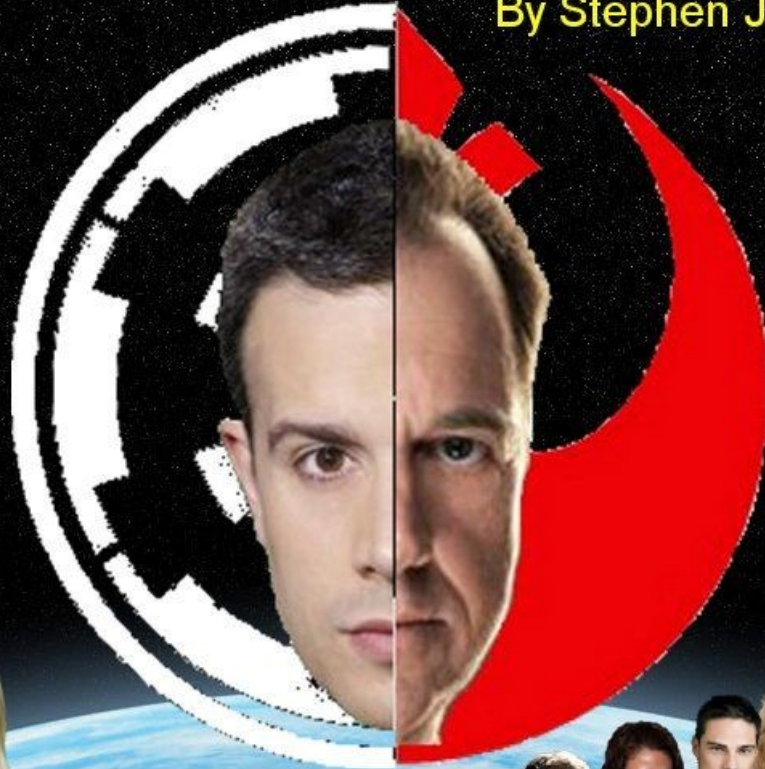


STAR WARS

4-12: The Forge

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 MAGE 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...

THE FORGE

WHEN KAY LAREN IS ABDUCTED THE REBEL TEAM LED BY MAJOR VORN LARCUS III ATTEMPTS A RESCUE. BUT FOLLOWING HER KIDNAPPERS INTO THE NEBULA LEADS TO A TERRIFYING DISCOVERY...

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

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1.

"I want papers on my desk by the end of the week." Doctor Jenessa Drame of the University of Estran yelled at her students as they got to up to leave and then she sighed as she noticed that not one of them seemed to have taken any notice.

"I foresee you having very little grading to do this week." Her devaronian assistant said, grinning.

"Really Grenick?" Jenessa replied, "Developed jedi skills all of a sudden have you?"

The devaronian snorted.

"That girl's here again I see." He said and he looked towards the back of the lecture theatre where a young blonde woman was pushing her way through the crowd of students trying to leave, "What is it with you two anyway?"

"Oh she's just a friend." Jenessa replied, "She works for Lady Sharva and you never know when someone who can put you in direct contact with a Member of Parliament can come in useful."

"Jenessa." The young woman called out and she waved.

"I'll be right with you." Jenessa replied and then she turned to Grenick and added, "Can you finish up here?"

"Sure." Grenick replied, "Though you may want to bear in mind that bossy women are why I left my home planet."

Jenessa approached the young woman.

"Kay how long have you got?" she asked.

"All afternoon." Kay replied, "Lady Sharva is speaking in Parliament."

"Then let's go grab something to eat." Jenessa suggested, "I know a great little place."

"So how are things going with your training?" Jenessa asked as the two women sat down at the open air tapcaf.

"Slowly." Kay replied, frowning, "Criston's instructions are all well and good, but he's never around when I'm trying to put them into practice."

Jenessa looked around.

"I'm sorry," she said softly, "but that holocron is a priceless artefact. I can't let you-"

"No that's not what I'm saying." Kay replied, "If Lady Sharva found it she'd probably have both of us shot."

And at that moment there was a burst of blaster fire.

"Stang!" Jenessa exclaimed, ducking beneath the level of the table and pulling Kay down with her even as other bystanders screamed and ran.

"What's happening?" Kay said, frightened, "Are the rebels attacking?"

"There's nothing here for the rebels to attack." Jenessa replied and she peered out from under the table towards the sounds of blaster fire. She saw a marked police landspeeder on the far side of the street; its two occupants now lay sprawled across the road. Close to this was an unmarked speeder van that had two masked individuals standing beside it with blasters in their hands, still firing at the empty police vehicle. But worryingly there were two more armed and masked individuals rushing right towards her, "Uh-oh. I've got a very bad feeling about this." She said.

The two armed beings barged through the tapcaf, kicking over tables and striking anyone who failed to get out of their way fast enough. When they reached Jenessa and Kay's table it too was upturned and they looked down at the two women.

"Its her!" One of them snapped and he reached out and grabbed hold of Kay who reacted by screaming.

"Let go of her!" Jenessa yelled and she attempted to break the gunman's grip on Kay, but almost immediately the other masked gunman brought the butt of his blaster down in her face and she rolled backwards in pain, blood pouring from the gash made above her eye.

"Let's move." The gunman then said and he too grabbed hold of Kay. The pair then began to drag her back towards the speeder van as their comrades kept watch. Bundling Kay into the van the masked beings fired one last volley into the air before they jumped into the vehicle themselves and it sped off, the side door only being pulled shut after the vehicle had begun to move.

Then there was the sound of sirens.

"Ouch. That stings." Jenessa said as the first aid droid dabbed antiseptic on her wound.

"So you didn't recognise any of them?" the police investigator asked her.

"No. Like I said, they wore masks. I couldn't even tell you what species they were."

"And what was your business with the young lady? Do you come here often? Perhaps your attackers were lying in wait for you both."

"We're friends." Jenessa replied, "We met during a rebel highjacking of a liner and stayed in touch. She's the handmaiden to Lady Lynn Sharva."

"Yes we're aware of that." The investigator replied, "In fact we've already contacted-" but before he could continue a woman's voice called out.

"Get out of my way. Don't you know who I am?" and both Jenessa and the investigator looked around to see Lady Sharva herself barging past a police officer that had mistakenly attempted to keep her away from the crime scene. Behind Lady Sharva were four armed humans wearing prominent armoured vests that all bore the emblem of Estran's Parliamentary Guard, the elite security force dedicated to protecting the planet's legislators.

"You there! Doctor Drame. Tell me what happened." Lady Sharva demanded as she came closer.

"I was just conducting the questioning Lady-" the investigator began but Lady Sharva cut him off.

"I wasn't talking to you. A member of my household has been abducted and it is likely that it is part of a plot against me. The Parliamentary Guard has jurisdiction here, not some two credit city police officer."

At this point Jenessa tuned out of Lady Sharva's rant against the police force that had failed to prevent the abduction of her handmaiden as something on the ground caught her eye. It was a tiny metal pendant in the shape of the twisted loop that was the symbol for infinity and Jenessa realised that when she attempted to free Kay she must have ripped it from around the masked being's neck. Cautiously she extended a leg and placed her foot over the pendant before dragging it back towards her.

After being released by the police Jenessa went straight home and made sure that all of the blinds were closed so she could not be observed from outside. Then she sat out and took out the pendant.

"Okay, so tell me why the rakata want Kay." She said, staring at the small crystalline cube on the table in front of her and she held up the pendant. She then waited for a reaction but there was nothing, "Talk to me damn it!" she yelled, "Look that this symbol keeps cropping up whenever I have dealings with the rakata. What's so significant about it and what do they want with her?"

"Kay Laren has been abducted?" a voice replied and there was a glow from within the cube as a holographic image of a tall human male materialised in front of Jenessa. This was the guardian of the holocron, an artificial intelligence created to match the behaviour and mannerisms of the jedi knight who had originally created it, Criston Harsis.

"Just over an hour ago." Jenessa answered, nodding her head, "I pulled this from around the neck of one of them."

"The rakata were once all Force sensitive just as Kay is." Criston told her, "But the same plague that wiped out so any of them also rendered the survivors blind to the Force entirely. This was problematic since they used the Force to control their technologies and resulted in the collapse of their empire, the Infinite Empire as they called it. Perhaps the local rakata have recovered some piece of their ancient technology that they wish to reactivate."

"I'm guessing this would not be a good thing right?"

"Mundane technological terrors are insignificant when compared to the power of the Force. So no, it would not be good. I know little of the attitudes of the rakata from when my creator was alive, but I doubt that they have reviewed their opinions of other life forms."

"Then I need to give this to the police." Jenessa said, "Maybe they can-"

"That may not be a good idea." Criston interrupted, "From what I know of the Empire that dominates the galaxy at this time they may also seek to use whatever the rakata have found to their own advantage."

"So if I can't go to the authorities and I can't just let the rakata keep Kay then that leaves me with only one other choice doesn't it?"

The cantina was set opposite the Empire's capital building of the sector and Imperial personnel made up the bulk of its customers. Through the windows Jenessa could make out the uniforms of numerous branches of Imperial service. But it was not any of the diners that she was interested in and Jenessa waited until she saw a particular individual serving food in the cantina before she made her own way inside and sat down. It was a peak time and she had plenty of time before the waitress approached her.

"Hi, how can I help you today?" the teenage girl asked with a smile.

"I'd like the nerf soup please."

"Anything to drink?"

"Just caf."

"And anything else?"

"Yes there is Cass. I need to get a message to Vorn."

"I finish in half an hour. We can talk then."

Jenessa timed her meal so that just as she was finishing it Cass's shift was also ending and the two left the cantina together.

"What's in the bag?" Jenessa asked, looking at a large paper package that Cass was clutching.

"Leftovers." She replied, "Corayle lets me have whatever he'd end up throwing away to take home to reheat and eat." And she passed the package to Jenessa while she unlocked her bicycle and began to push it along the street. Jenessa followed her, the pair walking to the run down apartment building that was Cass's home, "The turbolift's still out of order." Cass said, "We'll have to take the stairs."

"Stairs. How quaint." Jenessa replied.

The pair then headed up to Cass's apartment and as soon she closed the front door behind them Cass turn to Jenessa.

"So why do you need to contact Vorn?" she asked.

"A mutual friend has been abducted." Jenessa replied, passing the leftover food back to Cass.

"So its urgent then?" Cass asked as she placed the food in the kitchen and then slid a datapad from her uniform and put it down beside her computer.

"Very. We need to do something before she can be taken off world."

"That could be a problem." Cass said, "Mainly I just leave messages at a dead drop that get sent to the Alliance. The guys who pick up my messages don't even look at them."

"But you do have a way of getting word to them more urgently?"

"That depends. If Mace is here on Estran I can get word to them quickly, but if not then I can't guarantee anything."

"Well we have to try something, a woman's life could be in danger."

"Okay, but I hope you have money. Odras Balve doesn't do anything for free."

"Kara can you come on out here for a moment?"

Kara Bilstran looked up from her bunk when she heard the voice of Major Vorn Larcus III, the commanding officer of the rebel field team she was assigned to.

"Do I have to boss?" she asked.

"Yes you do." Another voice added, this one was Captain Mace Grayle, the owner of the transport ship *Silver Hawk* that carried the team.

"Oh what am I supposed to have done now?" Kara muttered to herself as she got up and pulled on a robe, "I bet the klutz has something to do with this."

Kara then walked out of her cabin and into the *Silver Hawk's* lounge area where she found not only the two officers but also the other three rebels who made up the occupants of the *Silver Hawk*. First was Tobis Dorfus, the ship's engineer while close beside him stood Jaysica Horbid. She was a short young woman and was the one Kara referred to as the klutz. Finally was Tharun Verser, a former mercenary who was the only genuine soldier in the team.

"What's going on?" Kara asked and Vorn produced a sheet of flimsiplast and began to read from it.

"Kara Bilstran, in recognition of your efforts on behalf of the Alliance to Restore the Republic your commission to the rank of sub-lieutenant is hereby reactivated. Effective as of oh six hundred hours today."

