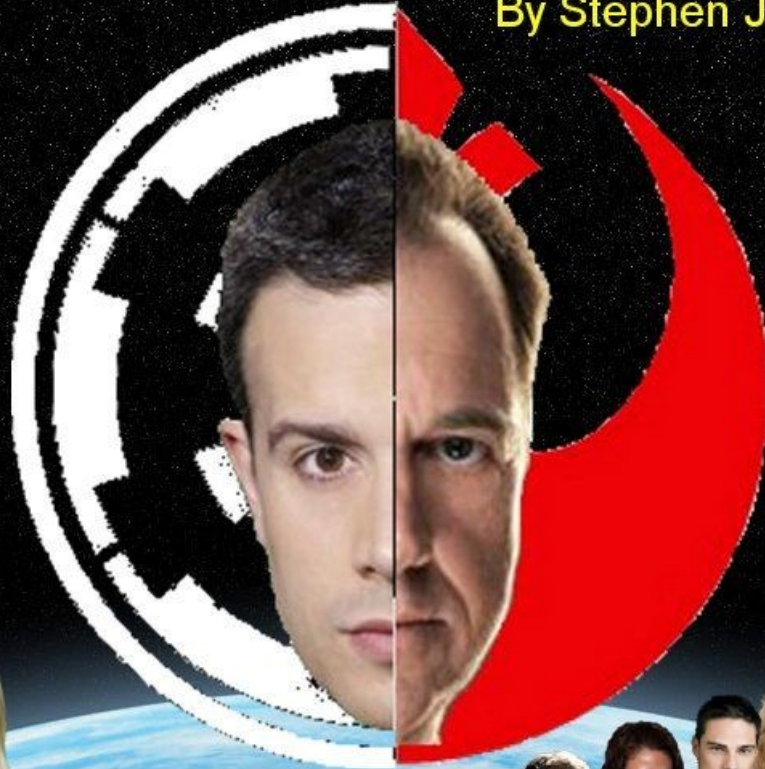


STAR WARS

4-07: Elder Statesman

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...

ELDER STATESMAN

WHEN A PROMINENT LOCAL POLITICIAN BECOMES AN EMBARRASSMENT TO THE EMPIRE PLANS ARE SET IN MOTION TO ELIMINATE HIM. VORN LARCUS III AND HIS UNIT MUST RESCUE HIM BEFORE HE CAN BE KILLED, BUT THE PROBLEM IS THAT HE DOESN'T WANT TO BE RESCUED BY THE REBELLION...

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

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1.

“So senator, how do you view the success, or even lack of it by the Empire in fighting this rebellion?”

The older man that Neema Gorord was interviewing let out a brief laugh.

“It’s not senator any more Miss Gorord. His majesty dissolved the senate and-”

“Neema please.”

“Well you should just call me Padras.”

“Very well, now back to the issue of the rebellion-”

“Of course. Believe that the force that this rebellion was able to gather at Tarlen recently shows that they are a force to be reckoned with. Any one of the four major ships they are alleged to have used could inflict horrendous damage on commercial shipping or worse yet a populated planet were they able to disable its shields.”

“And Padras, what about Allastra? The local defence forces were disbanded a year ago.”

“Indeed they were Neema. A decision that the Imperial administration has justified because by claiming rebel activity was down and Allastra had no need of a standing army. When in fact rebel activity has been increasing steadily over the last three years.”

“So far Moff Horatian had refused all my requests for an interview.” Neema said, “Have you been able to raise the issue with him?”

“Not as of yet. But your viewers may rest assured that despite no longer holding formal office I will continue to advocate on their behalf for-“

“It’s almost enough to put you off your dinner isn’t it?” Lady Lynn Sharva said as one of her dinner companions, Lord Maxamillion Torr, a tall balding man with a stern expression had the news feed shut off.

“I think that Max’s stomach is stronger than young lady.” Another man said. Though older than Lord Torr by about a decade this man still possessed a thick layer of white hair. As he spoke he lifted a glass of wine to his lips and took a sip.

“Indeed I do Couran.” Lord Torr replied, “Though I have to admit that what he said concerns me.”

“Don’t tell me you’re worried about the rebellion Max my boy.” Couran replied, a hint of smile appearing on his face.

“Of course not. But it does us no favours to be saying what he’s saying regardless.” Lord Torr said.

“He’s right.” This came from the fourth and final individual sat at the dinner table. Unlike the others Edvars Kurrad possessed no title to set him apart from others. However, his business empire gave him more wealth than all of the others put together and with that came influence as well as the ability to afford to dine at a restaurant that commanded a seating fee of a thousand credits per person before diners would even be allowed to see a menu, “Former Senator Padras Lukan’s remarks create uncertainty and that is the worst thing that can happen from a business point of view. Consumer and investor confidence will be hit even more than it already has been since Mon Mothma released her so-called ‘Declaration of Rebellion.’”

“If you know there’s going to be a disaster invest in canned food and blaster eh Edvars?” Couran asked.

“Exactly Lord Desh.” Edvars replied, “But with the Imperial authorities saying one thing and him another people become jittery. That’s bad for sales.”

“It’s the idea that he thinks he has the right to speak on behalf of anyone that gets to me.” Lord Torr said, “He hasn’t done a thing since the senate was disbanded three years ago. Now all of a sudden he’s being interviewed on a program seen across the sector.”

“Perhaps that what the interview was about.” Couran suggested, “He’s planning a run for office and wants people to take notice of him again.” Then he looked at Lady Sharva, “Its what you did when you wanted to take over Vorn’s old seat.”

A brief frown appeared on Lady Sharva’s face before she replied, annoyed at Couran’s reference to her behaviour.

“There aren’t any elections coming up though.” She said.

“That depends on what position he wants.” Couran said, “I believe that the Speaker’s term ends in about a year and a half. He’d need a lot of publicity to run for an office like that.”

The Speaker was the name given to the most senior member of the Parliament on the world of Estran, effectively the planet’s leader. It was a position Couran had held for some time before he retired.

“Stang.” Edvars exclaimed, “That’s the last thing we need. Oh well, he’ll never win. I’ll make sure whoever his opponents are they’ve got more funding than him.”

“But can you afford another year and a half of him shooting his mouth off Edvars? It could cost you a fortune in trade. It could cost all of us a fortune in lost investment returns.” Lord Torr pointed out. If Lord Desh is correct I’ve got a bad feeling about this.”

"Then something has to be done." Lady Sharva stated, "And it has to be done quickly."

Moff Gregor Horatian stood up as Lady Sharva and her handmaiden Kay Laren entered his office.

"Ah good morning ladies." He said as he directed them to the padded chairs specifically placed in front of his desk for this meeting, "Do please sit down. Have you been offered refreshments?"

"We have." Lady Sharva replied.

"Good, now what brings you to my office so urgently Lynn?" the moff asked using her first name rather than her title.

"Ah, straight to business as usual eh Gregor?" Lady Sharva said. Few individuals in the sector addressed the moff in such a personal manner, but he and Lady Sharva had known one another for many years, "Kay the datapad if you would."

"Of course my lady." Kay responded and she passed a datapad to the moff.

"That's a recording of Padras being interviewed." Lady Sharva said.

"I'm aware of it." Moff Horatian, "Rodge is furious about it. He called me up at home as soon as he was informed." The Rodge that Moff Horatian meant was Rodge Larrs, the sector's head of the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order, COMPNOR. He was the public face of the Empire for the sector and it was his job to handle media relations.

"So your office didn't approve the broadcast then?" Lady Sharva asked.

"Of course not. That bloody reporter has been harassing my staff for more than a year now trying to get an interview with me. As if I have the time to bother with answering questions about the rebellion when I could actually be doing something about them. She's upped her game now though it seems."

"Do you think that last night's broadcast was an attempt to coerce you into being interviewed then?" Lady Sharva asked.

"Rodge does. He's got his people looking at her activity more closely, trying to find out whether there's anything we can use to take her off the air permanently."

