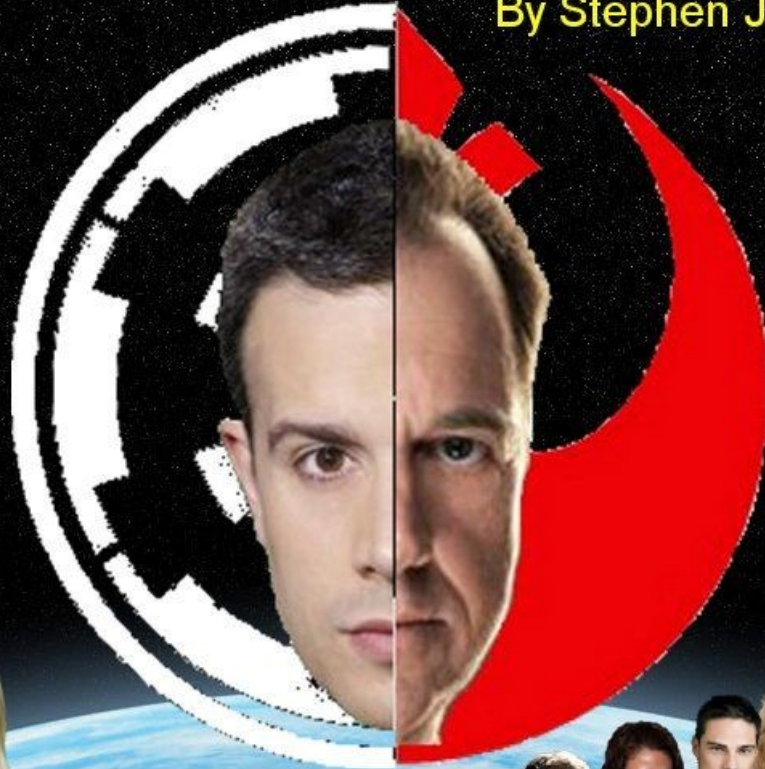


STAR WARS

2-07: Children of War

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...

CHILDREN OF WAR

ON A BRIEF STOPOVER ON ESTRAN, THE OCCUPANTS OF THE *SILVER HAWK* RECEIVE A REQUEST FOR HELP FROM A LOCAL RESISTANCE CELL THAT THINKS THEY HAVE BEEN COMPROMISED BY THE GALACTIC EMPIRE. BUT IN REALITY IT IS NOT THE RESISTANCE CELL THAT NEEDS THEIR HELP...

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

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1.

Neither Clieg Nale nor Vexer Jarn were especially high-ranking members of their organisation, then again humans were rarely promoted far within it. However, for an assignment like this they were essential. The cantina in which they were sat relied on the business of the Imperial capital building that stood opposite. Non-humans were not welcome in here.

"Got anything?" Clieg asked as he sat down with their order. He had placed it directly at the central counter instead of waiting for a waitress, neither of them wanted to be disturbed.

"Not much." Vexer replied. In one ear he had an earpiece that was connected to a tiny device he had stuck beneath the table. The device was a compact laser emitter with a beam frequency beyond the range of the spectrum visible to humans. Had aliens frequented the cantina then some of them may have been able to see the spot it projected, but as it was the targets of the beam remained blissfully unaware. The device was designed for audio surveillance. The beam vibrated in response to sound near to its point of impact and the device then turned the disturbance back into sound. By aiming the device at different places in the cantina Vexer could hear what other customers were saying. "The most interesting thing I've got so far is a bunch of guys near the kitchen discussing what they think some woman may or may not be wearing under a bodyglove."

"So no secret Imperial master plans then?"

"No. Perhaps if we'd got here earlier we'd have been in time to hear Palpatine discussing his plans for galactic domination with Vader, but they left so we're stuck with this lot instead."

"I tell you what," Clieg said as he took a bite of his burger, "the conversation may not be up to much but the staff are growing on me."

"Why do you say that?" Vexer asked, a puzzled look on his face.

"The waitress by those navy guys."

"I see her, the young one yes?"

"That's her."

"What's so special about her?"

"She just stole a datapad from one of them."

In another cantina on the far side of the same world another two men were meeting.

"This place never gets any better does it?" Vorn Larcus III said as he put down the drink, "That is disgusting."

"Oh I quite agree." the man sat opposite him replied, "But it's better than the alternative wouldn't you say?"

"You mean being arrested for treason? Should I be more worried about that than normal Couran?"

Lord Couran Desh smiled and produced a mem-stik that he slid across the table towards Vorn.

"I added a few things I recorded from the news." He said, "A mutual acquaintance of ours has been making it her business to put your recent activities in the public eye. She's creating quite the fuss about why you're still on the loose."

"This person wouldn't happen to be my replacement in Parliament would it?" Vorn asked, "My people told me she was somewhat upset at being held hostage."

"Oh that would be understating things my boy." Lord Desh said before taking another sip of his drink and wincing, "This really is bad." He said, "But not as bad as Lady Sharva's mood when she returned from her supposed luxury cruise that turned into a hijacking."

"She was upset then? Didn't she get a refund from the tour operator?"

"My boy she was livid. She wasn't even back on the planet when she began calling people to complain about the poor starport security that let you get aboard that ship. It only got worse when she landed. Three hours she kept me talking, or should I say she talked at me for three hours. Lord Torr had to put up with it for six apparently."

"So no refund then?"

"People like her don't worry about refunds my boy. You made her loose face. You know how much she hates being compared to you and now you're both being mentioned in the same news story."

"What about Mace?"

"Oh he's quite safe. The Empire doesn't suspect he's working with you. Lady Sharva spoke rather highly of the man. Stood up to a vile terrorist she said. Fearlessly put himself in harm's way to take on an armed felon. He's managed to keep his face out of the news though, so no one's going to be recognising him. You and your boy on the other hand... Well let's just say that you're not the only Larcus she doesn't like."

"She's going after Garm." Vorn said. Garm Larcus was Vorn's adult son. When Vorn joined the Rebellion Garm had remained behind with his family. His position in the Imperial Security Bureau had complicated matters for them both repeatedly.

"She is. Does that bother you?"

"No. I'm not sticking my neck out for him. Not after—"

"He shot you?" Lord Desh interrupted, staring at Vorn face to face.

Before Vorn could answer they both became aware of a man approaching their private booth.

"Well if it isn't the hero of the hour." Lord Desh said, standing up and offering his hand to Mace Grayle, captain of the transport ship the *Silver Hawk*.

"My lord." Mace replied as he shook Lord Desh's hand.

"Oh piffle." Lord Desh said, "To you it's Couran. Now sit down and share in our delicious beverages."

"Yes, we saved one for you." Vorn said and he pushed a third glass towards Mace as he sat down. Mace picked up the glass and took a sip. Instantly he put it back on the table.

"Own up," he said, "which of you two upper class twits drank this before me and put it back in the glass?"

"To what do we owe the pleasure anyway Captain Grayle?" Lord Desh asked.

"Yes." Vorn added, "Odras not good enough company?"

"Odras Balve isn't good enough to be in the company of ranats." Mace said in reference to the local criminal that he owed a great deal of money, "But he's not the reason I'm here."

"Oh? Then what is?" Lord Desh enquired, "Not that I don't appreciate meeting you again."

"A signal's come in from one of the local cells." Mace said, "They've requested a meeting. They think they may be compromised and need extraction."

"Oh great." Vorn said, wiping a hand over his face.

Vorn stood opposite the building that apparently housed members of a rebel cell. It looked like a commercial recycling depot because that was exactly what it was. Vorn had no idea why they were waiting here, only that this was where they had arranged to meet.

It was of course possible that it was a trap. A false message from a local cell had been used by Garm to try and lure Vorn into trouble before, so this time he was taking no chances. To the north the two female members of Vorn's unit, Jaysica and Kara were standing outside a clothes store, alternating between looking in the window and watching the street around them for any signs of Imperial or local law enforcement.

Meanwhile to the south Mace and his engineer Tobis were sat in a parked speeder. Equipped with a deck-clearing stunner that could project an incapacitating energy blast over a wide area, Mace was ready to rush in and disable any hostile forces should they spring an ambush. Finally the former mercenary Tharun Verser accompanied Vorn himself. Vorn hoped that Tharun's extensive combat experience would alert them to any attack before it began.

"So what you think?" Vorn asked.