And Vorn lowered the flimsiplast and looked at Tharun, "Now if you wouldn't mind sergeant." He said and Tharun strode towards Kara, took out a badge that was a small silver square marked with a pair of red circles and pinned it to her robe. Then he took a step backwards, stood up straight and saluted.

"Congratulations ma'am." He said.

Kara just stared at him, dumbfounded.

"At ease sergeant." Vorn said as he poured several small measures of drink into a row of cups and passed them around, "Congratulations lieutenant." Vorn said with a smile as he handed Kara her drink and then he raised his cup, "To Lieutenant Bilstran." He said and the other rebels raised their cups also.

"But how?" Kara said suddenly, "I mean why has my commission been reactivated?"

"Maybe Captain Tarl forgave you for hitting him." Jaysica suggested.

"And maybe the Emperor will abdicate." Tharun muttered as he downed his drink.

"There's more." Vorn said, still smiling and he passed Kara the flimsiplast. Setting down her drink untouched she read the letter.

"My flight status has been reactivated as well?" she said.

"It has." Vorn said, "You're cleared to fly starfighters again."

"Wait a minute," Jaysica said, "does this mean she's leaving us?"

"Well that rather depends on Kara." Vorn replied, "Of course I'm sure we'd all love her to stay but if she'd rather rejoin the starfighter corps then that's up to her."

"I – I don't know." Kara said still staring at the letter.

"Just take your time." Vorn said, "In the meantime we'll be leaving for Estran soon so you may want to go and get dressed."

"Leave the rank badge behind though." Mace added, "If the Empire boards us a rebel rank insignia may take some explaining."

Mace was the first to exit the *Silver Hawk* upon their arrival at Estran. The starport he frequented was an out of the way facility consisting of numerous private docking bays that attracted little attention from the authorities, but today there was an Imperial Customs agent waiting for him. Nervously Mace approached the man.

"Is there a problem?" he asked.

"That depends." The agent asked and it occurred to Mace that the man could be looking for a bribe to allow the *Silver Hawk* to escape being searched, "Are you Mace Grayle?"

"Yes I am."

"And your ship is the *Silver Hawk*?"

"It is."

"Then you are to come with me. You and as many of your friends as are aboard." The customs agent told him. Mace frowned briefly. The agent had not asked anything about other occupants so he presumably knew that Mace was not alone. But if the Empire was starting to suspect that the *Silver Hawk* was a rebel vessel then they would have sent more than just a single customs agent.

"Where to?" Mace asked.

"Mister Balve wants a word with you." The agent replied.

2.

Odras Balve ran his criminal operation from one of the many cantinas located close to the docking bays. The man in the customs uniform did not go inside with the rebels, there were too many beings inside who would panic at the mere sight of a uniform and neither the man nor Odras had any desire to see violence erupt inside the cantina. That would be too likely to bring the attention of authorities that Odras may not be able to buy off.

"Ah Captain Grayle." The barman said when he recognised Mace, "Mister Balve is waiting for you. Go right on through, but leave your weapons please."

"No chance." Tharun replied.

"Then you can wait out here." The barman said.

"Perhaps if just Mace and I went in to see him." Vorn suggested, "The rest of you can wait out here with our blasters."

Tharun snorted.

"Sounds like a trap to me." He said.

"Unlikely." Mace said, "I owe him too much money." And he took the heavy blaster pistol from under his jacket and handed it to Tobis at the same time as Vorn gave his far more compact holdout blaster to Tharun.

"We'll be right back." Vorn said and then he and Mace proceeded through the door behind the bar.

In the office beyond the door they found Odras Balve himself sat behind his desk. His wookiee bodyguard was positioned just within the door and there were six chairs laid out in front of the desk.

"Where are your other companions Mace my friend?" Odras asked, leaning to look around the two rebel officers.

"Waiting outside ready to start shooting if this is a set up." Mace replied, "And we're not friends Balve."

Odras slapped both hands over his heart.

"Mace that wounds me right here." He said, "What have I ever done to you?"

"Charged me an extortionate amount of interest on my loan?" Mace said as he and Vorn sat down.

"But who else would lend you the money?"

"Tried to get me to sell my friends into slavery?" Mace suggested.

"But that would clear your debt to me Mace. If you were willing to throw in either of the other two charming ladies who approached me last night then you'd make a tidy profit yourself."

Mace and Vorn glanced at one another.

"Yes the little waitress contacted me again." Odras explained, "Only this time she wasn't alone." And he slid a datapad across the desk. Shown on the screen was a still shot taken from a video transmission that clearly showed Cass and Jenessa, "Apparently they need to see you rather urgently, though they were reluctant to tell me where they were. It seems that they don't trust me."

"Your own mother doesn't trust you Balve." Mace replied.

"Did they say anything else?" Vorn asked, "For example why they need to see us?"

Odras shook his head.

"They only paid enough to get me to tell you what I've already told you. I offered to extend them some credit for more, but they didn't seem to appreciate the offer."

"You know it would be nice if we could help Cass find somewhere better to live." Jaysica said as the rebels scaled the stairs to Cass's apartment.

"We can't do anything to draw attention to her, you know that." Mace replied.

"Yes, but it would still be nice." Jaysica said.

"Not as nice as you keeping quiet for a while." Kara commented from the back of the group.

"Look we're here now." Vorn then pointed out as they reached the floor where Cass lived. As they made their way down the corridor towards the door to Cass's apartment slid open and she appeared.

"Mace!" she called out, "Come on in." and as Mace walked up to her she hugged him, "Is Malia here too?"

"No, Malia's busy with her own command." Mace replied and Cass's face fell.

"Hello again." Jenessa then added as the rebels filed into the tiny apartment.

"Jenessa." Vorn replied, extending his hand to her. Then he added, "So what's so important you risked going through Odras Balve?"

"Someone took Kay." She said, "Four masked gunmen pulled her right off the street. Gunned down a pair of cops who just happened to be there as well."

"Could it have been something to with Lady Sharva?" Tharun suggested, "I can think of a few people who'd want to take her down."

"Yeah. Us." Kara said.

"I tried to stop them." Jenessa said and Vorn frowned.

"Taking on armed men?" he said.

"Yeah, I know it was stupid. Maybe your bad habits are rubbing off on me. But I managed to grab this." And Jenessa held out the pendant.

"Not those guys again." Kara said, "Who the hell are they anyway?"

"Obviously very dangerous." Vorn said as he took the pendant from Jenessa and examined it before passing it on to Mace, "We've seen them organised into large groups in remote areas and now they're staging an attack right here in the capital."

"I tried asking Criston." Jenessa said.

"Who's Criston?" Cass asked.

"A jedi knight." Jaysica told her.

"A dead jedi knight." Kara corrected her.

"Oh." Cass said and then a puzzled look appeared on her face, "Hang on, how is that possible?"

"She has a holocron that contains a copy of his personality and everything he knew." Jaysica then added, indicating Jenessa, "It's a secret though."

"Known only to us and everyone Jaysica's told." Kara said.

"What did he have to say?" Vorn asked.

"He said that the rakata used to control their technology using the force." Jenessa said.

"And we know that these guys have connections to the rakata." Mace said, holding up the pendant.

"But we still don't know who they are." Jaysica pointed out.

"But we know where to find them." Vorn said.

"Where boss?" Kara asked.

"Thracken." Tobis said suddenly and Jenessa's face fell.

"Exactly." Vorn replied.

"Who's Thracken?" Cass asked.

"Don't you know anyone?" Kara responded.

"Thracken Grammel? He's just some crazy old man." Jenessa said, "He's been filling my inbox with messages for over a year with stories about strange goings on here and in the nebula."

"Which appear to be true." Tharun muttered.

"Slight problem boss," Kara began, "aren't the local cops on the look out for us where he lives?"

"Yes they are." Vorn responded, "So we'll need someone they don't know, but who Thracken does that can make contact with him." and he looked at Jenessa.

"Oh no, you can count me out. I'm not stupid enough to go looking for that lunatic alone." She said.

"But you wouldn't be alone." Cass said, "I'd be with you." And when that drew a scowl from both Jenessa and Vorn she looked at Mace, "Please say I can." She added.

"Short help's better than no help." Tharun commented.

"Not always." Kara said, glancing at Jaysica who frowned back at her.

"We're only asking her to deliver a message." Mace said to Vorn.

"I can handle myself if I need to." Cass said, "I helped Mace steal those prototype fighters."

"Delusions of grandeur aren't going to help." Jenessa said.

"No actually she did." Mace replied.

"Okay then its settled." Vorn said with a sigh, "Cass, you can come. You and Jenessa will find Thracken and bring him to us."

"No way. I'm not going." Jenessa said sternly, folding her arms.

"Then I guess we're sending Cass in alone then." Vorn said.

"But she's just a kid!" Jenessa snapped, "You can't put her in harm's way like that."

"She volunteered." Mace replied.

"Pretty brave if you ask me." Tharun added.

Jenessa frowned.

"Oh you can be devious Vorn Larcus." She said.

The *Silver Hawk* set down beside a dirt track that led into the settlement where Thracken was known to land his scoutship between flights into the Spire Worlds and nebula. As the occupants all descended the access ramp Cass noticed Jenessa loading bullets into her revolver.

"Are you really taking that?" she asked, "Why don't you use a blaster?"

"She doesn't own a blaster." Vorn told her.

"Why?" Cass asked.

"Because this makes a rather loud noise when fired." Jenessa said, "Useful for scaring off even large animals from near a camp."

"It'll also get through a lot of weapon scanners." Tharun added, "No accelerator coil for their field to pick up."

"I think I'd still rather have a blaster." Cass said.

"Which reminds me." Mace said and he pulled a slender blaster pistol from under his jacket.
"You kept it!" Cass exclaimed, her eyes widening as he handed her the weapon and a power cell.
"I said I would." Mace replied, "Now keep that hidden unless you need it."
"I never agreed to this." Vorn said to Mace, but he just shrugged.
"If anything does go wrong she'll need to take care of herself major." He said.
"You should still have checked with me first." Vorn replied.
"So where will we find Thracken then?" Jenessa asked, slipping her revolver into the holster on her hip.
"Try the cantina or the starport." Mace suggested.
"There's a starport here?" Jenessa asked, looking around the area and seeing no signs of civilisation apart from the simple dirt track.
"It's a landing field." Kara said, "No services, just a simple beacon."
"Err, there's also the general store." Tobis said.
"That's right." Jaysica added excitedly, "That's where we found him last time."
"So how far is it anyway?" Jenessa asked.
"About five kilometres." Mace said, "Sorry, but we couldn't risk getting any closer."
Jenessa and Cass glanced at one another.
"Well I suppose we should try walking then." Jenessa said.

Cass coughed as they stepped inside the cantina. The air was thick with smoke from the assorted cigarras and pipes that many of the patrons seemed to be smoking.
"At least Corayle doesn't let people smoke in his cantina." She said. Then she looked around and added, "I just realised I don't even know what this guy looks like."
"He looks like that." Jenessa replied, pointing towards a table in the far corner of the cantina that had single individual sat at it, "Come on, I'll introduce you." And she began to head for the bar.
"Why are we going this way?" Cass asked.
"Because I get the feeling he'll be more co-operative if we give him a drink. Do you want me to see if they'll serve you something?"
Cass remembered being given several bottles of beer by Mace during the last mission she had accompanied the rebels on and she also remembered how ill she felt the morning after.
"No thanks. I'll give it a miss for another five or ten years I think." She replied, shaking her head, "Maybe forever."
"If that's what you want." Jenessa said and she waved the barman over, "Two beers please." She said to him, sliding some coins across the bar and the man scowled at her briefly, "How rude." She added softly as the barman went to fetch the drinks. When he returned he place one in front of each of Cass and Jenessa without appearing to care about Cass's age. The teenager was about to say something when Jenessa spoke up instead, "Just give it here." She said, picking up both drinks, "Now come with me." And she led Cass towards Thracken.
Thracken was sat hunched over his drink and he did not even look up as the pair approached him.
"Fancy another?" Jenessa asked, sitting opposite Thracken and placing one of the beers in front of him.
"You came! At last you came!" he yelled out, startling Cass as she too was just sitting down and several of the cantina's other patrons began to look towards them.
"Mister Grammel-" Jenessa began.
"Oh, oh no its Thracken. Call me Thracken you and your daughter."
"Daughter?" Jenessa replied and she and Cass looked at one another.
"We're not related." Cass said, "We're both just friends of Vorn and his team."
"He needs to see you." Jenessa added.
"See me? But why?" Thracken asked.
"Do you remember Kay?" Jenessa asked in return and Thracken nodded, "Well some people took her. People wearing this." And she placed the pendant on the table.
"Put it away!" Thracken hissed, "Quickly, we need to get out of here." And he looked around nervously.
"Perhaps you're right." Jenessa replied as she noticed a group of men glaring at them from across the room. The three got up from the table and headed for the exit.
"This way. Follow me." Thracken exclaimed as they stepped outside into the street and he waved at the others to keep following him.
"Where are we going?" Cass asked.
"To my ship." Thracken answered, "Everything we need is there."
"Need for what?" Jenessa asked.
"To deal with them." Thracken told her and he looked back to where the men who had been staring at them in the cantina had just emerged.
"Who are they?" Jenessa said as they picked up their pace, still heading for the nearby landing field.