"I was having dinner with several friends when we saw the interview." Lady Sharva said, "The first part of it anyway. Couran Desh was with us and he seems to think that Padras is the problem."

"Padras?" Moff Horatian said, a puzzled look on his face, "He's just a former senator."

"So are both of us Gregor." Lady Sharva pointed out, "You nominated me to take your place when the Emperor gave you your job here and Padras took over when my term finished. We both got positions elsewhere, why should you think that he'd just fade away after the senate was disbanded?"

"What does Lord Desh think he wants then?" the moff asked.

"He wants to be Speaker. He wants control of Estran."

"I control Estran." Moff Horatian said sternly, "I control the entire sector."

"Yes you do Gregor. But so far every government has been co-operative, even the Allastran administration offered no resistance when you disarmed them. From what he said last night I think Padras would not be so co-operative, he could even try and petition Coruscant for your recall. Accuse you of being soft."

"I see." Moff Horatian said and he activated the intercom, "Could you have Rodge Larrs and Gayal Tharr join us?" he said before leaning back in his chair.

Rodge Larrs and Gayal Tharr arrived together. Rodge wore formal civilian clothing while Gayal was dressed in the uniform of Imperial Intelligence.

"Thank you for coming so quickly." Moff Horatian said, "Rodge this concerns an issue we've already spoken of."

"You mean Neema Gorord's broadcast?" Rodge replied.

"Exactly. Gayal have you seen it?"

"I avoid watching the news." Gayal replied as she sat down, "COMPNOR censor most of the interesting stuff." And she threw a glance at Rodge.

"We do try." Rodge responded.

"Well Lady Sharva has brought something to my attention that was overlooked by us." Moff Horatian said, "She feels that former Senator Lukan could become a problem for us. I want options for dealing with him. I don't care how it's done so long as it doesn't look like we're interfering in local affairs."

"Could we blackmail him?" Rodge suggested.

"I doubt it." Lady Sharva replied, "Anything he's done wrong probably involves other important figures we don't want damaged. Besides, we need to keep him quiet indefinitely. If he thinks we're about to expose him he may go public ahead of us and reveal the blackmail as well."

"Then the answer's obvious." Gayal said, "He has to die."

"It's done." Lady Sharva announced to the collection of images on the display. The communications link established from the back of her luxury speeder had established a simultaneous connection to everyone she had dined with the previous night. She could see all of them and they could all see one another.

"You can't mean the old boy's been made to shut up already?" Couran replied.

"No I don't." Lady Sharva replied, "But I easily convinced Gregor that he was a loose cannon that could not be tolerated. Then his own people did the rest. That nasty little upstart from intelligence was almost ready to go out and shoot him dead in the street."

"An assassination?" Edvars asked, "Isn't that going a bit far?"

"Not at all." Lord Torr responded, "Provided it's handled properly it's the best course of action."

"And the Empire is so good at handling things this way old boy." Couran added, "Though since just gunning the man down may attract attention I'm guessing that Gregor has something else up his sleeve."

"Well Lynn?" Lord Torr asked, "Does he?"

"Why I'm so glad you asked that Max." Lady Sharva replied with a grin, "It's something right up your alley."

"So who should we use?" Rodge asked Moff Horatian, "I'm sure the ISB or COMPForce could provide-"

"Thugs." Gayal interrupted before turning to the moff, "Sir Intelligence has properly trained assassins who are more than capable of undertaking this assignment. They won't need the help of these locals either."

"Maybe not," Moff Horatian replied, "but by involving Lady Sharva and Lord Torr we guarantee their silence. If they try to go public later we can make sure that the only evidence is of their part. No, I think that this task should fall to someone outside of the regular command structure. Someone I know can be depended on to keep quiet. Now if you don't mind I have a call to make."

Both Gayal and Rodge got to their feet and bowed slightly before heading for the door. Moff Horatian watched them leave and only when the door closed behind them did he activate his desktop communicator.

"Hello?" a woman's voice asked.

"Vay it's me." The moff said, "I need to see you right away, there's a little job I need you to carry out. One that suits your talents perfectly."

2.

Mace Grayle, captain and owner of the YT-1300 class transport the *Silver Hawk* was used to the approach to Estran. As a smuggler before joining the rebellion he had learned how to predict the movements of the orbiting security vessels so that he could slip through the net and touch down in one of the less well-observed starports. Right now a customs corvette was just passing by below the ship and at any minute Mace knew that it would alter its course towards a nearby space station. Sure enough there was a flare from its engines and the ship pulled away, leaving a gap between it and the next nearest ship, a heavy cruiser who's captain was unlikely to think a small ship like the *Silver Hawk* was worth the hassle of diverting a navy capital ship to investigate.

"Hang on." Mace announced over the intercom, "We've got our hole." And he accelerated towards the planet. Sure enough, though he passed within a few hundred kilometres of the cruiser the warship held its course, prompting a smile from Mace.

"Bless those navy types and their adherence to protocol." He muttered to himself.

As the air outside the cockpit glowed red another man entered and sat down beside Mace. This was Major Vorn Larcus III, the commanding officer of the rebel unit assigned to his ship.

"Think we'll be on time?" Vorn asked.

"I doubt it." Mace replied, "We got here just at the wrong time. Your friend is going to have to wait for us a while."

"He won't like that. Vorn said.

"Yeah, just think, he'll have to sit in that cantina drinking that stuff I swear is piped right from their urinals."

And both he and Vorn smiled, "Mace then extended a hand to the ship's communications and opened a channel to the starport control tower, "*Silver Hawk* to Sector Eleven traffic control, do you read me?"

"Confirmed *Silver Hawk*, we have you on our scopes."

"Requesting approach instructions."

"Certainly *Silver Hawk*, follow beacon to bay seven and stand by for data transfer."

"Data transfer?" Vorn commented, looking at Mace, "What can that be about?"

"Clarify that control." Mace transmitted.

"There's a message waiting for Captain Grayle." The controller answered, "Sending it now."

The message was only brief, a few lines of text that had been uploaded to the starport system from a public terminal.

TELL THAT OLD CODGER I SHAN'T BE ABLE TO MAKE OUR MEETING MY BOY. BETTER MAKE IT AT MY PLACE INSTEAD. FOLLOW MY BEACON AND I'LL LEAVE A LIGHT ON FOR YOU.

"He must be in trouble." Vorn said, "Why else ask us to go straight there?"

"It could be a trap." Mace cautioned Vorn, "How do we handle it?"

"If he wants us to go to his place then that's where we go. I'll tell the others." Vorn replied and he got up and left the cockpit.

"Hello control, change of plan." He told the starport traffic controller, "We'll be making a detour and landing at a private pad."

The *Silver Hawk* touched down during darkness in the centre of a well-maintained lawn, lit by a collection of small spot lamps running around the edge. Even before the access ramp had finished fully deploying a figure in combat fatigues and body armour jumped down to the ground and looked around, a heavy blaster rifle tucked into his shoulder. Mace and Vorn were next, both holding handguns at the ready as they ran down onto the grass and just behind them was a man in overalls that held a blaster but had it lowered.

"Any signs of trouble Tharun?" Mace asked.

"No captain, no movement at all." The armoured man replied.

"It looks safe enough." Vorn called out, looking back into the ship and a pair of young women appeared at the top of the ramp. Unlike the male rebels who were dressed in plain, functional clothing both women wore expensive looking dresses and high-heeled shoes.

"So where's your friend boss?" the taller woman asked as she reached the bottom of the ramp and linked arms with Vorn.

"Right here Kara." Vorn replied as a glass door slid open and Lord Couran Desh walked out of his house onto the lawn to greet his guests.

"Vorn my boy!" he called out, "So glad you got my message. Do come in all of you. I had my autochef prepare food."

"You shouldn't have gone to any trouble Couran." Vorn said, "We thought you were in trouble."

