sets of parents who were now hurling abuse at one another that they doubtless would not like their offspring to overhear or repeat and the road ahead was blocked.

A chirping sounded from the dashboard of his speeder and Garm activated the vehicle's built in communicator.

"Garm?" a familiar voice asked. This was Director Helios, the most senior member of the ISB in the sector and the man Garm reported to.

"Here sir. Stuck here in fact."

"What? Oh never mind, just get here as quick as you can. The moff's calling everyone in, all personnel, all services. Military and civilian."

"What's wrong?" Garm asked.

"Local immigration flagged up a suspect earlier today and they've passed it on to us. Looks like we've got ourselves a priority one fugitive. Briefing is in half an hour."

"I'll be there." Garm replied and he broke the link. In all of Garm's years working for the ISB he had never heard of a priority one fugitive alert in this sector and he had no intention of missing out on it. Adjusting the engines of his speeder he lifted the vehicle higher off the ground, above the level of the other vehicles around him and as irate drivers yelled at him to reduce his altitude he raced away.

The cantina was packed with the morning rush. All of the customers were human and the majority in Imperial uniforms. Located as it was just opposite the Empire's centre of operations for the sector the cantina picked up a lot of business from Imperial personnel who preferred to eat away from the building's own canteen.

Teenage waitress Cass Jungen held her datapad up for the owner to see.

"Table four Corayle," she said, "three bantha breakfast biscuits. Two with blue sauce, one plain."

"Drinks?" Corayle asked as he copied the order to his computer. The screen flickered and he frowned, slamming a fist against the side of the terminal.

"Just caf." Cass replied.

"Good." Corayle said, "This blasted machine is playing up again. They'll be lucky to get anything else."

Cass looked back at the crowd of Imperial troops.

"If this keeps up you should be able to replace it." She said. Then before her employer could reply there was a sudden chorus of bleeps, chirps and other electronically produced tones. Simultaneously all of the cantina's customers looked to their comlinks or datapads and got up. At some tables they tossed coins and banknotes onto them before leaving while at others one of the Imperials remained behind to settle the cost of the meal. From the table that Cass had just served one of the customers, a man in an army lieutenant's uniform approached her.

"Hi," he said to Cass, "look I'm sorry about this, but can I cancel that order?"

"Sure." Corayle said through the hatchway to the kitchen, "I hadn't got it into the system yet."

"Thanks." The lieutenant said, "I'm sorry about this."

"Don't worry." Corayle replied, lying and the lieutenant turned to leave. As he walked away Cass went back to clear her other tables, brushing past the officer as she went.

"If this keeps up," Corayle called out from the kitchen as Cass began to wipe down her table, "we won't be able to get that new computer."

"Don't worry I'm sure they'll be back." Cass said and she glanced down at the datapad she had managed to slip out of the lieutenant's pocket as she passed him, "And in greater numbers, you'll see." She added.

The meeting room was more crowded than Garm was used to. Typically there would be just one or two representatives from the major Imperial services present to either report to or be briefed by Moff Gregor Horatian. Today however Garm also saw representatives of Imperial customs, sector rangers as well as an assortment of local officials. Sat behind the moff as Garm and Director Helios entered the room Garm caught sight of a young blonde woman wearing a tight black bodyglove and the pair exchanged glances and smiles. This was Vay Udra; officially an intern sent here by the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order, or COMPNOR but the rumour was that she was the moff's young mistress. Garm however had worked with Vay enough to know that such tales were false.

"Of course she'd be here as well." Director Helios muttered and for a moment Garm thought he was referring to Vay. Then he saw that Gayal Tharr of Imperial Intelligence was already sat down in her usual spot. A pair of sector rangers had been stood in the way, but now that they had moved aside Garm could see both Gayal and the mysterious man who had arrived recently. According to Vay he was called Ibram and was a member of the shadowy inquisitorious.

Beside the moff sat Rodge Larrs the local head of COMPNOR and just after Garm and Director Helios took their seats he looked around.

"I think we're ready to begin." He said and he activated the holographic display in the centre of the room, "Gentlemen, ladies, this is our fugitive."

Garm looked at the image. It was a brief video clip that showed an individual walking through an immigration checkpoint aboard one of the many skyhooks located high up in the planet's atmosphere and directly connected to the world of Estran via turbolift clusters from the surface. Hundreds of thousands of beings could pass through these each day and to begin with Garm did not notice anything that would have flagged this one up to the immigration authorities.

"I'll leave this up to one of our local representatives." Rodge then said and he looked to one of the local agents, "This is Crieg Krover of Estranian Immigration and Naturalisation. Mister Krover, please do go on."

"Thank you." The man replied and he looked at the repeating video clip, "We regularly compare the numbers of passengers registered on a flight with the number passing through our checkpoints and on a flight today we encountered a discrepancy. Now this isn't that unusual, people often try to sneak past the checkpoints to gain access to the planet unobserved, but this man was able to walk right through."

"Couldn't your man have made a mistake?" Fleet Admiral Vretan asked and he looked towards the immigration official in the image.

"No." Krover responded, "If you look carefully at the surveillance footage you will see that the man does not present any sort of identification. This was not a mistake, it was foul play. The man was somehow able to exert an invisible influence over our agent."

"Tell them about the weapons scanner." Moff Horatian said calmly.

"Of course sir. Our suspect is armed."

"Why wasn't he stopped at immigration then?" Director Helios asked.

"Because the scanners aren't set up to detect this particular type of weapon." Krover answered, "It showed up as a razor of some sort."

Garm noticed Vay and Ibram react to this, looking at one another briefly as the projected hologram changed to a still image taken from the weapon sensor readouts. As the mysterious man had walked through the sensor it had highlighted an object hung from the back of his belt, hidden beneath his long coat. It was a cylinder about thirty centimetres in length and four in diameter. Garm recognised this immediately, he had witnessed Vay wield such a weapon on several occasions.

It was a lightsaber.

"It seems that we are dealing with a jedi." Moff Horatian announced.

2.

Cass ran up the stairs to the apartment where she lived alone. As soon as she was inside she locked the door behind her and then rushed to a desk on which sat an obsolete computer. Typically Cass just cloned the contents of the datapads she stole from customers before returning them and claiming that the owners had left them behind. However, this time she had been able to acquire the datapad from the Imperial officer while it was active, meaning that Cass now had access to every file stored on it.

This particular datapad featured a permanent wireless link to the local Imperial network, making it particularly valuable. This also meant that the alert that had caused the officer and his comrades to suddenly leave the cantina had been delivered to him via this device instead of a conventional comlink or point-to-point link. The message was easy to find, it was the most recently added file and required no special password to access. REPORT TO STATION – PRIORITY ONE FUGITIVE ALERT.

Cass did not know exactly what this message meant, but the general meaning was clear. The Empire was chasing someone very important to them and if the Empire wanted them so badly that they were calling in all their personnel then the Rebel Alliance would be just as interested in them.

She dropped the datapad and went to the communicator set in the wall close to the front door. Normally when she copied information from stolen datapads she would place the data on memory sticks that she left at a dead drop to be collected. However, a rebel field unit had provided her with a way of getting a message to them in an emergency. She just had to hope that they would get it in time.

Cass entered the comm. address from memory, she did not have it written down just in case and she waited for the call to be answered.

“Yes?” a man’s voice said, giving no clue as to who she was speaking to or where they were.

“I need to speak to Odras.” She said, “He knows me.”

Mace Grayle, captain and owner of the transport ship the *Silver Hawk* was getting impatient, the trip to Estran had been a wild bantha chase for the rebel team assigned to his vessel. They had been supposed to be meeting with a potential defector from the Imperial military, but for some reason they had failed to turn up at the agreed time and place. The rebels had given up on waiting and the team’s leader; Major Vorn Larcus III had decided that they deserved a break before returning to sector headquarters to report their failure. Unable to decide on a single activity, the team had split up into ones and twos and agreed to meet here at this time. Now though it looked like Mace was the only one who had been watching the time and he found himself standing alone on the corner of a street in one of the shadier parts of town. Both sides of the street were lined with unlicensed cantinas, gambling dens and other less savoury establishments.

“Well, well, Mace Grayle without all his friends.” A voice said from behind him and Mace spun around, his hand reaching for the blaster he had holstered beneath his jacket. He stopped when he saw that the man who’s voice he recognised was not alone. A massive wookiee bodyguard stood immediately behind him and Mace noticed at least three other figures nearby standing as if they were watching what happened.

“Odras Balve.” Mace said, relaxing but still keeping an eye on the other men. Then he looked upwards, “Well look at that. The sun is out and you haven’t burst into flames. Huh, guess I owe Kara ten credits.”

“You know Mace my friend,” Odras said, “if that young lady is proving troublesome then perhaps we could come a mutually satisfactory arrangement that would eliminate part of your debt to me.”

Mace scowled.

“I’ve told you before Odras. Neither Kara nor Jaysica are mine to sell you. I’m no slaver.”

“No, from what I hear your engineer wouldn’t be very happy if you sold little miss Jaysica Horbid. Quite the couple I hear. What about that young waitress then? Who’d miss her?”

“Listen Balve-“ Mace snapped, stepping forwards to grab hold of the crime lord, but as soon as he had taken a single step the wookiee roared and stepped forwards himself, taking hold of Mace by his neck and stopping him in his tracks.

“Release him.” Odras said as Mace began to choke and the wookiee let go. Mace staggered back, gasping for breath and then Odras continued to speak, “Your young friend Cass came to me. She wanted me to give you a message, she wants to see you. Quite urgently it would seem. Funny, she still insists on paying up front in full. I can’t tell if I should be honoured that she trusts me to do as I say or if someone has been spreading viscous stories about what happens to people who find themselves in my debt. People like you Captain Grayle.”

Mace just glared at Odras, rubbing his neck where the wookiee had come close to crushing it.