"I don't know. But I've seen that symbol on them. I think there are a lot of them nearby and I don't think that slug thrower will deter them for long."

"Good job I'm armed as well them." Cass said, reaching into her jacket.

"Keep that hidden!" Jenessa snapped, placing her hand on top of Cass's before she could draw her blaster.

"Why?" Cass asked.

"Because there's a cop right over there who may ask awkward questions about what you're doing with it." Jenessa warned her.

"Look we're almost there. Not far now, not far." Thracken said excitedly and he pointed to his ship.

They rushed to the hatch of the ship, the mysterious group of men still trailing them. Thracken acted quickly, unsealing the hatch and beckoning to Cass and Jenessa to enter the ship after him. Cass frowned as soon as she entered the ship, though like this vessel the *Silver Hawk* was an old ship that had been used when its current owner had come into possession of it the *Silver Hawk* was still much newer and was in better repair. Beyond this the already cramped interior of the ship was further reduced by the amount of clutter that Thracken had allowed to build up over the years.

Thracken sealed the hatch and rushed to a nearby locker, taking a carbine from inside.

"This should even things up a bit." He said.

"It might if you loaded it." Jenessa commented.

"Ah yes of course. Now where did I put those power packs?"

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Cass said, "Perhaps we should contact Vorn."

3.

"How many?" Vorn asked from the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk*.

"There were five to begin with, but another two just showed up." Jenessa responded, "For now they seem satisfied with just hanging around outside the ship, but there's no telling if they'll try and break in."

"What if they just took off and flew here?" Mace asked from beside Vorn.

"Possible." Vorn said, "But I've got another idea. What if we went there?"

"I thought the idea was to avoid the town so we didn't get arrested."

"It still is. I'm thinking that we can hover over the landing field just long enough to drop some of us down. I'd like you to lead the group."

"What's your plan?"

"If we could get hold of some of those guys alive then maybe we could get some answers." Vorn said and Mace smiled.

"The deck sweeper. Fired from the cargo hatch?" He said and Vorn smiled back. Mace's deck sweeper was a bulky and short ranged stun blaster designed for use in boarding actions. Rather than firing the highly contained bolts that normal blasters did it released its energy in an expanding cone that would envelope a large area.

"It's easier than using a regular blaster set to stun and if we get lucky we may just get them all." Vorn explained, "Just in case we'll be ready to rope down to the ground and finish off any that are left. As well as pick up a prisoner."

"What then? Mace asked.

"Then we see what we can find out."

Mace began the engine start up sequence.

"You better let everyone know then." He said, "Just leave me to get us there."

"Hold tight Jenessa." Vorn transmitted, "We're on our way." and then he got up and ran from the cockpit.

"Major what's going on?" Tharun asked as Vorn reached the lounge area where all of the other rebels except Kara were sat while a gold coloured protocol droid filled their mugs with fresh caf.

"Tobis says we're about to lift off." Jaysica added.

"We are." Vorn replied, "Cass and Jenessa have found Thracken, but it looks like they've been spotted by the people who took Kay. We're going to rescue them, where's Kara."

"Missress Bilstran is in her cabin." The droid said.

"Thanks Jeeves." Vorn replied and he took a deep breath, "Kara!" he yelled and after a brief pause she appeared, peering out of her cabin.

"Why so loud boss?" she asked and then she frowned and added, "Is that shaking the engines?"

"Yes we're off to rescue Cass and Jenessa." Vorn told her.

"Rescue? What's wrong?"

"Mob of rakata collaborators apparently." Tharun said.

"But what about the cops?" Kara asked.

"We won't be setting down long enough for them to be an issue." Vorn explained, "We'll drop lines from the cargo hatch and rope down." Then he looked at Tobis, "Mace will be going too so you'll have to fly the ship."

"Err, right okay." Tobis replied.

"What about me boss?" Kara asked, "I mean don't you think it would be a good idea if I were to get on the turret just in case?"

"The turret can't depress that far." Tharun pointed out, "Unless you're trying to hit a target a few thousand metres away you'll-"

"No Kara's right." Vorn interrupted and then he looked at her, "Yes, you better get in the turret." He said, "Jaysica, Tharun, time to arm yourselves."

"We're on approach." Mace said as he rushed into the hold, his heavy blaster pistol holstered under his shoulder and the bulkier deck sweeper in his grasp. He halted when he saw Jaysica, Tharun and Vorn waiting for him, all of them wearing the safety harnesses they would need for sliding down to the ground, "Where's Kara?" he asked as Tharun handed him a harness as well.

"In the turret." Vorn replied and Mace frowned.

"The turret? But it can't depress that far-" Mace began before Tharun interrupted.

"That's what I said." He muttered, "But the major said otherwise."

"It's just a precaution." Vorn said and then he looked to the red and white R5 astromech droid by the controls for the large cargo hatch in the floor, "Okay Harvey, open it up." He said.

There was a rush of passing air as the hatch in the floor slid open to expose the ground below, still passing at an alarming rate as Tobis flew the *Silver Hawk* towards the landing field.

"Mace get ready." Vorn said and Mace stepped closer to the open hatchway and brought the deck sweeper to his shoulder. All of a sudden the *Silver Hawk* came to a halt, the sudden deceleration barely felt inside thanks to the artificial gravity field. Below the ship the group of men who were stood outside Thracken's scoutship, that looked to have grown from the seven Jenessa had spoken about, looked upwards and gasped as they saw Mace aiming his weapon towards them.

"Scatter!" one yelled and the group began to spread out just as Mace fired. There was a bright blue flash and the expanding energy pulse enveloped about half of the group, causing them to collapse instantly.

"Go!" Vorn snapped and he and Tharun tossed a pair of syntherope lines through the hatch.

Caught by surprise by the sudden aerial assault the men on the ground were not prepared as the two rebels came sliding down from the hovering transport and both men were safely on the ground and had their rifles ready before any of them could even draw a weapon. Tharun fired first; a three shot burst sending one of their opponents sprawling in the mud. Vorn also fired a brief burst from his own rifle, aiming to keep his opponents' heads down while he darted towards the closest of the stunned men.

"Okay this guy's alive." He told Tharun.

It was then that Jaysica and Mace followed Tharun and Vorn down the syntherope lines. Mace landing safely and swiftly untangled himself, but Jaysica was not so lucky. One of the men who had avoided the stun blast chose that moment to try and rush Tharun from behind, a curved knife in his hand. But just as he ran past Jaysica's line she came plummeting down on top of him and the pair landed in a heap.

"Help me!" she squealed, wrestling with the man for his knife, but around her the other rebels were occupied firing at the rest of their opponents.

Unsure of what was happening on the ground below Tobis increased the altitude of the *Silver Hawk* as a safety precaution and Jaysica screamed as she was suddenly lifted up off the ground and left hanging upside down, caught in the line but still holding onto the wrist of the man with the knife.

By this time the group facing the rebels had become more organised, having taken cover and drawn their own blasters. However, they carried only lightweight pistols rather than the more powerful DL-44 Mace carried or the rifles Tharun and Vorn possessed. A sudden sharp 'crack' was heard over the sound of the blaster fire as Jenessa appeared in the now open hatchway of the scoutship and from beside her Cass leant out and fired a shot from her sporting pistol.

"It's a crossfire!" one of the remaining men yelled, "Let's get out of here!" and he turned to run, only to be struck by another shot from Tharun.

"Let them go!" Vorn snapped as he watched the fleeing men.

"But they could bring the cops." Tharun pointed out.

"We'll be long gone by then." Vorn replied, "Now someone cut Jaysica down and let's grab a couple of these guys and get out of here."

"Wake them up." Vorn said and buckets of cold water were thrown in the faces of the two men now hanging upside down from cargo hooks in the *Silver Hawk's* hold with their arms bound behind their backs. Both men spluttered as their eyes opened suddenly and they saw the rebels along with Cass, Jenessa and Thracken all staring at them.

"Jeeves would you mind refilling these for us?" Mace asked Vorn's protocol droid and he passed him the buckets that he and Kara had been holding.

"Certainly Captain Gr-" the droid began.

"Don't use my name in front of them." Mace interrupted, scowling.

"Oh I do apologise sir." Jeeves replied, "But I'm afraid that torture runs counter to my programming and I'm not familiar with the social protocols regarding it."

As Jeeves shuffled out of the hold Vorn stepped forwards.

"Let's start with a simple question." He said, "Who are you working for?"

"Kriff off old man." One of the prisoners replied, "We'll tell you nothing."

"But you already have." Vorn replied and he held out his hand to reveal a pair of metal pendants in the form of the infinity symbol, "We know you work for the same group that took our friend and we're rather keen to find her."

"Like I said, kriff off."

"I really think you should reconsider." Vorn said.

"Oh really? Well I'll tell you what I think shall I? You're bluffing. Women and a kid watching? You're not going to be torturing anyone. You're too soft."

Vorn smiled.

"Yes you're right. I don't have it in me to torture anyone." And then he looked towards Mace and Tharun, "Get me answers. I don't care how you do it. Use the droid if you have to." And then he began to walk towards the nearest doorway, "Everyone else follow me, let's leave them to it."

"Droid? What droid?" the other prisoner said nervously.

"Its just some protocol droid." The first replied, "Like I said, they're bluffing." And at that moment Jeeves reappeared clutching a bucket of water in hand.

"I have the water for you sir." He said to Mace and both of the rebels still in the hold took a bucket each and promptly threw the contents over their prisoners.

"Now get out Jeeves." Mace said and as the droid left the hold he shut the door behind it.

"Is that the best you've got?" the first prisoner asked, snarling and the two rebels glanced at one another.

"Oh that's not us trying to torture you." Mace said.

"No." Tharun agreed, "Its just to make things easier for the droid."

"What droid? You sent it away."

"Not that droid." Mace said and all of a sudden there was a crackling and the smell of ozone from behind the two prisoners.

"It's a kriffing torture droid!" the second man yelled.

"The water makes the electricity flow over you better." Tharun said, "Gets into more places." And the crackling sound was heard again.

"Now who are you working for?" Mace asked.

"It's the church!" the second man cried out, "The Church of Infinity!"

"Don't tell them you-,," the first yelled, but then he clenched his jaw and shuddered as an electrical current coursed through him.

"That was the lowest setting." Mace said.

"We were told to keep an eye on that crazy old man!" the second man exclaimed, "He's been shooting his mouth off about things the church wants kept hidden and its attracting attention. We don't know anything about your friend. Honest!"

"Believe them?" Tharun asked, looking at Mace.

"Maybe we should leave them alone with the droid for an hour or two." Mace replied.

"No he's telling the truth!" the first man snapped, gasping, "We were just watching the old man for the church. They want to make extra sure he's not causing trouble for them in the next day or so."

"Why now?" Tharun asked.

"We weren't told. Honest." The second prisoner replied.

"Sounds like he means it to me." Tharun commented.

"Then we're done here." Mace said to Tharun, "We'll hand these two over to the Alliance for more thorough questioning."