"Oh piffle. It's not like I made it myself and I'm not the one in trouble." Couran replied. Then he shifted his gaze to the two women and looked at what they were wearing. A puzzled look appeared on his face, "May I ask why exactly are you dressed like that?" he said to Kara.

"Because I didn't think we should turn up at a posh place like this dressed like people who shop at a jawa thrift store." Kara replied before glancing at the other woman, "The klutz just copied me."

"Oh I see." Couran said, "And if there had been trouble?"

"Oh I came prepared for that as well." Kara said and she lifted up a leg so that it stuck out through a long split in her dress and smiled. Taped to her thigh was a military style blaster pistol, "I offered to let the boss hide his hold out piece down the front of my dress but he didn't think he would be able to get it out in a hurry if he needed it." And Vorn sighed.

"Very nice young lady." Couran said.

"The gun or my leg?"

"Yes."

"Can we go inside now?" the other woman asked, "It's cold out here."

"Do be my guest my dear. Jaysica isn't it?" Couran said and the woman nodded and smiled, linking her arm with the man in overalls.

"Come on Tobis." Jaysica said, "Let's go get something to eat."

As the pair strolled towards the house Couran could not help but notice that the back of Jaysica's dress was tucked into her underwear.

"Oh, err-" he began but Tharun tapped him on the shoulder.

"We find it best not to tell her." He said, "That way she may not think we've noticed."

Still wearing his armour, Tharun sniffed at the tiny sandwich before taking a bite. He smiled and nodded and then took another larger one.

"So what's so important that you risked bringing us here?" Vorn asked Couran.

"Well its not really much of a risk now is it my boy?" Couran replied, "Your man Mace is still Lynn Sharva's favourite free trader after you set him up to get her off that cruiser you hijacked."

"She's still talking about that?" Mace asked.

"Oh yes my boy." Couran answered, "She's even mentioned you in Parliament." Then he coughed and held out a hand, "A principled businessman who has demonstrated the will of the citizenry to resist terrorism." He said.

"Wouldn't she be disappointed to know the truth?" Mace commented.

"That still doesn't explain why we're here." Kara said.

"Aside from giving you an excuse to wear one of those dresses filling up my hold?" Mace asked.

"Its only one crate each." Jaysica protested, "Plus that extra dress Kara has hanging from the ceiling. But that's not much really. You don't think so do you Tobis?" she said looking at Tobis who so far had said little since the ship had landed.

"What? Oh err-" he stammered.

"Never mind." Vorn said, "Couran, why have us come here instead of the usual place."

"Well firstly my food doesn't taste like bantha vomit my boy." Couran told him, "Secondly, my leaving the capital may attract more attention than your ship landing here right now and thirdly," and he looked at Kara and smiled, "I doubt your companion would have worn such an outfit were we to meet in the usual place."

"What's keeping you in the city?" Mace asked.

"Ah, now I'm glad you've asked that." Couran said and he activated a large wall mounted view screen. On it was the interview given by Padras Lukan to Neema Gorord, the sound muted, "Do you remember him my boy?" Couran asked Vorn.

"Senator Lukan?" Vorn replied, "I haven't heard anything of him since the senate was dissolved."

"Well he's suddenly decided to re-enter public life." Couran said, "And I think he's planning on running for office again. This time as Speaker."

"So he wants to be the Empire's bootlick boy." Tharun said abruptly, "Who cares?" then, remembering that Couran had once been the speaker he added, "No offence meant there my lord."

"None taken." Couran replied before turning back towards Vorn and Mace, "The issue is that he seems to be taking a very hard line attitude against the Alliance."

"You think he knows about you?" Mace asked.

"Oh no. If he suspected anything then he'd have contacted the authorities already. No, the problem is that he has been accusing old Gregor of being soft on you and that has upset several people we know greatly. They want him out of the way."

"You mean dead right?" Tharun said before taking another large bite of a sandwich.

"Indeed." Couran replied, "Now I know he's no fan of the Alliance or even you Vorn my boy, but I don't think that he deserves to be killed. In fact I think you could use this to your advantage."

"How?" Jaysica asked.

"Because if we tell him he's been targeted for assassination then we can get him to defect." Mace replied.

"And a high profile defection like that would be very embarrassing to both the Imperial sector government and the Estranian administration." Vorn added, "Neither can claim the Empire is here for the benefit of the population if they're bumping off people for asking the wrong questions."

"So why didn't your defection cause a fuss like that?" Jaysica then asked Vorn.

"Because his was painted as the actions of a man only looking out for himself young lady." Couran told her, "Padras hasn't questioned the Empire's right to rule at all."

"How do you know all this anyway?" Tharun then asked.

"Because the idea originated outside of the Imperial administration." Couran answered.

"Lord Torr and Lady Sharva?" Vorn said.

"Indeed my boy. Plus that industrial fellow Edvars Kurrad."

"I never pictured him as the murdering type." Mace said.

"He isn't." Couran said, "He just wanted Padras to keep his mouth shut and stop upsetting his customers. Though I think that Lynn and Max knew exactly what Gregor's people would come up with when she met with him."

"So how are they planning on doing it?" Tharun asked, "I mean I doubt they'll just vape him in broad daylight will they?"

"No of course not. Too many difficult questions." Couran replied.

"Like who shot him?" Kara commented.

"Indeed." Couran said. Then he began to explain, "He'll be invited to dinner by Max, with Lynn and I in attendance. During the meal we'll question him about his intentions. If he admits to planning to run for office we'll suggest that we move the discussion back to his home where we can continue it more discretely. If not Lynn will ask about his time in the senate, apparently wanting to compare their experiences. Padras never can resist dropping the names of all the famous people he met there and the mementoes he has. Then one of us will ask to see some of these and he'll invite us back to his home."

"Surely you don't mean you'll be the ones to kill him?" Vorn said in amazement.

"No of course not my boy. We won't be alone; Max will have his man Corva with him. While we talk he will slip away and disable the house security system. Then after we've left an Imperial assassin will enter and take care of him, making it look like a burglary gone wrong."

"And since he's made no public announcement that he's running for office no one will suspect it was anything more." Mace said.

"Even if they did they'd be looking for something from his past." Vorn added, "Someone he upset in the senate. Not looking into his future plans."

"So how do we handle this then boss?" Kara asked, looking at Vorn, "I mean this bloke's hardly any friend of ours. Why not just let him get killed? One less Imperial collaborator to worry about."

"She does have a point there major." Tharun said.

"Err, well I doubt he thinks the Empire's about to kill him." Tobis said, "I mean, well, it's just that he could change his mind if he finds out."

"That's a good idea major." Mace said to Vorn, "If we could let him know what's going on he'll never sit back and let it happen."

"We'd need proof." Vorn said and he looked at Couran, "Do have something we can use? Something that won't give you away?"

"Sorry my boy. I'm not at the centre of this plot, I'm just hanging around enough that I can tell you what they're up to. If you want definitive proof then you'll have to find it yourself and fast as well, the dinner is being arranged as we speak."

3.

Back aboard the *Silver Hawk* Tharun sat down heavily as the ship lifted off and placed a large packet of folded plastic on the table in front of him. Unfolding this he then proceeded to remove the food that he had brought back from Couran's house and laid it out.

"So where are we going to boss?" Kara asked as she leant over the table and reached out for some of the food.

"Get your own." Tharun said, slapping her hand away.

"Ouch. You big bully. Boss he hit me."

"Yes I know." Vorn said flatly, "If you're still hungry I think there's some bantha breakfast biscuits in the cupboard."

"Blue sauce?" Kara asked.

"I think so." Vorn replied.

"Ooh goody." Kara said, darting to the cupboard.

"In answer to your question I'm not sure yet." Vorn said, "Mace has to see Odras Balve, so we'll be heading there first. I'll try and come up with something on the way."

"Well hopefully we'll be going somewhere warm." Jaysica commented, then she added, "Was it just me or was there a draught in Lord Desh's house?" then she turned around and headed for her cabin. Now standing behind her for the first time all evening Tobis' jaw dropped as he saw her exposed underwear.