“Well I’ve done my part, I’ll be going now.” Odras said and he turned away from Mace briefly before turning back to face him, “Oh one last thing.” He said, stepping closer so that he and Mace were practically face to face, “I really can’t let people act towards me with such disrespect in public without there being some sort of

penalty exacted." And suddenly he butted Mace in the face. Mace let out a surprised grunt and fell backwards, clutching at his nose where blood was pouring from both nostrils as he landed on the ground, "Now we're done." Odras said with a smile.

Mace just sat on the ground, dazed and bleeding as Odras and his thugs left. Then he felt a hand on his shoulder and he looked up to see Tharun Verser, one of the team assigned to the *Silver Hawk* standing over him.

"Captain are you okay?" he asked, helping Mace to his feet.

"Nothing hurt but my pride sergeant." Mace said, "Oh and my nose."

"What was all that about?" Tharun asked, "I thought you paid him off for this month when we first landed."

"I did." Then a thought occurred to Mace, "Did you see all that then?"

"Yeah I did. I saw them heading this way when I was coming back to meet everyone and decided to hang back and see what they were up to. It seemed too much of a coincidence for them to be heading for our rendezvous."

"And you just stood back and watched?"

"Well to be fair Balve did have that walking carpet with him, plus four other guys."

"Four? I only counted three."

"One stayed by the corner. What did that sleemo want anyway?"

"It's Cass." Mace replied.

"Cass? Is that kid in trouble?"

"I don't know, but apparently she wants to meet up with us."

Tharun reached into his pocket and took out his comlink.

"It's Tharun, we may have a problem." He transmitted.

There was a brief pause before Vorn replied.

"Go ahead." He said simply.

"Captain Grayle has heard from Cass, she wants a meeting."

Another short pause followed this.

"Then forget the rendezvous." Vorn said, "Everyone get back to the ship as fast as you can. Jaysica, Tobis, did you get that?"

"Err, Tobis here. Yes sir. We're, well, we're already back there."

Mace and Tharun looked at one another.

"Ah, young love." Tharun commented. Then he spoke into the comlink again, "The captain and I will be there in ten minutes."

"So make sure you've tidied up after yourselves." Mace then added, his voice raised so that the comlink would pick it up.

"Kara and I are about twenty minutes out." Vorn said, "Try and get the ship ready for lift off by the time we get there. Vorn out."

When Vay entered Garm's office she found him in the company of three local law enforcement officials.

"No," he said to them sternly, "I don't think you do know what you're doing. Look, your people are wasting time going through transit pass uses from behind computer terminals. Our guy has only been on the planet for a few hours. That's nowhere near enough time for him to have gotten hold of a legitimate transit pass. He'll be on foot or paying directly for travel. You'll be better off just putting your people at the travel hubs and looking for him themselves. Now get out of here and try doing your job."

Without a word all three men turned and left the office, walking past Vay close enough that she was able to easily pick up on their emotions.

Anger.

"Having trouble?" Vay asked Garm and she sat down on a small couch, lifting her legs up and swinging them round so that she was lying across it.

Garm sighed.

"Vay, some of these local boys are as bad as the Allastran military used to be. We've dealt with all the serious stuff for twenty years now and they seem to have forgotten how to do anything more than give out traffic tickets."

"Ooh that reminds me." Vay said excitedly and she got up off the couch and dashed toward Garm, squeezing herself between him and his desk. She tapped at his computer and then calmly sat down in Garm's lap, "Look, you're on camera." She said and she pointed to the display. Peering around Vay's head Garm saw an image taken by a traffic camera that showed his speeder as he had been making his way to the office that morning. A label at the bottom of the screen simply read ALTITUDE VIOLATION, "Don't worry," Vay then said, "Gregor says you won't get a ticket for it."

"No, after the way I just spoke to those three nerf herders I'll probably get my licence revoked."

"Then I'll just have to kill them for you won't I?" Vay said.

That's not a very nice thing to say.

The voice suddenly popped into Vay's head once more and she frowned briefly, still unable to determine its source.

"So is there a reason for your visit?" Garm asked, "Or did you just come here to show me pictures of my speeder and sit on my knee?"

"Why? Does it excite you? No wait don't answer that. I'm here because Gregor sent me. We're to report to Gayal Tharr's office."

Garm frowned.

"What the hell for?" he asked. There was a significant rivalry between ISB and Imperial Intelligence, the two organisations often running parallel operations that sometimes interfered with one another.

"Gregor says he doesn't have time for Intelligence and the ISB bickering while there's a jedi on the loose so he wants his best ISB agent paired with his best Intelligence agent."

"Oh great, so I get lumbered with Gayal Tharr. I've got a really bad feeling about this."

"Oh its not Gayal." Vay replied, "She's not going out in the field."

"Then who?"

"I don't know. We'll just have to go to Gayal's office if we're to find out. Now come on, I'll hold your hand if your scared."

Garm tapped the side of Vay's head.

"Those magic powers of yours need tuning." He said, "You're confusing frustration with fear. Now get off me or I'll have to carry you to her office."

"I like the sound of that."

Garm could not help but notice the stares he got as he entered the offices of Imperial Intelligence. On the rare occasions the ISB and Intelligence shared information it was transferred electronically. The two agencies did not trust one another enough to welcome rival agents into their offices for even the briefest of times.

Vay knew the way to Gayal Tharr's office and she led Garm past the desks of the suspicious looking agents to her door. Without bothering to knock or otherwise announce herself Vay opened the door and went inside.

"Oh its you." Gayal said sternly, "And you've brought Agent Larcus I see. I just got the communiqué from Moff Horatian."

"I understand that I am to be working with one of your people." Garm said, trying to hide his irritation.

"Indeed you are Agent Larcus." A voice said from behind Garm and he looked around to see Ibram sat beside the door. As the man stood up Garm noticed that like Vay he was carrying a lightsaber and he immediately guessed why this man was taking a leading role in the hunt for a suspected jedi knight.

"Yes Agent Larcus," Ibram said, "I was once part of the Jedi Order. But unlike many of my fellows I was able to see the failings of their ways. Now you will assist me in bringing one of the last few remaining jedi to justice."

"Nobody said anything about me being subordinate to anyone from Intelligence." Garm replied and Vay winced.

"What Garm means-" she began before Ibram curt her off.

"Listen to me Agent Larcus," he said; leaning closer to Garm, "your investigative experience will help us track this man. But when we find him you are to leave him to myself and young Miss Udra. You cannot hope to tackle him yourself. Do you understand?"

"Of course." Garm said, "So where would you like to start?"

"At the ground station to the skyhook." Ibram said and Garm smiled.

"Exactly where I would have suggested." He said, "My speeder is downstairs."

"Then bring it around to the front of the building. I will meet you there shortly." Ibram said.

Garm simply nodded and left the office, followed by Vay.

"I didn't think you liked them working together." Gayal said as she watched Garm and Vay walking away through the still open office doorway.

"For now I need them both." Ibram replied, "But don't worry. I sense an opportunity here, Agent Larcus will try his best to apprehend the jedi no matter what I say."

Gayal smiled.

"And if the jedi should happen to resist him-"

"Then a good agent will have fallen in the line of duty." Ibram said.

3.

Normally flights from one part of Estran to another were ignored by customs, there were far too many of them to continuously check every starship and airspeeder that had not even left the atmosphere. But today was different, the Empire had mobilised a massive force around the capital city and that meant that every docking bay was being watched.

"Is this really such a good idea?" Jaysica asked as Mace prepared to go out and meet the customs agent waiting outside the *Silver Hawk*. One of two women in the group, Jaysica was by far the smallest of them.

"Don't worry little lady." Tharun reassured her, "The good captain isn't on any watch lists."

"That we know of." The other woman, Kara, a tall brunette added.

"That we know of?" Jaysica exclaimed, "So what if he is on one we don't know about?"

"Then Tobis takes over as captain and when you two get married half the ship becomes yours." Kara said.

"What?" Tobis said suddenly, "Oh, we're not getting married. I mean not yet. I, err—"

Tharun put his hands on Tobis' shoulders from behind.

"Don't worry lad." He said, "No need to panic yet."

"Says the man who married my daughter." Vorn commented.

"If you're all finished discussing what happens in the brief time before my being arrested and those agents out there charging aboard to finish you lot off could I have your fake IDs please?" Mace asked and one by one the other rebels all handed over identity documents that would allow them to pass through customs without being identified as the wanted fugitives they were. Mace then strode down the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp towards the waiting customs agents.

"Registration." The lead agent snapped and Mace handed over a datapad along with his identity card, "What happened to your face?" the agent added as he noticed the traces of blood around Mace's nose.

"Faulty pressure seal on a coolant line. Hit me in the face when I wasn't ready."

Nodding the agent inspected both the datapad and Mace's identity card briefly, logging them on his own datapad.

"Are there others aboard your ship Captain Grayle?" the agent asked without bothering to look up.

"Yes, five passengers."

"All native?"

"No. Two from Estran, two from Tarlen and one space born. I have their cards here."

Subconsciously Mace held his breath as the customs agent went through the identity cards. But gave none of them more than a cursory glance before returning them, not even bothering to make any note of them in his records.

"You can go about your business." He said and as he gave the cards back Mace exhaled.

"So what's the reason for all this?" he asked.

"The Empire has the right to inspect any vessel or cargo under its jurisdiction." The agent replied and then he just turned and walked away.

Mace watched them leave and then looked back up the access ramp.

"We're clear." He called out and the other rebels emerged from the ship.

"How did it go?" Vorn asked.

"They barely checked our IDs." Mace replied, "And the agent didn't inspect Jaysica or Kara's cards at all."

"Well let's not waste any time waiting for them to come back and start asking more questions." Vorn said,

"Cass's place is within walking distance of here, so I suggest we get a move on. Bring the droids as well and make sure that all your weapons are out of sight."

When Garm first heard the footsteps approaching his speeder he assumed that it was Ibram arriving, but his face fell when he looked into the rear view mirror to see who it really was.

"Oh no." he said to Vay just as the woman got close.

"Agent Larcus!" the woman called out to him, "Can I have a quick word with you?"