"No signs of an ambush." Tharun replied, "But there could be an entire company spread out over the roofs along this street and we'd never see them."

"Let's go then." Vorn said and Tharun nodded.

"After you major."

Vorn checked the way was clear before calmly crossing the street. On the other side he stopped and waited while Tharun followed him. Then the pair strode up to the door of the recycling centre and went inside.

"Can I help?" the man behind the desk inside asked.

"My girlfriend wants me to replace her taun taun skin coat." Vorn said, "Can you recycle it?"

"The coat or the woman?"

"What will you give me a better price for?"

The man stood up and extended a hand.

"Howen Kast." He said, "I'm the cell leader.

"Major Vorn Larcus," Vorn replied as he shook the man's hand, "and this is my sergeant, Tharun Verser."

"We're still exposed here major." Tharun said, looking towards the wide window beside the door they had just come through.

"Follow me." Howen said and he beckoned for Tharun and Vorn to follow him into a back room. Vorn stepped forwards before Tharun blocked his way.

"Just in case." Tharun whispered and the former mercenary placed his hand on the blaster holstered beneath his jacket.

"So what do you do here exactly?" Vorn asked as he followed Howen and Tharun out of the front office.

"Exactly what it looks like from the outside." Howen replied, "We recycle stuff. You'd be amazed at what people throw out, things that we can fix up and make use of without there being any record of our purchasing it."

"So what makes you think you've been compromised?" Vorn asked.

"We get messages from other cells." Howen explained, "They use dead drops."

"So one of your people was spotted at one of these drops then?" Tharun said.

"No. We don't go to the drops." Howen replied, "Ah, here we are." And he led the two men into a large room filled with droids line up beside a conveyor belt. At one end the contents of large containers of rubbish was

being tipped onto the belt and as it passed them by the droids picked out items made of particular materials for repair or reuse.

"The other cells leave their messages in the trash in specific locations," Howen said, "and the droids pick them out for us. The city operates the droids that empty the trash in the first place so none of my people goes near the drop sites."

"I'm still not hearing why you think you're compromised Mister Kast." Vorn said sternly, "Calling for a face to face meeting is risky and—"

"We've got this." Howen interrupted and he held up a mem-stik, "It came from a cell that was lost months ago. Suddenly someone's leaving messages in their spot?"

"What's on the mem-stik?" Tharun asked, "Are you sure someone didn't just chuck it out."

"Those things do break every so often." Vorn agreed.

"That's what we thought." Howen replied, "So we had a look to see if it could be fixed and found nothing wrong with it."

"Then what's on it?" Vorn asked.

"Cloned drive data." Howen replied, "From Imperial issue datapads."

Vorn frowned.

"Imperial? You can read the data?"

"No, they're encrypted. But we can read the drive headers that list who each one was issued to. Looks like someone just plugged a bunch of datapads into a computer loaded with commercially available cloning software on it and ripped the data off bit by bit."

"Crude." Tharun said.

"But effective." Vorn said, "What sort of data are we looking at here?"

"That's just it. There's no pattern to it. The cloned datapads were issued to members of all branches of Imperial service, military and civilian."

"Is this the sort of information that the cell used to send you?" Tharun asked.

"No. They just sent weekly updates of manufacturing at the local KDY plant. We think the Empire has broken one of the cell that got caught and they're trying to trace where the drops go. It's just a matter of time before they track them here. My people need out."

"Weekly drops you say?" Vorn repeated, "When did you get that?"

"Four days ago." Howen replied, "Are you thinking—"

"That whoever sent that may send another tomorrow?" Vorn asked, "Yes I am and I think my people should be there to see who drops it off."

2.

The starport freight terminal was a hive of activity; all around Clieg and Vexer simple-minded droids carried cargoes of all descriptions to and from the array of transport ships docked there. They were not interested in any of the cargoes today though, they were here for a meeting.

"You're late." A gruff voice said from behind them and the two men turned to see a yellow-skinned borneck cyborg standing immediately behind them.

"No we're not." Clieg replied, "We've been waiting for you for over an hour Derl. Its not our fault you couldn't find us."

Derl scowled.

"Just shut up and follow me. He's waiting for us." He told them.

Derl led the two men to a relatively quiet area of the terminal where the interior lighting was inactive.

Standing beneath a light freighter a mouse-like sullustan was waiting.

"You're late." He said.

"We've been through this with your... your... What is your job anyway?" Vexer said, turning to look at Derl.

"Stop blathering you fool." The sullustan said.

"Look Sall-" Clieg began.

"That's Mister Sall to you."

"Sorry. Mister Sall-"

"Just tell me what you found out."

"We've found a way of getting information right out of the Imperial capital building." Clieg told him.

"Show me." The sullustan said.

"I don't exactly have it on me." Clieg said and the sullustan frowned.

"Well you better have it the next time we meet, or I may just have to pass on the news of your failure."

"I just don't get it." Kara said as Tobis unfurled the blanket and began to lay out the picnic, "Why did the boss stick us two here with the picnic basket?"

"Err." Tobis began, "I think it was so we could keep our blasters handy without them being seen. Yours isn't registered and I don't have a permit to carry it in public."

"I didn't mean why do we have the basket. I mean why us? Come on, you must be wishing it was Jaysica here instead of me."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course not." Kara replied sarcastically, knowing full well of the engineer's feelings towards Jaysica, "Well since this is supposed to be a romantic picnic we should act romantic." She added and she grabbed Tobis's collar, pulled him towards her and pressed her lips up against his.

"Kara?" Vorn's muffled voice came from the comlink in her pocket as she continued to kiss Tobis, "Kara what are you doing? You know Tobis needs air don't you?"

Kara release Tobis and the engineer slumped down on the blanket.

"Jealous boss?" she asked into the comlink.

"No. Now just you keep an eye on that trashcan. We need to see who puts stuff into it and what they're putting in."

"What about Tharun and the Klutz?" Kara asked.

"Never mind them, they're in position and doing what they should be. Now you do the same."

Kara turned towards the roof of the building that Mace and Vorn were watching from and stuck out her tongue. Then she tossed the comlink into the picnic basket still active.

"Wanna make out some more?" she said to Tobis, "Or are you still saving yourself for Jaysica?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." Tobis said again and he looked towards the trashcan they were supposed to be watching.

"Right." Kara said.

"Do you think that hand gesture is aimed at me?" Vorn asked as he and Mace observed Kara and Tobis through macrobinoculars.

"Maybe." Mace replied, "Still its better than what her last CO got."

"Ah yes, a punch in the face." Vorn said, lowering his macrobinoculars for a while, "Still without his black eye we wouldn't have the charming Miss Bilstran for company would we?"

"At least Jaysica and Tharun aren't complaining."

"Tharun why are we doing this?" Jaysica asked.

"To find out who left the package at the drop point. Didn't you listen?"

"No, I mean why do we have to be the ones standing on a street corner wearing Imperial uniforms while Kara and Tobis get to sit down and eat?"

"Well little lady," Tharun replied, "I'm guessing its because the only two uniforms we had available only fit us."

"I suppose so." Jaysica said, slouching her shoulders and putting her hands in her pockets.

"Stand up straight." Tharun said, "Soldiers don't slouch."

"Its like being back in the army." Jaysica said as she stood up straight, "Those eight weeks felt like eight years." Then she smiled, "Tharun do you have any money?" she asked.

"Not much. Four or five credits."

"That's enough, give it to me."

"Why?" Tharun asked.

"Look?" Jaysica said and she pointed to a snack droid, "It's got mulchies."

"Mulchies?"

"Yeah, you know, where they freeze a drink then mulch up the ice and put it in a cup. Then you drink it as it melts. Look its only three credits. I'll pay you back. I promise."

Tharun sighed and gave Jaysica the money. She rushed off to the droid and returned with a large plastic cup filled with blue ice and a straw sticking out.

"I love these things." She said before sticking the end of the straw in her mouth and sucking. Then she frowned and lifted out the straw, "Of course sometimes its really annoying when the straw gets clogged right away." She said and instead she lifted the cup to her mouth and tilted it, sucking directly at the coloured and flavoured ice inside. When she lowered the cup Tharun smiled.

"What?" Jaysica asked.

"Nothing little lady." He said as he looked at the large blue stain on Jaysica's upper lip and the tip of her nose, "But you've got a little something there."