"Oh, err-" he began.

"Leave it lad." Tharun cautioned him and he held up a piece of decorated food, "Have one of these. In fact take two, one for you and one for the little lady with her ass out."

"Oh so you share with him and the klutz." Kara exclaimed, placing her hands on her hips as she waited for the oven to signal her food was ready.

Tharun shrugged as he handed the food to Tobis.

"We need proof of the plan." Vorn said, "And as I see it any that does exist is going to be in one of three places. With Lord Torr, Lady Sharva or somewhere in the Imperial network."

"They won't put black bag stuff like this on an open network." Tharun pointed out, "Its probably all verbal orders with no written records."

"And why would either of those two snobs be keeping records of a plan to murder someone?" Kara asked as she sat down, placing a plate and a bottle of blue sauce on the table. Then as she started to spread the sauce over one of the two square biscuits on the plate she added, "I mean do those people even write anything down for themselves? I thought they get minions to do stuff like that for them."

Vorn smiled.

"Kara you're amazing." He said.

"I know." She replied, pressing the two biscuits together so that the sauce was between them.

"Care to let us in on why?" Tharun asked.

"Lynn wouldn't have met with the moff without her handmaiden. If we can find Kay she may be able to fill us in." Vorn said.

Kara smiled at Tharun.

"See, I'm amazing." She said, "Bet you wish you'd shared that food with me now." And she bit into the bantha breakfast biscuits, squeezing the sauce between them hard enough that a jet squirted out and struck Vorn's face.

"What and miss that?" Tharun commented, grinning while Vorn frowned and wiped his face.

"What do you mean everyone saw and said nothing?" Jaysica's voice was suddenly heard yelling from her cabin.

Tharun shook his head and sighed.

"I warned him, but the lad just wouldn't listen." He said.

Estran's parliament building was surrounded by security while it was in session. Since a terrorist attack that Vorn's unit had foiled a few months earlier security had been tightened by the addition of extra physical barriers and guards. Limiting access to the parliament building to only government employees and the Parliamentarians themselves meant that their private staff were required to wait elsewhere while their employers debated one another. Though unpopular with the Parliamentarians themselves, this new regulation had proven a boon to nearby business owners, who now saw an increase in custom from the staff who needed a place to spend their time and money.

The rebel team moved amongst the crowds of people that packed the nearby tapcafs and restaurants, searching for Kay. To cover all the possible places she could be the group had split up and it was Tharun that

found her sitting alone in a side street cantina tucked away beneath a busy roadway that he had only entered with the intention of getting a drink for himself.

"Buy your a drink lady?" he said to her as he sat down next to her.

"No thanks I'm - Oh, its you." She said and she looked around the cantina, "Are you alone?"

"For the moment." Tharun replied, "The others are wandering around outside somewhere."

"So why are you here? Can you tell me? Are we in danger?"

"That's a lot of questions from someone who won't even let me get her a drink." Tharun replied, "But in order, trying to save a guy's life, yes because you're critical to the first phase of our plan and probably yes - Jaysica's nearby after all."

"Err, did you just say you needed me? Look, if this is about what Doctor Drame said-

"Yes I did." Tharun interrupted, paying no attention to anything after the question, "Though I think I should let the major fill you in." and he took out his comlink, "Found her." He signalled, "Cantina under the skyway, west of Parliament Plaza." And without waiting for a reply he returned the device to his pocket.

"We need access to Lynn's computer again." Vorn told Kay.

"More forged entry passes?" Kay asked in reply, "She already knows you used her clearance to get in last time. She'll start to suspect me if you keep on doing that."

"No," Vorn replied, "we're not looking to get into the Parliament building this time. Besides, after the security changes passes can only be issued by Parliament staff. No, we're looking for evidence of what Lynn herself is doing."

"Basically we want you to get us into her mansion." Mace added.

"Yeah, while she's doing her 'look at me, I got voted into office number in a room full of other stuck up windbags'." Kara commented.

"I used to be in Parliament." Vorn reminded her.

"Yes boss and if I was an Estranian citizen I would have pretended to pay attention when you asked for my vote. But I'm from Tarlen, so it doesn't matter does it?"

"I'm sure the captain and Tharun voted for you though." Jaysica then said, smiling and Mace and Tharun looked at one another nervously.

"Ah, well I was rarely on the planet long enough to keep up with things like bothering to vote." Mace said.

"And when I was younger and the guy came round to deliver voting papers my old dad used to chase them off our land with a blaster." Tharun added.

"Really?" Tobis suddenly asked.

"Yeah," Tharun answered, "After the first couple of times the local council made sure it only sent people who were in good shape."

Vorn sighed.

"Look Kay, we've got information that your employer is involved in a plot to have someone killed." He said.

"Someone we don't like." Kara muttered.

"You mean Padras Lukan, the old senator?" Kay asked.

"Well there's our proof boss." Kara said, "March her up to the old man and let her tell him. Job done and we can leave."

"Hey look, I can't get involved that much." Kay responded, "Besides, why should he believe me?"

"He wouldn't." Vorn said, "But if we can get a look at Lynn's computer then maybe we can find something incriminating."

There was a pause as Kay considered her position.

"You promise that she won't know I helped you?"

"Hey, its us." Kara said and Kay just stared at her.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." She said, "But alright I'll help you." Then before anyone could reply she added, "But if this goes wrong you have to promise that you'll get me out of here."

"You have my word on it." Vorn said, "Now we'll be working in two teams. Mace will take Kara and Tobis and go with you while I take Tharun and Jaysica to see Padras. If Mace's team finds anything they should transfer it directly to me."

"Why can't Tobis come with us?" Jaysica asked.

"Because he's the one best qualified to go snooping around the computer." Mace pointed out to her.

"Then can't I go with him instead of Kara?" Jaysica asked.

"No." Vorn replied, "We'll be breaking into Padras' home so I need you to deal with his security."

"And Tharun to cover your escape when you screw it up." Kara commented.

When she opened the door to Lady Sharva's luxurious home the first thing she did was check to see if anyone had noticed her. Focused entirely on this she found that not only could she not see any of the other household staff but she could actually sense them clustered in the kitchen on the far side of the house.

"Kay, I think you may be Force sensitive."

The words spoken to her so recently sudden echoed through her mind and Kay gasped.

"What's wrong?" Mace whispered, his hand sliding under his jacket to where his blaster was holstered.

"Nothing." Kay replied, "The way's clear, everyone's at the back of the house."

"How do you know?" Kara asked.

"Oh, err, its where they always are when Lady Sharva's not around. Probably gambling. Follow me."

"Oh, err, I know they way." Tobis said, "You've shown me before. The office right?" and he pointed in the general direction of Lady Sharva's office.

"Be polite Tobis." Kara said, "Ladies first." And then she turned to Kay, "After you." She said.

Kay just smiled and quietly led the rebels through the house to Lady Sharva's private office. As soon as they were inside Kay closed the door behind her while Tobis rushed to the desk.

"Has she changed any of the set up since last time?" he asked.

"No. That is I don't think so." Kay said, "She never found out you were here."

"Well providing Tobis can get this done quick enough for you to be back outside Parliament when her ladyship finishes diverting public money into her back pocket she won't know we were here this time either." Kara said.

"Not a fan of politicians are you?" Mace said to her, but before Kara could reply Tobis spoke up.

"Err, I've got her messaging log here." He said, "There are quite a few threads between her, Edvars Kurrad and Lord Torr."

"Oh you also need to look at anything to and from Lord Desh." Kay commented as she moved around behind Tobis and looked at the screen, "He's involved in this as well."

"What?" Tobis said, forgetting for a moment that Lord Desh's involvement with the Alliance was a secret known only to a handful of individuals, almost half of whom were in the office, "Yes of course, there are several messages from him as well."

"Anything with the subject line 'Killing a former senator'?" Kara asked.

"No, nothing." Tobis replied, shaking his head slightly as he spoke.