"How about 'goodbye' Neema? That's a word." Garm replied, but she ignored him and instead held out a recording rod towards him.

"Agent Larcus its obvious that something is going on, can you tell me what it is? Does it have anything to do with your father? Rumours are that he was instrumental in the recent rebel attack on Tarlen."

"Neema I don't care what rock you're getting these stories from underneath, you must realise that there's no way I'm divulging operational details to you." Garm told her, "Now get out of here before you get arrested."

"So you are involved with whatever's going on then. Will the moff finally be making a statement about rebel activity?"

"Not everything has to do with the rebellion Neema." Garm said, "You of all people should know that."

"Then what is going on Agent Larcus? You can't tell me that the current security clampdown around Estran City is normal."

Garm was about to repeat his suggestion that the reporter leave when Vay leant across the passenger seat and stared Neema in the eyes. She concentrated, focusing on her mind before she spoke.

"Go away." She said.

"I wish I could do that." Garm said to Vay as Neema simply turned off her recording rod and began to walk back down the street.

"It does come in handy." Vay replied with a smile.

Controlling the mind of another is not the right path to take Vay.

Vay just frowned briefly while Garm continued to watch Neema walk away from the speeder in his mirror.

You have an opportunity here Vay. The man you are hunting can change your life forever.

"What?" Vay said suddenly.

"Huh?" Garm responded, looking at her.

"What?" Vay said again, this time directing her question to Garm.

"You said 'what'." Garm replied.

"Did I? Never mind, it's not important." Vay said, not wanting to have to explain the mysterious messages she was getting to anyone. Then she noticed Ibram coming down the steps of the capital building, "Look here's Ibram now." She said quickly to change the subject.

"I wish they'd get that turbolift fixed." Jaysica said as they reached Cass' floor in the run down apartment building.

"So do I." Kara agreed before she added, "It would make your complaining shorter."

"Actually Miss Bilstran," Vorn's protocol droid Jeeves said, "I think that if the turbolifts were function then Miss Horbid would not be complaining at all."

"Oh shut up or I'll shut you down." Kara replied.

"Well really, I was only trying to help." Jeeves said.

"Yes you were, thank you Jeeves." Jaysica added, smiling as she glanced at Kara.

From the rear of the group there was a sudden burst of sound, a series of bleeps and chirps. The source of this was a red and white astromech droid that had struggled up the stairs with the rebels.

"What did he just say?" Kara asked.

"Harvey was agreeing with Miss Horbid." Jeeves said, "In that he would much rather have been able to take the turbolift."

"Yeah," Tharun said, "well I don't think the building management had droids in mind when they neglected to maintain the systems."

At the head of the group Vorn reached the door to Cass' apartment first and he pressed the communicator button. Nothing happened.

"This place really is awful." He said and he knocked on the door instead.

"Why don't we just move her somewhere nicer?" Jaysica asked.

"Because if she lived somewhere she couldn't afford for herself it would draw attention." Tharun pointed out.

"She could always join us." Kara suggested, "You know she wants to."

"She's seventeen." Vorn said, "Right now she's better off here."

"If she is even here." Mace added and he too knocked on the door, "Cass are you in there?" he called out.

Then when there was no reply he looked at Vorn, "You don't think the Empire got here ahead of us do you?" he asked.

Vorn looked at Jaysica.

"Get this door open." He ordered, "Quickly."

Jaysica produced a compact multitool that she used to remove the lock panel from the door, exposing a tangle of wires behind it.

"I don't think much of this lock." She said and then squealed as there was a flash from the wiring. However, the door promptly slid open.

Vorn stepped inside while both Mace and Tharun drew their blasters before following him.

"Looks clear." Vorn said as he looked around the apartment, "I don't think that the Empire's been here. Her computer's still here and they'd have taken that."

"They could have got her at work." Mace observed.

Vorn shook his head.

"We can't think like that. Now everyone in and we'll wait for her to get back from wherever she is."

Cass arrived a few minutes later, clutching a bag of groceries that she almost dropped in surprise when she found the rebels in her apartment.

"You didn't answer so we broke in." Tharun said.

"Yeah, nothing creepy about that." Kara added.

"We were concerned." Vorn said, "Don't worry we didn't damage anything."

"Never mind that now." Cass snapped and she rushed to the desk where the datapad she had stolen that morning was still lay, "Take a look at this." And she held the device out towards Mace.

"How did you access this?" Mace asked when he saw that it was active.

"It was switched on when I stole it." Cass replied, "Look at the last message. It looked important so that's why I asked you to come here."

"Priority one fugitive alert." Mace said and he passed the datapad to Vorn for him to see for himself, "Well that explains all the extra security."

"They're not onto us are they?" Jaysica asked worriedly.

"Oh we're not that important." Tharun told her.

"Well someone obviously is," Vorn said, "and if the Empire is that desperate to get hold of someone then we should be too."

"Boss, are you seriously saying that the six of us are going to try and find a complete stranger faster than every Imperial stooge in the region even though they know who they're after and we don't?" Kara asked.

"He is." Mace said.

"Yes I am." Vorn said, "So to start with we need to find out who we're looking for." Then he looked down at the dataport behind the desk, "Is that connected?" he asked, looking back at Cass.

"I think so." She replied, "But I don't have an account to-"

"Never mind about that." Vorn said and he turned to Tobis, "Tobis, if you could have Harvey take a look please."

"Oh, err, yes of course." Tobis said and he looked at his droid, "Harvey, plug in." he said.

The astromech droid chirped again as it rolled across the floor and extended a probe into the data port. There was a brief pause before the droid let out another chirp.

"It seems that Harvey has located a central data server and has fooled it into thinking we are legitimate users." Jeeves announced.

"Good." Vorn said, "Now Harvey we need any information you can find about this fugitive the Empire is looking for."

"But stay away from official Imperial networks." Mace added, "Especially military ones. If they trace your hack it'll lead them to Cass."

Given the geographical location of Estran City, well away from the planet's equator as well as its low orbit the skyhook required a continuous supply of power so that it could maintain its position high above the city. Additionally both the link and skyhook were well shielded against attack or accidental collision and this meant that even more power was required. The massive dedicated generators for these functions were buried beneath the ground station itself, a large building that contained numerous stores and other businesses dedicated to providing the services needed by travellers.

As Garm drove towards the building he could see that there was already a significant military presence here. Many of the rooftop landing pads that would typically be used for both passenger and freight transport airspeeders were instead occupied by gunships and other troop carriers while the familiar white armoured forms of stormtroopers could be seen all around the building at ground level. Where normally an individual would have been able to enter or leave the building unimpeded today everyone was being stopped by the Imperial troops and queues were forming outside.

"Looks like General Dern's got this place locked down." Vay commented.

"I'm not surprised." Garm replied as he pulled his speeder over, "Think of the damage if that jedi decided to sabotage this place. A one hundred kilometre spire falling to the surface? We're talking tens of thousands of casualties."

"Three hundred and fifty." Ibram said from the back of the speeder, "Intelligence calculates that severing the link near the skyhook would cause up to three hundred and fifty thousand casualties on the surface from the impact alone. That figure does not include secondary casualties from the disruption caused to city services."

Garm did not reply, instead just shutting off the engine of his speeder.

"Hey you!" a voice called out sternly, "You can't park here. A special enforcement zone is- Oh, I'm sorry sir I didn't realise it was you."

Garm got out of the speeder and saw that the statement had come from the leader of a squad of stormtroopers patrolling the area around the ground station.

"You were expecting me?" Garm asked.

"Yes sir." The squad leader replied, "We have orders to escort you and your companions inside immediately."

"Then lead the way." Garm said and then he looked at Vay, "An escort, that's nice."

"Makes you feel wanted doesn't it?" Vay replied with a smile.

"If we could keep ourselves focused on our task." Ibram said and he began to walk towards the ground station.

The sudden excited burst of sound from Harvey made Cass jump.

"Does he always have to do that?" she asked.

"Only when he's found something and wants to rub it in our faces." Kara replied.

"Which means pretty much always, yes." Tharun added.

"So what's he got Jeeves?" Vorn asked, approaching the pair of droids.

"Well Major Larcus sir, it would appear that Harvey has intercepted an Imperial bulletin regarding the fugitive." Jeeves translated.

"I thought he was supposed to stay clear of Imperial networks." Jaysica said.

"Does the Empire know?" Cass added nervously and Harvey then produced a rude sounding noise.

"There's no need to put it like that." Jeeves said, looking down at the astromech droid, "Even if you are correct." then he looked up again, "Harvey has not attempted to breach any Imperial networks, though he claims to be capable of doing so without getting caught."

"Ha!" Kara snapped and Harvey produced another rude sound that Jeeves did not bother to translate. Instead he continued to explain Harvey's previous response.

"The Moff's Office has issued an alert to every planetary enforcement body, including licensed bounty hunters. This includes a full description of the fugitive as well as visual data. Harvey can provide you with this if you wish."

Harvey let out another short burst of sound.

"Oh dear, it seems that he will only do so if Miss Bilstran apologises." Jeeves translated.

"No way!" Kara exclaimed, "Boss, I don't need to apologise to him do I?"

"Just show us the data Harvey." Mace said and he glanced at Tobis.

"Oh, err, yes. Do as the captain says Harvey." Tobis added.

The astromech droid chirped once and turned its head to face the centre of the room before activating its built in holographic projector. Instantly a life-sized image of the man being hunted by the Empire appeared, showing him making his way through the immigration checkpoint.

"Does the bulletin say why he's wanted?" Tharun asked, "If it turns out he's just some runner for the hutts or Black Sun then I say let them have him."

"Runners for crime syndicates don't warrant priority one fugitive status." Mace replied, "No, this guy's important for some other reason, he's—"

"He's a jedi." Vorn said suddenly.

"No he's kriffing well not!" Kara exclaimed then she looked at Cass and added, "Don't swear by the way. It's bad."

"She's right major." Tharun said, "The jedi are extinct. If they weren't then we wouldn't be here right now would we?"

