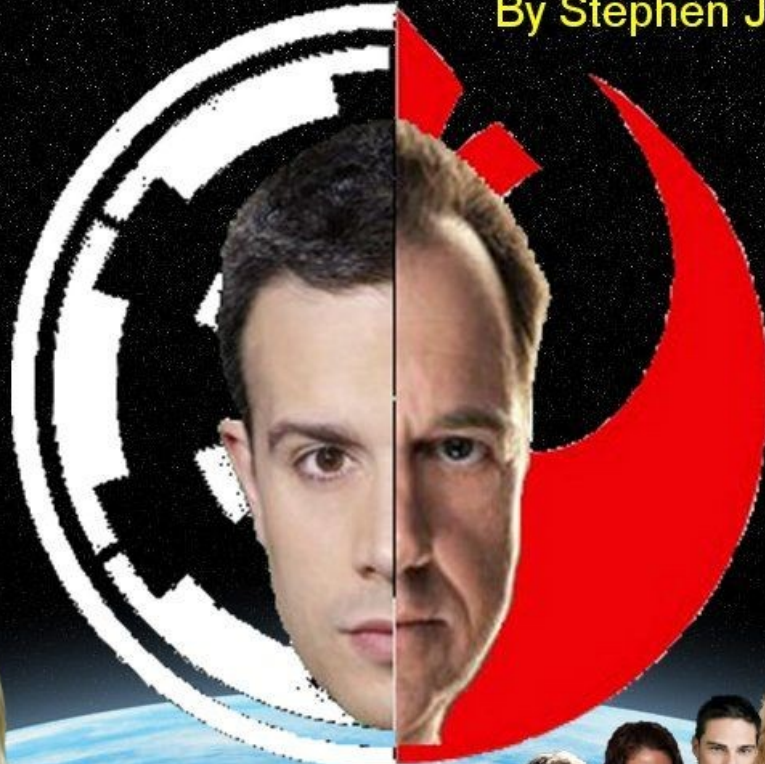


STAR WARS

2-04: Memories of a Dead Empire

By Stephen J Dutton



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Civil war turns father against son

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

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

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

TITLE

LOTS OF PEOPLE HAVE AN INTEREST IN A REMOTE WORLD THAT WAS ONCE OCCUPIED BY THE ANCIENT INFINITE EMPIRE OF THE RAKATA. THE UNIVERSITY OF ESTRAN WANTS TO STUDY THE RUINS LEFT BEHIND WHILE THE REBEL ALLIANCE WANTS TO USE IT AS A SECRET BASE. BUT WHO IS THE THIRD PARTY THAT HAS SENT A FORCE TO SEIZE THE WORLD AND WHAT DO THEY WANT?

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

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1.

Jenessa Drame, doctor of xenoarchaeology at the University of Estran looked up over her desk when she heard her office door slide open.

“Hi Grenick.” She said when she saw the horned devaronian male standing there, “What are you doing here? I thought you’d be at the party.”

“I was.” He replied, “But Professor Pawecki sent me to find out what happened to you. There are some influential people there tonight and he wants to show you off to them.”

“What he would really like to do,” Jenessa said as she looked down again and continued to search through her desk drawer, “is set up a metal pole and have me dance around it while the rich old men he invited tonight throw money at me for the university. Ah – here it is.”

“What?”

“My ID card.” she replied as she stood up, “I tried getting into the main hall but there were stormtroopers on the door who wanted to know who I was first, so I told them I was supposed to be inside and that they didn’t need to see my identification.”

“I take it that it didn’t work.” Grenick said to his superior.

“No it didn’t.” Jenessa replied, “The stormtrooper just said he’d heard that before and wasn’t falling for it again. Whatever that means. I don’t even know why there are stormtroopers here anyway.”

“You haven’t heard then?” Grenick said, “The moff himself is at this do tonight. Along with Rodge Larrs, head of COMPNOR for the sector. The professor isn’t just after funding from locals, he wants the Imperial authorities to fund this little trip of ours.”

“And he thinks they’ll give money to a department run by a non-human?”

“He’s hoping you’ll overshadow him.”

“That shouldn’t be difficult, he’s less than half a metre tall. Okay – how do I look?” Jenessa asked as she pinned her identification to her dress and stood up straight.

Grenick looked Jenessa up and down.

“If I were attracted to your species | would probably join the old men in trying to stuff money down your dress while you danced.” He replied.

“Thanks. I think.”

The two colleagues walked together towards the hall where the evening’s fund raising event was being held, a journey that took them outside.

“Doctor Drame!” a voice called out. Grenick turned around to see who it was, but Jenessa kept walking.

“Don’t stop.” She said, “Keep moving.”

“Why?”

“Just don’t stop.” She repeated.

“Doctor Drame!” the voice called out again and a white haired man of considerable age came running up to the pair, “Dr Drame, I’ve been leaving messages for you. I’m Thracken Grammel.” He said.

“Yes I know.” Jenessa said without looking back at the man, “I’m sorry but I’m not interested.”

“But we’re in danger!” he protested, “I’ve seen it. You can help me prove it. We need to stop them.”

“Look buddy,” Grenick interrupted, “the lady’s not interested.”

“But she has to help.” Grammel went on. Then, as they approached the entrance to the hall there was another voice.

“What’s going on here?” one of the stormtroopers demanded. Then when he caught sight of Grammel he added, “Who are you?”

“He’s lost.” Jenessa said as she and Grenick held out their identifications for the stormtroopers to see.

“You two may enter.” The stormtrooper told Grenick and Jenessa. Then he looked at Grammel, “Move along.” He told the old man.

“But we’re in danger!” Grammel called out again as Grenick and Jenessa made their way inside and the stormtroopers guarding the door blocked his way as he tried to follow.

“So who was that?” Grenick asked when they were inside the building.

“Just some crazy old man who’s been leaving messages for me for the best part of a month now. He says there’s something going on in the nebula and thinks that only I can save us all.”

The pair then entered the main hall. Professor Nerak Pawecki had made sure that examples of the artefacts that Jenessa had brought back to the university on her many expeditions over the years were displayed prominently around the walls of the room so that people could see them easily no matter where they were stood. Tucked away in a corner a small orchestra played a selection of music by well-known human composers.

“So who’ve we got here then?” Jenessa whispered to Grenick, “Am I supposed to know any of them?”

"I don't think so." Grenick answered, "We've got a few parliamentarians, some bigwigs in industry and the government types are over there." And he pointed towards one of the clusters of guests. Unlike the other groups that had formed the people in this one were all dressed in a similar manner, that being Imperial dress uniforms. Jenessa wasn't very good at identifying the rank markings on such uniforms, but she could tell by the number of coloured blocks on the men's chests that they were all of high rank.

"Ah Doctor Drame." A high-pitched voice called out from the group of Imperials and Jenessa caught sight of the tiny avian figure of her department head, Professor Pawecki, "I'm so relieved you've arrived. I've been trying to explain the expedition you're planning to the good moff here but you know the details so much better than I."

Jenessa took a deep breath.

"Wish me luck." She whispered to Grenick, "I'm going in."

"I'll go mingle with the buffet." He replied.

Jenessa smiled as she walked over to Professor Pawecki and the Imperials who towered over him.

"Jenessa Drame." She said and she held out her hand towards the oldest looking of the men, hoping that it was the moff, "Pleased to meet you."

"Likewise." The man responded, "Moff Gregor Horatian at your service." And he took her hand, lifted it and kissed it gently. As he did so Jenessa caught sight of a young blonde woman standing behind the moff who frowned as he kissed her. "Allow me to introduce some of my advisors." the moff went on, "This is mister Rodge Larrs, from the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order, Director Calvin Helios of the Imperial Security Bureau, Fleet Admiral Praus Vretan head of the naval sector group and General Julius Dern, army commander for the system and my chief defence advisor."

As the moff gave each man's name Jenessa reached out her hand and to the named man and he shook it.

"And who is this?" she asked, looking at the young woman behind the moff.

"Oh this is Vay Udra, my intern." The moff answered, "I'm teaching her the ins and outs of politics." Jenessa didn't believe him for a second, but was smart enough not to challenge him about it.

"The professor was telling us that you're planning an expedition into the Spire." Admiral Vretan said, referring to the collection of star systems that existed between two of the local nebula's 'arms' that extended vertically upwards in relation to the other systems of the sector. Because of the large amount of interstellar debris that made navigation there difficult the region was only rudimentarily charted and had a reputation as a hideout for pirates and rebels.

"That's right admiral." Jenessa replied, "We've come across some interesting ruins there. Our probe droid's readings suggest that they could be over thirty thousands years old."

"That predates the Old Republic." Rodge Larrs commented.

"Indeed it does." Jenessa said, "We believe that it could have been inhabited when the Infinite Empire of the Rakata held sway over this region."

"Doesn't that concern you doctor?" General Dern asked, "You're a long way from help if you run into the Rakata out there."

"Oh there's no need to worry about that General." Professor Pawecki interrupted, "The Rakata have been extinct in this sector for millennia."

"Have you got my money?" Emissi Caysa asked, leaning back in her chair. Her client was hiding his face under a dark robe of some sort but that didn't bother her. All she cared about was what his money looked like. Some people would be nervous about allowing strangers into their homes, but the man had too much to lose to try anything stupid. Her droid SB-20-SNK, a modified R2 unit that assisted her when breaking into supposedly secure computer networks was recording everything.

"Right here." The man said, holding up a roll of bank notes, "Now what about the data."

Emissi smiled and held up a mem-stik. Then she pulled it away when the man reached out for it.

"Pay me first." She told him.

The robed man put the money down on Emissi's desk and slid it towards her. Emissi picked it up eagerly and tossed the mem-stik to the man. Catching the mem-stik, he produced a datapad and plugged the two together before he looked at the display to see what he had just bought.

"Excellent." He said softly, "The images are crystal clear."

"Precise jump data too." Emissi said, "Useful for travelling to that part of space."

"You looked at this?" the man asked.

"How else did you expect me to steal it from the university network?"

"You are correct of course and you have honoured our deal. Now I will be leaving you, until we require your services again."

Emissi smiled. She was too busy counting the money to be paying her client much attention as he left her apartment. She gave him a couple of minutes to get down to the street below before she got up and walked to her window and looked outside. She was just in time to see the hooded figure climb into the back of a landspeeder before it drove away.

Returning to her desk she sat down and logged onto the planetary vehicular licensing database using a backdoor she had been able to install covertly. Then she entered the registration number of the speeder her client had just got into.

"Hey Sneaky," she said to her droid, "looks like we've been doing holy work."

"Where's Tharun?" Mace asked Vorn as he rushed into the command bunker.

Major Vorn Larcus III was standing beside one of the narrow slits that provided a view over much of the battlefield, observing what was happening outside and directing his troops.

"Dead." he replied flatly.

"Dead?" Mace repeated.