"Could there be any other records of private communications anywhere else?" Mace asked Kay.

"I don't think so." She answered, "She tends to keep all of her work messages in her office in the Parliament building. I can't get you in there."

"Oh this isn't the sort of thing anyone would want on an official computer." Tobis said, "Those things tend to get backed up and it takes major pull to remove anything for good. In fact even if you have that sort of power the mere fact that someone wants something removing from the records tends to get others asking questions about why."

"Well there aren't any more networked machines in the house." Kay said.

"So what'll the boss do now?" Kara said, looking towards Mace, "I mean wasn't this supposed to be his proof for the old man?"

"I guess he'll just have to hope his powers of persuasion are up to the task without proof." Mace answered.

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

4.

"I can't see." Jaysica protested.

Vorn, Tharun and Jaysica were stood behind a hedge that separated an area of woodland from the street where Padras resided and although both men were tall enough to see over it Jaysica was far too short.

"Never you mind," Vorn replied as he continued to look through his macrobinoculars at Padras' home, attempting to determine whether or not the former senator was in, "Just keep a look out for anyone coming."

"But Penny can do that." Jaysica replied and she pointed to the tiny box-shaped mouse droid by her feet. In response the droid emitted a cheerful bleep.

"Come on then little lady," Tharun said, lowering his own macrobinoculars, "I'll give you a lift up." Then looking at Vorn he added, "She needs to get a look at the security set up anyway major."

"Oh very well then sergeant." Vorn replied and he looked back at the house.

Tharun handed his macrobinoculars to Jaysica and then crouched down. Wrapping his arms around her legs he stood up again, lifting her off the ground.

"How's that?" he asked.

"Great." Jaysica told him, "I can see everything from up here." And she lifted the macrobinoculars to her eyes.

"Well corporal?" Vorn said, "What's your assessment?"

"Someone's at home." Jaysica told him, "I can see an open window at the back of the house."

"I hadn't spotted that." Vorn commented as he adjusted his view, "Now what about security?"

"There's an active beam web. I can see the emitters against the walls of the house. My guess is that it covers the entire grounds."

"So as soon as we set foot on the property he'll know we're there?" Tharun said, shifting his grip on Jaysica as he tried to keep her aloft.

"Yes and quit moving about so much."

"Well stay still up there."

"I'm trying to get comfy." Jaysica said as she wriggled slightly, "You're not a very good ladder you know. In fact this would be better if—" and at that point she accidentally kicked Tharun with her heel, catching him in the groin.

"Oof!" was all he could say and he doubled over, letting go of Jaysica entirely.

Jaysica let out a cry of alarm as she fell forwards, landing face first in the hedge with a crash. The hedge was filled with tiny thorns and as Jaysica fell through it these dug into her face.

"Get me out!" she exclaimed as she flailed her arms about, try to dislodge herself without getting scratched any further.

However, Vorn first turned his attention to Tharun who was lay on the ground, groaning.

"Tharun are you alright?" he asked, extending a hand to help the big man back up.

"I'll reserve judgement on that sir." He croaked, "At least everything still seems to be there."

"What about me?" Jaysica asked as she finally freed herself from the hedge, her face now covered in tiny scratch marks and bits of the hedge caught in her hair. Tharun and Vorn both stared at her, "What?" she asked, "It was an accident."

"Just pick up penny and let's get moving." Vorn said.

"At least there's a hole in the hedge now." Tharun commented, picking up the holdall that contained most of their equipment and he squeezed through the Jaysica-sized gap.

A low decorative wall surrounded Padras' home, but this offered no cover to the rebels. However, the former senator had lined his back garden with closely spaced trees to increase his privacy so they made their way around to that side of the house, where the open window on an upper floor was in full view.

"I think I could fit in through there." Jaysica commented, looking at the window.

"Oh really?" Tharun asked, "And how were you planning to reach it? Don't think I'm giving you another lift up."

"We need to get to the house first." Vorn said.

"That's easier said than done." Jaysica said and she crouched down beside the nearest tree, "Look at these." And she pointed to the slender black rods that stuck up about knee height from the ground all around the edge of the garden.

"The sensors for the beam web?" Tharun asked and Jaysica nodded.

"Is it active?" Vorn asked.

"Hang on, I'll check." Jaysica replied and reaching down she gathered together a small pile of dead leaves that the gardener had overlooked, "Tharun I need your lighter."

"Just remember," Tharun said as he gave Jaysica his lighter, "we're here to break into the house, not burn it to the ground."

"Oh ha ha." Jaysica said, setting fire to the leaves. Then she lowered her head and gently blew across them, not enough to scatter them and spread the fire, but enough to send the smoke drifting past the nearest of the rods. Briefly a narrow red beam appeared in the smoke.

"Well I suppose that means its active then." Tharun said.

"It is." Jaysica said, getting back to her feet and returning his lighter.

"So how do we get past it?" Vorn asked.

"We don't." Jaysica said, "But Penny does. The beam is set high enough above the ground that small animals wandering through the garden won't continuously trigger the system. Penny's small enough to slip underneath it. I'll need a datapad."

Vorn took out a datapad and gave it to her. Jaysica plugged her comlink into the device and then looked down at her droid, "Okay Penny," she said, "send me the feed from your camera and I'll tell you what to do. Now go."

The little droid chirped and set off across the garden. The wheeled body of a mouse droid was intended for indoor use and had poor ground clearance, however Padras' lawn was well maintained and so flat that Penny was able to cross it rapidly.

"Okay now move around the house." Jaysica told the droid, "Keep close to the wall and look out for any sort of box sticking out."

Letting out another chirp Penny began to circle the house until the image being sent to the datapad showed a dull grey box fixed to the wall that had a wire running out of each side.

"That's it." Jaysica said, "Penny, open that up."

A claw-like appendage emerged from inside Penny's outer casing and extended up to the box. The droid forced this between the main body of the box and its cover before prising it open. There was a clatter that could be heard from the end of the garden as the cover fell to the floor and exposed the electronics inside.

"Good, now grasp the exposed contacts in the centre of the board." Jaysica said and she watched as Penny reached out and pinched the pair of metal pins sticking out of the circuit board, "Okay that's it." Jaysica then said, looking at Vorn and Tharun.

"What's that?" Tharun asked.

"The system's been put into an engineer test mode." Jaysica explained, "So long as those contacts are shorted together by Penny's lifting claw you could land a shuttle in the garden without it being picked up."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Tharun asked and he pulled his rifle from the holdall.

"I agree." Vorn added, "Let's make a move for that door over there and then you can get us inside Jaysica."

Vorn was the first one to step into the house, finding himself in a narrow corridor that had only basic decoration. From some other location in the house he could hear the faint sound of music.

"What if he's not alone?" Jaysica asked as she entered the house behind Vorn.

"Oh so now you think of that." Tharun commented.

"Don't worry." Vorn said, "Padras' wife left him years ago and he was never one for organic servants. We should be able to deal with any droids we find easy enough. Now I suggest we head towards the music."

The music led the rebels through Padras' house to the main hall where a large archway gave access to a luxuriously decorated lounge and sat in the lounge with his back to the rebels as he watched a holographic recording of an orchestra was Padras Lukan himself.

"Good afternoon senator." Vorn called out, "There's no need to get up."

Despite this statement Padras leapt to his feet and spun around to face his uninvited guests.

"You!" he snapped, "Traitor!"

"So you recognise me then." Vorn said.

"Of course I do you rebel scum." Padras replied, glaring angrily at Vorn, "You're Vorn Larcus the third. You betrayed and deserted your people to join your precious criminal uprising. Rest assured that when I'm-

"You won't be doing anything if you don't listen to me." Vorn interrupted.

"Ah, so you're here to kill me then." Padras said and he looked at Tharun, "Though I see you needed to bring him to do it for you. Personally I'm surprised you didn't just put a blaster bolt through me while my back was turned. That's more your style isn't it?"

"Would you just shut up and listen to me?" Vorn snapped, "We're here to save you."