"Tharun." Mace's voice said suddenly from the comlink on his belt, "I think someone's heading for the trashcan. Can you see them from where you are?"

"Yeah I see them captain." Tharun replied, "Its just some kid on a bike."

"A bike?" Mace repeated, "You don't see those too often. Kids these days all want replusorsleds."

"I always wanted a bike." Jaysica said as she wiped her face, "But my parents thought I'd keep falling off. I don't know why. They got my kid sister one when she asked for it though."

"If we've all finished complaining about our childhoods and assignments," Vorn interrupted, "could we please get back to the task at hand?"

"Understood major." Tharun replied and he returned his comlink to his belt. Beside him Jaysica banged the side of the cup with her hand to break up the ice it contained then shook it, causing the contents to rattle.

"Here you go dear." A voice said suddenly and both Jaysica and Tharun looked around to see an elderly human woman rummaging in her purse, "I've got some change right here." And she dropped some coins into the cup, "Its so good to see young people doing charity work. Especially when I'm sure those nasty rebels take up so much of your time."

Jaysica and Tharun both stood in stunned silence and watched as the old woman walked away. It was Tharun that spoke first.

"How much did we get?" he asked.

Jaysica reached into the cup and picked out a handful of low denomination coins.

"About four credits." She said, "I can pay you back and still have a credit left over."

"I'll wait till you've cleaned the blue off them. Tharun said. Jaysica shrugged and stuffed the money in her pocket. Then she tipped the cup up again to take a drink. When nothing came out she tipped it further. Tharun looked away as the entire contents of the cup dropped out. Jaysica's eyes widened as she got a mouthful of the frozen drink and the remainder spilt over her chin and the front of her tunic. She dropped the cup and pulled frantically at her tunic, shaking the ice from it then undoing it to shake loose the fragments that had fallen inside her collar.

"Are you just going to leave that there?" Tharun said.

"What?" Jaysica replied as she removed her tunic.

"The cup." Tharun said, "How about you get rid of it properly instead of just leaving it?"

"Hold this." Jaysica asked, passing the tunic to Tharun. She bent over and picked up the discarded cup and looked round, "I'll be right back." She said.

"What the hell is going on down there?" Mace said as he and Vorn watched Jaysica struggle with her beverage.

"I hate to think." Vorn replied, "Hang on, where's she going?"

"To get rid of the cup I think." Mace answered, then he added, "Oh no." as Vorn grabbed his comlink.

"Tharun stop her!" Vorn's voice screamed over the comlink, "She's heading for our trashcan!"

Tharun spun around to see that that was exactly where she was going. If their target chose to spear now the sight of her standing nearby risked scaring them off regardless of whether they were genuine or not. Without replying to Vorn, Tharun took off after her.

With the cup in one hand and a pack of tissues from her pocket between her fingers, Jaysica walked towards the trashcan, wiping her face. As she used up each tissue she dropped it into the cup and plucked another from the pack. By the time she reached the trashcan she was as clean as she thought she was going to get so she held the cup full of tissues out and prepared to drop it. She stopped when she saw the mem-stik in the trash.

"We need to get away from here little lady!" Tharun suddenly exclaimed as he caught up to her.

Jaysica pulled the mem-stik from the trash.

"Oh." Tharun said, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

3.

Gathered together in the lounge area of the *Silver Hawk* Vorn stared at his rebels. Mace was stood beside him while the rest were sat around the table that was bare but for the mem-stik resting in the middle.

"So let's get this clear," Vorn began, "whoever put this in the trash was able to walk right up to it without you seeing them because Tobis was too busy fighting off Kara's advances and Tharun was distracted as Jaysica juggled frozen snacks. Did I miss anything?"

"We made four credits." Jaysica said.

"One net." Tharun added, "The mulchy cost three."

"You made four credits?" Kara asked, "How?"

"Well it was me really." Jaysica said.

"Hang on." Kara replied, "You're saying that you put on a costume, stood on a street corner and someone gave you money?" then, before Jaysica could reply Kara turned towards Tobis and said, "Hey Tobis, did you ever think of just paying for it?"

"Shut up!" Mace bellowed, "This is serious."

"I didn't see you two using your officer's super powers to see anything." Kara replied, folding her arms.

"Actually we did." Vorn said, "We saw who left the mem-stik. We even told you about them."

"When?" Kara asked.

"The kid on the bike." Tharun said, cradling his head in his hands.

"The kid on the bike." Vorn repeated.

"Fortunately," Mace said, "as I said you don't see too many of them around on Estran nowadays. So Tobis, you're going to have to hack into the local camera systems, traffic, security, I don't care what and find that kid. Have Tharun help you. He saw him."

"Her." Tharun said, "It was a girl."

"Here you go Cass." Corayle Hanasham, Cass' employer and the owner of the cantina said and he placed a bowl of soup on the table in front of her, "There's some of the rycrit steak pies left as well." he added, "You could take them home and freeze them if you want."

"I don't have a freezer." Cass replied as she began to tuck into the soup, "But I'll have one now if you can heat it up."

"Sure." Corayle said and he headed back towards the kitchen.

Cass continued to consume the soup, but she abruptly stopped when she thought she saw someone standing in an alleyway across from the cantina. Was it an Imperial agent spying on her? Perhaps they had finally discovered that their owners were not accidentally leaving the datapads she copied in the cantina after all.

She stood up and picked up her bag before rushing out of the cantina. Just after she left Corayle returned with a reheated slice of pie.

"Tell me you're leaving why don't you." He said as he tipped the food into the trash.

Outside Cass dashed around the cantina building until she reached the fence that her bicycle was secured to. She looked around again, checking that there were no Imperial agents ready to pounce on her. Then she unlocked her bicycle, climbed on it and rode away as fast as she could.

"She's moving." Clieg said and he headed for the speeder.

"Why didn't we just grab her here?" Vexer asked as he followed Clieg to their vehicle.

"See, that's why I'm in charge." Clieg said.

"Why?"

"Because I don't suggest attempting to kidnap little girls when they're right opposite a building that has round the clock protection from Imperial troops. How long do you suppose it would be before the first stormtrooper came running to investigate the screams? Now get in and let's get after her."

In the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk* Mace and Vorn watched as Tharun and Tobis went through video footage from around the city.

"There, that's her." Tharun said and he pointed to an image on the screen. It showed a teenage girl riding a bicycle along a street.

"Where's this from?" Vorn asked Tobis.

"Oh, err, it's a public security camera." Tobis replied.

"Where?" Vorn asked.

"Outside the capital building." Tobis told him.

Mace looked closely at the image.

"Zoom in on her," he said and the astromech droid plugged into the Silver Hawk's systems did as it was told, selecting the portion of the image that showed the girl and enhancing it, "What's that she's wearing? Is that a uniform?" Mace added.

"A school uniform?" Tharun suggested, "She looks that sort of age."

"Is that a name tag?" Vorn asked, indicating what looked like a badge on the girl's clothing, "Zoom in some more."

The astromech droid chirped.

"Err, Harvey says he can't sir." Tobis said, "Not with this software."

"It's a waitress' uniform." Mace said, "She's a waitress. Tobis, where are the nearest cantinas to this camera's location?"

Tobis called up a map of the area and overlaid business details on it.

"That's convenient." Tharun said, "There's one right opposite the capital building."

"And that's just the sort of place that Imperial personnel would frequent." Vorn said, "And accidentally leave their datapads there."

It had started to rain by the time that Cass reached her building and she dashed up the steps, pushing her bicycle alongside her. Opening the front door she pushed her bike inside and shut the door behind her. Only then did she relax. With a locked door behind her she at last felt safe.

"Oh no, not again." Cass said to herself when she saw that there was a sign pinned to the door of the turbolift that simply read 'NOT WORKING'. Sighing, Cass proceeded to push her bicycle up the stairs instead.

"I really must protest about this Major Larcus." The golden coloured protocol droid complained, "I'm programmed for etiquette, not espionage."

"It's hardly espionage Jeeves." Vorn replied, "All we need to know is who that girl is and where she lives. Now what did you find out?"

"Well sir, the local data network is very poorly designed for gathering such information. Harvey and I have been searching it for almost an hour now and—"

"Just tell me what you've found!" Vorn shouted.

"Well really!" Jeeves replied, "I was just getting to that sir. We have tracked the young lady back as far as an apartment building in a rather disreputable part of Estran City."

"An address?" Mace asked.