"What about that Luke Skywalker?" Jaysica asked.

"Technically he's not a jedi." Mace told her before he added, "I think."

"Well this guy is." Vorn said, "Watch as he comes up to the desk. See there. He doesn't hand over any documentation while the agent is speaking to him, instead he just makes that funny little gesture with his hand and walks right on through."

"So he bribed his way through." Kara said.

"No." Vorn replied, "No money changed hands. Nothing did."

"So what's your plan major?" Tharun asked.

"We recruit him." Vorn replied.

"Recruit him?" Mace repeated.

"Yes, to the Alliance." Vorn answered and when he saw the looks of disbelief staring back at him he went on, "Look, this guy needs somewhere to hide and all the jedi I knew were honourable. If we can get this guy off planet we'll have no trouble convincing him to join the Alliance."

"I hate to disagree with you major but the last thing this guy is trying to do is hide." Mace replied and everyone looked at him.

"How do you know?" Cass asked.

"Because this is Estran." Mace replied, "It may not be one of the Core Worlds but in terms of population and resources it's as close as you'll get for fifty parsecs in any direction. If this guy was looking to hide then he'd be somewhere on the Outer Rim living in the middle of the desert or a swamp or something. Even if he was forced to come this deep into the Mid Rim he'd head for somewhere with a lower population density. Tarlen maybe, but not here. No, this guy's not hiding. He's looking for something and he thinks he can find it here."

"So what's he hunting?" Jaysica asked.

4.

Vay stood back and watched while Garm spoke with a group of security agents. These were local officials, tasked specifically with protecting the ground station and as such they were familiar with the building and its operations.

"Shouldn't we be over there with him?" Vay asked Ibram. It had been his idea for Garm to quiz the guards by himself, "They may know something important."

"Stop being so rigid in your thoughts." Ibram replied, "Agent Larcus asks questions and looks at security recordings because he has no other way of gathering information. We on the other hand have access to the greatest tool ever. We can control the energy field that binds together the universe itself. Now tell me what you feel?"

"Bored?" Vay muttered and Ibram scowled at her.

Anger.

"Okay I felt that." Vay said and then she paused and opened her mind to those around her.

Be careful. When you face the man you are after you must do so alone. Do not let this Ibram find him.

Vay took a deep breath; concerned that Ibram may sense the mysterious voice that spoke to her through the Force. But a quick glance in his direction gave no hint that he was aware of it and Vay relaxed.

"I can sense that a lot of people are annoyed at being delayed." She said.

"Beyond that." Ibram said, "Look past these insignificant beings and their limited minds and feel the state of the Force itself."

Vay's eyes widened and she felt a shiver go down her spine, something that should have been impossible with the temperature controls built into her bodyglove.

"We're not alone." She said and a sinister smile spread across Ibram's face.

"There are troops at every transport hub, facial recognition programs are being run on camera footage all across the city and yet no one has identified the man we hunt. Why? Because he never left this building."

Harvey continued to project the hologram into the centre of the room while Mace and Vorn watched, hoping to discern some clue that would lead them to the fugitive jedi. The other rebels had instead headed for the kitchen; putting Cass' shopping away while the young girl herself remained sat beside Mace and watching him and Vorn.

"There's nothing." Mace said, "Face it major this clip is just him conning his way through immigration. We need more information."

Vorn looked towards Harvey.

"Harvey can you find anything more?" he asked but after the little droid let out a chirp Jeeves translated.

"I'm afraid not Major Larcus sir." He said, "It appears that all subsequent communications regarding this individual are on secure networks. Unless you wish him to attempt to--"

"No." Vorn interrupted, "We can't risk leading the Empire here."

"But if this guy's so important isn't it worth it?" Cass said, waving at the image of the jedi floating in front of her, "I can come and join your--"

"That's out as well." Vorn said, "Look Cass, I promised you that we'd get you out of here if the Empire finds out about you but that doesn't mean I'm going to be the one who brings them here."

Cass slumped back on the couch.

"Mace let me carry a blaster. And drink beer." She muttered and beside her Mace winced as Vorn looked at him.

"Oh really?" Vorn said.

"Gee thanks for that." Mace said to Cass, then he turned his attention back to Vorn, "We need to get more information on this guy." He said, "And we know of only one place that he's definitely been."

"Yes I know." Vorn replied, "We've got to get inside the skyhook's ground station." Then he looked at Cass, "Not you though." He added and her face fell.

Vorn and Mace observed the main entrance to the ground station from behind a shop corner, using its glass walls to make it look like they were studying the goods being offered for sale while at the same time remaining concealed from view from the ground station itself.

"That's a lot of troops." Mace commented.

"Stormtroopers as well." Vorn said, "No chance of them just waving us through. Look at them, they're even checking IDs on species that can't possibly be humans in disguise."

"Too bad those kaminoans were so damn good at growing them." Mace said.

"Yeah, we must remember to compliment Doctor Na when we get back to headquarters." Vorn replied, "I'm sure he'd love to hear how his creations are still giving us trouble."

"Come now boss, you can't blame him." Kara said as she and Tharun arrived behind Mace and Vorn, the first two individuals to have spoken to them while they waited here.

"What did you see?" Mace asked as he and Vorn turned around.

"More boys in white." Tharun answered, "Every door, plus squads patrolling the surrounding area. Major, I can't see our phoney IDs getting us past them."

"The jedi could do it." Vorn commented as he took another look at the stormtroopers guarding the ground station entrance, "Of course he was likely long gone before they even got here."

"Maybe Tobis, Jaysica and the droids will have found something." Tharun suggested.

"Let's hope so." Mace said, "Where the hell are they anyway?"

"If they didn't have the droids with them I'd suggest they just snuck off to make out somewhere." Kara said, "Something I'd never do in their position of course."

"There they are." Vorn then said and he nodded towards the ground station where Jaysica and Tobis were just making their way past the main entrance, Harvey and Jeeves behind them. They headed for a bridge that brought them across the road and to the corner where the other rebels waited.

"Find anything?" Mace asked.

"Err, maybe." Tobis answered.

"Maybe?" Vorn said.

"Well we couldn't exactly try just in case we were wrong." Jaysica said.

"Just tell us what you found." Vorn told them.

"Well there are loading bays around the back of the building." Jaysica said, "There were no guards outside but the doors were sealed."

"There could still be troops inside them." Tharun commented.

"That's why we didn't have Harvey try and unseal them." Jaysica said, "How could we explain to a squad of stormtroopers why we were breaking into the ground station?"

"You did the right thing." Vorn said and then he tapped the backpack Jaysica had over her shoulder, "You got Penny in there?" he asked and she smiled.

"Of course." Jaysica replied and she opened up the backpack to remove a boxlike mouse droid, modified internally but externally identical to the standard Imperial military model, "What do you need her for?"

"I want you to send her into the ground station and have her make her way towards the loading bays." Vorn said, "She can tell us if there are any guards inside. If not then we'll force the door."

Jaysica frowned.

"What if someone steals her?" she asked.

"Oh who's going to steal her?" Kara responded, "An Imperial droid in a building surrounded by stormtroopers?"

"Miss Bilstran is quite correct." Jeeves chimed in, "The penalties for stealing an Imperial droid are—"

"You might want to bear in mind that Jaysica stole her from the Imperial army to begin with." Tharun interrupted.

"Well okay then." Jaysica said, setting the tiny droid down on the ground and activating it, "But she better be alright."

The mouse droid beeped as its systems activated and it rolled back and forth once.

"Penny I need you to go in there." Jaysica said, pointing towards the ground station, "Find the loading bays at the back and wait for further instructions."

Penny rolled across the bridge, heading directly for the ground station entrance. As the rebels watched the tiny droid continued on its way and simply rolled past the stormtroopers on duty, the soldiers simply assuming that it was one of theirs.

"Okay that's it." Vorn said and he looked at Jaysica and Tobis, "Lead the way."

The area to the rear of the ground station was deserted with several large wheeled containers of rubbish positioned to one side of the loading bay.

"Quick, get behind them." Vorn said, pointing to the containers, "We don't want any of those patrols to catch us back here."

Tobis rummaged through his pockets and produced his datapad.

"Here." He said as he handed it to Jaysica.

"Thanks." She replied, kissing him lightly on the cheek and she connected her comlink to the datapad.

Activating the joined devices she searched for a signal from Penny, "I've got it." She said gleefully, "Look, she's in the main shopping area."

Sure enough the image being transmitted from the camera Jaysica had added to Penny showed that she was in part of the ground station dedicated to retail commerce. Despite the enhanced security measures in

effect the area was crowded with beings of numerous species. The mouse droid simply made its way through this crowd; droids were so commonplace that none of them took any notice of Penny other than to step out of the way if necessary.

"Stop right there!" Kara snapped, leaning close to the datapad and Penny halted, "Good, now turn left and pan up."

Inside the ground station Penny turned and adjusted the angle of the camera. Now the image showed the display in a store window.

"Wouldn't I look gorgeous in those shoes?" Kara said, pointing at the datapad's screen.

"I want those." Jaysica added, "Major, can we-" and then she stopped speaking when she saw how both Mace and Vorn were glaring at her and Kara.

"If we're done window shopping," Vorn said, "we do have a job to do."

"You two got to do some window shopping." Kara muttered.

"Penny, keep going." Jaysica said and the droid set off once more.

"Err, you should have her go through the store." Tobis suggested.

"She's not there to check out shoes Tobis." Mace said.

"Err, no. That's not what I meant." Tobis replied, "If Penny cuts through the store then she can get to the loading bay behind it."

"That is a good idea." Tharun said looking at Vorn who nodded.

"Send Penny through the store." Vorn said.

Garm looked at the wall full of displays, each one showing the feed from a different security camera.

"So if you can just feel this guy why do we need all this?" he whispered to Vay, hoping to avoid having Ibram overhear. However, the older man's hearing was keen enough that he heard what Garm said.