"Yes, he was hit by artillery fire in the opening stages of the battle. What about the others?"

"Dead as well." Mace replied, "Jaysica triggered a mine and —" then he paused.

"What is it?" Vorn asked, lowering his macrobinoculars.

"The enemy doesn't have any artillery." He said, "We do because we're the Empire. They're the under-equipped rebels today."

"So how did Tharun die then?" Vorn said as he fumbled with his equipment until he found what he was looking for - a datapad that was being updated in real time with the progress of the exercise, "This has him dead alright." Vorn said, "He logged himself in as being hit by artillery fire."

"He logged himself in as dead? Not an exercise marshal?"

"No." Vorn said as he continued to study the datapad, "And he wasn't the only one he logged in a dead either."

"Who else?"

"Corporal Mara Heed." Vorn said.

"Ah." Mace said, "I think I see what's happened here."

"So do I." Vorn said sternly, "And I'd rather it not be happening on my battlefield. I think I'll send some tanks over to his last known location."

"Tanks?" Mace asked.

"Yes, we have tanks. Look." And Vorn pointed out of the bunker to where several battered landspeeders were parked in a row. Each of them had a silhouette of an Imperial repulsortank painted on it so that it stood out clearly. Mace grinned.

Vorn was about to order his 'tanks' into action when another rebel officer entered the bunker. An armband clearly identified him as one of the marshals for the exercise.

"Hello colonel." Vorn said.

"Major. Captain." Colonel Max Collis replied, "How are things going?" Colonel Collis was in charge of the Alliance's special forces in the sector and he was using the exercise to evaluate potential recruits to his forces.

"Oh the rebels have been giving us a good run." Vorn said, "But the Empire's about to strike back."

"Well I'm afraid it's going to have to wait," Colonel Collis said, "Something's come up."

"What is it?" Vorn asked.

"As you know we've been looking for a world to replace the safeworld hit by the Empire recently." The colonel began and both Mace and Vorn nodded. They had been on the planet when the Empire had attacked it and had been instrumental in getting most of its inhabitants away from it safely. Now those people were stuck living in the cargo hold of a converted Lucrehulk-class battleship. "Well Colonel Ergard found a planet that looked suitable as a replacement."

"Looked." Mace repeated.

"Yes, looked. We found out recently that the University of Estran is sending a small group there to look at some of the ruins we thought would make a good starting point for a colony. We need your team to go out there and see what they're up to. If they're only going to be there a short while we could still use the place after they've gone."

Vorn smiled.

"When do we leave?" he asked.

"Now. Training is over, time to actually earn your pay."

Mace yawned. Piloting a ship through hyperspace could be tiring, especially when it involved following a route that was not fully charted into the space around the local nebula. He decided that a hot cup of caff would help keep him awake for his turn looking out for the arrival of the research team later on and was in the middle of preparing it when the sound of footsteps caught his attention.

"Kara, aren't you supposed to be on watch?" Mace asked the woman entering the Silver Hawk's lounge area. Kara looked at the ship's captain.

"I just finished my shift." She replied, "It's Jaysica's turn now. Any chance you could make me one of those too?"

"Sure." Mace said, taking a second mug from the shelf above his head. Then he stopped suddenly and turned around. "Hang on." He said, "You left Jaysica in the cockpit alone?"

"Well it's her turn on watch." Kara said.

"That may be," Mace said with a frown, "but there's a lot of important stuff in there and I don't fancy the idea of her triggering an uncontrolled atmospheric entry 'by accident'."

"Don't worry." Kara reassured him, "Harvey's there as well and I took precautions to make sure she doesn't break anything. She won't cause any trouble at all."

"What sort of precautions?" Mace asked suspiciously, "The major will be really mad if you've hurt her."

"Would I do that?"

"Yes you bloody well would."

"Well I didn't this time. Come and see." And Kara headed back out of the lounge. Mace set down the cup and followed her to the cockpit. As the pair approached a squeaking sound became audible and then a woman's voice called out.

"Kara? Is that you? This isn't funny. I'm telling the major."

"The boss is in bed." Kara said as she walked into the cockpit. Then she turned to face Mace, "There you go, she's fine." She said, pointing at Jaysica. Mace looked at the young woman on watch and grinned. Jaysica Horbid was sat in one of the cockpit's rear seats, well out of reach of the flight controls that Tobis's R5 astromech droid Harvey was plugged into and as far as Mace could tell almost an entire reel of tape had been wrapped around her, binding her to the seat and pinning her arms to her sides. More tape was wrapped around her legs. The chair squeaked as Jaysica rocked back and forth, trying to loosen the tape.

"Tell her to let me go." Jaysica protested to Mace as she wriggled in the chair, causing it to squeak as it rocked back and forth.

"Are you giving me an order on my ship? Because that could be considered mutiny." Mace replied, "Now just keep watch and someone will be here to replace you later." He added before he left the cockpit, still grinning.

"I'm still telling the major." Jaysica said, looking up at Kara.

"The boss won't care. He likes me more than you." Kara replied, and then she followed Mace out of the cockpit, "Keep an eye on her Harvey!" she called out as she walked away and the droid chirped.

"Come on Harvey," Jaysica said, "you can cut through this tape easily." And she wriggled, the chair squeaking once more. The astromech droid remained where it was, plugged into the Silver Hawk's flight systems and made a rude sounding noise.

"That wasn't very nice." Jaysica said when she saw the translation of the droid's response on a nearby display. Then Harvey produced a more excited sounding high-pitched chirp. "What is it?" Jaysica asked and she looked at the instrument panel. There she saw the sensors readings that clearly showed the heat plume of a spacecraft entering the atmosphere below them.

"That must be them!" Jaysica exclaimed, "Let me out so I can tell the others."

Harvey repeated the rude sounding noise and then chirped again and Jaysica saw on the sensor display the unmistakable return from a second spacecraft following the first.

"That doesn't look good." Jaysica said, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

2.

The shuttle lurched suddenly as it entered the atmosphere and beside Jenessa one of her students held a bag over their mouth to vomit.

"Given how much this ship costs, you'd think that it would offer a smoother ride." Grenick said to Jenessa as he watched the student wipe his mouth.

"Sorry folks." The pilot said, "But even with all his billions Mister Kurrad can't control the weather out here."

"Just back on Estran hey?" Jenessa replied and the pilot smiled.

"I hear he has an entire subdivision of his company dedicated to it." He said, before the ship lurched again.

"Could you please just let the man drive?" the student asked weakly.

"Don't worry," the pilot said looking over his shoulder at the student, "we'll be on the ground in few minutes."

"Yes, in tangled wreckage if you don't watch where you're flying." The student said, his eyes opening wide as a mountain came into view through the clouds.

"Oops." The pilot said, "Thanks for that, that was a close one." And the shuttle banked as he steered it around the obstacle.

"Remind me why we chose him as our pilot?" Grenick asked.

"Because he works for Edvars Kurrad who's bankrolling forty percent of this operation." Jenessa replied.

"Is that it?" the pilot asked, pointing out of the cockpit to where a cluster of regular lines could be made out on the ground below.

Jenessa got to her feet and rested on the back of the pilot's seat to look for herself. She smiled when she saw what he was pointing to.

"That's it all right." She said, "Take a look at this you two."

"I'll pass if you don't mind." The student said, "I'm sure it will be just as impressive when we land safely. If we land safely."

"Amazing." Grenick said, "It must cover a huge area to be visible from this distance."

"One of the biggest finds in history." Jenessa said. Then she added, "And it's all mine."

"Hey! Where the hell do you think you're going?" Jenessa yelled at the four figures she saw walking away from the camp. She recognised them all as students here for the extra credit of a field expedition.

"To the ruins." One of them called back.

"Oh no you're not!" Jenessa shouted, "Who the hell taught you xenoarchaeology? I haven't decided who's going to be surveying what yet and I don't want all of you just wandering about treading on god knows what and picking things up at random until I've had a chance to take a look myself."

"But there's nothing else to do in camp." Another of the four, this one a female, protested.

"There's plenty to do young lady." Jenessa scolded her, "Just ask Grenick, he'll find you something to do. We didn't bring any labour droids with us so there's latrines to be dug if nothing else."

The four students began to walk back in Jenessa's direction, their expressions making it clear that they were not happy with their experience of fieldwork so far.

"I told you we should have just gone for a smoke under the ship." One of them muttered to his friends. Then, just as the group was walking past Jenessa there was a sound like thunder from overhead and all five looked skywards. There in the sky was the unmistakable trail of a spacecraft entering the atmosphere.

"Who's that?" the female student asked.

"I don't care." Jenessa said, "Unless they think that they can have my dig site."

"You landed us too far away you idiot." Kenit Durvell said without any effort to disguise his contempt.

"Mister Durvell, we are paying you well for this mission." The pilot replied, "Which means you should remember that you are our employee, not our superior."

"I am your only profession soldier!" Kenit snapped, "Eleven years in the Estranian Defence Forces. That's more than your fanatics can muster collectively."

"Nevertheless," the pilot went on, "you are being paid to advise us on strategy and tactics. Now by divine will we are here. So what do you advise?"

"That you do exactly as I tell you."

"It's not my fault." Jaysica told Vorn, "I could have come and told everyone if I wasn't taped to this chair." And she wriggled again.

Vorn looked at Kara and Mace, sipping his drink as he did.

"It was for health and safety reasons boss." Kara said with a smile.

"Health and safety?" Vorn repeated.

"I don't feel safe when she's here alone and unrestrained." Mace replied.
"And her 'accidents' are bad for my health." Kara added, nodding.
"Someone let me go!" Jaysica shouted, rocking back and forth and stamping her feet on the deck. As she leant backwards she pushed down with her feet and there was a sudden 'snap!'
"Ahhh!" Jaysica screamed as the chair toppled over.
"Ow! My foot!" Kara then screamed and she leapt backwards, grabbing the foot that had been where Jaysica landed, "I think you broke it you idiot."
Jaysica looked upwards.
"And my chair!" Mace exclaimed.
"Just get us down there. Walking distance from their camp, but try to keep us from being spotted." Vorn said to Mace, then he left the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit shaking his head.

Mace located a clearing that was large enough to set the *Silver Hawk* down in on the far side of a line of hills from the university camp site, but still less than three kilometres from it. The height of the hills allowed him to bring the ship in low using its repulsorlift engines and remain undetected. The mysterious second vessel meanwhile, had set down some distance on the far side of the university camp so there was little, if any, chance of them detecting the *Silver Hawk*.

Tharun was the first to emerge from the ship and he was less than impressed with Mace's choice of landing zone.

"I don't like this major." He said as he scanned the horizon with his macrobinoculars, "We're vulnerable here."
"In what way?" Vorn asked.

"Well just look at those hills." Tharun said and he pointed towards the terrain that had hidden their approach from the university party, "I know we needed to keep ourselves hidden, but they let people get to within a click without us seeing them. That's close enough to drop mortar rounds on us."