"What? You save me? A traitor, his hired hit man and some street urchin that looks like she fell through a hedge? I don't think so."

"Hey my falling through that hedge was an accident." Jaysica exclaimed.

"Padras you're on an Imperial hit list." Vorn said, "You're recent outbursts have annoyed the wrong people and now they're going to shut you up for good."

"Oh and I suppose you're here to prevent this attempt on my life then are you? Where's your proof of this ridiculous claim?"

Vorn sighed.

"I don't have any, I'm asking you to trust me. The Empire doesn't want to see you elected Speaker."

Padras gasped.

"But how did you know?" he asked, "I've made no announcement."

"Because there are people who know you that still trust me Padras." Vorn said, "Now look, if you come with us we can get you away from here and—"

"That's it isn't it?" Padras snapped, "You're here to abduct me so I won't be elected speaker. You're insignificant rebellion is afraid of what I'll do when I'm in power. Believe me when I promise you that I will mobilise every resource of Estran to—"

"Oh shut up!" Tharun yelled, "Look, we're here to help you. Do you want to live or not?"

Then there was a faint wailing sound in the distance.

"Are those sirens?" Jaysica asked.

"Of course they are." Padras replied and from his pocket he removed a slender cylinder.

"A wireless distress beacon." Vorn said.

"Indeed." Padras said, "I sent for help as soon as I saw you. I think you'll find that as a former senator the local security services respond rapidly when I send for them."

Tharun dashed to the window and peered outside, he held his rifle pointed down but was ready to bring it up and use it if needed.

"Major, we need to go." He said.

"I agree." Vorn said and then he turned to Padras once more, "Look Padras, you're in real danger if you stay here. Come with us and we can protect you."

"Hah!" Padras snapped.

"Okay let's move." Vorn said and he headed towards the door the rebels had entered through.

"Penny! Quickly!" Jaysica called out and there was a chirping as the tiny droid rolled towards her. Jaysica scooped up the droid and was about to run away from the house when Vorn took hold of her.

"No." he said, "Leave Penny here."

"Leave her here?" Jaysica replied.

"Yes, inside. She can keep an eye on what's going on and transmit what she finds out to us."

"Nice idea." Tharun said, "No one notices mouse droids."

"She better be alright." Jaysica replied as she set Penny down just inside the door, "Now go hide." She said and the droid chirped one last time before rolling away.

The sirens were louder now and the sound of repulsorlift engines could also be heard as the police vehicles got closer.

"Okay now let's get out of here." Tharun said and the rebels began to run.

They headed for the hole in the hedge that led back to the woodland where they knew the police speeders would be useless.

From behind them they heard an engine and the blaring of sirens. Without waiting for instructions Tharun whirled around and fired a short burst from his rifle. The powerful weapon sent several energy bolts into the police speeder's engine and its driver struggled to bring it to a safe halt as the force field holding it above the ground failed.

"Faster." Tharun said.

A second police speeder appeared ahead of them and came to a sudden halt. The moment it was stationary the doors flew open and a pair of police officers rolled out of the vehicle with weapons in their hands.

"Stay where you are!" one yelled, aiming his blaster towards Tharun and Vorn knew exactly how the former mercenary would react.

"No!" he shouted, knocking Tharun aside before he could open fire.

"Major what are you doing?" Tharun demanded as a blaster bolt from one of the police officers flew overhead.

"They're not our enemy." Vorn replied and he reached into the kit bag Tharun carried and removed a second rifle, this one of the compact design used by Imperial troops. He flicked the selector switch 'Stun'.

"Then why are they shooting at us?" Jaysica asked from where she had dived for cover.

"Stun blasts only sergeant." Vorn ordered and he opened fire, sending one blast after another towards the police officers. Tharun frowned and adjusted his own weapon.

Vorn's initial attack had driven both policemen behind their vehicle for cover and although he had so far failed to hit either of them he was at least limiting their ability to return fire and this gave Tharun the time he needed. He took a deep breath and exhaled, his eye pressed against the rear of his rifle's optical sight. The moment it was lined up on one of the officers he squeezed the trigger and a bright blue bolt felled him instantly. Tharun then shifted his aim and repeated this, carefully lining his shot up and then taking down the target in one go.

"Clear." He said.

"Get in the speeder." Vorn instructed, "Jaysica, you're driving."

"Me?" Jaysica replied, "But isn't Tharun a better driver?"

"He's also a better shot and we may need covering fire. Now get in."

Jaysica climbed into the police speeder and immediately began to feel about under the seat. Tharun leapt in beside her while Vorn paused only to collect the blasters from the stunned police officers before getting into the back.

"What are you waiting for?" Tharun asked, looking at Jaysica who still had her hand beneath her seat.

"I need to adjust the seat." She replied, "That cop was really tall."

"More like you're just short little lady." Tharun commented.

"Got it!" Jaysica snapped and the seat slid forwards so quickly that her face struck the steering column and the horn blared out, "Ow." She added, rubbing her nose as she sat up.

"Can we get a move on before more police turn up?" Vorn asked from the back seat.

"Oh, yeah right." Jaysica said and she put her foot down on the accelerator.

5.

"What is it Corva?" Lord Torr asked when his trusted retainer entered the room.

"You need to see this my lord." Corva replied and he marched towards a wall-mounted display. At the moment it showed a static image of a mountain range but when Corva adjusted it the picture changed to a video news broadcast. Immediately Lord Torr recognised the reporter as Neema Gorord.

"-Live from outside the home of former Senator Padras Lukan where not one hour ago a rebel team made an attempt on his life. An emergency signal was received from Mister Lukan's home and police units responding drove away the rebels without casualties. According to a source within the Estran City Police Department the would be victim was able to identify one of his attackers as the former Member of Parliament Lord Vorn Larcus the third." And at this point the picture was split down the middle, one half still showing Neema while the other played stock footage of Vorn delivering a speech in the Parliament chamber.

"What the hell was he doing there?" Lord Torr shouted, bringing a clenched fist down on his desk.

"I can't be certain my lord." Corva replied, "But my source in the police says that Padras Lukan claimed they tried to warn him of a threat to his life from the Imperial government. It seems that he didn't believe them." Lord Torr scowled and let out a sound similar to a low growl. Reaching out he activate his communications system.

"Lynn." He said as soon as the connection was made but before Lady Sharva could speak, "Have you seen the news?"

"No. I'm on my way home from Parliament. What's wrong?"

"Vorn Larcus just tried to warn Padras about our plan."

"Impossible. How could he know?"

"Well I for one didn't tell him."

"Neither did I. What about Couran? They were pretty close back in the day."

"That was before Vorn committed treason. Couran Desh would never be a part of that; he was the Speaker after all. No, either the rebels have a well placed agent in the Imperial administration or Edvars Kurrad has been blabbing to people he shouldn't have."

"He didn't sound too happy with the scheme." Lady Sharva noted, "Perhaps he tried to unburden his conscience."

"This does however offer us an opportunity." Lord Torr said.

"How? The local authorities will be watching for another attempt on his life."

"Exactly. So when an assassin does kill him the rebellion will get the blame. We don't even need to fake a burglary now. Vorn Larcus doesn't know it yet, but he's just helped us out immensely."

"So what happened then? Lady Sharva offer you tea and you forgot why you were there?" Tharun said to Kara as he strode aboard the *Silver Hawk* and into the lounge.

"Where's the boss and the klutz?" Kara asked in return.

"Getting rid of a speeder." Tharun said, "Now what happened?"

"Why? Didn't things go well? Can I get you some caf?"

"No they kriffing well didn't. But yes to the caf. Strong."

"So what happened then?"

"Well we got inside alright, but the miserable old fart didn't believe a word the major said to him. Just called him a traitor and called the cops. That's when we decided to leave."

"Well Tobis found nothing to earn his sergeant's pay. There was a bit of an awkward moment when I thought he'd given Lord Desh away to Kay as well." Kara said as she handed a mug to Tharun, "Fortunately he was able to get away with it."