"Alliance?" the first prisoner asked, "But you guys aren't supposed to torture people."

Mace smiled and looked past them to where Harvey was positioned so that neither prisoner could see the droid. From inside it's casing an electric arc welder protruding, crackling with power.

"What part of just let them hear the welder and don't poke them with it don't you understand Harvey?" Mace asked and the droid responded with a vulgar sounding noise.

4.

"The Church of Infinity?" Vorn said as Mace and Tharun repeated what the prisoners had told them.

"You ever heard of them boss?" Kara asked.

"A few times yes." He replied, "I always figured they were harmless. They do a lot of charity work. The homeless, convicts and so on. When I was in Parliament a few of them approached me for access to funds for community projects."

"The homeless and convicts." Mace said, "Just the sort of people to go to if you're recruiting an army. Promise them food, shelter and work and they'll be eating out of your hand."

"Maybe we should try it." Tharun commented.

Vorn turned to Jaysica and Tobis.

"I need to know everything there is to know about the Church of Infinity. Pay particular attention to their resources for moving people off world." He told them, "Use Harvey and Jeeves to help you, I want answers and I want them quickly."

Nodding, both Jaysica and Tobis headed for the cockpit, with Harvey and Jeeves following them.

"Are you sure they won't just land another ship out here boss?" Kara asked.

"I doubt they will." Vorn replied, "Even if that had been their plan then I'm sure they'll know now that we've been about and will switch to a more secure landing spot."

"So what about the rest of us Vorn?" Jenessa asked and she glanced at Cass and Thracken.

"Hopefully we we'll be able to figure out where Kay's being held and free her." Vorn replied, "In which case we'll drop you off at the starport in Estran City. But if the rakata manage to get her off world then we may need Criston's help in figuring out where they've taken her and I'm afraid that means we'll need you as well." Then he paused for a moment before adding, "Unless you're willing to let us borrow that holocron."

"No chance Vorn." Jenessa replied, "That thing's priceless. It could well be the last jedi holocron in the galaxy."

"Then you're in for the duration." Mace said.

"Yes I'm afraid so." Vorn added then he looked at Cass and Thracken, "I don't think we'll be needing either of you two any more though."

"Oh but you will." Thracken said suddenly, "Yes, you will. I've seen them you see. I've seen their ships even if no one believed me at first. I can help you track them."

"I'm with you too." Cass added.

"No chance." Vorn replied, "We're not risking you without good reason. You're going back home and back to work."

Cass frowned and folded her arms.

"He's right Cass." Mace told her, "You're doing good work where you are now and I'm sure your boss will get suspicious if you don't turn up again tomorrow."

"I asked for a week off." She then replied.

Mace glanced at Vorn.

"She can stay on the ship if there's trouble." He suggested and Vorn sighed.

"Oh very well then." He said, "But you follow orders young lady. Understood?" and Cass grinned.

"So what are we looking at?" Tharun asked as the rebels and their guests huddled around the datapad presented by Tobis.

"Well, err-" he began before Jaysica interrupted.

"These are the ships that the Church of Infinity is registered as owning." She said excitedly.

"So they own three shuttles." Kara replied, "So what?"

"So they've filed flight plans for them all Kara." Jaysica replied.

"That's lieutenant to you." Kara said with a smirk and Vorn frowned.

"Where to?" Mace asked.

"Err, well, we- we're not sure." Tobis answered, "There was no destination listed for any of them."

"But all three are leaving at twenty-three hundred hours tonight." Jaysica said.

Mace looked at Vorn.

"Three groups of three?" he said and Vorn frowned.

"I'd rather leave Cass out of this." He said.

"Come on boss its just a stakeout." Kara said, "I'm sure the kid can handle that."

"I'm almost eighteen." Cass pointed out.

"Which means you're not eighteen yet." Vorn replied and it was Cass's turn to frown, "But in this instance I'll make an exception." He went on, "Kara I want you to take Cass and Tharun to stake out one ship. Mace will

take Tobis and Thracken to one of the others while Jaysica and Jenessa will come with me to the third. We'll take the droids as well. One per team. Jeeves with us, Harvey with Mace's and Penny with Kara's."

"Hey why does she get my droid?" Jaysica protested.

"Because I'm an officer and your group has the boss's droid." Kara replied.

"Penny can help Kara's team break into the docking bay if you fit her with a security module to let her break the lock" Vorn said, "Harvey will handle the security for Mace's team while you can bypass it for us."

"You hear that Jaysica?" Kara asked, "You're equivalent to some bits if tin." And in response Harvey let out another rude sounding noise, "Sorry about comparing you to her little guy." Kara said to the droid.

"Actually Lieutenant Bilstran," Jeeves said, "I think that Harvey was in fact taking offence to your calling him a —"

"I don't mean to rush you major," Mace said, interrupting the protocol droid, "but if we want to get to the starport in time to find all these ships we need to leave now."

Vorn nodded.

"Very well." He said and he looked around at all of the others, "Now remember, we're trying to save Kay. Do not under any circumstances do anything that could put her at risk. Or you either." He added, looking at Cass.

The three rebels teams made use of the service duct beneath the starport to gain access to the docking bays where the Church of Infinity kept its shuttles. As expected electronic security seals protected the hatches leading from these ducts to the bays, but these were soon over ridden and the rebels crept into the bays and concealed themselves.

"This is Vorn, all teams report in." Vorn signalled, whispering into his comlink.

"Mace here. We're in but the bay is empty and the ship is still sealed."

"Same here boss. You want us to break into the ship?"

"No." Vorn replied, "When they show up to launch I don't want these guys knowing we've been here.

Everyone stay out of sight and stay quiet. Vorn out."

In their docking bay, concealed behind a row of deactivated binary load lifters Kara looked at Cass and Tharun while she put her comlink away.

"Okay everyone," she said, "Looks like we just sit here and wait."

"How long for?" Cass asked.

"As long as it takes kid." Tharun answered her.

"Afraid so." Kara agreed, "Welcome to the exciting world of fighting evil."

"Wait something's happening." Tharun hissed and he aimed his rifle towards the entrance to the docking bay as it slid open.

"Can you see Kay?" Kara whispered as she unfolded the stock of her carbine so as not to make too much noise and lifted it to her shoulder.

"No, just the shuttle crew I think. Two individuals, both human." Tharun replied.

"Are we going to shoot them?" Cass asked.

"No." Kara replied, "It'll give us away."

The rebels watched as the shuttle crew opened up their vessel and went inside and a moment later a droid of unusual design came walking out of it on four spindly legs spaced evenly around its cylindrical body.

"What the hell is that?" Tharun whispered.

"Droid of some kind." Kara said, "I'm not familiar with the type though."

"It looks old." Cass whispered, peering around the other two rebels.

At that moment the crew came back out of the shuttle and stood beside the droid.

"Remain here while we fetch the cargo." One said, "Do not allow any being aboard the ship, stun them if necessary but avoid the use of any weapon that would attract the attention of starport security. Signal your compliance." And there was a short chirp from the droid before the crew turned and left the docking bay.

"Okay that sounded to me like they've gone to fetch Kay. We need to get aboard that ship now." Kara said, "Before those goons get back and we'll ambush them from inside their own ship."

"But how with that droid down there?" Cass asked, "If we shoot it won't security be alerted like they said?"

"If we try hitting it from here then probably yes." Tharun told her, "We need to get right up to it and press a blaster against its body to mask the discharge. If that thing is some sort of security droid then it may be armoured. My A280 is the best thing to use against it. Then we move it out of the way and wait for those guys to get back with Kay."

"Sounds like a plan." Kara said, "Off you go."

"Are you kidding?" Tharun replied, "Sure I can sneak around behind that ship but that droid'll gun me down before I can reach it. I need a distraction."

"Like what?" Cass asked.

"You lieutenant." Tharun said to Kara and she frowned, "I'll need you to jump out when I'm in position and let the droid fire on you." Tharun went on.

"See now that's where I have a problem." Kara said, "My getting shot."

"But it'll only be a stun bolt won't it?" Cass asked and Kara glared at her.

"I'm not getting shot." She said sternly, "Find another plan."

"Fine. Over to you lieutenant." Tharun said and Kara's face fell as she realised that as the highest-ranking rebel present it was up to her to formulate a strategy.

The shuttle crew then reappeared in the company of four other individuals. Unlike the shuttle crew none of these were human, instead belonging to an assortment of non-human but still humanoid species. All were muscular and armed but most significant was that between them they were dragging Kay towards the shuttle. Kay looked subdued, her head hanging down as she walked and beyond being held tightly by two of her four captors there were no signs of any restraints.

"Too late to get in the ship now." Tharun said.

"We'd never have made it anyway." Kara told him.

"No but I'd have been in a better position." Tharun replied, "I've no clear shot from here."

The aliens dragged Kay into the shuttle and after a few moments reappeared without her, walking straight out of the docking bay.

"Okay so they're gone, but how we deal with that droid?" Kara said and then there was the sound of the shuttle's engines starting up.

"Too late." Tharun said.

"No it isn't." Kara replied suddenly and she looked around.

"What?" Cass asked.

"Not you. Her." Kara said and she looked down at Jaysica's mouse droid Penny.

"Huh?" Tharun commented.

"She can sneak past the droid and get into the ship." Kara said, "Then when it gets wherever its going she can signal us." Then she looked down at the tiny boxlike droid, "Understand Penny?" she asked and the droid let out a chirp before zooming across the docking bay towards the shuttle.

The security droid standing guard briefly turned towards the mouse droid, but in accordance to its instructions it did not open fire.

"Get in here!" a voice suddenly called out to the security droid and the machine simply turned around and walked up the ramp into the shuttle. Behind it Penny also zoomed up the ramp just before there was a hiss and it lifted off the floor, sealing the ship.

The noise given off by the shuttle's repulsorlifts increased dramatically and the ship rose up into the sky, hovering in midair as its pilot turned it to the desired direction and then all of a sudden it accelerated away and was gone.

"Of course you're the one who's got to tell Jaysica why we don't have her droid any more." Tharun said.

5.

Tharun approached Vorn just as the *Silver Hawk* landed aboard the space station that served as the Alliance's headquarters for the sector.

"You know major we wouldn't be having to do this if Kara had just created a diversion like I said." He said and Vorn frowned.

"Explain."

"Well that droid standing guard outside the shuttle was ordered to attack using stun blasts only. All it needed was for Kara to make an appearance so the droid would be focused on her while I took it out."

"So she didn't want to risk getting hit by the stun blast?" Vorn asked.

"It looks that way."

"I'll have a word with her." Vorn said and then both Jaysica and Kara appeared from their cabin.

"I don't see what the fuss is about." Kara said as she followed Jaysica.

"The fuss is that Penny's not yours to send off into danger." Jaysica snapped back at her.

"Well what else was I supposed to do?" Kara asked, "Just let those guys escape with Kay and us not have any way of tracking them?"

Tharun drew in breath to speak but he stopped when he noticed Vorn shake his head.

"Look," Vorn said to Jaysica, "I'm off to meet with General Kain and other senior officers about this. With any luck the whole of the Alliance's sector forces will be looking for Penny's signal. Then we'll get her back for you. Okay?" but Jaysica just grunted.

"She still shouldn't have sent her." She muttered.

A tall dark-skinned human, General Kain smiled as Vorn entered the briefing chamber accompanied by Mace and Jenessa. Also waiting for them was the mon calamari Rear Admiral Aphanar who commanded the sector's Alliance naval battle group, Colonel Harris Ergard who surveyed worlds to determine how useful they were as potential bases for the Alliance, Colonel Max Collis who commanded the Alliance's special forces and Shyla Nerin who was in charge of support services.

"Perhaps you can explain what's so important that you wanted us all here major. Also who this individual is." Admiral Aphanar said, her large eyes briefly moving towards Jenessa before focusing back on Vorn.

"This is Doctor Jenessa Drame. Head xenoarchaeological field researcher for the University of Estran." Vorn said and Jenessa smiled.

"So what's she got to do with whatever's going on?" Colonel Collis asked.

"Jenessa show them." Vorn said.