"Somehow I doubt that a bunch of teachers and their students came here with artillery sergeant." Vorn replied.

"I know that sir, but there's that second ship to consider."

"If you know of a better landing site, go to it." Mace said as he walked down the ramp behind Tharun and Vorn.

"This place is fine." Vorn said, "I know it's not ideal, but it's what we've got."

"If you say so major." Tharun said.

"I do say so." Vorn said, "Now get your gear sergeant, we're going for a walk."

"Where to?"

"Where else? To meet our new neighbours."

The three men went back inside the *Silver Hawk*, where they found their other three companions in the lounge area. Jaysica and Tobis were crouched on the floor with parts of the damaged cockpit chair between them while Kara was sat on the couch in the corner clutching her recording rod.

"I hate to ask this," Vorn said looking at Kara, "but what are you doing?"

"Are you kidding me boss?" she replied, "We have Jaysica here with an assortment of tools and some really strong adhesive. I'm just waiting for the show to start. Don't worry, I'll record it for you so you can watch it later."

"Well that's something to look forwards to when we get back." Tharun said as he picked up his equipment pack.

"Back? Where are you going?" Jaysica asked.

"To meet the neighbours the major says." Tharun told her.

"Ask if we can borrow a cup of sugar would you?" Kara said.

"We will." Vorn replied as he and Tharun left the ship once more.

"I thought we brought our own water with us." The student said to Jenessa. He was a first year undergraduate from the computing department and he had no previous experience of the galaxy outside of educational establishments that she knew of.

"We did Myles," she replied, "but we need to know if the local sources are safe just in case anything goes wrong. Or perhaps you'd rather wait until we find ourselves out of water until you start trying to figure out what sort of treatment is needed."

"No Doctor Drame.

"I thought not. Now I'm going to take this test kit to the river and by the time I'm back I want you to have set up and networked all our computers. We don't want to lose a thirty thousand year old artefact just because we don't know which box it's in do we?"

"No doctor. I'll get right on it."

"Good, you do that."

Jenessa waited until she was outside the tent before she started to shake her head.

"Students giving you a hard time?" she heard Grenick ask and she turned towards him.
"Oh hi there." She said, "At least with you around I know that there's someone apart from me that knows what they're doing."
"You could go easier on them." Grenick suggested, "Bossy women are why I left Devaronia."
"Am I that bad?"
"Some of them have taken to calling you Darth Drame behind your back."
"Darth? I like the sound of that. I could choke the life out of students who hand in term papers late without leaving any forensic evidence." And Jenessa reached out a hand as if she were using some supernatural power to attack someone in front of her.
"Well I just wanted to let you know that the first groups have left for the city. I told them the areas you assigned them."
"Good. Let's see if this lot can actually read maps. I'm off to get a water sample from the river. I should be back within the hour."

"Okay so now what?" Jaysica asked.
"Now we glue the valve in place." Tobis said, "Could you hand me that tube please?"
"Hey Tobis." Kara said from the couch, "Didn't Mace say that Jaysica was supposed to fix the chair? I've not seen her do anything so far."
"She's been helping me." Tobis said, sounding hurt.
"What by handing you bolts and tubes of glue? Still I suppose its better this way. Less chance of her breaking something else."
"I can do this!" Jaysica snapped. Then she looked at Tobis, "Okay, so where do I put the glue?"
"Right there." Tobis said, pointing at a hole in a metal tube, "But be careful with that glue because its-" But as he spoke Jaysica squeezed the tube hard and liquid came pouring out.
"Ee-you!" she called out as the liquid covered her hands and she dropped the tube on the plastic sheeting laid out beneath the chair parts.
"Don't!" Tobis yelled as she moved her hands closer together, intending to wipe the glue away, "That's a contact adhesive. If you rub your hands together they'll stick."
"Oh yeah." Jaysica said, "I've done that before haven't I?"
"Oh Tobis!" Kara yelled, "You just ruined it. That would have been comedy gold. I could have put that on the republic day disc."
"Republic day disc?" Jaysica asked.
"Yeah, I'm putting together a video disc of all the stupid stuff you do that I've been able to record to show on Republic day."
Jaysica frowned then looked at Tobis.
"Where's the solvent?" she asked.
"It doesn't work on glue that hasn't set yet." Tobis said, "Its cheap stuff."
"So how do I get this off?" she asked.
"Just put your hands under running water for a few minutes while its not compressed." He told her.
"Okay, I can do that. Can someone help me with the tap?"
"Oh no." Tobis said, "You can't do it in the ship. The glue will clog up the pipes."
"So what do I do?" Jaysica asked, alarmed that there seemed to be no way of getting the glue off her hands.
"Stick your hands together." Kara said, "Then the solvent will work. Come on do it. You get the glue off and I get more footage for Republic day. We both get what we want."
"What the hell is going on here?" Mace demanded as he appeared from his cabin.
"I've got glue on my hands." Jaysica said, "I can't touch anything."
"She needs running water," Tobis explained, "but the glue will stick in the pipes in the ship."
Mace wiped his face and sighed in frustration.
"There's a river." He said, "Just beyond the line of hills between us and that university lot. I saw it on the scans we did from orbit when I was looking for somewhere to land."
"That'll do." Tobis said, "Its flowing water. Let me help you there."
"I don't need your help." Jaysica replied, "I'm a grown woman. I can find a river." and she got up and headed for the entry ramp.
"I bet she falls in it and comes back with some sort of fish stuck to each hand." Kara said.

Jaysica held her arms away from her as she walked through the woods, well aware of how Kara would react if she were to return to the Silver Hawk without having removed every trace of the glue from her hands. She could hear the sound of running water from below her and she smiled as she realised she had found the river.

"Told you I could find it." She said to herself and she began to walk down the embankment between her and the sound of water. The slope of the embankment began to increase and Jaysica decided on looking for

another way down. But as she turned to go back up the embankment the ground beneath her feet gave way and she lost her footing entirely. Screaming, Jaysica slid down the embankment towards the sound of running water.

Jenessa lifted the vial out of the river and closed its cap before she put it in her jacket pocket. She stood up and was just starting to walk back to the campsite when she heard a scream from above her. She looked around just in time to see a young woman rapidly sliding down the embankment towards her. Before she could react the woman ploughed right into her and knocked her off her feet. Jenessa cried out in alarm as she fell.

"Oh god, I'm so sorry." Jaysica said as she sat and looked at Jenessa, "It was an accident. Honest." Then she got to her feet.

Jenessa looked up at Jaysica.

"Well since you knocked me down you could at least help me up." She said.

"Oh yes. Of course." Jaysica replied and she held out her hands. Jenessa grabbed hold of them and with the help of a pull from Jaysica she got to her feet also.

"Right then," Jenessa said, "you can let go now."

"No I can't."

"What?"

"I can't let go."

"Right. You're starting to worry me now."

"There's glue."

"Glue?" Jenessa repeated and she tried to tug her hands away from Jaysica's.

"Yes. I spilt it on my hands. That's why I came here. I was told that running water would wash it away providing it hadn't set."

"Let me guess," Jenessa said, "when you took my hands in yours it set."

"Yes. But it was an accident."

"That's two in as many minutes. Are you some sort of accident prone clown?"

"You don't seem like a very nice person you know." Jaysica said.

"And you don't seem like a very smart one." Jenessa replied, "Now lets get back to camp and see if there's something there to separate us. Permanently."

The two women began to move, both in opposite directions.

"My camp is this way." Jaysica said, nodding her head in the direction of the *Silver Hawk's* landing site.

"Yes well I'd rather head for mine. If the people at your are anything like you I might end up being decapitated by someone trying to peel a blumfruit."

Jaysica followed as Jenessa led her in the direction of the university camp.

"My name's Jaysica by the way." She said, "What's yours?"

"Drame. DARTH Drame."

3.

"Myles, I don't care about excuses." Grenick said to the student, "You reviewed everything before we left Estran. It's too late to be saying there's something missing. Doctor Drame won't stand for it."

"But Gren-

"No buts!" Grenick snapped, holding up his hand, "Get it sorted."

Before Myles could protest further both Grenick's and his attention was caught by sudden murmurings from around them and they both looked around to see a pair of men walking up the trail from the woods towards them. Of the two the older one looked to be the leader. He carried himself as if he was used to having his orders followed, while the military style garb of the other gave him the look of someone not to be taken lightly. But what Grenick noticed the most and was concerned by, was that both men were armed.

"Stay here." He told to Myles and he headed towards the two men. "Hello there." He greeted them, "Can I help you?"

"The name's Vorn," Vorn said, holding out his hand, "and this is my man Tharun."

Tharun just nodded and Grenick noticed that his eyes were moving about as if assessing targets. Grenick took Vorn's hand.

"Did you come down in that ship to the north?" he asked.

"Oh no." Vorn replied, "My party's been here some time on a hunting expedition. We spotted your ship land and thought we'd just wander over and say hello."

Grenick looked at the two men's blasters again. The rifle Vorn carried was lightweight and had the look of a sporting gun, but Tharun's was unmistakably a military arm that matched his clothing.

"I didn't think there was anything big enough that you'd need that sort of firepower to kill it living around here." He said indicating Tharun's weapon.

"Oh Mister Verser is here as an advisor." Vorn answered, "I hired him for his knowledge of survival and tracking. The gun came with him. Better to have him and not need him than need him and not have him wouldn't you say? But anyway, where are my manners? Who are you sir?"

"Grenick Veck. Teaching assistant at the University of Estran. We're here on a research assignment."

"The ruins?" Vorn asked, "We saw them from the air and I thought they looked interesting. But Tharun suggested that they were better to be avoided."

"Is that so?" Grenick asked and he looked at Tharun.

"Risk of collapse." Tharun said, "Though I see you've brought bracing gear to take care of that. Plus you never know if someone else has moved in."

"Indeed." Grenick said, "Anyway do come with me. Can I offer you a beverage?"

"Caf. Hot. Strong." Tharun said and he slung his rifle over his shoulder, an action that made Grenick more at ease. He led them to the mess tent where several pots of caf were permanently on the boil.

"Do help yourself." He said.

Vorn just sat down while Tharun poured them both cups of caf.

"So anyway Mister Veck-" Vorn said as he took the drink Tharun offered him and blew on it.

"Grenick please."

"Sorry. Grenick. Are you going to be here long?"

"A couple of weeks most likely." Grenick said as he too got himself a drink and sat down, "Perhaps a month depending on what we find this time."

"This time?" Tharun commented.

"Well you must have seen the area of the ruins." Grenick explained, "Our expedition can only cover a tiny fraction of them. Based on what we find here, the university will determine if more groups are to be sent."

"I see." Vorn said, nodding and he and Tharun glanced at one another.

Before anything more could be said there was a commotion outside and two female voices could be heard arguing.

"Its not like I did it on purpose." One said.

"A kowakian monkey lizard has the brains not to do something like that!" the other snapped.