"Oh yes Captain Grayle. It would seem that since the area is so unsavoury, the local authorities have located quite a large number of public surveillance systems there. As a result Harvey and I were able to locate several images of the young lady you seek both entering and leaving one particular building. It is reasonable to believe that that is her place of residence."

"An apartment building?" Mace said to Vorn, "That's going to make things difficult. She could be in any one of the apartments there."

"That's probably more than a hundred." Vorn said, nodding and rubbing his chin.

"Indeed it is sir." Jeeves agreed, "Which is why I thought to check the building against other public city databases."

"What did you find?" Vorn asked.

"Well to begin with the local residents seem to be very sloppy about keeping their details up to date. Quite a number of the apartments either had no information at all, or residents' details were contradictory when compared with other sources."

"Yes, but what did you find Jeeves?" Vorn repeated.

"Well sir, it would appear that one of the apartments is occupied by a young lady living alone."

"Alone? No family recorded?" Mace interrupted.

"No Captain Grayle. As I said all records state that she lives alone."

"But you have an apartment number?" Vorn asked.

"Yes sir I do."

"Good." Vorn said, "That's all we need." Then he looked at Mace, "Looks like we'll be getting our money's worth from that hired speeder." He said.

Clieg and Vexer gave Cass ten minutes after she entered the building to see if she was going to come out again. They split up and Vexer circled the building, assessing all of the ways in and out before meeting up again with Clieg who had stood watch at the front entrance.

"Find anything?" Clieg asked.

"A couple of fire doors. But they were both sealed from the inside."

"Then we go in through the front door." Clieg said and he went up to the door, followed by Vexer. The two men looked around to make sure that they were not being observed.

"Camera." Vexer said when he spotted the surveillance device mounted on the building across the street. "Don't worry Vex." Clieg replied as he pulled a flat card from his jacket. The card had a wire trailing from it that led back to a palm-sized box that he also removed from his pocket. He inserted the card into the key slot and waited. The numerical display on the box flashed as it access the door's locking mechanism before settling down and showing a number. At the same time the door's locking mechanism released. "Apartment six fourteen." Clieg said, reading the number from the display, "That was the ident for the last key card to gain access. Let's go." Vexer wedged a small strip of plastic into the locking mechanism before he allowed the door to close but not lock. Then he and Clieg, noticing that the turbolift was out of order, headed up the stairs.

Tobis pulled the speeder over at the corner of the street where Cass lived.

"We should be out of sight of the local cameras here." He said.

"Excellent." Vorn replied. Then he turned in his seat to face Jaysica and Kara, "Alright you two, I want the pair of you to go and introduce yourselves to this young lady."

"Why just us major?" Jaysica asked.

"Because from what we know she lives alone. How would you feel if we turned up on your doorstep in that situation?" Vorn replied.

"I get it." Kara said and she grabbed hold of Jaysica, "Come on, let's go make a new friend. Just don't do that thing you always do."

"What thing?" Jaysica asked as Kara pulled her from the vehicle.

"There you go again." Kara said.

"What?"

"You just can't stop can you?"

Outside apartment 614 Clieg and Vexer halted.

"So how do we handle this?" Vexer asked.

"Simple Clieg said and he pulled a pair of envelopes from his pocket, "Stand back." he said, "Keep away from the spy hole and be ready."

Cass yawned. Her shift the next day began early and she had decided to turn in for the night. But as soon as her head hit the pillow there was a banging at her front door. At first she ignored it, but then there was another banging sound.

"Hello?" she heard a voice calling from the hallway, "I saw you come back a few minutes ago. Hello?"

Cass got out of bed and wandered across her apartment towards the door.

"Who is it?" she called out as she turned on the light.

"I'm from downstairs." The voice replied, "I got some mail addressed to you."

Cass frowned. She was not impressed at being disturbed over such a trivial matter. Would it have been too much for her neighbour just to put her mail in the correct post box downstairs instead of bothering her with it? But there could be something important so she did not want to risk angering the man now by telling him to go away. Instead she went to the door and looked through the spy hole set into it.

In the hallway outside she saw a male human clutching a pair of envelopes. She did not know the man, but then again she had made a point of not mixing with the building's other residents. She reached out and opened the door.

As soon as the door slid upwards Vexer also stepped into view. He reached out and pressed his hand over the track of the door for a moment before withdrawing it.

"We're here about the datapads." Clieg said, "Our boss wants to talk to you about them."

"I don't know what you're talking about. Go away!" Cass yelled and she hit the door control again. But when the door dropped shut it got only as far as the specially shaped wedge that Vexer had jammed into its track. Instinctively Cass tried to flee, which meant retreating further into her apartment. Clieg and Vexer ducked under the jammed door and went after her. Cass ran for the kitchen unit and pulled open a drawer. The only things she could think to use as weapons were the knives kept in there. But as she grabbed at one of the knives and turned around to confront the intruders Clieg lashed out and knocked the blade from her grip.

"We won't hurt you if you do as you're told!" he snapped as he clamped a hand over her mouth. Cass swung her fists at Clieg and he used his free arm to pull her in close and restrain her.

"Grab her feet!" he yelled at Vexer, "We'll have to do this the hard way."

Jaysica and Kara arrived at the door to Cass's building already soaking wet from the rain.

"It's got a security door." Jaysica said, "What shall we do."

"Use the com of course." Kara said and she used a keypad beside the door to dial apartment 614. There was no answer so she tried again.

"What's wrong?" Jaysica asked.

"Maybe she's using the refresher." Kara suggested.

"Well she better hurry up." Jaysica said, "I want to get out of this rain." And she leant on the front door.

Kara just stared as the door swung open and Jaysica fell into the lobby.

"Its alright, I'm okay." Jaysica said as she picked herself up.

"I didn't ask." Kara replied as she stepped inside. She looked down at the door mechanism and saw the strip of plastic jammed into it.

"That doesn't look typical." Kara said.

"Maybe someone kept forgetting their key." Jaysica suggested.

"Or maybe not. Do you have your blaster?"

"Right here. Why?"

"Because I've got a very bad feeling about this. Let's go find our girl."

"The turbolift's broken." Jaysica said.

"Then we take the stairs. Come on."

"I hate stairs."

"Then give me your blaster and I'll go alone."

"No, I'm coming."

The two rebels walked up the stairs side by side. They had reached the third floor when Kara placed her hand on Jaysica's shoulder.

"Wait. Listen." She whispered.

Footsteps could be heard coming down the stairs towards the rebels and from the sound of it there was more than one person. In addition there was another sound that was muffled. Jaysica reached into her jacket to where her blaster was holstered.

"Not yet." Kara whispered, "We should find out what's going on first." Jaysica nodded and left her hand inside her jacket.

"If you stopping struggling this would be over much quicker." Vexer said as his feet came into view of Jaysica and Kara.

The two rebels then saw that between them Clieg and Vexer were carrying Cass. Vexer had hold of her feet while Clieg had one arm around her waist and arms and the other over her mouth. The teenager was obviously not going with them willingly.

"Hey guys!" Kara called out, "I think you should let the young lady go."

"And I think you should just keep moving and ignore everything you've seen." Clieg replied as the two men continued towards the rebels.

Jaysica and Kara looked at one another.

"Now?" Jaysica asked.

"Now." Kara replied.

As Jaysica drew her blaster Kara rushed up the stairs and slammed into Vexer. Both men let go of Cass and she let out a yelp as she dropped to the stairs. A blaster shot rang out as Jaysica fired over everyone's heads and caused Clieg to duck back instead of striking out at Kara.

"Come on!" Kara yelled, grabbing hold of Cass's arm, "We're here to help."

Vexer tried to grab Kara, but she delivered a kick to his groin that left him gasping for breath.

"Move!" Kara shouted at Cass.

"Who the hell are you?" Cass yelled back, "Why should I trust you?"

"We got your mem-stik." Kara replied, "Besides do you want to stay with these two sleemos?"

"Good point." Cass said and she let Kara help her to her feet.

As the three women rushed down the stairs Clieg emerged to check on Vexer.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

"Oh just great." Vexer replied, "That bitch can kick."

"Boss we need a pick up!" Kara yelled into her comlink, "We're on our way down the stairs with to hostiles behind us."

"Copy that Kara," Vorn's voice replied, "we'll be there in thirty seconds."

When the three women reached the lobby Cass suddenly ground to a halt.