"Certainly." She said as she produced her holocron and set the crystal cube down on the floor in front of them, "Okay you can make an appearance now." She said and there was a flicker of bluish light as Criston Harsis materialised.

"Good day." The hologram said, its virtual had turning to look at each of the senior rebels in turn, "I am the guardian of the holocron of the late jedi knight Criston Harsis and I am here to help warn you of the danger you are in."

"Danger?" Colonel Ergard asked.

"Yes, from the rakata." Criston replied and Admiral Aphanar snorted.

"The rakata?" she asked, "From what we've seen they're just a handful of aliens lurking in the outer reaches of the sector and trying to steal what they need to maintain a society from the Empire."

"Sounds familiar." Shyla said softly and Vorn smiled at her briefly.

"The Infinite Empire of the rakata was dependant upon the species' Force sensitivity to operate its technology." Criston explained, "When they lost this ability they were unable to maintain their empire and it crumbled to be replaced by the Old Republic. However, from the information presented to me by Doctor Drame and your Major Larcus it would appear that the rakata in this region are planning to reactivate an unknown item of this ancient technology."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Colonel Ergard said.

"And so you should." Criston replied, "The rakata of old were in the sway of the Dark Side and the current generation appears no better."

"So why are the rakata such a sudden threat now?" General Kain asked.

"An associate of ours called Kay Laren has been abducted by them." Vorn replied, "And she's Force sensitive."

The assembled rebel commanders looked at one another nervously.

"I take it you have a plan for locating her?" Colonel Collis asked.

"We managed to plant a – err, an agent aboard their ship." Mace said, "She'll signal us when they reach their destination."

"So what do you want from us?" Admiral Aphanar asked.

"We're hoping that we can sneak into wherever they're holding Kay," Vorn said, "but we'd like some backup just in case."

"How much back up?" Colonel Collis asked.

"Not much." Vorn said, "We want to do this quietly. Slip in and out hopefully without the rakata even noticing us."

"A squadron of fighters should do it." Mace added.

"Though it depends somewhat on the signal we get from Penny. Ahh, that is, the signal from the droid we inserted onto the rakata's shuttle."

"Very well major." General Kain said, "We'll consider your request. Come to us again when you know exactly what it is you need. You are dismissed."

Vorn glanced at Mace and Jenessa and then nodded to his superiors. The hologram of Criston vanished and Jenessa picked up the holocron again before all three of them left the briefing chamber.

"That went well." Vorn said.

"But now what?" Jenessa asked.

"We wait." Mace said, "I don't know about any of you but I've got plans. Malia and I are having a meal and we're taking Cass along since she's stuck here for the time being."

"I suppose I'm stuck here as well aren't I?" Jenessa replied.

"Temporarily yes." Vorn told her, "But—"

"Vorn!" Shyla Nerin's voice called out from behind them as she dashed to catch up with them.

"Shyla I—" Vorn began.

"Oh don't worry it's nothing important." She interrupted, "I was just wondering if you'd like to join me for dinner tonight."

"Ahh." Vorn answered and he glanced at Jenessa, "Well I was thinking that since the good doctor is stuck here I should—"

"That's okay." Shyla said, "Rain check." And she turned around and walked away.

"So is she the one?" Jenessa asked Vorn quietly.

"The one?" Mace then asked.

"The one he turned me down for." Jenessa replied, "On the *Ocean Queen* I asked him to spend the night with me and he said there was someone else but it wasn't serious. So is it her?"

Mace grinned.

"Is it?" he asked and Vorn sighed.

"I'm not going to lie to either of you." He replied and then without a further word he walked away.

"Guilt?" Jenessa asked Mace.

"Guilt." He agreed. Then he added, "So if you've no other plans for dinner you can always join myself and Malia. We're can have one guest each in the officers mess so you and Cass make up our limit."

"What do you want from me?" Kay asked as a pair of rakata guards dragged her from the shuttle and held her in front of two more of the aliens. None of them replied to Kay's question, instead they just stared at her, one of them holding out some sort of medical instrument and jabbing it into her arm, "Ow!" she exclaimed, "What do you want?"

"Four thousand." The rakata with the instrument said suddenly in Basic, "It is not much but you will suffice for now." And then he said something to the guards in their own language and they dragged Kay away.

"No!" she yelled, "Where are you taking me?"

The guards took Kay to small chamber where they began to cut away her clothing. She screamed but the aliens ignored her, instead tossing the fragments of her clothes aside. Kay was afraid that they would leave her naked, but the rakata presented her with a form of bodyglove that left only her head, hands and feet visible. The garment gripped the rest of her body tightly and all over Kay could feel the touch of cold metal against her skin from numerous small metallic discs stitched into the weave. Thus dressed the rakata guards then dragged Kay out of the room once more.

Dragging her through the corridors of their facility the rakata took Kay past a viewport and in the brief time she was able to see through it she saw clouds of brightly coloured gases and she realised that she had been taken into the nebula that bordered along he sector, meaning that she was aboard either a large starship or a space station. Either way the design did not seem familiar to Kay and she guessed that it was something the rakata had built themselves. Just as the viewport was disappearing from sight Kay also caught sight of something else outside, a massive ring shaped starship that she recognised as a Trade Federation vessel. The rakata pulled Kay into a turbolift and when they stepped out of it they emerged into what could only be a command and control centre. All around the room were banks of instruments that sat inactive. But the rakata

paid these no attention and instead pulled Kay towards the centre of the room where more of their species stood surrounding what looked like an ancient cryogenic storage unit.

"What are you doing to me?" Kay cried out as she was lifted into the tube like construct and began to strap her in.

"Do not struggle." One of the aliens told her, "You will only harm yourself."

"What do you want?" Kay pleaded, "Why are you doing this to me?"

"We have spent many centuries attempting to get to where we are now." The rakata explained, "Once our people manipulated the very energy of the universe to bend it to our will, but all that was lost long ago. Now you will take the place of one of us to bring this station to life fully."

"I'll never join you!" Kay yelled.

"Oh but you will." The rakata replied, "Because it is the only way you will ever leave here alive. You see your sensitivity to what your people called the Force before the knowledge of it was suppressed is limited in comparison to others we are aware of. But you were the only one we could obtain so for now you will just have to do. If we should happen to obtain a better subject we will have no further use of you however and we will release you unharmed. Providing you have been co-operative."

"And if I've not?"

"Then you have no need of your arms or legs to operate this machine." The rakata said and then he added something else in his own language that caused another one of the aliens to step forwards wielding a large axe.

By this time the rakata had secured Kay and they instead began to connect a series of wires to the metal studs built into her bodyglove.

"These will ensure your muscles do not waste away." The rakata told Kay, "You see we do care for your well being." And then a tight fitting skullcap was placed over her head and fastened in place, "Now tell the machine to awaken." The rakata said.

"What? I-" Kay began but the rakata slammed his hand against a button on the tube in Kay was held and she screamed as electricity shot through her from the studs.

"Co-operate." The rakata said sternly, "Tell the machine to awaken."

"But I don't know-" Kay started to reply but all around the room the instrument panels activated.

"Excellent!" the rakata called out, "Now tell me what it shows you." And he tapped at a nearby control console.

"A droid." Kay answered, seeing an image of a droid in her mind, "I think its one of the old Trade Federation battle droids."

"Good." The rakata said, "Now just imagine a legion of these droids."

In a vast chamber far below the control centre a row of human sized doors hissed open and from each one stepped a battle droid. They strode towards conveyor belts on which blaster carbines had begun to emerge from another machine and picked up one each. A watching rakata rushed to a communications panel to report the events to the control centre above.

"Excellent." The rakata in the control centre said, "Now lets try something a little larger." And on the screen in front of him an image of a Lucrehulk-class battleship replaced that of the battle droid.

In the hangar bay the Church of Infinity's shuttle sat unwatched as from within a mouse droid came rolling out of the vessel. The droid chirped once and then began to travel around the hangar, using a concealed holographic recorder it recorded images of the assorted transports and gunships held there as well as the rakata technicians working on them.

With other droids of Imperial and Republic origin working around the hangar not one of the rakata gave the droid a second thought.

Penny came to a brief halt by the hangar's external doorway, a massive opening covered only by a shield to prevent the atmosphere inside from being blown into the near vacuum of space in the nebula. After making a short recording of the clouds of gas the droid then returned to the shuttle and went inside. Heading to the cockpit a cover in Penny's chassis opened and from inside a claw designed for fine manipulation and activated the shuttle's communications system. It took just a few seconds to upload the images that Penny had recorded in the hangar and then bring the long-range antenna on line.

Back in the control centre the rakata monitored the production of droids and starships, all completely automated and drawing upon the energy of a nearby star that still burned with all the brightness of one that had formed only a few hundred million years earlier.

"All systems are functioning within desired parameters." One of the rakata announced and their leader approached the tube where Kay was held.

"You have done excellent work." He said to her.

"Then let me go. Please." She replied.

"Oh no we can't do that just yet." The rakata said, "We need to prepare you for your stay." And he said something in his own language to two other rakata standing nearby. Both of these wore clean white tunics that gave them the look of medical personnel. Stepping forwards the two rakata leant over Kay and as one took hold of her head, pulling her mouth open the other forced a tube inside. Kay let out a muffled scream and tried to struggle as the tube went deeper. The rakata stopped pushing the tube down her throat only when a mask fitted around it was fitted neatly over Kay's nose and mouth and it was strapped in place. With Kay continuing to struggle and trying to spit out the tube the rakata stepped back and the transparent cover of the tube lowered shut. Moments later there was a sound like that of running water and all around Kay the tube began to fill with a greenish fluid.

"Signal Horsa and his human lackey on Estran." The rakata leader said, "Tell him everything is proceeding as we have foreseen."

A row of rebel technicians sat by their consoles monitoring subspace communications from across the sector. Most of these concentrated on Imperial frequencies, recording scrambled messages that would then be passed onto cryptologists to interpret. But there were others monitoring the handful of obscure frequencies that the Alliance made use of and it was one of these that noticed the sudden appearance of an unexpected signal. The databurst included numerous still images and short video clips before it repeated. But more importantly there was another component to the message, several sets of navigational co-ordinates that described accurately how to reach the point of origin.

"Sir I think I have that signal we were told to watch for." The technician called out.

6.

As he inspected his fighter Captain Jarad Tarl could see Kara smirking in his direction from across the hangar, her new rank badge worn prominently on her chest.

"I take it that you're satisfied?" he said to Vorn as he walked past, heading for the *Silver Hawk* and Vorn halted to reply.

"Don't forget the rest of the deal Jarad." He said, snarling, "Your little enterprise is now over. You and Mister Varner are not to be selling any more transfers, promotions or other assignments. Understood?"

"You see I was thinking that maybe we'd continue." The fighter pilot replied, "After all you wouldn't want her to lose her new promotion would you? That idiot corporal would lose her rank as well. So from where I stand-

"Oh shut up!" Vorn snapped and several of the other nearby fighter pilots and their ground crews stared at the two officers. Both just waited in silence until the watching rebels turned their attentions back to their own work and then Vorn went on in a quieter tone, "Kara would never have lost her rank in the first place if you hadn't sold the promotion she was after. Just remember that when you're thinking about selling any more. Now I'll be checking those lists carefully Jarad, so better make sure that they're all legit or you'll be hoping whoever take over yours and Kyle's positions is as corrupt as you because it's the only way you'll ever get your rank back. Do I make myself perfectly clear?"

Jarad snarled.

"Perfectly. Now kriff off."

Vorn smiled briefly.

"You forgot to say 'sir'." He said and Jarad snapped to attention and saluted.

"Kriff off sir." He hissed. Vorn waiting a few seconds while Jarad remained at attention and held the salute until Vorn eventually returned it and continued on his way.

"Problem boss?" Kara asked, having seen the exchange but not heard a word of it.

"Not any more." He replied as he walked up the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp, dodging Tharun his way down.

"What's wrong?" Tharun asked Kara.

"Oh nothing." She replied, "The boss just had a bit of a run in with that stuck up scruffy looking nerf herder Jarad Tarl, that's all."