"I know that voice sir." Tharun said.

"Jaysica." Vorn said, "I know." And he got up.

Tharun and Vorn followed Grenick to the tent door and looked outside where they saw Jaysica and Jenessa walking through the camp apparently gripping one another's hands.

"Doctor Drame?" Grenick said, "What's going on?"

"This fool glued her hands to mine." Jenessa said. The she saw Tharun and Vorn, "Who the hell are they?" she asked.

"Oh hi guys." Jaysica said when she noticed them, "Can you tell her I'm not an idiot?"

"I wish I could." Tharun said, "But all evidence points to the contrary at this time."

Jaysica's face fell.

"Look Grenick," Jenessa said, "just go get some solvent for this glue would you. I want this idiot out of my camp before she breaks something. We'll be in my tent."

"I'm terribly sorry about my young associate." Vorn told Jenessa as he and Tharun followed her to her tent,

"She was suppose to stay at our camp while we came to introduce ourselves in a more civilised manner."

"I teach." She said to Vorn, "I know what its like to be surrounded be people who can't be left unsupervised for a second. I call them freshmen." And they both smiled, "I'm Jenessa by the way. Doctor Jenessa Drame."

"Pleased to meet you. Vorn. I would shake your hand but... Well you've got your hands full right now."

Grenick then appeared with an aerosol can in his hand.

"Bryn said this should do the trick." He said, "Hold up your hands."

Jenessa lifted up her hands and Jaysica jerked forwards as hers were pulled upwards as well.

"Hey! Be careful." She said.

"Careful? That's rich coming from you." Jenessa replied.

Then, as Grenick sprayed the two women's hands, Vorn noticed an image in a frame on a folding table. It showed two people one of them clearly Jenessa, the other a slightly older man that Vorn recognised.

"Is that Doctor Howishan with you?" he asked, picked up the image, "Was he a friend of yours?"

"Yes. A good friend." Jenessa replied, "How did you know him?"

"Oh we just met once or twice that's all. I was sorry to hear about his death."

"Yes well, it was an accident. That's what the authorities say." Jenessa said and then she breathed a sigh of relief as the glue gave way and her pulled her hands free of Jaysica's, "Now if there's nothing else my people are rather busy."

"Of course." Vorn said setting the image back down, "But do let us know there's anything you need."

"We could do with some data cables." Grenick said.

"What?" Jenessa said, looking at her assistant.

"Myles is claiming we didn't bring enough."

Jenessa sighed.

"He was supposed to check them before we left. Never mind, we'll just have to do without."

"I'm sure we have some-" Vorn began to say.

"No. Its fine." Jenessa replied.

"Very well." Vorn said, "Tharun. Jaysica. Let's be on our way. Thanks for the caf."

Vorn led his companions out of the tent and Jenessa watched as they walked away from the camp. Then she went to her bed and pulled a trunk from beneath it.

"Why wouldn't you accept their help?" Grenick asked as Jenessa knelt down and opened the trunk.

"Didn't you recognise him?" she said, "Vorn."

"No."

"I did, we've met before. At a university fundraiser."

"He didn't seem to remember you."

"Probably because these clothes don't show off any cleavage. You know what those events are like."

"Yes, you've mentioned it a few times. So who is he?"

Jenessa pulled a plain wooden box from the trunk, followed by a cardboard box.

"Vorn is Vorn Larcus the third." She said as she opened the wooden box to reveal a large slug-firing pistol and opened out the ammunition cylinder, "He was a Parliamentarian on Estran." She continued as she tipped bullets out of the cardboard box and began to load her weapon, "But now he's a member of the Rebel Alliance and a traitor. Now do you still keep that blaster handy?"

"Got it right here." Grenick replied and he produced a compact blaster pistol form his pocket, "I wasn't about to walk up to two armed men with nothing more than my charm to fend to fend them off."

"Good. Because we may need it and go find our pilot, I think I saw him tuck a blaster in his kit before we left. Tell him I think we've stumbled onto a rebel base."

"Just what were you doing away from camp?" Vorn asked Jaysica as they walked back towards the *Silver Hawk*.

"Well Tobis was helping me fix the chair-"

"The one you broke?" Tharun interrupted.

"The chair." Jaysica said, "When some glue got on my hands."

"You squeezed the tube too hard didn't you?" Tharun asked.

"I got glue on my hands and Mace sent me to the river to clean it off. So it's his fault I was there to get stuck to that nasty woman."

"I liked her." Tharun said.

"She's a bantha. Did you see how she reacted when we offered to help her?" Jaysica said, "Who was that man in the picture anyway major?"

"Biggs Howishan." Vorn said, "He was a university professor. I met him a couple of times at fundraisers and then later again with the Alliance."

"He's one of us?" Tharun asked.

"He was. He was a recruiter until he died in a shuttle crash."

"Hang on minute." Tharun said, stopping suddenly, "Was that woman at any of these fundraisers?"

Vorn thought for a moment.

"Its possible." He said, "Its difficult to remember everyone."

"Then she may know who you are." Tharun said, "Which means—"

"She know we're rebels." Vorn said, finishing Tharun's sentence for him, "Come on, let's get back to the ship as quickly as we can."

Everything about this expedition excited Cal Handan. As a first year student he considered himself lucky to have been selected to come and explore this ancient place and his enthusiasm was proving annoying to the other three members of his group as they examined the structure they had been assigned to.

"There we go." He said as he peeled the sheet of plastic away from the wall. The sheet heated up when pressed against a surface and the side facing it would melt. Then, when the plastic set it could be removed, producing a perfect imprint of what lay below. In this case row after row of carving older than human interstellar travel by thousands of years, "What do you think Doctor Drame will make of this Kally? Kally?" Kally did not answer. She was standing at the door to a balcony that overlooked an overgrown square outside.

"Kally what's going on?" Cal asked.

"Who are they?" she said and she pointed across the square. Cal walked over to join her at the door and look for himself. There he saw a group of men emerging from another ruined building and cross the square. He saw they all carried blasters.

"Kally get back!" he hissed and he yanked Kally back away from the door.

"Cal, what are you—" she began to say when there was the sound of blaster fire from outside followed by screams. Cal bobbed his head through the door and saw the other two members of their group lying dead on the ground below.

"We're in trouble." He said, "We need to get the hell out of here."

Taking Kally by the hand, Cal led her from the room and headed for an exit they knew to be on the opposite side of the building from the advancing armed men. Then they ran as fast as they could. Though the streets were overgrown, the two students were still able to make their way quickly through them. That was until Kally caught her foot on a root and fell forwards.

"My ankle!" she cried out.

Cal stopped and crouched down beside her as she clutched at her ankle.

"Let me see." He said and he looked as Kally removed her boot, wincing in pain. Cal reached out for the injured ankle, but Kally cried out when he touched it.

"It looks bad Kally." He said, "I'll have to carry you."

"No." Kally said, "You need to keep going."

"I can't leave you."

"I can hide here." She replied, "Look, that building over there looks good. Just help me to get in there then go get help."

Reluctantly, Cal helped Kally into the small building she had indicated. Then he continued running towards the camp. He had got only a few hundred metres when he heard the distinctive sound of a blaster shot followed by Kally's shrill scream. Cal stopped and turned, staring back the way he had run for just a moment. Then he continued on his way.

"No way." The pilot said, "I'm not a soldier."

"Neither are we." Jenessa said, "But we're the only ones with guns."

"Yeah, two hand blasters and an archaic slug thrower used to scare off animals. I saw those rebels who came to the camp. That big one looked like he could kill us easily. He'd sleep well that night too."

"You work for me," Jenessa told him, "and I'm ordering you to get ready to defend this camp."

"I work for Edvars Kurrad." The pilot replied, "You know, the man footing the bill for this little field trip. So I say we just call him up and he can get the authorities to send some stormtroopers to rescue us."

"That could take days." Grenick said, "The rebels are just over those hills."

"Then let's just get the kriff out of here."

"Not when there are still people unaccounted for." Jenessa said, folding her arms, "There's over twenty of my students in the city."

"Well it looks like one of them's coming now." The pilot said and he pointed to where Cal Handan was running towards them.

"Doctor Drame! Doctor Drame!" he yelled, "They killed them! They killed Kally! They killed everyone and they're heading this way!"

"It's a bust." Vorn said as he entered the *Silver Hawk's* lounge, "The university mission is apparently just the first of many. Looks like Colonel Ergard's going to have to find us a new safeworld."

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

"We leave. There's nothing for us here." Vorn replied.

"Okay this looks good." Jenessa said, surveying the narrow trail that ran around a vertical wall of rock and the edge of the woods, "They have to come this way to reach the camp so we can ambush them here."

"So all of a sudden you're a military strategist?" the pilot asked.

"If you've got any better ideas I'd love to hear them." Jenessa answered.

"No. Where do you want me?" the pilot said.

"Here." Jenessa said and she pointed at a fallen tree that lay beside the track, "We'll all hide down here so we can shoot down the trail."

Grenick, Jenessa and the pilot all made their way to the fallen tree and crouched down behind it. Then they waited.

After what seemed like an age there was the sound of people walking towards them. There was no talking however and Jenessa was aware that there could be more of her students making their way back to the camp. Slowly she raised her head to see over the tree and saw the first of a group of armed men coming towards her.

"Its them." she whispered to her two companions and she pulled back the hammer on her firearm. Then she gave out a shout, "Now!"

All three raised themselves up from behind the tree and leant over it, still using it for cover. Jenessa pointed her gun and the approaching man then froze. She wasn't a soldier, the pilot was right about that and she had never fired her gun at anything other than a paper target just to get used to the feel of it. She used it to scare off animals, just like the pilot had said. Now she was aiming at a living, sentient being and she could not bring herself to pull the trigger.

The pilot fired his blaster and the armed man coming along the trail spun round as the shot hit him. Then Grenick fired too, his compact pistol having too little range to be effective and the shot went wide.

There were shouts from the men behind the one shot by the pilot and a volley of blaster fire came back from them. Jenessa dropped back down behind the tree and looked at Grenick just as he did the same thing.

Then she heard the pilot dropping behind the tree as well and she turned to look at him.

His lifeless eyes stared back at her and Jenessa screamed.

"Oh god no!" she carried out. She dropped her gun and grasped the pilot; desperately looking for any signs of life, "Stay with me! Stay with me!" she shouted.

"Doc. He's dead." Grenick said, "Doc, we have to get out of here."

"He can't be dead. Oh god he can't be."

Then a shadow fell over Jenessa and she looked up to see a man pointing a rifle at her face.

"Now would be a good time to get your hands up." He said.

Grenick and Jenessa raised their hands.

4.

With no need to conceal their departure from the planet, Mace piloted the *Silver Hawk* in the most direct route to reach space. A route that took them over the university campsite and the ruined city beyond it. As they flew Vorn looked out of the viewport from the co-pilot's seat at the ground below.