"Our quarry has similar senses to us Agent Larcus." He said, "If we approach too close then he may detect us. But by making use of these devices we may be able to determine his location and you and the stormtroopers we have at our disposal can corner him. Then and only then will Vay and I deal with him."

"Providing he's in one of the public areas." Garm responded. All of the images shown in front of them were of the parts of the ground station open to the public. The service areas and even the leased business units had no links to this central control room.

"Excuse me agents," a man's voice said from behind Garm and both he and Vay looked around to see who was speaking. There stood a man in formal clothing as opposed to the security and military uniforms almost everyone else in the room was wearing, "I'm Kallic Seer the administrator of this facility and I was wondering when you'll be done here. The store tenants are complaining that-"

"The opinions of shopkeepers do not concern me." Ibram said sternly, "We will be here as long as necessary and the security measures will remain in place as long they are needed. Perhaps you feel you are being treated unfairly?"

Fear.

Something about Ibram's demeanour told Kallic that it was not wise to argue with the man, even ignoring all the stormtroopers stationed around the ground station and a slight smile appeared on Vay's face as she sensed his discomfort.

"Of course not." Kallic said, "It's just that I would like to be able to tell my tenants-"

"Tell them that the Empire is working as fast as it can to resolve a major security issue." Garm interrupted, "If they complain any further then tell them that there's an ISB agent ready to speak to them privately about the situation."

"What? Oh, of course. Thank you." Kallic said. Garm's theory was that the threat of a personal meeting with the ISB would dissuade any further complaints and Kallic guessed this. Without another word he scurried away as Garm and Ibram turned their attention back to the security footage.

Penny rolled through the store ignored by both staff and customers who assumed that the compact droid was something to do with the force of stormtroopers who seemed to be everywhere anyone looked.

Behind the sales area was the room used for storing merchandise not on display, boxes of expensive footwear stacked high on shelves that looked to be of much lower quality than the goods they held.

"You know it wouldn't take much for Penny to just remove a couple of-" Kara began as she carefully watched the footage being transmitted from Penny's camera.

"No." Vorn said sternly, "This is a military operation and not an excuse to engage in petty larceny."

"Yeah," Tharun added, "if we get caught the last thing you want is the tribunal taking a shoplifting charge into account when they hand down a sentence for treason. Though I think Lyssa would appreciate some sandals to go with all those dresses she got from stores."

"You're not helping sergeant." Vorn said.

"I doubt he was trying to major." Mace added, "But I'd just like to point out that if we are going to be pilfering any shoes then Malia's size is-"

"I said no and I meant it." Vorn said, "Now Jaysica, get Penny moving again."

Departing the store through the back door Penny emerged into the loading bay itself, a massive dimly lit chamber consisting of a raised platform running around the edge of the empty space. Though there were no transports present at the moment it was obvious that the vehicles would be expected to park beside this raised surface so that goods could be easily offloaded.

The most significant detail of the room however was that it was deserted

"Open the door corporal." Vorn said, looking at Jaysica.

"Give me two minutes." She said and she passed the datapad back to Tobis, "Here, keep watch while I work."

The lock panel beside the loading bay door was not of the high quality Jaysica had become used to when attempted to pierce military security, but there was a sensor included that would alert the control room when the door was opened, legitimately or not.

"I need to bypass this sensor." She said, "Then we're through."

"And how long will that take?" Mace asked.

"It's done." Jaysica said and there was a brief hiss and the loading bay door shot upwards.

"Okay quickly now," Vorn said, "everyone inside." And the rebels dashed inside, letting the door drop shut once again after they passed, "There's a terminal over there." Vorn called out, pointing to a computer terminal set into the side of the raised platform, "Tobis have Harvey plug in and see what he can find. The rest of you, weapons check."

Harvey rolled across the loading bay and plugged into the terminal, successfully accessing the ground station's computer network almost instantly. However the droid let out a sudden squeal of alarm only moments later.

"What's wrong with the little guy?" Tharun asked as he unpacked a pair of rifles from a battered looking holdall, he handed the one that was standard issue to the Imperial military to Vorn while he retained the heavier one for himself.

"It would appear that Harvey has located footage of someone important in the security records." Jeeves translated and at the same time Harvey's head spun around so that its built in holographic projector pointed towards the rebels. The droid then projected a flat image taken from the ground station's computer into the air.

"Oh great." Mace commented and he looked at Vorn, "Your son."

Sure enough the image was of Garm walked through the main concourse of the ground station, but the image also showed that he was not alone.

"Not just junior." Kara said and she pointed to the figure in the black bodyglove, "Look, it's stinky."

"Never mind those two, who is that?" Vorn asked and he pointed to the third figure being escorted by the stormtroopers, Ibram.

5.

"Well he isn't in any of the common areas." Garm said, "In fact he was even able to conceal himself getting off the turbolift when it reached the surface."

"He was expecting surveillance." Ibram said, "We only saw him on the skyhook because he had to go through immigration."

"Well as I see it that leaves us with only one choice," Garm said, "we gather a large force and conduct a full sweep of this place."

"We don't have enough troops for that." Vay pointed out.

"I know." Garm said, "We've enough to keep the building sealed up but not drive him into those troops without knowing vaguely where he is." And then he took his comlink from his pocket.

"What are you doing Agent Larcus?" Ibram asked and Vay smiled.

"He's calling for more troops of course." She said.

With their weapons concealed under clothing or returned to the holdall Tharun carried the rebels exited the loading bay directly into the ground station's main concourse.

"Keep an eye out for surveillance." Vorn cautioned them, "They may not be looking for us, but if my son or Vay are watching then they're bound to recognise us."

"So where do we start?" Jaysica asked.

"Well, err, he's obviously not out here." Tobis said, "I think he's either in one of the service areas or one of the businesses. Somewhere without the central camera system."

"Ooh, dibs I search the shoe store boss." Kara exclaimed.

"No." Vorn said sternly, "The man we're after is hiding from Imperial persecution, I doubt he came here to buy ladies shoes."

"If he did Penny would have spotted him." Tharun added.

"Cantinas." Mace said simply and when the others looked at him he explained further, "You can get everything you need in them. Food. Drink. Sit in a private booth and no-one will pay you any attention or if you need to know how things work in the area you can just ask the bartender."

"So how many cantinas are there here?" Vorn asked as he looked around. Even just from where he stood he could make out four.

"A lot." Tharun said, "If go into all of them and buy just one drink then we'll probably be falling down drunk before we find this jedi guy."

"Speak for yourself lightweight." Kara commented.

"Tharun's right." Vorn said, then he looked at Tobis and Mace, "So captain, corporal what do you two think? You spent years in places like this looking for customers and avoiding revenue officers. This jedi's spent more than two decades on the run, he must have picked up a few tricks."

"Somewhere like there." Tobis said and he pointed out the largest cantina visible from beside the door to the loading bay.

"What's so special about there?" Kara asked.

"Entertainment." Mace replied, "That place is advertising sports feeds. It's the sort of place to go for more than just a quick beer or two."

"Err, it'll also be dark." Tobis added, "If there are screens then people won't want glare from bright lighting reflecting off them. That means he'll be able to, you know, hide."

Jaysica smiled and planted a kiss on Tobis' cheek.

"You're so smart." She said.

"Well then Mace, Tobis," Vorn said, "lead the way."

The inside of the cantina was just as Tobis had said it would be. Overhead lighting was at a minimum, concentrated round the bar itself. Meanwhile the only other illumination came from the multitude of massive display screens set into the walls all around the cantina as well as several holographic projectors mounted in tables. As soon as the rebels entered they found themselves confronted by the life-sized holographic image of two reptilian barabels beating one another floating above the nearest table while the men sat around it looked on and cheered.

"Okay let's spread out." Vorn said, "The droids can stay here by the door while we check out the patrons of this place. Tharun you're with me, Tobis go with Mace and—"

"But I want to go with Tobis." Jaysica protested.

"Yeah well I think the major reckons that a pair of beautiful women will get more answers out of drunken spacers." Kara said, "Only we haven't got two, so you'll have to make up the slack." And Tobis scowled at her, "Hey I was just kidding." Kara then added defensively.

"Well don't." Vorn said, "This is important. If we can get this guy to join us it will represent a major boost for the Alliance. Not necessarily just in this sector either, it could have galaxy wide implications."

The gunships touched down on the rooftop landing pads with their hatches already open. Immediately soldiers in white armour began to disembark and form up into rows. This armour was not the sealed and anonymous armour of stormtroopers but was instead that of COMPForce, the armed military wing of COMPNOR itself.

"Move!" the soldiers' commander bellowed, "I've seen you do better than this."

"Perhaps we should consider throwing the slowest off the roof." His second in command added, deliberately making the comment loud enough that the soldiers could hear it over the sound of the gunships' engines.

"I don't think there'll be any need for that Major Kramm." Garm said to the company commander as he walked out across the roof. Then he looked at the other officer and nodded in greeting, "Captain Layne." He added.

"Agent Larcus," Major Kramm said, "I hear you've a problem that needs solving. Well COMPForce is here now so you can consider it solved." Then he noticed Vay and Ibram step out onto the roof also, "Ah, so your lady friend is in on this as well."

"Plus her grandfather it would seem." Captain Layne added and he was surprised when Ibram suddenly looked in his direction.

"Major Kramm, Captain Layne, meet Ibram – err Ibram?" Garm began.

"Kellesen." Vay prompted him.

"Yes of course. Ibram Kellesen of Imperial Intelligence." Garm said and then after a brief pause he added, "Allegedly."

"Major, you will instruct your men to follow my commands to the letter." Ibram said and he looked at Captain Layne again, "All your men."

Hatred.

Vay grinned.

"He doesn't like you." She said.

"I'll be careful." The captain replied.

"Have you been briefed?" Garm asked the two COMPForce officers.

"Just the basics." Major Kramm replied, "You're after a priority one fugitive. Armed and dangerous."

"Major you have no idea how dangerous this individual is." Ibram responded, "The man we are hunting is a jedi."