Tharun frowned.

"Really? He's had a few of those recently."

Across the hangar Jarad watched Vorn disappear from view and then turned as he heard someone approaching from behind him.

"What's going on?" the new arrival asked.

"Nothing Kyle. Not for the time being at any rate." Jarad answered.

"I saw Major Larcus here." Kyle Varner said, "Did he-"

"He made it clear that he'll be watching us." Jarad interrupted.

"So what does that mean?"

Jarad smiled.

"We wait a couple of months for him to get tired of watching us and then its business as usual." He said.

"You're in my seat." Vorn said to Cass as he entered the cockpit and found her sitting in the co-pilot's seat beside Mace.

"Mace was just showing me the flight systems." She replied, "Just in case I need to take over."

"Flying a starship isn't like waiting tables." Vorn told her.

"I kind of gave her a bit of a flying lesson in a TIE fighter." Mace added.

"Well we'll be leaving soon so I need to sit there." Vorn said to Cass, "Now go and help Tharun, he's checking our personal gear."

Cass smiled as she got up and walked past Vorn.

"Jump details are all loaded in major." Mace said as Vorn sat down, adjusting the seat back to where he needed it instead of how the significantly smaller Cass had set it.

"You know I'm not happy about taking her with us." Vorn replied, looking back out of the cockpit after Cass.

"Its my ship major." Mace said to him, "And she's my guest."

Vorn sighed.

"What if she gets hurt?"

"Then it's not your fault. Now I already know that Malia and the *Renegade* are ready to leave, what about Blue squadron?" Mace asked, changing the subject.

"Captain Tarl will follow us until the final jump. His ships will only engage the rakata on our command so we'll need to hold out for eight to ten minutes. I hope that new shield of yours is up to it."

The navigational data provide by Penny was a string of jumps through hyperspace that initially took the *Silver Hawk* through the partially charted Spire Worlds and from there into the massive nebula that neighbored the sector. From this point the jumps became short hops of one or two parsecs to avoid the gravity wells of partially formed stars and stellar debris inside. As stated by Vorn, Captain Tarl's blue squadron and Captain Malia Mayan's corellian corvette *Renegade* stuck with the *Silver Hawk* only as far as the final jump before halting. The other rebel vessels would remain here until either the occupants of the *Silver Hawk* called for them or the fighters' fuel levels became depleted.

When the *Silver Hawk* dropped out of hyperspace at their final destination the cockpit was crowded. Kara was in the turret and Jaysica and Tobis were both in the ship's workshop monitoring systems from there but given that there were two extra passengers aboard that still meant that there were not enough seats to go around and Tharun stood at the back of the cockpit in the doorway with Cass and Jeeves while Jenessa and Thracken sat in the seats behind Mace and Vorn.

"What the kriff is that?" Tharun exclaimed as the blur of hyperspace gave way to the clouds of gas in the nebula. Then remembering that Cass was standing beside him he clamped a hand over his mouth.

Mace had brought the *Silver Hawk* out of hyperspace some distance from the actual co-ordinates provide by Penny, the intention being to slip closer un-noticed rather than give themselves away by exiting hyperspace right on top of the rakata. But even from this distance a massive structure was visible. This possessed a main spherical section with several massive blade-like towers extending both up and down with the sphere located in the middle. From this central section a beam of energy extended towards a nearby star.

"Its huge." Jenessa commented as the others in the cockpit looked at her, "And no I've no idea what it is."

"Is it a space station?" Cass asked.

"This is not good." Thracken commented, "No, no, not good at all. I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"You and me both." Mace agreed.

"It is the worst case scenario." Criston said as his hologram materialised in the centre of the cockpit, "It is a star forge."

"What's a star forge?" Mace asked.

"The rakata created the star forge as a workshop to churn out the weapons they needed for their empire building." Criston explained, "Later on Darth Malak and Darth Revan used it in their attempt to overthrow the Republic. The original was destroyed, but it seems that the rakata have been able to recreate it here."

"Look!" Vorn said suddenly and he pointed towards the star forge, or more precisely to where a large ring shaped vessel was passing between the lower set of blade towers, "It's a lucre-hulk class ship."

Mace looked at the sensor display.

"And its not alone either." He said, "There's an old Banking Clan frigate and a Commerce Guild destroyer out there as well."

"The missing ships from Bryant Ko's fleet." Vorn said and he looked at Criston, "Can that thing copy a ship if you give it an example to work from?" he asked.

"I am not sure. The Republic strictly controlled knowledge of the rakata and their technologies. But Darth Malak and Revan used the original to recreate several classes of Republic design so it is likely."

"That's why they took the old Separatist ships." Mace said, "a single planet full of rakata is no threat to the Empire, but with those droid controlled ships they can build an armada. Picture one rakata admiral leading a fleet of a thousand ships and multiply that by as many rakata there are."

"Which could be several billion." Jenessa said.

"We need to get aboard." Vorn said, "That thing has to be destroyed. Mace, take us in."

"Okay everyone," Mace said into the intercom, "we're about to run silent. I'm shutting everything down so nobody activate anything without permission."

The interior of the *Silver Hawk* went dark as Mace shut down the lighting and from his seat in the cockpit Thracken just muttered.

"I told you. I told you all."

A brief push from the *Silver Hawk's* drives gave the ship all the push it needed to propel it towards the rakata star forge. The clouds of gas in the nebula produced large amounts of interference to sensors, interference that had already masked the *Silver Hawk's* arrival from hyperspace now helped conceal it as it crept closer. With only the bare minimum of systems active, the occupants of the ship resorted to using hand held macrobinoculars to study the space station as they approached it. At first this stretched the portable devices beyond their limits, but when the distance closed to just a few hundred kilometres or more details became visible.

"It doesn't look complete." Tharun commented as he caught sight of an area of one of the downward pointing blade towers that lacked hull plating.

"Maybe not." Criston said, despite the holocron being unable to properly observe the station from this distance, "But it seems that enough of its systems are on line for it to be functional. The energy stream you can see is drawing power from that young star to power the manufacturing plants within. The incomplete sections are most likely non-essential areas."

"But they do give us a way in." Mace said, "Look inside the scaffolding at the top of the construction."

"I don't see-" Vorn began and then he stopped speaking.

"It's a hatch isn't it? Yes it is, it's a hatch." Thracken said excitedly before Vorn could speak.

"I think so." Mace replied, "Its probably an incomplete turbolift shaft or duct." Then he handed his macrobinoculars to Cass, "Want to take a look?" he asked and Cass grinned.

"Sure." She replied, taking the macrobinoculars and lifting them to her face. The Mace looked past her out of the cockpit.

"Hey Tobis!" he bellowed, causing both Cass and Jenessa to jump, "Get up here, there's something I want you to see."

"Couldn't you just have used the comm.?" Jenessa asked.

"I shut it down." Mace replied, "No sense risking it giving us away."

"I doubt there's much chance of that in these clouds." Vorn said as Tobis appeared in the already crowded cockpit.

"Hi, err, you called captain?" he asked. Those in the cockpit who looked around at the engineer immediately averted their gaze again when they saw his ruffled hair and the smudges of lipstick on his face.

"You heard that did you lad?" Tharun said, "Over the strenuous technical work you and the little lady were carrying out I mean." and he passed his macrobinoculars to Tobis.

"Thanks. Err, what am I looking at."

"That big space station out there." Mace said, "I want you to tell me what you think of the hatch set into that unfinished section."

"Err. Well, it's hard to tell."

"Best guess Tobis." Vorn said.

"Oh, err. Well it looks like a turbolift shaft."

"Can we seal the ship to it?" Mace asked.

"Ahh. Umm. No, it's not a docking port." Tobis said.

"I'm not interested in it being pretty." Mace said, "If we align the *Silver Hawk's* top hatch to that exposed part of the shaft can we weld our hull to it and make an air tight seal?"

"I, err, I suppose so." Tobis told him, "But it wouldn't be very durable. The slightest knock could rip the ship free."

"That'll do." Mace replied, "So long as we can get from in here to in there."

"We're going aboard that?" Cass asked.

"No. You're staying here." Vorn replied before Mace could and when Cass frowned he added, "We need someone to stay here with the droids and watch the ship. If the rakata figure out we're here they may try and board us in return."

"We still need to get a seal major." Tharun pointed out.

"Kara and I will do an EVA." Mace said, "We'll make the weld and then we can cut into the station."

"I want to keep Kara in the turret until we're ready to go aboard." Vorn said, "Can you handle the welding alone?"

"I would offer to help you, but I neglected to bring my space suit along with me." Thracken said, "Though of course it does take me some time to put on."

"That's alright. I can do it by myself if I have to." Mace said then he looked at Tobis, "Take over while I suit up. Get us inside that exposed framework and as close to the shaft as you can. I'll guide you in from there."

"Err, yes captain." Tobis replied as Mace vacated his seat and squeezed through the crowd.

"Oh and one last thing Tobis."

"Err yes captain?"

"Wipe Jaysica's lipstick from your face." Mace said.

The storage room where Kara and Mace kept their vacuum suits also doubled up as an air lock, a ladder running to the ship's top hatch. As Mace stood inside this room, changing into his suit he spotted Vorn appear at the doorway holding a welding torch.

"I thought I'd bring you this to speed things up." He said.

Mace frowned.

"So what's with leaving Kara in the turret?" Mace asked, keeping his voice low, "You know as well as I do her field of fire will be next to nothing."

"I just want to be ready in case we have to make a quick get away." Vorn replied.

"Fair enough, I'll go with that." Mace said, "But I need to know one thing."

"What?"

“Will you tell me what’s really going on when we get back to headquarters?”

Vorn smiled, set the torch down on the floor just inside the room and then shut the door between himself and Mace.

7.

The top hatch slid open silently and from his position half way up the ladder Mace looked up at the structure of the star forge above him.

"Okay I see the shaft." He signalled, hoping that the low powered transmission would be lost amongst the enormous mass of metal all around the ship, "Now take us up slowly."

Mace felt the brief vibration as Tobis fired the *Silver Hawk's* thrusters and the shaft grew larger, "Nearly there Tobis. Power back." Mace said as the gap narrowed to just few metres and there was another vibration as the *Silver Hawk* decelerated just before it collided with the station. Mace paused, waiting to see if the ship would drift away, but when it looked like its position was stable for at least the time being he climbed to the top of the ladder and held up the torch.

When Mace stepped back into the lounge area he found the rest of the *Silver Hawk's* current occupants waiting for him, all fully armed and ready to go.

"The seal's secure." Mace announced and then he looked at Jaysica, "Its all yours." He added.

Jaysica slipped past him and looked up the ladder at the hatch covering their way into the rakata station and from her pack she took a block of explosives. Scaling the ladder Jaysica pressed this against the hatch and then spread the malleable substance out, covering a wider area but still keeping it clear of the weld joining the *Silver Hawk* to the station. After pressing a detonator into the charge she quickly descended the ladder again and went back into the lounge, sealing the door behind her.

"Okay here we go." She said, taking out her comlink and she activated it to send short wireless pulse.

Instantly there was a dull 'crump' from beyond the door followed by the familiar clanging of metal falling on metal.

"Harvey how are we?" Vorn called out, looking along the corridor that led to the cockpit to where Harvey was plugged into the nearest computer access port and the droid let out a shrill whistle.

"Harvey says that atmospheric pressure in the airlock is normal and that carbon monoxide levels from the explosion are tolerable Major Larcus sir." Jeeves translated.

"Then let's go." Vorn said, "Tharun you're on point."

Without a word Tharun led the way into the air lock and up the ladder into the star forge and the others followed one by one. When it was Mace's turn Cass suddenly wrapped her arms around him.

"Take care." She said before relaxing and stepping back.

"You seem to have acquired a fan there captain." Kara commented as she followed Mace up the ladder, but he just grunted.

As expected the *Silver Hawk* was connected to the end of an incomplete turbolift shaft and although there was no car to carry the boarding party up to a finished part of the station there were handholds that would allow them to climb.

The first doorway out of the shaft was only the equivalent of few floors up and Tharun stepped off the ladder and stood on the framework of the shaft beside it.