"What was that?" he said, noticing a sudden flash from the ground.

"What was what?" Mace asked, his mind on the sky in front of the ship.

"There it was again." Vorn said, "That looked like blaster fire."

"Blaster fire? Who's shooting down there?" Mace said.

"I don't know." Vorn replied, "But I've got a really bad feeling about this. Power up the turret and take us back down."

While Mace turned the *Silver Hawk* around Vorn headed for the lounge where he found the rest of the rebels seated.

"Change of plan." He said, "Looks like someone's started shooting. We're going back. Kara get on the gun, everyone else get ready to drop."

The *Silver Hawk* hovered at just above treetop height and a hatch in her belly opened. Tharun was the first one out, using a winch intended for cargo loading and unloading to control his descent. As soon as he hit the ground he released the line from the safety harness he wore and waved to signal that he was clear. The line was retracted and then with Tharun covering the area, Vorn followed him down in the same manner.

"Are you sure this thing is safe?" Jaysica asked Tobis as the line came back up for a second time and he went to hook it to her harness.

"Err. Yes. I think so." He said, and then he added, "You've done this before."

"I fell flat on my face." Jaysica reminded him.

"Oh. Yes." Tobis replied. Then, rather than connect the line to Jaysica's harness he instead threaded it through it and hooked it to his own. Then he wrapped an arm around Jaysica's waist.

"Tobis! What the hell are you doing!" she yelled at him.

Tobis looked at the R5 astromech droid that was operating the winch.

"Harvey! Now!" he shouted and he jumped through the hatch with Jaysica in his arms.

Though they were supposed to be providing cover for the next person down neither Tharun nor Vorn could avoid looking up as they heard the scream from overhead even over the sound of the *Silver Hawk's* engines, only to see both Jaysica and Tobis hurtling towards them.

"Stang!" Tharun yelled, fearing that Jaysica had simply fallen and Tobis jumped after her. It was only when they decelerated and came to a halt just above the ground that he breathed a sigh of relief.

"If we're finished with the stunts," Vorn said as Tobis unhooked himself and Jaysica, "we have a job to do."

"I thought we'd finished what we were sent to do." Jaysica said.

"Okay then it's not our job." Vorn admitted, "But we can't just leave without finding out why some one's shooting at a research team." Then he activated his comlink, "Okay Mace we're all down and safe. Circle around and try and find out what's happening. We're going to split up. Keep in touch."

"Got it major." Mace replied and with a roar of repulsorlifts, the *Silver Hawk* headed in the direction of the university camp.

"Right then." Vorn said to the rebels with him, "Tharun, Tobis head for the campsite. Jaysica, you're with me. We're heading for where I saw the blaster fire."

"Why do they get to go to the camp?" Jaysica asked.

"Because I'm the only one of us that saw the blaster fire and if you go there again I think Doctor Drame will kill you."

After tying Grenick and Jenessa up most of the armed men continued towards the campsite. Only one of their number was left behind to watch over them. He now sat on the fallen tree that the trio from the university expedition had used as cover for their failed ambush while his captives lay on the ground in front of him. With her wrists and ankles bound together, Jenessa could not tear her eyes away from the body of the pilot.

"I got him killed." She said, "He didn't want to fight, he just wanted to get away and I got him killed."

"You didn't shoot him Doc." Grenick reassured her, "They did." And he glared at the man guarding them.

"I know but--"

"Shut up!" the guard shouted and drawing a knife he strode to where Jenessa lay and knelt down beside her. Grasping her by the jaw he placed the tip of his knife inside her mouth, "We only need one of you to answer

questions." He snarled, "So I can cut out your tongue and we can still get information from your friend. Get it?"

Her eyes wide with fear, Jenessa did not reply. The guard relaxed his grip and stood up, returning the knife to its sheath. Then a sharp 'crack' caught his attention. Spinning around he saw Jaysica staring down at the twig she had just stepped on.

"Oops." She said and she raised her blaster.

The guard reached for the rifle he had over his shoulder, but with her gun already in her hand Jaysica was faster. She fired only once and the energy bolt hit the guard squarely in the chest. He uttered a brief cry as he slumped to the ground and Jenessa found herself looking into the eyes of another dead man.

"Well hello there Darth. Jaysica said to Jenessa, "Need a hand?"

"What the hell are you doing here?" Grenick said, still none the wiser as to why Jaysica had just shot a man that the expedition members had assumed to be a rebel soldier.

"Saving you." She replied and she took a step forwards.

And tripped over a tree root.

There was a 'Thud' as Jaysica hit the ground and she lay still.

"Oh great. Just what we need." Jenessa said.

As they drew closer to the expedition camp Tharun and Tobis heard a mixture of screams and shouted commands, punctuated by occasional bursts of blaster fire.

"Stick behind me lad," Tharun whispered, "and stay alert."

Tharun kept low as he crept closer to the camp, aware that Tobis was not far behind him. Abruptly he halted and he held up a clenched fist, signalling to Tobis that he too should halt. The engineer had spent enough time around soldiers that he understood what Tharun wanted and he stopped and crouched down.

"There's a sentry ahead." Tharun whispered, "Wait while I deal with him."

He slung his rifle over his shoulder and instead drew his knife. Then he began to creep towards the armed man in front of him. Not expecting trouble from the direction of the trail, the sentry focused his attention on the campsite itself and was prepared to prevent anyone from escaping. This proved to be his undoing when Tharun clamped his free hand over the man's mouth, pulled him backwards and slit his throat. For a few seconds the dying man kicked and struggled, but then he was still and Tharun relaxed his grip. Changing back from his knife to his rifle, Tharun signalled for Tobis to follow him.

"Ow!" Jenessa snapped as she felt the plastic ties binding her digging into her wrists when she tried to wriggle out of her bonds. She turned her head as far as she could in Grenick's direction, "Can you get free?" she asked him.

"Doc, I can barely move." He replied, "I think the whole idea of them hogtying us out here was so we wouldn't get free and bother them."

"Oh great." She said, "That means our only hope is the fool lying unconscious over there." And she nodded towards Jaysica.

"Hang on a minute," Grenick said slowly, "if she's a rebel, then how come she shot the rebel soldier guarding us?"

"Well it could just be because she's a complete nerf herder."

"You know," another voice came from behind Grenick and Jenessa, "if you keep saying nasty things about my friends then I may just leave you here on this planet all alone." Then Vorn strode past them and crouched down beside Jaysica and checked she was not seriously hurt.

"Jaysica." He said softly as he shook her, "Time to wake up."

"I don't want to go to school mom." Jaysica mumbled, "The other kids don't like me."

Vorn shook her harder and Jaysica's eyes flickered open. Still dazed, she looked up at Vorn and spoke.

"I found the mean lady." She said. Then she closed her eyes again.

"Jaysica!" Vorn shouted and Jaysica's eyes opened again, this time they stayed open.

"Ugh. What happened?" she said.

"You tripped over a tree root." Grenick answered.

"Are you okay?" Vorn asked.

"Is she okay?" Jenessa said, "In case you haven't noticed we're still tied up over here."

"Jaysica," Vorn said, "get up and cut them loose. I think I'll take a look at our friend here." And he indicated the soldier shot by Jaysica.

Jaysica pulled a compact multi-purpose tool from her pocket and unfolded it to reveal a set of cutters that she used to cut through the plastic ties binding Grenick. Then she looked towards Vorn.

"Are you sure we have to untie her?" she said.

"Yes we do." Vorn answered without looking up from the dead soldier. Jaysica sighed and turned to Jenessa.

"Hold still." She said.

"Oh don't worry," Jenessa replied, "I'm in no hurry to loose any fingers." Then she let out a sigh as her bonds were cut and she sat up, rubbing her wrists.

"So would someone like to explain what's going on?" Grenick asked, "Because I lost track when she shot the guard." And he pointed at Jaysica.

"I'd like some answers too." Jenessa added, "What is this exactly? A falling out between rebel cells?"

"Oh this man's no rebel." Vorn said.

"So who is he major?" Jaysica asked.

"I'm not sure. I just know he's not one of us. Colonel Collis would have told us if there was a second group being sent here. Besides its against our rules of engagement to attack civilian targets."

"Oh the rebellion's suddenly got a sense of honour has it?" Jenessa said, "I watch the news, I know what—"

"You watch the news the Empire allows to be broadcast." Vorn interrupted and then he stood up and turned to face Jenessa, "I thought the same until I found out the government was staging attacks to justify clamping down on our freedom."

Jenessa folded her arms and scowled.

"Oh, so it's a conspiracy theory is it? Staged terrorist attacks to boost support for government policy? Let me guess, a friend of a friend knows someone that read a report somewhere. No one ever has first hand knowledge of these things do they?"

"Actually my sergeant Tharun, the man you met earlier, was involved. The Estranian government told his unit that the targets they were hitting were rebel camps. Your friend Howishan knew it as well. He was one of us too."

"He was never—" Jenessa yelled.

"He recruited for the Alliance!" Vorn yelled back at her.

Shocked at this accusation, Jenessa was left speechless.

The soldiers were gathering students together in one place. So far Tharun had not seen any bodies, but the way that the students were being lined up and knelt down suggested that the soldiers were getting ready to mow them down in one go. Tharun pulled out his comlink and activated it.

"*Silver Hawk* are you there?"

"*Silver Hawk* here. Go ahead." Mace replied.

"Can you sweep in over the camp site? I need something to distract these guys. If Kara could let off a couple of cannon shots it would be helpful. But be aware, there are friendlies in the area."

Mace banked the ship sharply and directed it towards the university camp.

"Stand by Kara." He said into the intercom, "We'll be over the target area any moment."

"Err Mace," Kara replied, "the gun's mounted on the top of the ship, you do remember that don't you?"

"Oh yes, I know." Mace said.

"Oh no. You're not actually going to—"

"Yes."

Ahead of the ship Mace could now make out the campsite and he descended towards it. Then he spun the *Silver Hawk* on its axis so that was upside down.

"Master Grayle!" the gold coloured protocol sat in the co-pilot's seat beside him began, "This vessel is not designed for inverted atmospheric flight! The risk of catastrophic repulsorlift failure is increased—"

"If you don't shut up I'll shut you down!" Mace snapped, "I need to concentrate."

There was a roar of engines as the *Silver Hawk* made a low pass over the campsite. Soldiers and students alike looked upwards just as Kara fired the ship's laser cannon. Designed for ship-to-ship combat, the targeting system was inadequate to properly target human sized targets. But the row of explosions created by the energy bolts striking the ground sent the soldiers rushing for cover.

Two of them made the mistake of heading towards where Tharun and Tobis were hidden and Tharun killed them both with a burst of fire from his rifle. The he took aim more carefully using the built in scope and fired a single shot that sent another soldier tumbling to the ground.