"Hang on," she said, "I can't go out there like this." And she pointed at the nightdress that was all she was wearing.

Kara looked out of the building where it was still raining heavily.

"Good point." She said, "Jaysica give her your jacket."

"Why me?"

"Because you're both short. Mine will swamp her."

"Okay, I get it." Jaysica said as he pulled off her jacket and handed it to Cass. Then the three women rushed out of the door into the night.

Clieg and Vexer burst out of the front door with their own blasters in their hands just as the women were getting into the speeder driven by Tobis. Clieg began to raise his weapon when Tharun leant out of the speeder and pointed a heavy rifle towards them.

"Oh stang!" Clieg yelled as they both dived for cover just before Tobis put his foot down on the speeder's accelerator and drove off.

"Well this is just great!" Clieg exclaimed as he watched the speeder disappear round the corner, "How the hell will I explain this to Sall?"

"It could be worse." Vexer said.

"How?"

"I could be the one having to explain how we let a little girl get away."

4.

"Good even miss." Jeeves greeted Cass as she boarded the *Silver Hawk* with Vorn and the other rebels, "Do please let me know if there is anything you require. My facilities are at your disposal."

"How about some clothes?" Cass asked.

"Jaysica-" Vorn began.

"I know, I know." She replied, "Come on kid let's see what we can find." And Jaysica led Cass into her cabin. When the pair re-emerged Cass was wearing some of Jaysica's clothing. The rest of the rebel unit was waiting for them in the ship's lounge.

"So I guess you guys are from the resistance then." Cass said.

"Alliance." Vorn replied, "I'm Major Larcus and I head up this unit. You can call me Vorn."

"Can I call you Vorn boss?" Kara asked.

"If it'll stop you calling me 'boss'."

"If you say so boss."

Vorn cradled his head in his hands.

"We fight the Empire you know." Tharun said suddenly when he saw the look of confusion on Cass's face.

"So how about you take a seat and tell us about yourself then." Mace said, "We know your name, but that's about it."

"Yeah," Kara asked, "how did you find out about the dead drop?"

"It was because of my parents." Cass said as she sat down at the table with the rebels.

"They're in the resistance then?" Jaysica asked.

"They were." Cass said, "My dad was responsible for taking the data they collected to the drop point and sometimes he took me with him. Who suspects a man out walking with his daughter in the park?"

"What happened to them Cass?" Mace asked, "I'm sorry but we need to know."

"I came home from school one day and they, they were, they-" and Cass just stopped.

"Dead?" Jaysica asked then she added, "What did I say?" when she noticed that aside from Tobis the other rebels were all glaring at her.

"No, that's just it." Cass replied, "They were just gone. Same with my kid brother. I thought maybe he'd had an accident and they took him to the hospital so I waited, but they never came back. Then the cops turned up and told me my parents were traitors. The Empire was seizing my house and I had to leave. I asked what happened to my mom and dad and brother but the cops didn't know because it was the Empire that arrested them."

"Do you know what happened to the rest of your parents' cell?" Vorn asked.

"I thought about trying to find them and warn them, but I only knew where two of them lived and they were gone as well when I got there. I don't know what happened to the last guy, Rayl Kivar."

"Whoa there!" Kara said, "Boss that's the creep from the ISB."

"The ISB?" Cass asked.

"Yes we've encountered him." Vorn said, "We thought he was just impersonating a member of the local resistance, we didn't know that he'd actually infiltrated a cell and had them arrested."

"What about the datapads?" Tobis suddenly asked.

"I had to drop out of school and get a job." Cass explained, "Waitressing was all I could get. One day an Imperial officer left his datapad behind at the cantina. I found out I could copy it and figured that maybe I shouldn't just wait for Imperials to leave their datapads, I should just take them."

"Didn't they notice when they all started losing their datapads?" Jaysica asked.

"I give them back the next day. Some of them even tip me, which helps out a lot. I doubt any of them would admit to forgetting their datapad."

"That's good." Tharun said, nodding.

"That's very good." Vorn agreed then he looked at Cass, "You say you dropped out of school. How old are you?"

"Sixteen."

"That settles it then." Vorn said, "We'll take you back to headquarters with us."

"To join the Rebellion?" Cass asked excitedly, "Could I join your unit? I saw the extra bunk in Jaysica's room."

"No." Vorn replied, "To go back to school where you belong young lady. You're sixteen. That's too young to be running around fighting a war."

"Then I'm staying."

"Not a chance young lady." Vorn said sternly, "You're coming with and that's final."

"So that's it? I try and help you out and you just kidnap me? I was doing just fine before you turned up."

"Apart from that pair of thugs dragging your downstairs in your nightdress." Kara pointed out.

"How are you any different?" Cass asked, folding her arms, "You're just dragging me off too."

The rebels sat silently.

"Fine." Vorn said eventually, "Have it your way. But there's one condition."

"What?"

"We need to make sure you're safe. If we can't see to it that those two thugs aren't going to be bothering you any more then you come with us. Deal?"

"Okay then." Cass replied, "Deal." And she held out her hand for Vorn to shake.

"I trusted you."

"I know Mister Sall." Clieg replied, "But there was an unforeseen complication. Our source had backup. We came close to being blasted by some guy with an A280."

"Who?"

"I don't know that."

"Then find out. If this being is part of an underworld group then we must know it's strengths if we are to gain to control of it. I have given you every opportunity to prove yourselves gentlemen; I haven't even asked you to tell me what you are offering me. All I will say is that it had better be good. Now get out of my sight."

As Clieg and Vexer walked away Vexer spoke softly.

"Why didn't you just tell him what we're after?" he asked, "He'd be a lot more reasonable if he knew we were offering him a line into the capital building."

"Two reasons." Clieg replied, "First, I want to make sure he can't claim the credit for our idea."

"Good point. What else?"

"I'm not admitting we lost a teenage girl until after we've caught her again. Now what have you found?"

Vexer produced a datapad.

"The speeder was hired."

"You get a name?"

"No. Its an automated service, you know one of those where you just plug a credit stick into a machine and tell it what sort of speeder you want and how long for. Then it gives you a time-limited key. There's no-one to ask."

"Then we've got just one lead left then. We'll have to try picking up the girl again at work."

"Are you going to follow me around all the time?" Cass said to Jeeves.

"I'm sorry miss, but its Major Larcus' orders. He wants me to be sure that your every need is met." The droid replied.

"And he doesn't want you suddenly doing something stupid like running off on us." Kara added while she painted her toenails at the table.

"He wasn't quite so rude about it though." Jaysica added as she wiped up the milk she had spilt.

Cass sat at the table with Kara.

"Can I ask a question?" she said.

"Go on." Kara replied, "But keep it clean. Jaysica's very innocent." And she ducked as Jaysica hurled a cloth across the lounge towards her.

"Well how long have you two been part of the rebellion? How old are you supposed to be?"

"There isn't actually an age limit." Kara answered, "But I've been in for six years now."

"And I've been in for three." Jaysica said as she wandered over to reclaim the cloth.

"That's why I'm better than her." Kara said and ducked again.

"But you both finished school?"

"Oh yes." Kara said, "I think Tobis is the only one of us who didn't. He was raised on starships. Why, are you missing it?"

Cass shrugged.

"I don't think you're missing much." Jaysica said, "I hated high school."

"Why?"

"If you want to know what she did at high school," Kara began, "then next time you've access to the planetary data network just search for the words 'student', 'green' and 'flagpole'." And she nodded and smiled.

"Oh yeah?" Jaysica responded, "Well I'd tell you what to look up for Kara, but you'd have to be eighteen and have a valid credit account."

"I'm not sure I like the sound of this conversation." Vorn said as he walked into the lounge from the cockpit.

"So what have you found then boss?" Kara asked.

"Not much I'm afraid to say. I don't think the two men who attacked Cass were Imperial agents."

"So who were they?" Cass asked.

"Our current guess is that they're members of a local underworld group. They probably saw you taking a datapad at work—"

"Oh my god! Work!" Cass yelled, "My shift started twenty minutes ago!"

A number of cantina patrons turned their heads when Cass burst in and rushed into the kitchen.

"Where the hell have you been?" Corayle demanded when he saw her, "And look at the state of you!"

"I'm sorry." Cass said, "I tried to call, but my comm's been cut off. There was a burst pipe in my building right above my apartment. I had to get everything out of the way before it was ruined."