"The lad knows what he's doing." Tharun said, sipping at the drink and then wincing due to the sharp unpleasant flavour.

Just then there were more footsteps from the direction of the access ramp and Jaysica and Vorn entered the ship.

"What the hell happened to your face?" Kara said, wide eyed when she saw the scratches covering Jaysica's face.

"Tharun dropped me into a hedge." She replied, "And it's not funny. It really stings."

"Oh come on you baby." Kara said, beckoning Jaysica to follow her, "I'm sure I've got something in my medical bag that'll help." And she led Jaysica to their cabin.

"So where's Mace?" Vorn asked Tharun while pouring himself a drink.

"Beats me. It was just Kara in here when I got back."

"Well I better go-," and Vorn winced just as Tharun had done when he sipped at his drink.

"Hey don't blame me. Kara brewed it." Tharun said.

"Kara was it? Well it seems she's gone from just punching officers to trying to poison them." And he tipped his drink down the sink, "I'll go look for Mace." He then said and he headed for the cockpit.

Sure enough Mace was sat the pilot's seat, leaning back into its padding. Beside him the co-pilot's seta sat a gold coloured protocol droid.

"Jeeves you're in my seat." Vorn said to the droid.

"Oh Major Larcus sir I am sorry." The droid answered, getting up immediately so that Vorn could sit down.

"We were just reading about your afternoon." Mace said to Vorn, "You've made quite a splash." And he pointed to a small display that showed Vorn's image along with a report concerning the events at Padras' home.

"Is there much of this?" Vorn asked.

"It would seem that all of the sector, planetary and local media outlets are carrying it sir." Jeeves said.

"You're famous major." Mace added.

You should have nothing to do with this Vay.

Ever since Moff Horatian had given Vay the task of disposing of the former senator the spirit of one of her distant ancestors had been unwavering in its opposition and had made several attempts to persuade her to refuse the order.

"So what do you expect me to do?" Vay asked out loud. She was stood in a turbolift taking her up to the office of the chief of Estran City's police force and being the only one in it she could answer Lara's spirit verbally.

Don't kill him. A jedi uses the Force for knowledge and defence. Never attack.

"Then it's a good job I'm not a jedi." Vay pointed out, "Plus I won't be using the Force to do the killing. It needs to look like a rebel hit."

The turbolift came to a halt and the door slid open. Having already memorised the floor plan Vay made her way directly to the police chief's office, knocked on the door and entered.

"Who are you?" the man demanded, "And why are you just barging in here?"

Vay held out an identity card, one that gave her true name but listed her position as an aide to the sector moff.

"Moff Horatian is worried about the safety of Padras Lukan." Vay told the chief, "He sent me here to offer the use of Imperial agents to guard him instead of your officers." Vay concentrated as she spoke, twisting the chief's understanding so that he interpreted the offer as an accusation of incompetence by his force.

Anger.

This was exactly the reaction Vay had hoped for and she only just suppressed a smile.

"Now look here young lady," he exclaimed, "I don't care how high up this case is being watched from. My people are good at their jobs and they can look after one man just fine. Now go back to your boss and tell him we don't need a bunch of ISB clowns marching in and exercising jurisdiction."

"Of course." Vay replied with a smile and she left the office just as another police officer was entering.

"What was that about?" the newcomer asked the chief.

"Nothing. Just the Empire trying to muscle in on our operations. Don't worry though, I told them no.

When Vay got back to her speeder in the parking lot beneath the police headquarters building she activated its communications, sending a priority call directly to Moff Horatian's office.

"Yes Vay?" he asked.

"It's done." She replied, "They rejected the offer and plenty of people heard it."

"Excellent." Moff Horatian said, "Now after you've killed him the local police will be blamed for lax security and not us."

"Ah, here he is now. Padras do take a seat, we were just about to order." Lady Sharva said as Padras was shown into the private room at the restaurant, "You know Lords Desh and Torr don't you?"

"In passing yes." Padras replied as he sat down in the chair that was held out for him by one of the staff, "Good evening my lords."

"Good evening to you." Couran said, "I must say you're becoming quite the celebrity. First that interview you gave the other day and now the Rebel Alliance has you in their sights."

"Those rebels are insane." Padras said, "You know they actually accused the Empire of wanting to have me killed."

"Outrageous." Lady Sharva exclaimed.

"Indeed." Lord Torr added, "There seem to be no depths they won't sink to. What we need is a concerted effort to drive them from the planet."

Padras smiled.

"It's interesting that you should say that." Padras said, "Because I was planning such an action."

“Really?” Couran asked, “And how would you accomplish it? Retired politicians don’t have much authority, even if we do have some influence with the younger generation.” And he glanced at both Lord Torr and Lady Sharva.

“Retirement is an interesting concept for a politician though isn’t it?” Padras responded, “We can always run for another office if we want. Speaker for example.”

6.

The rebels had taken up a position in the grounds of another house close to Padras' home, concealing themselves in the space between the main house and the garage that was built to handle several standard sized vehicles. A brief search had confirmed that the building was empty so it provided an excellent observation post so long as the rebels made no attempt to break in and risk triggering any alarms with so many police so close by.

"We've got four speeders, each with two cops in them." Mace said, observing Padras' house through his macrobinoculars and making use of their light amplification capabilities to see in the dark.

"Four? I only see two." Vorn commented.

"There's another to the rear of the house and one on the far side." Tharun told him.

"Oh yes, I see them now. Tobis, what about their comms?"

"What? Oh, err, just a moment." Tobis said and he too out his comlink, "Any signals?" he said into the device and there was a short burst of chirps and whistles from his astromech droid back on the *Silver Hawk* that was followed by Jeeves' voice.

"Harvey states that none of the units are currently making any attempts to communicate with one another or their headquarters." The protocol droid translated.

"And the house security?" Vorn said to Jaysica.

"Active." She replied, watching the video feed being sent by Penny from within the house, "Penny's set up beside the main panel though, so she can shut it down any time we want."

"No leave it." Vorn said, "Couran said that Lord Torr's thug would be taking care of the security system. If it's already been taken off line he'll get suspicious."

"Speeders coming." Mace announced, his attention still firmly on the road and both Tharun and Vorn looked and saw a column of luxury vehicles approach Padras' home. The lead vehicle pulled into the driveway and paused while the garage door opened before going inside. Meanwhile the other two vehicles just pulled into the driveway and stopped. The doors opened and Lady Sharva and Lords Desh and Torr got out of them, Lady Sharva and Lord Torr accompanied by Kay and Corva respectively.

"I could take Torr's head off from here." Tharun commented.

Vorn sighed.

"As much as I'd like to be rid of the man I'm not sure a summary execution while there are eight police officers and his bodyguard close by is the best way to go about it." He said.

"Still at least we have a plan besh." Kara said.

The main door to Padras' house opened to reveal the former senator himself and he waved his guests inside.

"Okay, now we wait." Vorn said.

"So what exactly have we been doing up until now then boss?" Kara asked.

It had not taken much for Corva to excuse himself and begin sneaking about the house. The security keypad was easy to locate and Corva was relieved to see that it was hooked into the system wirelessly. Connecting his comlink and datapad he ran a simple program that isolated the frequency of the security network and then identified the direction of the main security panel.

He found this in a droid storage room, a cramped featureless space located between two bedrooms that had several domestic serving droids stood motionless inside.

"Status." he said to the droids, but none responded and he smiled and approached the security panel.

In terms of domestic security the system was high quality, but with direct access to the panel and a working knowledge of many such systems Corva had no trouble in shutting down not only the house alarm sensors and active beam web but also deactivated Padras' personal alarm transmitter.

His job done, Corva left the room and returned to his master downstairs, oblivious to the fact that one of the droids in the room had in fact not been inactive. In the far corner a single mouse droid had watched his actions closely and transmitted video footage back to Jaysica.

"Okay they're leaving." Vorn said as he saw the nobles exiting Padras' house and return to their vehicles.