"Let's go!" Tharun shouted and he got up and ran into the camp, "Where did they go?" he yelled at the nearest student. His hand shaking, the student pointed towards a stack of crates. Rushing towards the crates Tharun pulled a smoke grenade from his webbing flicked the pin from it and threw it. The grenade bounced off the top of a crate and over the stack. There were cries of alarm and, not realising that the grenade was not a lethal type, the soldiers taking cover there emerged. Tharun brought up his rifle again and flicked the selector back to automatic. He squeezed the trigger and sent a steady stream of energy blasts into them.

"Is that all of them?" he shouted at the terrified huddle of university expedition members. Several of them nodded in reply but none spoke. Tharun pulled out his comlink.

"*Silver Hawk* the bad guys are down. I don't think we have any friendly casualties here, but it may be an idea for Kara to look them over."

"Well what we have here," Vorn began, "is not a professional soldier."

"I got that from the way the way you friend got the better of him." Jenessa said.

Jaysica scowled but Vorn ignored the comment and went on.

"Both his rifle and knife are commercial models, not military issue and his clothing is a mix of different patterns. Probably bought from a surplus store."

"So he's a mercenary then?" Grenick asked.

"I don't think so." Vorn replied, "Not a proper one anyway. He had no tags like mercenaries tend to wear. Just this." And he held up a golden pendant that he had taken from around the dead man's neck. It was a simple disk with a raised pattern on it.

"A number eight." Jaysica said when she saw the pattern, "What does that mean?"

"A lucky number?" Grenick suggested.

"Its not a number eight." Vorn said and he let the pendant drop and hang from his hand. The pattern could then be seen to be lying on its side compared to how Grenick and Jaysica had interpreted it, "Its an infinity symbol."

Then his comlink chimed.

"Vorn here." He said.

"Hi boss." Kara's voice replied, "Look we're at the university camp. Everything seems quiet now that Tharun's shot everyone that deserved it, but the nerds are worried about their teacher. Apparently all the real adults here went wandering off with guns to try and stop the guys who were shooting at them."

"We've got them." Vorn told her, "We'll head back to you now. In the mean time take a look at the bodies you've got there. I want to know who these people are."

"Gotcha boss. Kisses. Kara out."

"None of them?" Kenit said when he was told that the men sent to attack the university camp were not responding to communications.

"No sir. Its like they've just disappeared."

"So now we have to send more men to find them and since we landed so far away," at this point he glared at the pilot of the ship that had brought them here, "it could take hours to find out if its just a communication problem or if something's happened to them."

"I'll get some men together." The man that had reported the problem said to Kenit.

"You do that." The mercenary replied.

5.

Back at the university camp Vorn was not especially surprised to find that the bodies of the armed men bore similarities to the one he had examined himself. They all carried commercially available equipment and clothing and none of them had any military identification tags. Instead each man wore a golden pendant. Some of them carried comlinks, but they had been deactivated and Vorn was loath to have them turned on just in case someone was listening at the other end.

"Does this symbol mean anything to you doctor?" Vorn asked.

"Nothing." Jenessa replied, "though this place was once part of the Rakata's Infinite Empire. And it's Jenessa by the way. You saved us, I think that deserves first names."

"Rakata?" Kara said, "Oh great work boss, you've dropped us into a hotbed of xenophobic slavers."

"They've been extinct here for millennia." Jenessa replied.

"See." Jaysica said to Kara, smiling, "Jenessa says you're safe."

"To you its still Doctor Drame."

Jaysica's smile vanished just as one appeared on Kara's face.

"Well I think the important thing is for you to get your people out of here." Vorn said to Jenessa.

"There's still some of them missing." Jenessa said, "I know they're probably dead, but some may just be hurt or in hiding. I can't just leave them."

"Of course you can't." Vorn said, "We'll give you a hand searching for them. I take it you have a rough idea of where they went?"

"Of course I do." Jenessa answered, "I assigned each group a specific location I'd scouted. That's where they should be."

"Assuming they've not run off." Grenick said.

"Well we'll just have to deal with that if they have." Vorn replied.

"Another problem major." Mace added, "Tobis has taken a look at their ship and he says it's not ready to fly. Looks like the pilot was overhauling the engines."

"How long?" Vorn asked, looking at Tobis.

"Oh." The engineer replied, "Err. About... Well... Five or six hours. At least. Less if Jaysica and Penny can help me."

"You can have the droid." Vorn said, "But I need Jaysica for another job."

"You do?" Jaysica asked.

"Yes I do." Vorn said. Then he looked at Tharun, "From the re-entry path of the ship we're assuming brought these mercenaries here they landed on the far side of the ruins. Now there's a ravine between here and there with only one crossing point. I want you to take Jaysica and set up an OP by the ravine. Let us know if anyone else comes this way and be ready to blow the crossing if needs be."

"Why not blow the crossing straight away?" Tharun asked.

"Because I'd rather not vandalise a structure that's stood for tens of thousands of years if we don't need to." Vorn replied and Jenessa smiled.

As far as Jaysica was concerned there was nothing special about the bridge. Its construction methods seemed the same as structures built by countless civilisations across the galaxy. Of course she had never seen one that could last for over thirty thousand years without anyone to maintain it before, but that meant nothing to her as she set explosives at several points along it. Then she headed back to the place where Tharun was setting up their observation point.

The OP was a simple structure, a camouflaged sheet strung up between some trees with branches placed around it for walls. At just over a metre tall, it was not possible for anyone to stand up in unless they came from one of the galaxy's smaller species.

"All set little lady?" Tharun asked when she entered the concealed shelter.

"Set and ready to blow." Jaysica replied, "The triggers are set to channel six." She added, waving her comlink.

Tharun rolled out a thin mattress and laid a blanket over it.

"I'll take first watch." He said as he lay down on his stomach so that he could see through the narrow slit between the front wall and sheet above them that overlooked the crossing and looked out through his macrobinoculars. Sat opposite Tharun Jaysica opened up her backpack.

"I got this from one of the students." She said as she pulled out a sleeping bag, "he said it was a good one."

"It is." Tharun replied as he glanced at it, "It covers your head as well, just leaves your face exposed. Keeps you good and warm. Not that you really need that here, but try and hang on to it after this is over."

Jaysica smiled as Tharun turned back towards the bridge. She took off her boots, climbed into the sleeping bag and closed her eyes.

It was dark when Tharun woke Jaysica.

"I need to take a leak." He said, "Take over."

"Okay." Jaysica replied and she tugged on her sleeping bag's zipper, "Ow." She said.

"What?" Tharun asked.

"Oh nothing. I just stubbed my toe, that's all."

"Right, well keep the noise down while I'm gone."

"Okay." Jaysica whispered and she watched Tharun leave the shelter. When he was gone she tugged at the zipper again and once more felt a sharp pull at the clump of her hair that was caught in it.

The group sent to locate the first wave of soldiers sent against the university expedition had waited at the rally point for hours before they advanced further into the ruins. They had not expected to encounter a group from the expedition led by an armed man apparently recovering bodies of students killed by that first wave. Unsure of how to proceed and not to break communications silence the group had fallen back for fresh orders. It was as they approached the ravine between themselves and their own camp that the first man held up his fist for them to halt.

"Kaddid." He whispered, "There's someone moving up ahead."

"Where Jurst? Point them out to me."

Jurst pointed into the trees either side of the trail they were following and Kaddid raised a pair of macrobinoculars. The light-enhancing device let him see through the gloom to where a man stood close beside a tree. He was extremely close beside the tree and Kaddid wondered what he was doing until he spotted a stream of liquid from between the man's legs.

"Weapon's ready." Kaddid ordered, "But no one fire unless they have to. We want this man alive."

Tharun had just finished fastening up his trousers and was on his way back to the OP when he noticed something. The sounds of wildlife that he had been listening to all night had ceased. While it was possible that this was normal for this world, Tharun knew of only one explanation for sure. Someone else was here. His first instinct was to reach for his rifle but he had left it in the shelter, so instead he let his hand fall to the holster where he kept his pistol.

Before he could draw the weapon he heard a sound behind him and he whirled around.

Tharun staggered backwards as a rifle butt was slammed into his face. Though dazed by the blow he was able to draw his pistol, but as he raised it to take aim at the mysterious man he struck him another blow from his side knocked the weapon from his hand. A third blow to the back of his neck sent him sprawling on the ground.

"I think there's a shelter of some sort over there." Kaddid said, pointing in the direction Tharun had been heading, "Go see if he was alone."

Inside the OP Jaysica wriggled as she tried to get her hair free of the zipper. If she had to ask Tharun to help her she knew that he would tell Kara and then she would never hear the end of it. It would likely end up on the compilation disc that Kara claimed to be making.

Then she heard footsteps from outside. At first she thought it was Tharun returning, but then she heard whispered voices. Tharun would not be talking to anyone so that left only one other possibility. The mysterious soldiers were trying to sneak up on her.

Another tug at the zipper confirmed to Jaysica that she was stuck and she looked for some way of getting out of the sleeping bag before the soldiers arrived. There was nothing available, she did not have the use of her hands anyway, nor was there anywhere for her to hide.

She heard the voices from outside again and took another look around. Seeing Tharun's bed roll an idea hit her. Jaysica dragged herself across the shelter and lay face down on Tharun's bed. Then she lay still.

"Ready?" one of the soldiers whispered as he grasped the flap covering the entrance to the shelter and the other soldier brought his rifle to his shoulder and nodded.

The flap was pulled back and the other man leant inside, swinging his rifle from side to side.

"Clear!" he called out, "There's no-one else here and there's just a single bed."

"Right then." Kaddid said as he looked down at Tharun, "Pick him up. Mister Durvell wanted someone to answer some questions and it may as well be him."

6.

Kenit Durvell, sergeant in the Estranian Defence Forces removed the power pack from his rifle and placed it along with the weapon itself on the counter before him.

"I have no blasters or ammunition in my possession." He stated flatly to the armourer as the other man picked up the rifle and checked its serial number against the record of weapons issued.

"Everything is in order." He said as he logged the weapon back into the armoury, then Kenit turned around and walked away. His watch shift was over and he was heading for the mess hall.

There was a dull 'crump' and he felt the building shake. His years of service told him that there was only one thing that would cause that – an explosion within the building itself. Seconds later alarms began to sound.

"Bloah!" Kenit yelled as he headed back towards the armoury. If the garrison was under attack then he needed a weapon.

Another explosion ripped through an external wall and Kenit was hurled backwards. As he lay dazed on the floor he saw a group of men storming in through the hole they had just made and firing on anyone moving. Each man wore armour and combat fatigues of the same pattern, but the patch on their arm that identified their unit was not a formal military one. Kenit knew that these were hired mercenaries. One of them turned towards Kenit and knelt down, bracing his rifle in his shoulder and fired over Kenit into another group of EDF troops who were trying to get to the armoury. Kenit looked up at the man and stared into his face. Then his vision grew blurry and he blacked out.

"Mister Durvell! Wake up!" the voice called as Kenit was shaken awake.