While the other rebels began to move around the cantina Mace and Vorn headed for the bar itself.

"Gents." The barman said simply in greeting, "What can I get you?"

"We're looking for a friend." Mace said.

"Really?" the barman replied, "A special friend? Perhaps just for tonight?" and he waved at a pair of women at the far end of the bar.

"No." Vorn replied and the barman waved the women back.

"Of course not. So sorry, I do hope I didn't."

"We just want to find our friend." Vorn said, "He came in via the skyhook before all this fuss started and we were delayed in getting here."

"So what does he look like then?"

Mace and Vorn glanced at one another, trying to remember the details from the security alert that Harvey had intercepted.

"He's human," Mace said, starting with the obvious, "and slightly older than myself."

"He has fair hair." Vorn added.

"Not much to go on." The barman said, "Not even a name."

"Ah." Mace said as he realised their mistake. But then the barman smiled.

"You know what he looks like but your supposed friend has never given you his name. Don't worry, I know the sort of friend your looking for and I can see why all this security would make him want to lie low."

"You do?" Vorn said, puzzled.

"You got us." Mace said, "So what's your cut to help us?"

"Five hundred." The barman said.

"That's steep." Mace said.

"Then find him yourself." The barman said and he calmly turned and walked away.

"What was that about?" Vorn asked Mace when the barman was distracted serving someone else.

"He thinks we're smugglers." Mace replied, "And that we're meeting a runner."

"Will he turn us in?"

"Unlikely. He doesn't want to run the risk of annoying someone he shouldn't. He just won't help us."

"Well let's just hope that the others are having more luck than us."

Without even looking Kara slapped away the hand that reached out to grab her.

"I wish the boss would let us shoot some of these sleemos." She said to Jaysica.

"We can't go around killing people just because they—" Jaysica began to reply but then she felt a hand and she shrieked before spinning around and slapping the face of the man it belonged to.

"Who said anything about killing?" Kara said, "I just want maim a few of them."

"What about him?" Jaysica asked and she pointed to a table set against the wall of the cantina.

"He's not done anything to us yet." Kara said, "We should at least pick someone that's—"

"No, I mean what about taking a closer look at him?" Jaysica interrupted and Kara now looked at the lone figure sat at the table. He wore a plain hooded robe that he had raised up to cover his head.

"I see what you mean." Kara said, "That robe itself just screams 'jedi knight' doesn't it?" and she took out her comlink. "Boss, your most beautiful minion has done it again. Check out the table beneath the pod racing feed. We're heading in now." And she put the comlink away again before noticing that Jaysica was smiling at her, "What now?" she asked.

"You just called me beautiful."

"I did not."

"Yes you did. You said the major's most beautiful minion had done it again. Now I'm the one that spotted him so I'm the beautiful one. And before you say anything else just remember I outrank you. Now you go first specialist and that's an order."

"Mutiny is looking so good right now." Kara muttered, "I punched superiors before you know."

"Just move." Jaysica said and Kara led the way towards the table.

The hooded figure remained where he was as they approached him from behind. Upon reaching the table they sat down, sliding around so that they sat either side of the hooded figure and prevented him from leaving.

"Hey there." Kara said, "Mind if we join you?" and she reached out and pulled down the figure's hood.

To reveal a blue-skinned wroonian.

"Stang." Kara exclaimed, "Sorry pal, wrong table." And she and Jaysica began to slide back out from behind the table.

"Hey, you can stay." The wroonian called out, his words slurred, "Share a drink with me."

"No thanks, we've got other plans." Jaysica responded, looking back at the wroonian just long enough to take her focus off where she was walking.

"Oof!" the sudden cry of alarm came at the same time as Jaysica walked into someone and she looked back around.

"I'm so sorry." She said, "It was an acc- Oh." And she found herself looking into the face of the jedi.

"It doesn't matter." Kieran said, "I was looking for someone else." And he turned to leave, in turn finding his way blocked by Tharun and Tobis.

"Yeah, well I think we're looking for you pal." Tharun said, "So take seat and let the little lady buy you a drink to apologise."

"You're not interested in me." Kieran said, "Step aside."

Tharun and Tobis looked at one another and were just about to part and allow Kieran to pass when Vorn's voice called out from close by.

"Actually it is you we're looking for and trying those little tricks of yours just makes it more likely that someone will notice you and turn you in. Something neither of us wants."

"In other words take a seat when it's offered." Mace added.

Kieran turned to the group sat around a nearby booth.

"Leave." He said simply, waving his hand in a discrete manner and without a single word of complaint they all got up and left.

"So how about we start with introductions?" Vorn said as the rebels and jedi sat down, "I'm Vorn and I'm in charge of this field team. Mace Grayle is captain of our ship and Tobis is his engineer. Tharun, Kara and Jaysica are the rest of my team. We're with the Alliance to Restore the Republic. Now how about you?"

"You can call me Kieran." Kieran replied, "I have no affiliation. Not any more."

"So what brings you here Kieran?" Mace asked, "Why set that trap?"

"What trap?" Jaysica asked.

"He set that wroonian up where he could be seen without making it too obvious." Mace explained, "Then when you and Kara revealed your intentions he moved in to identify you." Then he looked back at Kieran, "So who are you looking for?"

"I sensed a disturbance as I was passing through the sector." Kieran said, "A presence in the Force that indicated someone with abilities like mine may be here. I came to investigate."

"Oh great." Kara said, "He's looking for stinky."

"Stinky?" Kieran asked.

"She's referring to an Imperial agent hereabouts." Vorn said, "We know she is Force sensitive and we've witnessed her using her powers. As well as wielding a lightsaber."

"Plus she's got her hooks into the boss' son." Kara added, "I spent some time tied to her once while we were pretending to be slave girls."

Kieran just looked at Kara.

"Her real name is Vay Udra." Vorn said, "Her cover is—"

"I'm sorry, did you just say Udra?" Kieran interrupted.

"He can't know her." Tharun said, "She's too young to have been a jedi during the war."

"I know of the family." Kieran said, "They served as jedi for many generations."

"Generations?" Mace asked, "I didn't think that the jedi had kids."

Kieran shook his head.

"We weren't supposed to, not in the last thousand years anyway. But before that jedi married and had children just as any of you might. The Ruusian Reformations changed all that though, and a lot of jedi with families were forced out of the order. The Udras amongst them. But they continued to send recruits, one or two from each generation. So their tradition of service was able to continue. I expect that this Vay must have been an infant in the temple on Coruscant and was taken by the Emperor."

"Well this one works for the Empire that slaughtered the jedi." Vorn said.

"I see." Kieran said, "Then I know why the Force has brought me here. It is my destiny to confront this Vay Udra."

"And kill her?" Kara asked before adding, "Yay destiny."

"But why have the guy in the robe?" Tobis asked.

"I foresaw that the individual I was seeking would in turn come to seek me out." Kieran explained, "But I knew that the Empire was hunting me as well. I bribed the wroonian to act as a lure so I could see who was looking for me."

"And you found Jaysica." Kara said, "Lucky you."

"It seems to me that we have a double opportunity here." Vorn said to Kieran, "We can help you to deal with Vay Udra and then you can come with us."

"To where?" Kieran asked.

"To join the Rebellion." Jaysica said.

"And what if I say no?" Kieran asked, "I have not survived all these years by confronting the Empire head on."

"Maybe not," Mace said, "but with our help you could."

Kieran closed his eyes for a moment and took a deep breath.

"What's he doing?" Jaysica asked.

"Getting ready to turn you into a kowikian monkey lizard." Kara said.

"Can he do that?" Jaysica then asked.

"No I can't." Kieran said, opening first one eye and then the other, "I was attempting to discern the intention of the Force."

"Hippy stuff." Tharun commented and Mace and Vorn both glared at him.

"I will accompany you." Kieran said, "But I have conditions."

"Go on." Vorn said.

"We deal with this Vay Udra first. I can sense that she is near, doubtless she has also sensed my presence."

"Deal." Vorn replied.

"And you follow my orders precisely." Kieran added, "I have been trained to deal with those skilled in the Force and you have not. Her fate falls to me to determine. Agreed?"

"Agreed." Vorn said.

"Good." Kara said suddenly, "So how are we going to deal with the little witch?"

6.

“So what’s with that old geezer?” Major Kramm asked Garm, he and Captain Layne had approached Garm after Ibram had excused himself from the security office, supposedly to report back to Gayal Tharr but Garm wasn’t sure that he believed the man.

“Turned up a few months ago from the Core and started hanging around with Intelligence. Vay’s had more contact with him than me.” Garm replied, “That’s about it.”

“Do you trust him?” Captain Layne asked.

“He’s intel.” Garm said, “So no I kriffing well don’t. But he lowers the bar even for them I think.”

On the other side of the security office Vay watched Garm and the COMPForce officers talk.

You could slip away now. You may be able to find your quarry while those soldiers are still getting ready. You must face him alone.

“Leave me alone.” Vay whispered to herself.

“Excuse me?” the question came from a security guard sat nearby watching the feed from the ground station’s security cameras.

“What?” Vay asked in return.

“I thought I heard you say something,” the man said, “were you talking to me?”

“No, just mulling things over. Continue with your duties.” Vay told him and she began to head towards Garm. He can’t help you. You have to get to the jedi; only he can give you answers.

“How much longer?” Vay asked as soon as she reached Garm and the COMPForce officers.

“My men are in position.” Major Kramm replied, “It’s that Kelleesen who’s holding us up now.”

“Perhaps the old man’s gone senile.” Captain Layne commented, “He went to check in with headquarters and now he can’t remember the- Ack!” Captain Layne suddenly gasped at his throat, choking and behind him Garm saw Ibram standing in a doorway with one hand extending outwards.

“Perhaps COMPNOR should invest more time in teaching its recruits manners.” Ibram said flatly, slowly making his way towards Captain Layne, “And awareness of their surroundings. Just remember this captain, because you cannot see me does not mean I cannot see you.” And then he opened his hand. At the same time Captain Layne let out a sudden gasp and staggered sideways, steadying himself on a console, “Now then major,” Ibram went on, turning his attention to the astonished looking Major Kramm, “I believe you said that your men were ready to go?”