"I think your deck sweeper will be of use here captain." He said to Mace and he nodded.

"Sure." He replied, taking up a position on the other side of the door and unslinging the bulky stunner.

Tharun took hold of the door's manual release trigger and pulled it. Instantly the door slid open with a hiss and Mace rolled out of the shaft into the corridor outside.

"Clear." He said.

"Good job we didn't bring the droids." Tharun commented as he followed Mace into the corridor, "We'd never have got Harvey up that."

"Talking of droids." Vorn commented and he looked down the ladder to where Jaysica was following him,

"See if you can get in touch with Penny."

"Err, okay. As soon as I'm out of here." She replied.

When she too exited the shaft, Jaysica took out her comlink and connected it to the datapad that Tobis handed her.

"Penny can you hear me?" she signalled and there was a single chirp in response. On the display of the datapad a translation appeared confirming that it was Penny, "Where are you?" Jaysica asked and there were more chirps and whistles in response, "She's in the hangar still. Where's that?"

"How should I know?" Tharun replied, "I don't even know where we are."

"Perhaps we should have brought your astromech after all" Jenessa said, "He could have accessed their computer and downloaded a floor plan."

"Err, actually he'd need a Republic or Empire standard port for that." Tobis replied.

"So we can't access their system at all?" Tharun asked, "Its all alien?"

"Actually a lot of our technology is derived from that of the rakata." Jenessa pointed out, "We've just had twenty five thousand years of updating it."

"Well?" Vorn said, looking at Tobis, "Can you do it?"

"Err, I don't know." He replied.

"There is no need." Criston said as his hologram appeared, distorted because of the cloth bag Jenessa was carrying the holocron in, "Holocron technology was first developed by the ancient rakata and has remained unchanged. I can sense a data port close by that I can access. Added to which my storage capacity is far beyond that of your other devices. Therefore I can download more data than you possibly can."

The rakata commander continued to stare at the displays monitoring Kay's condition. The tube's life sustaining mechanisms had been tested briefly using a slave provided by the Church of Infinity, but that individual had not possessed the slightest sensitivity to the Force and had not been expected to control the core systems of the star forge.

"Sir." Another rakata called out from the far side of the room.

"Yes? What is it?" the commander asked.

"We have an unauthorised access to the main computer."

The commander looked around from the tube and approached the other rakata who pointed to a readout in front of him.

"There shouldn't be anyone in that sector." The commander said and he activated the communicator mounted to his wrist, "Security, send a droid to investigate sub tower four. We may have intruders."

The computer terminal was a traditional flat display and keypad set into the wall, but unlike the devices found in the Empire it included a cradle into which a holocron could be placed and it was from this that data was downloaded.

"How much longer is this going to take lad?" Tharun asked Tobis.

"Err, I don't know." Tobis replied, "I'm not even sure what's happening. The Criston AI is driving all of this, not me."

"Oh great." Kara commented, "We're putting out trust in a paperweight."

"A paperweight with knowledge of the universe that we've lost." Vorn pointed out.

Paying little attention to this conversation Thracken began to wander away from the rest of the group, a tapping sound from around a corner having attracted his attention. As he reached the corner he peered around to see what was on the other side.

"Oh. Oh no. This doesn't look good."

"What are you doing down there?" Mace suddenly called out when he noticed Thracken, "Stay close."

"Yes, of course." Thracken replied, backing away from the corner, "But you really should know about this."

"About what?" Vorn asked.

"The droid." Thracken replied just as a droid identical to the one that had protected the Church of Infinity's shuttle on Estran came around the corner.

"Security droid!" Tharun snapped and he raised his rifle. However, he was on the far side of the group from the droid and without a clear shot he held his fire.

Thracken on the other hand had an unrestricted field of fire and he let loose with a continuous burst of fire from his carbine. The burst just clipped the droid, but this glancing hit tore off one of the droid's legs and it overbalanced just as it was turning to fire on the rebels.

"Carbonite projector!" Tharun snapped as a blast of super cooled gas erupted from the droid, sucking the heat out of the air in the corridor and causing everyone to dive out of its path.

With her blaster carbine already in her hands Kara was the next to fire, aiming for the nozzle of the carbonite projector even as the droid was struggling to right itself. Firing three shots in rapid succession she struck the bizarre weapon and it exploded, dousing the droid itself in the substance. Before their eyes the group saw the droid turn white as it was frozen solid.

There was a sudden 'crack!' that echoed down the corridor as Jenessa fired her slugthrower before the effect could wear off and when the tiny projectile struck the frozen droid it shattered, pieces of it falling all over the deck.

"Criston are you done yet?" Vorn demanded.

"Not yet." The hologram answered, "I'm afraid that there are sections of the computer that require security passcodes to access and slicing was not something my creator saw fit to include in my make up. Perhaps if your engineer--"

"No time." Vorn interrupted, "Can you at least give us directions?"

"Yes I can."

"Good." Vorn said and he pulled the holocron from the cradle and tossed it to Jenessa who caught it in her free hand, "So tell us the way to the docking bay, we need to get Penny back."

In the control centre alarms sounded.

"We've lost the droid!"

"How?" the commander demanded, "Can you show me what happened?" and the rakata at the security console worked rapidly, searching for any relevant data.

"It's transmission was cut off mid report sir. We definitely have intruders."

"Show me." The commander ordered and on the screen in front of them both a still image of the rebels appeared. The commander activated his communicator again, this time setting it to access the station's public address system, "All sections, intruder alert. Human vermin are loose in sub tower four. I want them killed."

"What do you suppose that was about?" Kara asked as they heard something in the rakata's own language being announced and everyone glanced at Jenessa.

"What?" she asked, "I don't speak their language. In fact I don't think anyone does. Apart from them of course."

"Rakata!" Tharun snapped as a pair of the aliens appeared in the passageway ahead of them. One activated a device on its wrist while the other reached for a holstered blaster but Tharun was faster, firing two shots in as many seconds that sent both rakata sprawling across the deck with holes blasted in their torsos.

"Move!" Vorn snapped, "It's a fair bet they know we're here."

"Bring them on." Tharun said, snarling, "I prefer a stand up fight."

"What's happening?" the rakata commander demanded as a transmission was cut suddenly short.

"I'm not certain sir. I think there was firing."

"You think? Thinking's no good – I want definite answers. I want to hear that those humans are dead" The commander snapped and then he paused, "And I think I know the best way to get it done." And the he activated his communicator again, "Factory level two, what is your status?"

"Three hundred units completed commander."

"Fully functional?"

"Yes commander."

"Good. Activate them."

"The landing bay should be just up ahead." Criston said. His hologram appeared to be running along the corridor along with the others, but in reality it was just maintaining a constant position in relation to the holocron that created it.

"Does that mean we don't need to run any more?" Jaysica gasped.

"Not yet little lady." Tharun replied from the front of the group and then he looked round as there was the sound of something rolling along the deck behind them, "Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." He said before the first droid came into view.

"Destroyers!" Mace yelled and before the droid had a chance to unfold its body he fired a quick shot from his heavy blaster pistol that sent it crashing into a wall.

"Keep moving!" Vorn yelled, "Get to the docking bay." And at that moment two more destroyer droids appeared, these already unfolded and walking towards the rebels with their blaster deployed and surrounded by the shimmering blue bubbles of their shields.

In defiance Tharun fired at the leading droid even as the other rebels were starting to run, but even a direct hit from his powerful rifle was insufficient to overcome the droids' shielding and he too turned to run before the destroyers opened fire.

"Perhaps we should have just snuck through the ventilation ducts." Mace suggested.

"An impractical idea." Criston replied, "I'm afraid I don't have detailed plans of those."

"Yeah because being lost in the ventilation system would be so much worse than this." Kara commented.

As Tobis rounded a corner the doorway to the docking bay came into view ahead of him. But waiting in the doorway was a pair of rakata armed with rifles. One fired as soon as Tobis appeared and although he ducked back behind the corner the blast struck the wall close to his head and showered him with hot shrapnel.

"Tobis!" Jaysica exclaimed as Tobis fell backwards, dropping his blaster and clutching at his shoulder where some of the shrapnel had struck him.

"Pick him up." Vorn said as he bent down to assist Jaysica getting Tobis back to his feet.

"Destroyers closing major." Tharun warned.

"Okay then." Vorn replied, "Use the frag." And Tharun grinned as he plucked a grenade from his webbing.

"Fire in the hole." He said.

"He's using a grenade in here?" Jenessa exclaimed, "But that's insane!"

"Cover your ears and open your mouth." Mace told her, "Oh and duck."

Tharun threw the grenade back down the corridor behind them as soon as he saw the blue glow of the destroyer droids' energy shields and then threw himself to the floor. A few seconds later, just as the

destroyers came into view fully the grenade went off and filled the corridor around them with shrapnel. Their shields useless against the flying fragments, the droids were reduced to nothing more than piles of scrap.

"There'll be more of them." Mace warned.

"Got any more of those grenades?" Jenessa asked Tharun and he shook his head.

"Just a couple of smoke." He replied.

"They'll do." Vorn said, "Sergeant we need a screen."

"You're not going to charge those rakata are you?" Jenessa asked.

"No of course not." Vorn replied and he looked at Kara, "Come help Jaysica with Tobis. I need both hands free for my rifle."

"Full auto major?" Tharun asked and Vorn nodded.

"Exactly." He replied, "You, me and Thracken. We just fill that corridor with blaster fire." Then he looked at Mace, "While we're firing I want you to try and get close enough to use your deck sweeper."

"Hit the doorway?" Mace asked, swapping his pistol for the deck sweeper again.

"That's right. Stunning them should be enough."

"Just remember you all need to aim high." Mace said, kneeling by the corner. Then he added, "Let's do this."

Tharun tossed a smoke grenade around the corner. It bounced twice off the wall and deck before it burst open and a thick cloud of white smoke filled the corridor.

"Now?" Thracken asked.

"Now." Vorn replied and along with Tharun they darted around the corner and opened fire, sending bursts of automatic fire into the smoke intended simply to deter the rakata on the far side from shooting back at them. Mace slipped his breathmask on over his face and as the fusillade of blaster bolts flew above him he crawled along the floor through the cloud of smoke. Hearing the sound of rakata voices he halted and pointed the decksweeper towards them. The flash of blue illuminated the cloud as Mace fired and he heard a reassuring 'thud' as one of the aliens fell. But as he looked up through the cloud he saw the second alien now bringing his rifle to bear on him. Despite being able to clear a large area of enemies in a single blast, decksweepers were limited by their slow recharge time and Mace knew that he would not be able to take a second shot before the rakata. But just as the alien was about to fire there was a sudden shrill whistle and a small boxlike droid slammed into the alien's leg.

The rakata looked down just for a moment but it was long enough. A light on the decksweeper went from red to green to indicate that it was ready to fire again and Mace pulled the trigger. There was another flash of blue and the rakata fell. Mace crawled forwards beneath the continuing barrage of blaster bolts from the rebels until he passed through the doorway into the landing bay and he could stand up without fear of being shot.

"Clear!" Mace yelled, ripping his breathmask from his face as he saw that the bay was empty of rakata. With Jaysica and Kara carrying Tobis between them the rebels rushed through the cloud of smoke and into the landing bay after Mace.

"That little droid of yours saved my skin." Mace told Jaysica and she let go of Tobis and scooped up Penny in her arms while Kara struggled to suddenly take all the weight by herself.

"Oh I'm so proud of you." Jaysica said to the mouse droid.

"So now where to boss?" Kara asked, setting Tobis down against the wall.

Vorn looked towards Jenessa and the hologram standing beside her.

"Any ideas?" he asked.

"I'm afraid that although I now possess a plan showing the layout of this facility I am unable to determine where Kay is being held." Criston told him.

"Can't you figure out what rooms are for from the plan?" Tharun asked.

"I can make educated guesses at best." Criston replied, "This place for example was easy to locate because it required a large external door but did not need the ordnance storage and loading facilities of a fighter hangar. Kay could be being held in a command facility, the computer core or a medical unit. I can only positively identify the computer core and that is far from here."

Vorn sighed.