"What is it?" Kenit asked, glad to be woken from the nightmare that had troubled him for months.

"Kaddad is back." The man who had woken him said.

"Did he find the others?"

"No. It seems they may have encountered resistance and been lost."

"Seems? We need more information than that."

"He knows that. That's why he brought back a prisoner."

Kenit leapt out of bed.

"Tell Kaddad I'll be right with him." He said and the man rushed off while Kenit began pulling on his boots.

Kenit followed not far behind and was soon watching as Kaddad's men secured the hooded prisoner to one of their transport's landing struts.

"Let's get a good look at you." Kenit said, pulling the hood from Tharun's head. Then he looked into the face he saw in his nightmares. "You!" he yelled and he slammed his fist into Tharun's face. "Remember me?" he added.

"I don't think so." Tharun replied as he tasted the blood pouring from his nose, "I've slept with so many people's wives."

Kenit punched him again, this time delivering a blow to his stomach and knocking the wind from him.

"You'll keep." Kenit said, "I'll be back after I've had something to eat. Then you'll tell me what happened to the rest of my men. Today and the last time we met."

Vorn could see that Jenessa was distressed by the fact that a number of her students were being loaded onto their shuttle in bags. He had been reluctant to continue the search of the ruins after it grew dark, but she had been anxious to find out what had happened to everyone in her expedition. Kara had backed her too; pointing out that if any of them were injured then the sooner that they got medical help the better. But now with their vessel ready and every member of the expedition accounted for it was time to leave.

"Tharun," Vorn said into his comlink, "we're set to go. You can head back now."

There was no reply.

"Tharun? Are you there? Jaysica? Can either of you hear me?"

"Trouble boss?" Kara asked, creeping up behind Vorn.

"I can't reach either Tharun or Jaysica." He told her, "I think something's wrong."

"Or maybe Jaysica just broke their comlinks." Kara suggested, "Or maybe putting Jaysica that close to a fifty metre drop was just tempting fate too much."

"This is serious Kara." Vorn told her, "Go get Mace and Tobis. We're heading out to the crossing point after them."

With rifles taken from the dead soldiers, the four rebels headed out to where Tharun had told them he was building the OP. By the time they reached the location it was shortly before dawn and the sky was just starting to lighten. From a distance Mace and Vorn used their macrobinoculars to study it.

"No signs of movement." Mace said.

"Well that's good isn't it?" Tobis said, "Its an observation post after all. Why would they be moving around?"

"Kara, Tobis, go take a look." Vorn said, "We'll cover you from here. Keep your comlinks active at all times." "Gotcha boss." Kara said and she began to advance cautiously on the shelter with Tobis following not far behind.

As they got close Kara put a finger to her lips for quiet even though neither of them was talking and they both stood and listened.

"Ow!" came a cry from inside the shelter.

"Jaysica?" Kara called out, "Are you okay?"

"What?" Jaysica replied, "Err, wait a moment. Don't come in."

Kara turned towards Tobis.

"Come on Tobis." she said softly and she waved him to follow her as she walked up to the entrance to the shelter.

"But she told us not to-" Tobis began to replied.

"Oh come on." Kara said, "She's probably naked. Now's your big chance." And she pulled back the flap across the entrance. "What the hell?" she said in amazement as she saw Jaysica sat inside the shelter with just her face poking out of the sleeping bag and she smiled.

"I'm stuck." Jaysica said as Tobis appeared at the entrance also, "It won't open. My hair's caught in the zipper."

"Oh don't be such a baby." Kara said and she crawled inside.

"No wait Kara don't-" Jaysica began, but before she could pull herself away Kara grasped the zipper on the outside of the sleeping bag and pulled it as hard as she could.

"What the hell's going on?" Vorn exclaimed to Mace as they heard the ear splitting scream and both men picked up their weapons and ran towards the shelter themselves. "Kara?" Vorn signalled, "Kara what's happening?" but there was not reply over the comlink.

When Mace and Vorn reached the shelter they found Tobis handing Jaysica her boots as she put them on while Kara just stood back and watched.

"Look!" Jaysica said to Vorn and she put her hand to her head and pulled it away to show him the blood on her fingers, "I'm bleeding because of her!"

"Oh shut up." Kara said, "You'll be fine. Boss the Klutz had just got herself stuck in her sleeping bag. Come to think of it maybe I should have left her in there. She wouldn't be able to do as much damage."

"Never mind that." Vorn said, "Jaysica, where's Tharun?"

"They took him." Jaysica replied, "More of the soldiers who attacked the people from the university."

"How long ago?" Mace asked.

"I don't know exactly. A few hours though."

"Oh that's just great." Vorn said, "Well we better get back to the ship."

"We're not just leaving him behind are we?" Jaysica asked.

"No." Vorn replied, "But since we're assuming that the second ship you saw is the one that brought those troops here I want to find out exactly where it landed. For that we need the *Silver Hawk's* sensor data."

"You should have left already." Vorn told Jenessa when the rebels returned to the camp and found the university expedition still there.

"I just wanted to make sure you were alright." She replied, following them into the *Silver Hawk*.

"Jeeves!" Vorn called out.

"Yes master Larcus?" the golden protocol droid replied as it emerged from the cockpit into the lounge area.

"Search the *Silver Hawk's* sensor logs from when we were in orbit. I need to know exactly where that second ship we picked up came down. Get Harvey to help you if needed because I need the information yesterday."

"Oh master Larcus, if you needed information yesterday then you should have asked me yester-"

"Just get on with it!" Mace snapped.

"What's happening?" Jenessa asked Vorn.

"Tharun's missing." He replied, "He was taken by more of the men who attacked you."

"So you're just going to walk into a camp of armed men and get him back?" she said.

"That's what we do." Mace told her.

"Then I'm coming with you." Jenessa said.

"What?" Vorn asked.

"Look, you helped me and my people. It's only fair that I return the favour. I froze when I had the chance to kill one of the men who attacked us and it got my pilot killed. I'm not letting that happen again."

"Have you ever fired a blaster?" Vorn asked her.

"No but-"

"Mace," Vorn interrupted, "get another gun from one of those dead bodies and show her how."

"Right you are major." Mace replied, "This way please doctor."

"Its Jenessa." She said to him.

"Jenessa." Kara said looking at Jaysica, "He can call her Jenessa. I bet I could too. Only a right nerf herder has to call her Doctor Drame."

Less than an hour later with map data loaded into datapads, the rebels, along with Jenessa were ready to move out.

"Wouldn't it be quicker just to take your ship?" Jenessa asked.

"Quicker maybe." Mace replied, "But we don't know what sort of ship those guys came in, or what sort of weapons they brought with them. The last thing we want is to get clipped by AA fire because we were in too much of a hurry. We walk."

"Yeah, we walk." Kara added, "Join the rebel Alliance and see the galaxy they say. They just don't tell you that you'll be walking across it all."

With anyone else Kenit would have been getting frustrated after three hours of trying to beat answers out of them. But Tharun was a special case as far as he was concerned. Each blow was payback for how he himself had suffered, first during the attack on his garrison and then after when government security seemed just as keen to kill him as Tharun's unit had been during the assault.

"It's a simple question." Kenit said, "How many of you are there?"

"I'm no clone." Tharun replied, "There's just one of me."

Kenit hit him.

"Keep it up." Kenit said, "I'm enjoying this. Just like I bet you enjoyed killing my friends."

"They told us you were traitors." Tharun said, having no desire to hide why his unit had attacked the EDF posts, "Your own government hired us to wipe you out."

Kenit hit him again.

"I can see him." Vorn said as he gazed at the enemy camp.

"Is he alright?" Jenessa asked.

"In a word – No." Vorn said, "Looks like one of them has taken a dislike to him."

"That guy doesn't look like the rest of them." Mace said.

"No he doesn't." Vorn agreed, "I think he's the military brains of this lot. Separate him from the rest and they're just a rabble with blasters."

"So what do we do now boss?" Kara asked.

Vorn paused and took another look at the opposition.

"We split up." He said.

"Divide our firepower?" Jenessa said, "I thought that was generally held to be a bad thing in military circles."

"Often it is." Vorn replied, "But here we don't have a choice. There are too many of them for us to take on in a frontal assault. By splitting up we force them to split up to deal with us and their leader can only be in one place at a time. That leaves the rest of us just facing the rabble."

"Okay, so where do you want me?" Jenessa asked.

"With Kara." He replied before he looked at Kara, "I want you to circle around the camp to where the tree line gets closest to Tharun. It looks like a distance of about fifteen metres to him. When the shooting starts we'll draw them away from you and you release him."

"Okay, let's go." Kara said and she began to get up.

"Wait." Vorn said, "Mace give Jenessa your deck sweeper."

"What for?" Jenessa asked, "I've got this." And she held up the rifle she had been given.

"Because the deck sweeper uses a cone of energy that you don't need to aim as much," Vorn replied, "and it's only a stun weapon. You said you froze before, maybe having a non-lethal gun will make it easier for you to use."

Mace passed the bulky deck sweeper blaster to Jenessa who slung her rifle over her shoulder and took it from him. Then she went with Kara as they began to circle around the camp, keeping low as they moved.

"What about the rest of us?" Mace asked.

"You stay with me. Tobis I want you to take Jaysica."

Tobis smiled.

"I want you to head off to that stack of crates over there," Vorn added and he pointed towards where their enemies appeared to have placed their supplies and covered them in a disruptive patterned sheet, "and see if you can make it go bang. Not right away though. Use a remote detonator so you can be far away when it goes up. We'll use that as a distraction before we start our attack. Got it?"

Tobis nodded.

"Good, off you go now. Mace and I will keep an eye on what our enemy's up to while you're at it."

Jaysica and Tobis got up and moved off in the direction of the crates. Following the example of Jenessa and Kara they too kept low.

"You know major," Mace said when the others were out of earshot, "I'd feel better if we had actual military blasters for this instead of these hunting guns."

"I know." Vorn replied, "But at least they're blasters and they're better than what we had ourselves. When this is all over I'm sure the Alliance will be happy to have them."

"Sure they will. They just love going hunting. Too bad what they hunt tends to shoot back with better guns."

"Here. This one." Tobis whispered and he placed a hand on a crate to indicate to Jaysica that its contents, at least according to the labelling, were volatile. Taking a fist size lump of explosives from her backpack, Jaysica inserted the charge into the stack at this point.

"Its done." She whispered back, "let's get out of here." And the pair crept back into the woods surrounding the camp.

Carefully they made their way to higher ground. Tobis held out a hand to steady Jaysica when it looked like she might fall but she batted it away. When they reached a place that offered a good view of the camp below they lay down and aimed their rifles towards it.

"We're in position major." Jaysica signalled to Vorn.

"Good wait for my command." He replied and Jaysica set down her comlink in front of her.

"Tobis." She said after a brief pause.

"Err. Yes." He replied, unused to her addressing him directly.