“What about the generators?” Tobis asked.

“What about them lad?” Tharun responded.

“Well, err, they’re beneath us.” Tobis explained, “So there won’t be a crowd.”

“He’s right major.” Mace added, looking at Vorn, “The shield and power generators are automated.

Everything’s maintained by droids down there.

“They’re also too important to risk damaging.” Vorn said with a nod, “Which means that all those Imperial troops will have to watch their fire.”

“So will we.” Kara responded, “Or do you want the media broadcasting how we brought down a skyhook and killed thousands?”

“I just need one isolated area where we can separate the young lady from any troops that accompany her.” Kieran said.

“Well won’t there be blast doors?” Jaysica said, “If we rig a few to close when we want then we can isolate anywhere we want.”

“The klutz is right boss.” Kara said, “An armoured door is just what we need to guarantee us seven on one odds. Though I’m not making any assumptions about quality there.” And she looked at Jaysica, “Ow!” she suddenly snapped, “Boss she kicked me!”

“Oh no she didn’t.” Kieran said and he turned his gaze to Tobis who just looked downwards.

“We don’t have time for this.” Vorn said, “Now let’s find a way down to the generators and size up what we need to do.”

“We’ll need an access card.” Mace said, “The public don’t get to wander around near vital systems.”

“Just leave that to me.” Kieran said.

“We are here to inspect the generators.” Kieran said to the cleaner, waving a hand in front of his face, “We are expected.”

"Of course." The cleaner replied, "We've been expecting you." And he held out his access card to the reader by the door he had just emerged through. A light above it went from red to green and the door slid upwards. "I told you it would work." Kieran said and he waved the rebels through the door ahead of him. Then, as soon as the door had dropped shut once more he added, "Okay, so now where?"

"Err, Harvey should know." Tobis said and the astromech droid let out a series of bleeps.

"Harvey says that you are correct Master Dorfus." Jeeves translated, "When he accessed the computer network he downloaded a floor plan that included the restricted areas beneath us."

"Well then," Vorn said, "lead the way Harvey."

The droid bleeped again and rolled down the narrow corridor ahead of them. Jaysica's mouse droid Penny copied this and set off after Harvey.

"Penny be careful." Jaysica called out after the droid, "Wait for us."

Harvey led the rebels and Kieran down to the lowest level of the ground station structure. Down here the rumble of machinery was everywhere and just as expected there was not a single living being apart from themselves to be found.

"Okay so now we need somewhere we can seal off." Vorn said.

"It needs to be somewhere that Vay will find easily." Mace added, "As well as somewhere that we can get out of."

Harvey chirped and the rebels turned to Jeeves.

"Harvey says that the shield generator room is straight ahead." Jeeves said and Harvey chirped again, "Yes, I was just getting to that bit. Don't be so impatient." The protocol droid said, looking down at the astromech before continuing with the translation, "Also that the chamber is accessible from two opposite directions. A doorway about thirty metres ahead of us, plus a second corridor that runs parallel to the thermal exhaust vent designed to carry heat away-"

"Does that lead to the surface?" Vorn interrupted and Harvey bleeped.

"Why yes Major Larcus sir. Harvey says that it does." Jeeves translated.

"Our way out?" Tharun asked.

"Beats trying to fight our way through several hundred stormtroopers." Mace said, nodding slowly and Vorn turned to Kara.

"Kara I want you to check out that exhaust vent. If we can gain access to it then come back and let us know."

"Shouldn't I do that?" Jaysica asked, "I'm the one who can get us through the exhaust port itself after all."

"I know," Vorn replied, "but I want you to rig the blast doors around the shield generator room. I want them to close when we want and when they do I don't want them to open again. Can you do that?"

"Easily." Jaysica said.

"Then do it." Vorn ordered.

"Why rig them both major?" Tharun asked.

"We rig the nearest one so that we can trap Vay in the generator room with us." Vorn explained, "The other door is our insurance of sorts. When we make a run for the exhaust vent we'll seal that behind us. If the Imperial troops are able to break through the first door it will slow them down even more."

Just as Jaysica had assured Vorn it did not take long for her to rig both blast doors around the shield generators using parts from wireless detonators to close on a command sent by her comlink, while sabotaging the gears of the motors guaranteed that once closed the blast doors would remain that way. The news from Kara was just as good as well.

"There's an access hatch at the end of the corridor." She said, "I took a quick look inside and it looks clear all the way up to the surface. It runs at angle of about forty five degrees, so it's pretty steep but we can all make it, Harvey and Penny too."

"That's handy," Tharun said, "Now how do we get Vay down here?"

Kieran smiled.

"I think that's another one for me. You go wait back there, this will work better if she just sees me in here." He said and he drew his lightsaber.

"Sir I've got a red light on shield generator one." The technician said as he studied the console in the control room several levels up from the generators themselves, "Its still operating but one of the feed lines just went dead."

"Have the droids reported any trouble?" Kallie asked as he walked over to take a look for himself.

"No sir."

"Well send one to check it out anyway and pipe its visual feed up here. The last thing we need now is for the shields to fail."

"Of course sir."

Both Kallie and the technician then looked up to watch the footage being relayed from the droid tasked to investigate the fault. They continued to watch as the droid made it way into the generator room and headed

towards the nearest shield generator. Immediately they saw that a long gash had been cut in the casing and that smoke was rising from inside.

"What the hell happened?" Kallie exclaimed when he saw the damage, but before the technician could reply his question was answered when Kieran stepped into the image.

In his hands the jedi held a pale blue lightsaber that he swung towards the droid and the image suddenly went black.

"Security!" Kallie yelled, activating the communications system, "We have an intruder in the shield room!"

The COMPForce troopers had spread themselves into a line that stretched across the ground station and were advancing through it. Everyone they encountered was stopped and their identity checked. It was slow going but it guaranteed that the fugitive jedi would not get past them, the only way to go was in the opposite direction and that could only lead to the stormtroopers surrounding the ground station. Garm smiled as he walked along behind the row of troopers, convinced of the effectiveness of his trap.

"Security! We have an intruder in the shield room!"

Garm had made sure that the Imperial troops were able to monitor all of the ground station communications and he came to a sudden halt when he heard the warning from his comlink. He turned to look at Ibram and Vay.

"It's him, I can sense it." Ibram said.

It is. Run now!

Vay pushed past the COMPForce troopers and set off into a run, leaving Garm and Ibram behind her.

"Vay wait!" Garm yelled.

"She can't take him alone!" Ibram snapped, "After her."

"Kramm, Layne. With us." Garm snapped at the COMPForce officers, "Bring a platoon of your best men and leave the rest to continue the sweep."

"Get out of my way!" Vay yelled as she ran and most of the crowd did. Those that did not simply got pushed out the way as Vay barged past them to get to the door leading down to the shield generators. Approaching the door she pulled out the access card she had been issued and presented it to the scanner. Then as soon as she was through the doorway she discarded it, took the lightsaber from its pouch on her belt and ran on. Bolting out of the turbolift Vay immediately sensed the presence of her target directly ahead of her and she ran towards him, making use of the additional strength that came by letting the Force flow through her. As she neared the doorway leading into the shield generator room Vay got a clear look at Kieran. The jedi knight was standing on a raised walkway that ran between the two primary shield generators, staring straight at her and in his hand she saw that he held a deactivated lightsaber.

Behind her Vay heard the sound of the turbolift door opening again.

"Vay wait!" she heard Garm's voice yell out.

No keep going.

Vay ran on, straight into the shield generator room.

From where they waited in the corridor on the far side of the shield generator room the rebels saw Vay rush through the doorway.

"Now!" Vorn snapped and Jaysica triggered her control link to the blast door opposite. Immediately there was a hissing and the door slid shut, followed by a brief flash from a vent beside the door as thanks to Jaysica's sabotage the motor burnt itself out.

"It worked." Kara exclaimed, "It actually worked."

"I told you it would." Jaysica said, looking around at Kara and smiling, but then there was another hissing sound and the blast door immediately in front of the rebels also slid shut.

"No!" Vorn yelled as he realised that they too were now sealed out of the shield generator room.

Garm skidded to a halt as the blast door closed right in front of him.

"What happened?" Ibram yelled from behind him as he too came to a sudden stop.

Garm pulled out his comlink and activated it on the ground station's channel.

"Security control why have you sealed the shield generator room?" he asked.

"We haven't sir." The security office replied, "The door was been overridden locally and we can't do anything about it from here."

"Major Kramm." Garm said as he shut off the comlink, "Get this door open. I don't care how."

"Corporal." Major Kramm said, "You heard the agent, get this door open." And one of the COMPForce troopers dashed forwards; slinging his rifle over his shoulder before using the tools he carried to open a panel beside the door.

"I can't sir." He said almost immediately, "The motor's burnt out. It will have to be replaced before we can move the door."

"Stand back." Ibram said sternly and then he glanced at Major Kramm and Captain Layne, "What you are about to see is classified." He told them, "Discussing it is forbidden on pain of death." And he took out his lightsaber and activated it.

"What the hell happened?" Mace asked as he slammed the palm of his hand against the blast door in front of him.

"The klutz screwed up." Kara said, "Again."

"I didn't, honest." Jaysica protested and then she looked to the side of the blast door, "Look! The motor hasn't blown, that means that it wasn't my modification that caused the door to close."

"She's right." Tobis added.

"Then what did do it?" Tharun asked.

"Vay." Vorn said.

"Stinky?" Kara said, "How?"

"She can use the Force remember." Vorn replied, "She must have either seen us or sensed us and she shut the door to even the odds. Now its just her against Kieran."

7.

"Well that should guarantee us some privacy." Kieran said, returning his free hand to his side after using the Force to drag shut the blast door behind him.