"Then we need to take what we have and get out of here." He said reluctantly.

"We're leaving?" Jenessa exclaimed, "But what about Kay? The whole point in us coming here was to-"

"I know." Vorn interrupted, "But we don't have the numbers or the weapons we need to fight our way through however many destroyer droids are wandering about out there. Now if we can get the plans to this space station back to the Alliance then maybe they can find a weakness."

"Uh-oh." Tharun said, turning to face the doorway again as there was the familiar sound of destroyer droids rolling towards them.

"Get that door sealed." Vorn ordered Jaysica.

"Hang on a moment boss," Kara said, "doesn't that leave us trapped in here?"

"What about stealing one of these ships?" Jenessa suggested, waving at the rows of shuttles and other small craft.

"I'd rather not be trying to override their security lockouts with the rakata hammering at that door." Mace said and he looked towards the heavy blast door now closing behind them.

"So what are we going to do? Doesn't anyone have a plan?" Jenessa asked.

"Yes Mace does." Vorn said.

"I do?" Mace asked.

"Yes you do and I didn't approve remember."

Mace smiled and took out his comlink.

8.

In the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk* Cass sat staring out through the canopy watching the space between the blade like towers. This area had been empty when the *Silver Hawk* had arrived but now the frameworks of several large starships had appeared and before Cass's eyes the construction of these vessels was continuing at a rapid pace.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this." Cass said to herself.

"Don't worry miss." Jeeves said from behind her, "I'm sure they'll be alright. They're quite resourceful you know."

"I ought to be there." Cass replied, "Not stuck in here watching whatever this is." And she pointed towards the partially built warships.

"Oh no miss. Major Larcus and Captain Grayle were both quite clear that you are needed here."

"Cass." Mace's voice sounded from the communications system.

"I'm here." She replied.

"Cass we need a pick up." Mace said and Cass sat up straight, "Now listen to me carefully, you need to call Malia and tell her we need her and blue squadron here as soon as possible. Don't try coming for us until they're here to cover you."

"But what about the welds holding the ship in place?" Cass asked.

"Don't worry." Mace reassured her, "Those things will shatter as soon as you start up the engines. Just make sure that the top is sealed or you'll start venting atmosphere."

"But how will I find you?" Cass asked.

"I'm setting my comlink to send you a beacon. The droids will be able to help you follow it."

"Okay I got it. I'm on my way."

"No. Call Malia first."

"Sorry." Cass said, "This is my first rescue mission." And then Mace's transmission was replaced by a simple repeating signal. Cass looked at Jeeves, "So how do I turn on the subspace transmitter?" she asked.

"Honestly miss, even though you are merely following the orders of Captain Grayle I must register my—"

"Just tell me which switch activates the transmitter."

"Well if you're going to be like that it's this one."

"Signal coming in captain." The *Renegade's* comscan operator told Malia, "I think it's the *Silver Hawk*." Malia smiled.

"Mace honey is that you?" she asked.

"No it's me." Cass responded, "Mace is in trouble."

"What's wrong?" Malia asked, concerned.

"Everyone's stuck in a hangar. They want me to go and pick them up but I need covering."

"Okay Cass, we're on our way. What can we expect?"

"It's a space station. It's huge. There are some old separatist warships as well, but I'm not sure if they're operational."

"Hold on sweetie. We're on our way." Malia said and then she switched to the channel linking the *Renegade* to the fighters of blue squadron, "Okay Jarad, we're up."

Unlike the *Silver Hawk*, the *Renegade* and blue squadron emerged from hyperspace in close proximity to the star forge where the disruption of the nebula could not prevent their detection by the station's sensors and in the control centre an alarm sounded.

"What's happening?" the rakata commander demanded, looking around from the internal security station.

"Multiple hyperspace events commander." The sensor operator replied, "Thirteen ships. Looks like one small warship plus a dozen fighters."

"What's the status on our defences?" the commander then asked and another rakata replied.

"Only the originals are complete sir, but they are still not combat ready."

Lifting his wrist the commander activated his communicator.

"Factory level six – Scramble."

"Its huge." One of the fighter pilots exclaimed as he saw the star forge ahead of him.

"Cut the chatter blue five." Jarad replied and then he saw a cloud of tiny vessels emerge from the station and head towards them, "Renegade do you see that?" he transmitted.

"We see it blue leader." Malia's voice responded, "Vulture droids. Hundreds of them."

Jarad frowned.

"Blue squadron lock s-foils in attack position and follow me in. Fire at will."

From the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk* Cass saw the flashes of laser fire between the Alliance ships and the swarm of vulture droids launched by the rakata.

"Okay guys," she said to the two droids behind her, "this is our chance." And she took hold of the control column in front of her.

The *Silver Hawk's* engines roared as Cass channelled power into them. For a few moments nothing happened, but then the engine noise was joined by the sound of tearing metal as the ship tore free of the station and the *Silver Hawk* lurched forwards.

At the back of the cockpit Harvey let out a short burst of sound.

"I know that Harvey." Jeeves said, "But she is in charge here."

Harvey let out a crude sound.

"What did he say?" Cass asked.

"I'm afraid that Harvey does not think much of your piloting skills miss." Jeeves told her, "In fact he-"

"Okay I get it." Cass interrupted, "now just tell me how to follow Mace's signal."

The blast door sealing the hangar was beginning to glow a dull red as the destroyer droids on the far side continued to fire at it.

"Err boss they're coming through." Kara said nervously.

"I can see that." Vorn replied as he looked around, "Okay everyone find somewhere to take cover." He ordered and he looked at Tharun, "Sergeant when those droids break through I want you to pick our targets. We'll all fire at whatever you fire at unless you say otherwise, concentrating our fire may be the only way of bringing those things down."

Tharun nodded.

"Got it major."

"Oh and you and Kara give your sidearms to Jaysica and Jenessa. We need as much firepower as we can get and your backup weapons are more powerful than what they've got."

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Jenessa said as she took the military grade pistol offered to her by Kara.

"You and me both." Kara replied.

Then Mace spotted movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to face the external door.

"Oh don't be so negative." He said, grinning as the *Silver Hawk* hovered just beyond the landing bay.

"Now we see how good your flying lessons were." Kara commented, noticing the ship wobbling somewhat as Cass turned it to face into the landing bay.

The *Silver Hawk* lurched forwards again and there was a crashing sound as the main sensor dish mounting on the upper hull caught against the hull of the station and was bent back almost to the point of being ripped off. Mace winced.

"Run." Vorn yelled and he began to run towards the ship now hovering somewhat unsteadily inside the hangar.

As the group rushed towards the *Silver Hawk* the ship's landing gear lowered and the ship settled down on the deck, its engines still running. A moment later the access ramp lowered to reveal Jeeves standing at the top.

"Oh Major Larcus sir!" the droid called out as Vorn rushed up the ramp, "I'm so relieved to see you healthy. But I must protest at the flying abilities of-"

"Not now Jeeves." Vorn snapped and as he headed for the cockpit with Mace not far behind he shouted over his shoulder, "Kara get-"

"Yeah, yeah I know." Kara replied, "Get in the turret. Just try and get us out of here without it being ripped off okay?"

"Is everyone alright?" Cass asked, getting out of the pilot's seat so Mace could sit down.

"In better shape than my ship." Mace replied as he took the controls and at that moment the landing bay's internal door exploded inwards.

"Kara!" Vorn yelled into the intercom.

"Got him." Kara replied and there was the flash of laser fire as she fired a single blast from the *Silver Hawk's* laser cannon. The weapon had only limited depression, but it was just enough to take the head off the first droid to step through the smoking hole in the blast door while Mace transferred power to the shields.

"Now everyone hang on." He announced over the intercom and the *Silver Hawk* lifted off the deck.

The *Silver Hawk* emerged into a battle. Though heavily outnumbered the rebel ships were holding their own. The droid brains of the vultures were inferior to the pilots of the rebel X-wings and the modern agile fighters easily outmanoeuvred them. On the other hand the *Renegade* had no need to evade the droid fighters assailing it, instead the well armoured and shielded vessel simply barged through their lines, its turbolasers

firing all around it. Though not designed for an anti-starfighter role there were so many vulture droids in proximity to the corvette that its shots inevitably hit some, utterly obliterating each one struck.

"Having fun out there Malia?" Mace signalled.

"Oh yeah honey." She responded, "In fact just watch." And the *Renegade* burst through a group of vulture droids, heading directly for the nearest of the stationary capital ships, a Commerce Guild destroyer, "Any signs of life from that thing Krissa?" she asked her comscan operator who shook her head.

"None captain. It's dead in space."

"Well let's make sure it stays that way."

The *Renegade* sped towards the warship and as soon as it came into range the *Renegade's* gunners opened fire. Normally a vessel like the Commerce guild destroyer would have little to fear from a corellian corvette, but without its engines shields the ship was a sitting duck and explosions blossomed along its length as the smaller corvette flew past and poured fire into it.

"Are we quite finished having fun?" Jarad broadcast.

"All done blue leader." Malia replied, "All craft prepare to retreat."

The *Silver Hawk* flew directly away from the star forge, right into the cloud of vulture droids. But as they began to move in on the freighter Kara opened fire from the turret, forcing them to abort their attack run. At the same time blue squadron looped around behind the freighter, combining their firepower with the *Silver Hawk's* to blast a hole clear through the droids. The *Renegade* also altered course, rolling over the top of the burning destroyer and veering away from the star forge.

"Jump co-ordinates are set." Vorn said to Mace, "Punch it."

"They are gone commander." The rakata sensor operator told his superior as the rebel ships vanished into hyperspace, "We've driven them off."

"Yes I see that. But they escaped with whatever they took from our computer." The commander said and then after a brief pause he added, "I have the feeling that we'll be seeing them again. We must be better prepared next time."

Stepping out of the *Silver Hawk's* bathroom Kara realised that the ship was unusually quiet.

"Anyone still about?" she called out.

"In the lounge." She heard Vorn respond, "Can you come in here a moment?"

Kara entered the lounge and sure enough found Vorn sat waiting for her.

"Come take a seat." He told her, nodding towards the chair closest to her, "So how are you feeling now?" he asked as she sat opposite him.

"Huh?" she replied.

"I only ask because you've been unwell recently."

"Yeah well it's probably just bug I picked up."

"So is that why you suddenly stopped drinking caf? And alcohol too?"

"They were making me feel queasy."

"Of course they were." Vorn said and then he leant forwards across the table, "I was married for a long time Kara and I know the signs. You're pregnant aren't you?"

Kara's jaw dropped and Vorn went on.

"You objected to Tharun's plan for disabling a droid because that would have meant you getting shot with a stun blast and it's well known that they can cause miscarriages. You didn't want to risk the baby getting hurt did you?"

"Oh god boss I'm so sorry." Kara exclaimed and she looked down into her lap.

"Sorry? Sorry for what?" Vorn asked as he got and walked around the table, crouching down in front of her.

"Because I know you must have gone to a lot of trouble to get my flight status back. Now I've gone and ruined it because the Alliance will never let me in a starfighter cockpit while I'm pregnant." And tears started to appear in Kara's eyes.

"Kara I did have to pull some strings to get your commission back but I did it because you always seemed to want to fly again. Its not because I want to lose you from the team. You know that."

"Yes I know." Kara replied, "But what happens when people find out? What will they think about-"

"It doesn't matter." Vorn interrupted, "Whatever happens you'll always have my support. You know that. Now I tell you what, dry your eyes and go put on one of those fancy dresses you've got in the hold. Mace and Malia are having a meal with Cass and Jenessa in the officers' mess before he takes them both home tomorrow and I think there may be a couple of spare seats at the table."

Kara sniffed and smiled.

"Go on." Vorn added, standing up and helping Kara from the chair. Crossing the lounge she paused when she reached the hatchway that led to the cabins and turned around.

“Hey boss,” she said to Vorn, “how does it feel to know you’re going to be a father again?” and Vorn smiled, “Oh and to know you’ve got to break the news to that daughter of yours?” and his face fell as Kara vanished into her cabin.

“Kriff. I never thought of that.” He said to himself, “I’ve got a very bad feeling about this.”