"Why do you think Jenessa doesn't like me?"

"Err- Well-"

Tobis knew exactly why but certainly was not going to risk offending Jaysica.

"She likes the major though doesn't she?"

"I think so."

"Yes, she really likes him." Jaysica said. Then in a high pitched squeaky voice she went on, "Oh Vorn you're so wonderful, you can call me Jenessa because I'm so old and stuffy." Then she changed to a deep voice, "Of course Jenessa, I like you even though you're really mean and horrible."

"You do know you're comlink's still on don't you?" Kara's voice came from the comlink, "Tobis, control your woman."

"Knock it off everyone." Vorn signalled, "Its time."

Her face red, Jaysica switched the channel of her comlink to the one matching the detonator of the charge she had just set.

7.

The explosion of the crates sent a shockwave across the entire camp.

“Stand to!” Kenit bellowed as he grabbed the rifle he had set down while he interrogated Tharun, “Someone get me a bead on where they are?”

“Who?” one of the others called out.

“Whoever just blew up our supply dump you fool!” Kenit shouted back and he looked around, trying to find some sign of someone in the trees around the campsite clearing.

There was the sound of blaster fire and Kenit turned towards it and raised his rifle. The shots were incoming, being fired from within the tree line just as he would have expected. He noticed that the incoming blaster bolts were being fired individually rather than in sustained bursts and a thought occurred to him.

“They’re using our own kriffing guns against us!” he snapped to no one in particular. He dashed in the direction the attack, weaving from side to side so that he did not present an easy target to whoever was shooting at them. He dived behind an empty supply canister that had not been part of the demolished pile, pointed his own military pattern rifle towards the trees and fired a short burst at it.

“Just open fire!” he shouted, “Don’t wait for a target to get up and wave at you!”

The men around followed his order and began to fire into the woods in the approximate direction of where the incoming fire originated from.

Then one of the men screamed and fell backwards, a large round burn mark on his back. Then a second one fell as another blaster shot came from this new direction.

“We’re surrounded!” a man yelled and he got up to run but before he could take a single step he was shot down.

Kenit rolled over and fired another burst towards this second point of attack.

“Somebody get over there!” he shouted before turning his attention back towards the origin of the original attack.

“Okay doc, this is it.” Kara said, “Are you ready?”

“As I’ll ever be.”

“Good, let’s go. Remember stay behind me and stay low. Oh and don’t fire unless I say so.”

Kara began to head for the transport ship where Tharun was held and Jenessa followed behind her. With their attention focused on the two different directions they were coming under fire from, the enemy soldiers were oblivious to the two women now sneaking through their camp from a third and in just a couple of minutes they reached Tharun.

“Hi there.” Kara whispered as she used her knife to cut through the ropes binding him, “We’re here to rescue you.”

“You call this a rescue?” Tharun groaned, “You’re late.” Then he saw Jenessa, “And what’s she doing here?”

“Well you know. You wait ages for one rescuer and then two turn up at once.” Kara replied.

Something about this bothered Kenit. The camp was under fire from two different directions, but whoever was doing the shooting did not seem to be in any hurry to actual launch an assault and storm it. All they were doing was keeping the defenders pinned down. Which meant that what they were interested in was somewhere else.

“The prisoner!” he yelled, “Someone go and check on him! They’re trying to set him free!”

“Can you walk?” Kara asked Tharun as he held a bacta geltab against his beaten face.

“I think so.” He said and he tried to stand. Kara caught him as he began to topple.

“Here, I’ve got you.” She said, “Now let’s get moving.”

“Freeze!” a voice called out and Jenessa and the rebels looked around to see a group of half a dozen men aiming their weapons at them. “Drop your guns and raise your hands!”

Remembering what Vorn had said about the deck sweeper, Jenessa lifted the bulky blaster and pulled the trigger without thinking. There was a bright flash and Jenessa blinked as the expanding energy pulse enveloped the entire group. Without a sound they all fell to the ground.

“I did it. I actually did it.” Jenessa said.

“Yeah very good doc.” Kara said, “Now lets blow this joint and go home.”

“Boss we’ve got him. We’re on our way back to you now.”

“Good.” Vorn replied, “Tobis, you and Jaysica break off and met up with us here. We’re leaving.”

"What do you mean gone?" Kenit asked when Jurst informed him of Tharun's disappearance.
"I mean someone's taken him. The ropes were cut and the nearest squad stunned by whoever set him free."
"Oh this is just great." Kenit said in frustration.
"Well at least we're only being shot at from one direction now." Jurst replied.
"What?" Kenit said and then he noticed that it was true. The blaster fire coming from the second location had now stopped entirely. "They're pulling back!" he shouted, "Get after them!"

By the time Jenessa and Kara reached the rendezvous point Jaysica and Tobis were already there.

"Oh my god Tharun." Jaysica said, "Are you alright?"

"Don't be so bloody stupid." Tharun replied, "Of course I'm not."

"Okay everyone," Vorn said, "it looks like we've been rumbled, they're heading towards us. Let's fall back to the bridge."

While Jenessa and Kara helped Tharun, Mace and Vorn took it in turns with Jaysica and Tobis to cover their withdrawal while the other pair rushed on ahead. Behind them almost a hundred soldiers pursued them through the woods, gaining on them slowly.

"The bridge! We made it!" Jaysica called out.

"Get across!" Vorn yelled back, "Mace and I will cover you from this side."

As quickly as they could the five group members made their way across the bridge while Mace and Vorn fired in the direction of their pursuers. They did not aim their shots; they just fired as many as they could in the hope that it would slow them down.

"We're over boss!" Kara suddenly called out.

"Just in time." Mace said, "I'm almost out of ammo."

"Me too. Let's move." Vorn replied and the pair ran across the ancient bridge.

A blaster bolt whizzed between them and Vorn felt its heat as it passed by him.

"They're right behind us!" he shouted as he risked a glance over his shoulder and saw soldiers spilling out of the woods on the far side of the ravine onto the bridge.

Tobis raised his rifle, but with Mace and Vorn in the way he did not dare fire, instead he just had to wait for them to get across the bridge.

"Now Jaysica!" Vorn yelled as he and Mace reached the others. Turning around he saw that most of their pursuers, including the man they believed to be in charge were now rushing across the bridge after them. Beside him Jaysica had her comlink in her hand already and she set it to channel six.

"Down!" she shouted just before she detonated the charges.

The bridge that had stood for more than thirty thousand years broke in two as the explosives set across its middle blasted through it. The men rushing across the bridge, oblivious to the presence of the charges screamed as it collapsed beneath their feet and sent them plummeting to their doom in the ravine below. Some of the men, those nearer to the sides of the bridge were able to grab hold of the safety railings that its ancient and long dead builders had included. But when the falling bridge swung into the near vertical rock walls of the ravine many of them lost their grip and they too fell screaming to their deaths. Still hanging on to the railing, Kenit Durvell looked across the ravine to where he could see the group of people responsible for this. In particular he stared at the badly beaten but free and alive Tharun and he swore revenge. Then, slowly and carefully he began to scale the railing like a ladder.

"Thirty thousand years that bridge stood," Jenessa said, "and we destroyed it in a couple of days."

"Correction." Kara said, "Jaysica destroyed it. I never laid a finger on it."

"Lost? What do you mean lost?" Jenessa asked Professor Pawecki.

"I'm sorry Doctor Drame." He replied, "But no artefacts from the expedition reached me. Not even any images. Everything you gathered during your time there is gone."

"I was certain we had them." Jenessa said. Then she sighed, "They must have been left behind in the confusion. I just hope we get a chance to go back again. That place is a treasure trove of history."

"I doubt that will be happening for some time." The tiny alien replied, "The authorities are asking a lot of questions about your encounter with the rebels there."

"So they do believe that it was a rebel force that attacked us?"

"That's what they're saying yes. Though they are somewhat tight lipped about the people who came to your rescue. I think they were some sort of undercover Imperial unit and that helping you blew their cover."

Darall Harber, the public leader of the Church of Infinity looked at the open case on the table in front of him.

"Excellent." He said, "These are wonderful." And he removed one of the artefacts from the case, a statue about thirty centimetres tall depicting an alien warrior with a tall head and eyes protruding from either side, "A

Rakata warrior of the Infinite Empire.” He said as he studied the statue closely. Then he turned his attention to the being that had brought him this treasure. “This is everything?” he asked.

“It is.” Grenick replied, counting the banknotes that Darall had given him, “Plus I made sure the images were deleted from the computers before they could be uploaded to the university servers.”

“And no one else knows of our connection to the unfortunate events where these came from?”

“No. I made the connection when I saw your people’s pendants, but no one else did. That’s when I figured out you’d pay good money to get these. And you have. If you don’t mind I’ll be taking my leave of you now.”

“Of course mister Veck. Please do remember us if you happen to come across anything more. You are far more reliable than mister Durvell was.”

Grenick smiled, put his money away and left the room. As soon as he was gone another door opened and an alien in robes similar to Darall’s entered. The alien had a tall narrow head and eyes mounted either side of it, just like the statue.

“Your eminence.” Darall said, kneeling.

“It is done?” the alien asked.

“It is lord Horsa. We have everything the infidels took from the site. What shall I have done with them?”

“Destroy them. Before those who would make connections can see them. What about the place they came from? Will more infidels visit it?”

“No lord Horsa. Our contacts in the sector authorities have seen to it that no one will return there.”

The Tector-class star destroyer *Horrific* dropped out of hyperspace just beyond the planet’s gravity well. Almost identical in appearance to the more widely seen Imperial-class vessels, the ship traded its hangar and wing of TIE fighters for greater armour protection over its hull. Today the lack of fighter support would not be an issue as a trio of Venator-class ships appeared behind it. Their massive dorsal hangar doors slid apart and space above them was filled with the TIEs that swarmed out.

On the bridge of the *Horrific* Admiral Hall looked out at the planet they had come to.

“Sir.” A familiar voice came from beside the admiral and he looked around to see the head of his comscan department.

“Yes Lieutenant Halowan? What is it?” Admiral Hall asked.

“We are in position now sir,” Lieutenant Halowan answered, “and our supporting attack line has deployed its fighters to cover us.”

“Get me the *Firebrand*.” Admiral Hall said and he walked to the back to the bridge where the holographic systems were located. A flickering blue image appeared. It was of a woman in an Imperial Navy uniform.

“Admiral,” the woman said, “our fighters have been launched, No one can escape that world now without being intercepted. Where shall I deploy my line?”

“Remain where you are Captain Naje.” Admiral Hall replied, “I will take care of this rebel base personally. You have only to keep the rebels from getting past us. Relay this to the captains of the *Ferocious* and the *Falchion* also. Understand?”

“Yes admiral.” Captain Naje answered and her image faded away.

Admiral Hall returned to where he had been standing and looked out of the windows again.

“Open fire.” He commanded and the *Horrific*’s turbolasers began pounding the ruins from space.