"You just cut yourself off from your rebel friends." Vay said, "Big mistake." And there was a snap-hiss as she activated her lightsaber before leaping through the air towards Kieran.

The Jedi reacted quickly, activating his own lightsaber and holding the weapon horizontally out in front of him. As Vay descended, aiming to slice him in half with her lightsaber she found his blade in the way and there was a crackling as the two weapons touched.

"Vay wait." Kieran said as he took a step back and she just held her lightsaber at the ready, breathing heavily, "I just need to talk to you." And he deactivated his lightsaber, instead reaching for a datapad.

Listen to him Vay.

"Oh yeah? And what could you possibly have to say to me?"

"I am your father. My name is Kieran Udra."

Vay froze.

"You can't be." She said.

It's true. Everything he will tell you is true.

"How can you be my father?" Vay asked, "The Jedi didn't"

"I met your mother during the Clone Wars." Kieran explained, "And we fell in love. The Jedi Order knew nothing about it of course; they'd never have let me stay close to her if they had. Even after you were born we were able to keep our relationship a secret."

"My mother? Who was she?" Vay asked, still keeping her lightsaber raised.

"Here." Kieran said and he held up the datapad to show Vay an image of a woman not much older than Vay was now holding an infant in her arms, "Her name was Yarienne and she was a doctor."

"What happened to her?"

"There was an attack." Kieran said, his face falling, "The Separatists launched an orbital strike against a base on the same continent as her settlement and her home was caught on the edge of the blast. I rushed back as soon as I heard but I was too late to save her. But I heard you crying from under the rubble and I dug you out myself. It was your crib you see; when the building collapsed it protected you. That's how the order found out about you and your mother and they took you from me. I was to be expelled."

Vay lowered her lightsaber and deactivated it.

"I've been searching for you for over twenty years." Kieran went on, "I knew you'd survived, I could sense you. But it's taken me until now to find you. I knew that the Emperor had tried to lead you towards the Dark Side, but I could still sense the light in you and it brought me here."

"But what do you expect us to do now?"

"We run away together Vay. I can keep you safe from the Empire and show you the real ways of the Force."

"Where could we go?" Vay asked and she looked back towards the doorway she had entered through. Parts of the blast door were now glowing as Ibram continued to cut through it with his lightsaber, "They'll be in here any minute."

"The rebels behind the other door will help us. They want me to join them."

Vay frowned.

"I know them." She said, "They'll kill me."

"No they won't. I won't let them."

"What if they try?"

"Then they will have to deal with us both."

"I can't leave." Vay said, looking back at the blast door again.

"You're close to someone aren't you?" Kieran said, "Someone on the other side of that door. He's the reason for that spark of light that remains. Well I suppose I'm the last one to lecture anyone on inappropriate relationships but we need to leave. You may still see him again."

"I think the door's warped." Tobis said as he tried to trigger the blast door's motor to open it again.

"That takes some power." Vorn said, "Are you sure there's no way to open it?"

"Not using the motor alone." Tobis replied, "We need to be able to drag the door as well, but I don't know how we can."

"The fire extinguisher." Tharun said, looking back at a fire extinguisher mounted on the wall behind them.

"What about it?" Mace asked.

"Bring it," Tharun said and he raised his heavy rifle, "and stand clear of the door."

The rebels stepped back and Tharun fired repeatedly. The powerful bolts struck the heavily armoured door near its edge but managed to do nothing more than put smouldering dents in its surface, about the size of a human hand.

"Now spray those blast marks." He said, "Cool them down."

"I get it." Mace said as he brought the fire extinguisher closer to the door, "We use them as hand holds to drag the door and give the motor a hand."

"It looks like your friends are trying to get in." Vay said.

"Yours too." Kieran replied, "We don't have much time. Now will you come with me or not?"

There was a sudden grinding sound, that of metal against metal and both Kieran and Vay looked towards the blast door Ibram was cutting through. He had almost finished cutting a rectangular section out of the door and he had inflicted enough damage that the weight of the door itself was now trying to bend the section he was cutting loose inwards. It was obvious that it would not be much longer before he was through.

"Its too late." Vay said, "We'll never make it away."

"Then take this." Kieran said and he thrust the datapad into Vay's hand. It contains everything you need to know about who you really are."

"But why?"

"Because there's no escape for me without you. Whoever it is out there with that lightsaber will keep hunting me and he'll expect you help him. If you don't he'll kill you. The only way out is for you kill me."

"No!" Vay exclaimed, shocked.

"You have to." Kieran said and he wrapped his hands around the hand Vay was using to hold her lightsaber and lifted the weapon up so that its emitter was placed against his chest, "Do it." He said, looking straight into her eyes.

There was a sudden crash as Ibram breached the blast door.

"Vay!" Garm cried out, leaping through the breach and aiming his blaster towards her and Kieran.

"I love you." Kieran said softly and he pressed his thumb down on the activation switch of Vay's lightsaber.

The snap-hiss of Vay's lightsaber activating was accompanied by the hiss of the second blast door as the rebels opening it just in time to see the weapon's crimson blade emerge from Kieran's back.

"No!" Vorn yelled out as the jedi slumped to his knees and then fell sideways.

"Vorn Larcus!" Garm shouted when he saw his father, "You are under arrest!" and he shifted his aim.

Immediately Tharun opened fire in Garm's direction, his rifle on fully automatic. The barrage of energy blasts caused not only Garm but also the COMPForce assault troopers following him through the ruin blast door to dive for cover. Only Ibram and Vay remained standing, Vay gazing down in horror at the body of her father lying at her feet and Ibram calmly swatting the blaster bolts aside with his emerald green lightsaber.

"Jaysica get this door shut again!" Vorn yelled and he pulled Tharun back. Jaysica activated her comlink and the blast door's motor came to life. The door slid part way shut and the motor began to squeal as it continued to try and finish closing the door.

"Its not working." Kara said and she quickly fired two shots from her blaster through the gap at Ibram. But then the motor suddenly overcame the resistance it was encountering and the door slammed shut, a shower of sparks bursting from the motor as it burnt out.

"Now let's move." Vorn yelled.

In the shield generator room on the other side of the blast door Garm and the COMPForce trooper rushed to the now sealed blast door.

"Ibram!" Garm called out, "We need you over here."

But Ibram ignored him and instead walked over to where Vay stood.

"Impressive." He said to here as he looked down at Kieran's body, "I did not expect you to be able to defeat him by yourself. Perhaps your skills are better than the Emperor thought."

"Ibram are you listening to me?" Garm yelled and Ibram looked around at him.

"Your father and his comrades are irrelevant Agent Larcus." He said, "I have finished what I came here to do."

"That bitch murdered him." Kara said angrily as she sat down back on the *Silver Hawk*, "A genuine jedi knight and she just cut him down. We have to do something about her boss."

"She defeated a jedi knight." Tharun pointed out, "I doubt there's much we can do to her."

"She got lucky." Kara replied, "We've encountered her before and she's never seemed that powerful to me."

"Then she's getting stronger." Tharun said, "Force users tend to do that as they practice more."

"Yes they do." Vorn said, "And if Vay Udra is becoming more powerful then she could present a serious threat to us. But right now I'm more worried about that other man."

"You mean the one with the green lightsaber?" Mace asked, "If I remember right green means he's a jedi too, not some sith acolyte."

"That's how it was explained to me during the war." Vorn answered, "Which means we have another jedi knight on our hands, one that seems to have fallen from grace."

"Oh great." Kara said, "So now we have two evil force users running around the sector. I've got a very bad feeling about this boss."

Where am I?

Kieran was confused. The last thing he remembered was looking into the eyes of his daughter, an infant the last time he had seen her but now grown into a beautiful young woman. Now he could not tell where he was. He could not see, hear, feel, taste or smell anything. But he could still sense the Force all around him.

You're safe. You're with us now.

But who are you?

We are your family. All the Udras who went before you.

The Udras? Then I'm-

Dead? Yes. You activated Vay's lightsaber and it killed you. Now you are here with us. Come on, I'll introduce you to the others. They're waiting to meet you.

The others? I don't even know who you are.

My name used to be Neari. Now come along.

But what about Vay? What will happen to her?

Don't worry. She's being watched.

"Are you okay?" Garm asked as he pulled his speeder up in front of Vay's building, "You haven't said a thing since we left the ground station."

"I'm fine." Vay replied as she opened the speeder door to get out.

"You don't seem fine to me."

"I'm just tired." Vay replied, "Fighting that jedi took a lot out of me. I'd ask you up but I'm not really in the mood for company."

"That's alright. I need to go pick Cayla up from her grandparents' anyway. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yes, goodbye." Vay said and she headed inside the building, ignoring the concierge behind the desk in the lobby as he waved at her. She headed straight up to her apartment, slumped down on the sofa and pulled out the datapad Kieran had given her. She activated the device and began to flick through the massive folder of images it contained. One image after another of some individual she did not know, all of them dressed in the characteristic robes of the jedi.

"Who are these people?" she said to herself.

Your family, this is a record of the Udras' service to the Jedi Order. From before the Hundred Years Darkness right up to the Clone Wars.

"These are my ancestors?" Vay said as she continued to look at one image after another.

Yes they are. All of them. Wait. Go back.

"What is it?" Vay asked and she went back to the previous image she had just looked at, "Who are these people?"

Approximately four thousand years ago they were jedi.

Vay looked more closely at the image. It seemed to be a typical family photograph, a young man stood in front of his parents, all of them smiling.

That is Cal Udra when he had just passed the trials to become a jedi knight, along with his proud parents Varn and Neari.

"Cal Udra?"

Yes. Put the word 'great' in front of 'grandfather' about a hundred and sixty times and that describes his relationship to you.

"I wonder what he was like."

Pompous and bossy.

Vay frowned, not used to the voice in her head speaking in this way. Then her attention was suddenly drawn to a fourth figure in the image. A young girl standing just behind Neari. Her hair was in pigtails and she had the unmistakable single braided length of a padawan.

"Who's she?"

That's me. You can call me Lara.