"Okay, okay." Corayle asked, "But I'm not paying you for the time you've missed. Now get out there and take orders."

"Yes sir."

Clutching an order taking datapad Cass returned to the dining area and approached a man in an Imperial uniform with his cap angled to conceal his face.

"What can I get you?" she asked.

"Does the caf come with free refills?"

"Only if you order food too."

"Then get me a caf and a grilled gornt sandwich." Tharun said as he looked up at Cass.

"Boss are you really going to leave her living in this dive?" Kara asked Vorn as she took a good hard look around Cass's apartment, "I've seen prison camps more luxurious than this place."

"I did offer to evacuate her." Vorn pointed out.

"Yeah but you made her feel like a kid." Kara said.

"She is." Mace responded, "Do you want to put a sixteen year old on the front lines?"

Kara shook her head.

"The truth is," Vorn began, "that she can actually do a lot of good for us here. The datapads she takes are likely to be full of all sorts of intelligence that the Empire won't be able to trace. Assuming we can ensure she's safe of course."

"And if we can't?" Kara asked.

"Then she leaves with us." Mace said, "That's what she agreed to."

"And gets dumped with Lyssa?" Kara said, referring to Vorn's daughter who currently resided on a rebel starship housing refugees, "That'd be two women you've dumped in the wilderness without asking first."

"Perhaps." Vorn said, ignoring the second part of the comment, "Or perhaps if she's so keen to join up we can find something useful for her to do."

"Like cleaning up after Jaysica perhaps?" Mace suggested.

"Captain," Kara replied, "the boss said he wanted her kept away from danger."

Then there was a sound from outside the apartment door.

"She's in there right now." Vexer told Clieg via comlink.

"Right, I'm at her building now. I'm going to go into her apartment and see if I can find anything useful. Keep an eye on her. If she leaves the cantina follow her and let me know."

Clieg put his comlink away and gained access to the building using the same device as the previous night. This time however he left the lock as it was, doubting that the need for a quick exit would be as pressing as the need to keep his presence undetected to the other residents.

On his way up the stairs Clieg encountered several other residents, all of them human. He made sure to keep out of their way, neither helping nor hindering them. Some alien species may have difficulty in telling humans apart, but he did not want anyone remembering his face if quizzed about him later. On the sixth floor he quickly made his way to Cass's apartment and once more took the electronic lock pick from his jacket.

The apartment door had a lock somewhat more resistant to the device, but it was still less than a minute before the control panel beside the door indicated that the lock had released and Clieg pressed the button to open the door. Then he froze when he found himself staring down three blasters.

"Good morning." Vorn said, "Do come in and take a seat."

Clieg dived aside and the rebels heard him get up and begin to run down the hallway.

"Kara, get after him." Vorn ordered. Then he turned to Mace, "You better go down the fire escape. See if you can cut him off. I'll wait here."

Neither Mace nor Kara needed any further prompting and the pair were immediately rushing out of the apartment, Kara just running down the hallway after Clieg and Mace opening the window to access the staircase mounted on the outside wall.

As he rushed down the stairs, Clieg could hear the sound of someone coming after him, though he had no idea if it was just one of the three people he had seen in the apartment or all of them. Nevertheless his attitude was much different to when he had been coming up the stairs and as he encountered other residents he just barged past them regardless of their situation. As far as he was concerned, leaving someone lying on the stairs behind him may just slow down whomever was coming after him.

On the metal framed fire escape outside the building, Mace also rushed down one flight of stairs after another. Though he had begun his descent after Clieg had begun his, he did not have to contend with anyone getting in his way. Only a small handful of residents even looked in his direction as he ran noisily past their windows. In this part of town most people deliberately avoided taking an interest in what their neighbours' activities. To do otherwise risked making them witnesses.

On the lowest level of the fire escape, still a storey above the ground there was a ladder that could be slid down to ground level. Mace did not bother with even the second or two that lowering this would take. Instead he took the risk of simply leaping from the fire escape. He rolled across the ground as he landed, but was unhurt and he rapidly picked himself up and headed for the main entrance.

5.

Clieg made it to the lobby ahead of Kara and he rushed towards the front door. He pulled it open and stepped outside only to see Mace running towards him. Before the door could swing shut again, Clieg ducked back inside the building and slammed the door behind him. When Mace reached the door he found it locked.

"Stang!" Mace cursed as he realised that he did not have a key. He stepped to the intercom and dialled apartment 614, "Let me in major." He said when he heard the line pick up, before Vorn even had a chance to answer. There was a buzzing sound and Mace pushed open the front door and entered the lobby just as Kara reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Where the hell did he go?" Kara asked.

"He came back inside." Mace replied, "I didn't see where he went.

"He could be anywhere!" Kara exclaimed in frustration. Then an alarm sounded.

"Or maybe he's just gone out of a fire door." Mace suggested.

"Let's get out there after him then." Kara said as she ran to the front door.

"But I only just got back in." Mace replied, only half in jest and he followed Kara.

"There was only one of them here." Vorn signalled to Tobis, "Is there any sign of the other one where you are?"

"Err. One moment major." Tobis replied and he turned to Jaysica who was sat beside him on the roof. Like Tharun she wore an Imperial uniform so she could change places with him in the cantina, "The major wants us to take a look for one of the men you encountered last night." He said to her and both of them picked up their borrowed macrobinoculars and looked over the low wall around the roof they were located on.

"I see Tharun." Jaysica said, "He's just there eating something. But I don't see either of the two men I saw last night."

Tobis said nothing as he moved his macrobinoculars back and forth, looking for any signs of someone watching the cantina from the outside. He saw no one and was about to agree with Jaysica when an idea occurred to him and he pulled out his comlink.

"Tharun can you hear me?" he signalled.

"Sure can. Go ahead lad." Tharun replied quietly after a short delay while he swapped his sandwich for his comlink.

"Could you look our way please? Is there anyone standing right below us?"

As Jaysica watched Tharun threw a glance over his shoulder.

"Looks like there's a guy standing in the alleyway beside you." Tharun said.

"I think its one of the men we're after." Tobis said.

"Got it." Tharun said, "Get Jaysica down here to take over and I'll head out and take a look for myself. Oh and Tobis-"

"Yes?"

"Tell the little lady to get the gornt steak sandwich."

"Got it." Tobis replied before cutting the link. Then he looked at Jaysica, "Did you get that?" he asked.

Jaysica nodded, "I'm on my way." She said as she picked up her things and headed for the stairs.

Vexer yawned as he kept watch on the cantina, he had not got much sleep the night before and it was catching up on him. All morning he had watched people, all human and most in Imperial uniform going in and out and after so long they were all starting to look the same. However, the young girl he was keeping an eye on was still there serving food. Vexer had not noticed her taking any more datapads, but at this distance it was unlikely that he would.

Then Vexer spotted a man leaving the cantina. Like most of the other patrons he was in Imperial uniform and he had a pistol holstered at his waist. The man had his head lowered and his cap pulled down so Vexer could not see his face, but he did notice that the man immediately crossed over the road towards Vexer rather than turning towards the Imperial capital building. Vexer stopped leaning against the wall beside him and stood up straight. He heard the man's footsteps from around the corner as he approached and Vexer became nervous. Standing in an alleyway that was a dead end left him with nowhere to run if there was trouble so he stepped out of the alleyway and looked directly into the face of the man approaching.

Vexer's eyes widened as he looked into the face of the man who last night had pointed a heavy blaster rifle straight at him. Then he turned on the spot and ran. Tharun took off after him, chasing Vexer down the street. Vexer himself did not have a particular destination in mind, all he wanted to do was evade Tharun for long enough to loose him so as soon as he came to a turning he ran down it.

Tharun followed him down the side street and ahead he saw a pair of Imperial Navy enlisted men getting out of a speeder. Presumably they were posted to the capital building and left their speeder here while at work. An idea occurred to Tharun and he stopped running and shouted to the navy men.

"Hey!" he called out, "Grab that guy!" and he pointed at Vexer.

Vexer ground to a halt as the two men ahead of him looked around and saw Tharun pointing at him. Now he was trapped between Tharun and these two. He ran across the street but Tharun and the navy men both ran after him, keeping him trapped between them. He began to run back across the road but the navy men caught up to him when he was half way across and they tackled him. As they got back to their feet and dragged him up with them Tharun arrived and grasped his shoulder.