"So now we go in?" Jaysica asked.

"No." Vorn replied, "We wait for the assassin."

As it happened the rebels did not have to wait long before a figure slipped out of the shadows directly opposite Padras' house, apparently having been waiting right under the noses of the police without being noticed. Clearly female, the figure wore a skintight black bodyglove but had long blonde hair tied in a ponytail.

"Hey look who it is." Kara exclaimed, "Stinky."

Turn back before you go too far with this.

Vay approached the house by the most direct means possible, ignoring Lara's latest warning. Ahead of her sat a single police speeder that held two officers, both male. Vay simply waved her hand towards the vehicle and both officers suddenly froze, unable to move and totally unaware that anything was wrong. By the time the effect wore off Vay made her way up the drive and found more shadows to hide in. A nearby window was secured from the inside, but all Vay had to do was use the Force to manipulate the catch and then climb through.

Inside the house she could hear music and she followed the sound to the lounge where she found Padras sat reading as he listened. She held out her hand, focusing on the music player and the volume suddenly increased.

"There now." She said out loud, "Now no one will hear if you scream."

"Okay let's move." Vorn said, "Kara, could you please do something about those two police officers down there?"

"Sure boss." Kara replied, "Just let me change my shoes." And she began to remove the combat boots she was wearing and replace them with a pair of high-heeled shoes.

"Why her?" Jaysica asked.

"Because I've got long legs and a short dress. Whereas you've got stumpy legs and baggy pants." Kara said, "Still I wish I'd worn something a bit warmer. I've got goose bumps."

"You know if you want someone to rub-" Tharun began before Vorn interrupted.

"Sergeant before you go any further please remember you're married to my daughter."

"Of course sir." Tharun said, turning back towards the police speeder.

"You know Mace is still pretty serious with Captain Mayan and Tobis is with the klutz here boss." Kara said with a smile, "So that only leaves you to rub my legs warm again."

"Just move." Vorn said.

"Fine." She said before swiftly planting a kiss on Vorn's cheek. Then she handed her boots to Jaysica, "Look after these." She added and then she strode out of their hiding place.

The police officers both smiled as they saw Kara approaching them.

"Hey boys can you help me? You're my only hope." She said as she reached the speeder and leant down to the window.

"Of course. What seems to be the problem?"

"Well my uncle invited me to his house tonight and I seem to have gotten lost."

"Your uncle huh? A rich uncle is he?"

"Oh very."

"And old?"

"Kind of. Now can you help me."

"I'm sure we can." One of the policemen replied as both glanced briefly at one another and smiled, "What's his address?"

"Oh I have that here somewhere." Kara said and she began to rummage through her oversized shoulder bag, "Ah, here it is." And she suddenly produced her blaster pistol and before either officer could react shot a stun blast into each one's chest. From this close range even the protective vests they wore could not protect them and both slumped backwards in their seats, "Thanks for the help boys." Kara then said as she reached into the speeder and removed the officers' weapons from their holsters.

Behind her she heard the sound of footsteps and turned to see the other rebels closing fast.

"Give me back my boots." She said to Jaysica.

"Oops. I must have left them behind."

"Oh great." Kara said as she took off her shoes, "Now I have to go in barefoot. These heels weren't meant for breaking and entering."

Fear.

"Who the hell are you?" Padras demanded.

"Oh I'm just the one Gregor asked to silence you. Accusing a moff of weakness isn't a very good career move in politics you know. You can stop trying to activate that beacon as well senator. No one's coming to help you." Vay said.

"What?" Padras said, pulling the beacon from his pocket and trying to activate it again, "How did you-"

"Oh your friend Lord Torr is really Gregor's friend and his man Corva kindly shut down all your security for me. Now don't resist and this will be a lot less painful."

But before Vay could strike she sensed a disturbance behind her.

"Hi stinky." Kara said as Vay turned around and then she punched her in the face.

Vay ignored the pain and blood now coming from her nose and delivered a swift blow to Kara's wrist that knocked her blaster from her grasp then lunged towards her, grabbing her by the throat.

"Stang!" Mace exclaimed, having just lined up a blaster shot that he could no longer risk taking.

Tharun on the other hand rushed to join in the melee, but Vay sensed his approach and lashed out with a kick that caught him between his legs.

"Not again." He groaned as he collapsed.

Kara squealed as Vay rolled backwards while retaining her grip on the rebel and she was hurled through the air to land on a wooden table that broke under the impact. Tobis fired his blaster, but Vay rolled aside a fraction of a second before he pulled the trigger and the shot instead blew a large hole in the floor. Leaping back to her feet Vay also reached to her belt and produced her lightsaber. There was a 'snap-hiss' as she ignited the weapon just in time to block shots from both Mace and Vorn.

"Gregor never said not to use this on you!" Vay hissed and she charged. Still lying on the floor nearby Tharun was just about able to swing out a leg and trip Vay, delaying her long enough for the other rebels to retreat. Looking down at the prone Tharun Vay smiled and lifted her lightsaber above her head.

"Hey stinky," Kara's voice said suddenly as a blaster was pressed to the side of Vay's head, "dodge this." And Vay had just enough time to notice the flash before everything went black, "Oh stang." Kara then said as she looked first at Vay lying on the floor at her feet and then at her blaster, "I still had the thing on stun." And she adjusted the weapon before pointing it at Vay.

"No." Vorn said, "We don't execute helpless prisoners."

"You can't mean we're taking her with us." Mace said.

"Actually no." Vorn replied, "But we're not just murdering her either."

"Excuse me," Padras suddenly called out, "but would someone please explain to me what the hell is going on?"

"Padras this woman is an assassin on the Imperial payroll." Vorn told him and he pointed to Vay, "Now are you going to come with us or not?"

"Never! I'll expose this sordid plot to the entire sector. I'll bring down the Moff himself and—"

"You'll be dead before the sun comes up!" Vorn snapped, "Don't you see that they won't stop with just her? Now we've put a stop to this plot they'll just move against you directly."

"That's true." Tharun said as Tobis and Jaysica helped him back to his feet, "They'll probably use a tactical team to take you out and claim that they tried to rescue you from us but you were killed in the crossfire."

"Then they'll set you up." Mace added, "A few planted datafiles on your computer and they'll make it seem like you were really in league with us all along."

Padras backed away and slumped down into a chair.

"But I was going to be Speaker." He said.

"We can still get you out of here." Vorn said, "Right now we're your only hope to live."

As soon as the first police officer stunned by Kara recovered the alarm was raised. The other surveillance units had noticed Padras' luxury speeder depart a few minutes earlier but had not intervened. Now however the police made the decision to storm the house where all they found was Vay still lying unconscious on the floor.

Rodge Larrs stood at the podium to address the crowd of reporters.

"At approximately twenty two forty last night officers of the Estran City Police Department forced an entry to the home of former Senator Padras Lukan. There they discovered evidence of forced entry and no sign of Mister Lukan. We fear that he has been abducted by members of the rebellion and that he may be coerced into making false statements on their behalf to undermine public morale."

"Mister Larrs why wasn't the former senator under Imperial protection?" Neema Gorord called out from the crowd.

"Ah, I was just getting to that." Rodge replied, "A protection detail from the Imperial Security Bureau was assembled, but the local police insisted that his personnel only be used to protect the former senator. Had they not been so intransigent I am certain that Padras Lukan could have been saved. His loss to Estran is great and we deeply regret it. However, it is likely that he has already been taken off world and we have no leads as to where he is being held. Rest assured that no effort will be spared to recover him."

"I like that." Lady Sharva said as she shut off the screen.

"Yes' its very good." Lord Torr agreed, "Now if Padras tries to make any speeches on behalf of the rebellion it'll be assumed he's doing so against his will."

"And the part about rescuing him sounded so sincere as well." Lady Sharva went on, "I'd rather than Gregor's agent hadn't botched the job, but on reflection I'd say the rebels helped us out quite nicely. Wouldn't you agree?"