"Thanks guys." He said, breathing heavily, "This piece of poodo tried to snatch my wallet."

"Oh really?" one of the navy men said, snarling at Vexer, "Want a hand teaching him a lesson?"

"Thanks guys." Tharun said before he lifted his knee up between Vexer's legs, "But I got it covered."

As Vexer crumpled to the ground he just groaned and let out a croaking gasp of, "Not again."

Tharun drew the blaster pistol from the holster at his waist and looked around. Aside from the two navy men there was no one else in the side street to witness what he was about to do. Setting the weapon to 'stun' he shot Vexer at point blank range.

"When that guy wakes up he's really going to regret what he's done." Tharun said to the navy men as he holstered his weapon and picked up the unconscious Vexer.

"Now what are we supposed to do?" Kara exclaimed when she and Mace rounded the corner at the end of the street to see Clieg getting into a landspeeder and driving off, "Tobis has our speeder. We'll never catch him now."

"We call in some help." Mace said and he pulled out his comlink. "*Silver Hawk* do you read me?"

"Yes Captain Grayle, I read you." Jeeves replied.

"Good. Kara and I are on the corner of Keller Way and Shen Street. Our target's fleeing and a blue speeder. Get Harvey to track it would you?"

"Certainly Captain Grayle, I shall pass on your instr-"

"Just do it." Mace snapped and he broke the link, "Hopefully the droids will be able to track him for us. Now let's get back to the major. He'll be wondering where we are."

"Good idea." Kara replied and she linked arms with Mace before they began to walk back to the apartment building.

"Vexer where the hell are you?" Clieg said to himself. After he drove away from the apartment building Clieg had made a few turns at random and doubled back just to be sure that he was not being followed before he drove in the direction of the cantina. But instead of seeing Vexer on watch as he drove past, Clieg saw no sign of him.

He had a comlink of course, but if Vexer was laying low he might not appreciate an unexpected call. Clieg turned the speeder round once more and drove away.

At the end of her shift, instead of heading around the back of the cantina Cass instead went to where Tobis and Jaysica were waiting in the hired landspeeder.

"So do I get to go home?" Cass asked as she got in the back of the vehicle.

"Not yet." Jaysica said from the front passenger set, "You'll be sleeping aboard our ship tonight."

Cass sighed.

"So long as he's not thinking about flying off when I'm asleep." Cass replied, then she suddenly began to root through her bag, "Oh I got these." She added, pulling out a pair of datapads.

"Oh nice." Jaysica said as she took the datapads from Cass, "We'll get these cloned tonight and you can return them tomorrow."

Cass looked out of the speeder and noticed the direction that Tobis was driving in.

"So how about you tell me why you're taking me to your ship instead of back home?" she said.

"Something unexpected came up." Jaysica said, "You had a visitor today."

"At my apartment?"

"Yeah, one of the thugs from last night. Kara ran after him so he got away. The major thinks it's safer if you stay with us tonight again."

"So long as its not some sort of trick to get me to agree to leave."

"Oh its not." Jaysica reassured her, "Besides, there's someone else on the ship you may want to see."

Vexer groaned and opened his eyes. There was a pounding in his head that he put down partially to a result of the stun blast but also to the fact that he was upside down, hanging from the ceiling. He turned his head and took in his inverted surroundings. From what he could see he was in the cargo hold of a small starship. His movements made the chain tethering him to the ceiling creak and the sound attracted the attention of the

woman he could just about make out sitting on a crate.

"Boss!" Kara yelled, "Bat boy's awake!"

There was the sound of footfalls on deck plates coming from behind Vexer and he attempted to spin himself around.

"So this is him?" Cass asked as she looked down into Vexer's face.

"That's him." Vorn said, "Tharun caught him watching you at work."

"You know," Vexer said, "you'd all be much better off letting me go and giving me the kid."

"Like hell." Vorn said, sneering, "You and your friend don't seem like the type to have her best interests at heart."

"Yeah, well we have powerful friends," Vexer replied, "and I doubt my interest in the kid is any different to yours. At least I'm nearer her age, she'll enjoy me more." And he winked at Cass.

Vorn grabbed hold of Cass as she stepped forwards with her fists clenched.

"I think you should wait outside young lady." Vorn whispered to her. Cass stared at Vexer for a moment, then she turned around and left the hold.

Vorn watched her leave before looking back at Vexer.

"And now we will discuss the location of your friend." He said.

Tharun looked up briefly as Cass sat down at the table with him. He could tell from her expression that she was not happy.

"Troubled?" he asked as he continued to clean the parts of the rifle laid out in front of him.

"How can that guy be so confident when he's hanging from the ceiling?" Cass replied.

"Confident? That is unusual I'll agree. The first few hours after capture are when prisoners tend to be most vulnerable. They're still in shock from capture. Makes it the best time to question them."

"Vorn's questioning him now. Do you think he'll get him to talk?"

"It would make things easier for us. Maybe for him too."

"Will Vorn torture him?"

Tharun stopped cleaning his weapon and looked at Cass again.

"Would that bother you?" he asked.

"No." she replied, "Not after he tried to kidnap me."

"Too bad." Tharun said, returning to the cleaning of his weapon, "Because the major won't do it."

"Why not?"

"Because that's how the major works. He believes in all of the Alliance's high and mighty ideals."

"But you don't?"

"I'm more of a pragmatist. I've seen too much to have as many ideals left as the major."

"So what will he do?"

"Looks like you're about find out." Tharun said as both Kara and Vorn appeared from the *Silver Hawk's* cargo hold.

"Okay sergeant," Vorn said to Tharun, "it's your turn now."

Smiling, Tharun left the pieces of his rifle on the table and got up and headed for the hold. As he went he drew the blaster pistol holstered at his waist. Cass got up and went to follow him, but as she neared the door to the cargo bay Kara blocked her path.

"You'd better stay out here." She said.

"Why? What's he going to do?" Cass asked and she peered around Kara in time to see Tharun grip his blaster in both hands and take aim at Vexer's head.

"No wait!" the man yelled, "I can't tell you, they'll kill me!"

"So will I if you don't" Tharun replied.

"We can help you." Vorn said, "We can get you off world. Out of the sector even."

"It won't make a difference!" Vexer cried out, unable to tear his eyes away from the muzzle of Tharun's blaster, "Black S-" and then he stopped mid sentence, realising what he had just given away.

"Black Sun?" Vorn said from the doorway.

"Sounded like it major." Tharun said. Black Sun was regarded as the most powerful organised crime syndicate in galactic history. In the waning years of the Republic the organisation had suffered some severe setbacks and in the aftermath had chosen to withdraw from the sector. Now though, it seemed they were looking to make a comeback.

"Well I think that will be all." Vorn said, "We will let you go now." He added looking at Vexer.

"You're letting him go?" Cass exclaimed, "But he hasn't said anything."

"On the contrary he's told us we're dealing with the most unpleasant group of beings that don't use the title 'darth'. We're letting him go. We'll pass on that he's working for Black Sun to our superiors."

Tharun stepped closer to Vexer and reached up to where the chain supporting him was attached to the ceiling and he released it, causing the man to drop to the deck.

"You can't!" Vexer shouted, "They'll kill me! Slowly!"

"I know." Vorn said, "But you haven't done anything to make it worth my while trying to protect you. Sergeant, get him off the ship."

Tharun bent down to grasp Vexer, but the man pushed him away.

"No wait!" he cried out, "I'll talk. I'll tell you everything, just get me away from here. If Black Sun finds me I'm a dead man."

Vorn looked at Kara.

"Told you he'd crack." He whispered, "Now pay up."

6.

Vorn found Mace and Tobis in the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk* checking its systems.

"We need to move." He said.

"Rather not take off just yet." Mace replied, "Still a few more things to go over."

"No." Vorn said, "That's not what I meant. Our prisoner's Black Sun. He's just told us that his partner will be heading here at any time."

"To us?" Tobis said, alarmed.

"Not us specifically, but to the starport." Vorn explained, "His contact has a ship docked here, a YT-2400."

"Do we have a name or bay number?" Mace asked.

"Yes. Sliet Sall, a sullustan. He's in the west annex."

"That's handy," Mace said, "that's about as far from security as you can get."

"Yes well we need to hurry." Vorn said, "Our prisoner says that this sullustan doesn't know anything about Cass yet. If we can grab our guy's partner before he gets to his contact then she's safe."

"What about the sullustan?" Mace asked.

"He's got a bodyguard, a borneck cyborg. Either of them could be trouble. They're both Black Sun so as far as I'm concerned the pair of them are legitimate targets."

Vorn wanted as many sets of eyes as possible involved in the search for Clieg. This meant that he could not afford to spare anyone to remain behind either to look after Cass or to guard Vexer. Reluctantly he was forced to bring Cass along with them while Vexer was bundled into an empty crate and left sealed in the hold of the *Silver Hawk*. Cass was instructed to hang back and stay close to the rebels at all times.

The group moved as quickly as they could across the starport. They carried only the weapons that they could conceal, forcing them to leave their most powerful ones behind. Their destination was the YT-2400 operated by the Black Sun agent that Clieg was expected to rendezvous with. Ideally Vorn would have liked to intercept the man further away from his contact, but with no information on his route or mode of transport he was forced to settle for staking out the freighter he was headed for.

"Why don't you just take out his contact?" Cass asked as she ran alongside Vorn.

"Doesn't solve anything." Vorn replied, "The man we're after still knows about you. If everything isn't as he expects it he could just disappear and Black Sun could send someone else to make contact with him."

The west annex of the starport was a long, relatively narrow building. A central landing and take off area had a row of docking bays along each side, each one large enough for a vessel similar in size to the *Silver Hawk*. More than half of the available docking bays were empty, but the rebels still had to be wary of attracting attention from other starship crews as they neared their destination.

"Okay," Vorn said softly as the YT-2400 came into view jutting out of a bay just ahead of the rebels, "there are three possible access routes our man could take. Firstly he could come the same way we did. So I want Jaysica and Kara to wait here with Cass in case he's behind us. Secondly he could come in from the other end, so I'll take Tobis and go further on. Finally there's the exit at the back of the bay that leads outside. Mace, I want you and Tharun to take that one. Everyone understand their role here?"

The rebels nodded.

"Good. Then let's go and be careful, blaster fire around here could attract unwanted attention."

Jaysica, Kara and Cass waited where they were, keeping in the shadows at the edge of the annex's massive central area. Meanwhile Tobis and Vorn carried on walking as if nothing was amiss until they reached the other side of the docking bays and took up a similar position there. On the other hand, Mace and Tharun had to enter the bay itself and get past the freighter positioned there in order it get between it and the external door. The two men skirted around the walls of the bay, using the servicing equipment there to conceal themselves until they were happy that they could intercept anyone entering through the door before they made it to the ship's access ramp. All three groups then simply awaited Clieg's arrival.

"Speeder coming boss." Kara signalled when she heard the sound of an approaching repulsorlift engine,

"This could be our guy." And she placed a hand on the blaster beneath her jacket.

"More company from the ship major." Tharun added using his own comlink as Sliet Sall and his yellow-skinned borneck bodyguard descended the freighter's access ramp.

"Stop that speeder!" Vorn snapped, "Do whatever you have to!"

Without waiting any further Kara drew her weapon and aimed it at the speeder. The darkness of the annex was briefly banished by the light of her shot. The bolt of energy bypassed Clieg sat in the front of the speeder, but instead impacted against one of the vehicle's side mounted engine pods. The landspeeder lurched suddenly and its nose dropped and ploughed into the ground before it flipped over. Kara returned her blaster to under her jacket.

"Come on, let's go make sure he finished." She said to Jaysica. Then as Cass began to follow the two rebels she added, "Not you kid. You stay here."

The crash had the effect of masking Kara's shot. Neither Sliet nor Derl had been looking towards Kara when she had fired and they assumed that the speeder had suffered some sort of malfunction, the flash and the sound being part of this mishap. Like Jaysica and Kara, they ran towards the wrecked speeder, but with the intention of helping its occupant.

Mace and Tharun broke cover, rushing at the two Black Sun operatives. Derl whirled around and his cybernetic eye picked them out in the dimly lit bay just as easily as if they had been standing in the deserts of Tatooine at midday.

"It's a trap!" Derl shouted and he reached for his blaster, not worrying about remaining inconspicuous. Both Mace and Tharun tackled Derl simultaneously, knocking him to the floor and sending the blaster skidding off into the shadows. At the same time Tobis and Vorn broke cover and came rushing into the bay also.

Sliet panicked. With his bodyguard down and two more assailants approaching he decided to head for the one remaining safe place for him and he turned back towards his ship.

At the speeder Kara skidded to a halt and peered into the wreckage. A faint groaning told her that Clieg was still alive, though by the amount of blood dripping out from the vehicle it appeared that he was badly hurt.

"Help me with this door." She said to Jaysica and between them the two women pulled the badly bent speeder door open. Clieg rolled out of the speeder, more of his blood spilling out onto the ground. He coughed and yet more sprayed out from his mouth.

Kara grasped the back of his head in one hand and then placed the other one firmly over his mouth and pinched his nose shut. "Hold him!" she snapped as he began to try and fight and Jaysica knelt down beside him and grabbed hold of his arms until he went limp.

With his blaster temporarily lost, Derl instead resorted to using his cybernetic right arm as a club. He swung it towards Mace, who had to roll away to avoid being struck. The cyborg was about to take a swing at Tharun also when Tobis and Vorn arrived and the pair of them grabbed hold of his metallic limb.

"Are you alright?" Vorn asked Mace at the same time as he wrestled with Derl. Mace just nodded and then leapt back into the fight.

A whistle interrupted the fight, and Vorn looked up just long enough to see Kara waving at him before she ran off with Cass and Jaysica in tow.

"It's done!" Vorn snapped, "Let's get out of here!"

Tharun delivered a sharp kick to the back of Derl's knee to prevent him from getting back to his feet before the four rebels let him go and rushed off. They got out of the bay into the gloom of the central section of the annex just as Sliet reappeared from inside his ship, now clutching a blaster in his hand. Defiantly the sullustan strode after the rebels and fired into the darkness but hit nothing.

"You said it yourself major. She needs a contact." Mace said quietly as he and Vorn sat in Cass's living room, "Someone she can go to in an emergency instead of using the dead drop."

"I know that," Vorn replied, his voice equally low, "but do you really think he's our best choice?"

"If the Empire get a hold of her they'll break her in no time, we both know that. Do you want to risk a local cell? Or Lord Desh maybe?"

"No, but what you're suggesting is—"

"Is putting a vulnerable sixteen year old girl in contact with a man known for using vulnerable people to line his own pockets. But look at it this way, Odras Balve may be a career criminal but he sees the Empire only as a source of customers for his services and he sees Black Sun as a threat to his own position. He won't turn her over to either of them."

"Okay then." Vorn conceded at last, "Let's let her know." And the pair got up and headed for the kitchen.

There they found the rest of their unit and Cass, removing cans of food from several cardboard boxes and putting them into cupboards that had previously been empty. Aside from Jaysica who was picking cans up from the floor where she had dropped.

"These should last you some time."

"Are you sure you won't need these?" Cass asked.

"We can restock easily enough." Tharun replied.

"There's more." Vorn interrupted and he placed a clear plastic bag on the kitchen table, "There's just over four hundred credits here. Keep it hidden, ideally somewhere that you can always get at it. If ever there's an emergency then it needs to last you."

"You'll need this too." Mace said and he handed her a small folded piece of paper.

Cass unfolded it and looked at what was written on it.

"A com address?" she asked.

"Yes." Mace said, "It's of a man who can get a message to us in an emergency. A man called Odras Balve."

The rebels were suddenly silent.

"Err. Captain," Tobis began "are you sure about that? He's dangerous."

"Why?" Cass asked.

"He's a criminal." Jaysica told her.

"A killer." Kara added.

"We've discussed all of this, but in this situation he's useful to us." Vorn said, "He can get in touch with Mace and he won't sell Cass out to either Black Sun or the Empire."

"Plus he's expendable." Tharun commented.

"Be careful of him," Mace said to Cass, "only contact him if you need to get in touch with us quickly. Only pay cash, but not up front unless you want to risk him taking it and leaving you with nothing. If he asks for more than you have don't let him give you anything on credit. Trust me, he'll find a way of making sure you never get a debt paid off."

"Yes." Vorn agreed, "Only go to him in an emergency, for example if you suspect you've been discovered and need to be evacuated."

"So I can just go back to being in school?" Cass said.

"Perhaps." Vorn replied, "Or maybe if you're willing, I can find you something more useful to do."