

Star Wars

Kella Rand, Reporting...

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Just when Kella was sure the leader of the Indu San system was going to vote "no" to an alliance with the New Republic, he went and blew up instead.

Literally.

Sheer surprise momentarily froze her in place as security sirens began to blare and a cloud of hovercams whirred overhead, resembling a flock of electronic birds as they converged on the smoking ruin. Then her news sense snapped back as the media gallery erupted and reporters scrambled to get to the Council Chamber below, where what remained of Shek Barayel was sprawled against his chair. Pandemonium prevailed as hovercams circled overhead, recording every grisly detail.

Surveying the chaotic scene, Kella tried to suppress an unbecoming thrill of satisfaction. She'd been with the Galactic News Network long enough to know that murder was almost always more interesting than politics, and while an assassination wasn't the story she'd set out to cover, it would certainly do.

Though for the sake of her audience's sensitivities, she'd try not to look like she enjoyed it too much.

She'd been on Indu San two weeks, yawning through the endless speeches and diplomatic wrangling leading up to today's big vote. All eyes had been on Barayel, for though the entire Indu Council voted, theirs was merely an advisory role. The chief councilor, like the Imperial governor he'd replaced, was the one whose word was ultimately law.

The problem was, no one knew where he stood on this alliance issue. Though most of the council seemed to support it, he'd been maddeningly reticent through the diplomatic talks, hadn't taken the floor at all during the council debates, and had curtly declared "no comment" when questioned by reporters. The New Republic ambassador, Dictio L'varren, seemed to take it in stride like the seasoned negotiator he was, but for the media, the story so far was a crashing bore.

Barayel's actions had all the characteristics of another Outer Rim system poised to decline an invitation to join the New Republic. Not that newsworthy - - neutrality and a healthy respect for the Imperials still

active in the sector were much too common for reporters to get excited about.

But throw in a little murder and mayhem, and newsnets across the galaxy would be snapping the story up.

Digging out her comlink, Kella keyed in the frequency for the local GNN bureau and fairly leapt on Bureau Chief Robbe Nostler when he answered.

"Hold the newsdroid!" she told him, shouting to make herself heard over the uproar echoing through the stone Council Chamber. "We've got a hot one! Barayel's just been assassinated!"

"What?" Nostler asked. "When?"

"Assassinated. At the Council Hall. Just now!" she said. "Turn on the holovid and take a look - - the local stations should be carrying it." Holding the comlink to her ear, she heard the noise magnified on the other end as Nostler turned on the bureau's holovid and caught a live report transmitted by one of the in-system stations.

The story would have instantly hit all of the planetwide newscasts, but galactic reporters like her had to wait for their newsnets' courier droid to drop into the system, upload the local bureau's reports, then zip back into hyperspace to carry them further down the line for dissemination galaxy-wide. Fleetinglly she envied the ease and immediacy with which reporters in the past had filed their stories on the HoloNet, but it was long gone and now only the couriers with their dratted timelags remained.

"That looks hot all right," Nostler said after watching the holovid a moment. "Can you confirm if Barayel's really dead?"

"Oh yeah, he's dead," Kella assured him, grimacing at the sight below. "Darn messy way to go, too." Watching a dazed counselor get cornered by a reporter wielding a recording rod, she was reminded of the business at hand. "So hey," she demanded. "When does the courier show up? I don't want to get scooped on this."

"It'll be tight," Nostler warned. "Newsdroid's due in later tonight, but so is TriNebulon News'. First in the system, first out with the story, Kell."

She scowled. There was no way she was going to get scooped by TriNeb - - that sleazy excuse for a newsnet - - just because its courier showed up first. With its slant towards the sensational, TriNeb's reporters could make even the dullest debate sound interesting, if not quite accurate. She hated to think how they'd blow this whole thing up. She told him so, adding, "You keep an eye on the local reports, and I'll follow things down here. Call me if you hear anything good."

"Right," Nostler said, and signed off, but Kella wasn't listening. Below, a squad of Council Authority officers had arrived and were

attempting to restore some sort of order to the chaos. Blasters drawn and bellowing orders, they cleared a path to the late chief councilor, herding his horrified colleagues to the sides of the chamber and forcing back the pack of overeager reporters as well.

But what caught her attention was the sight of a man slipping out a small door on the far side of the chamber, followed by one of the blue-uniformed officers. Recognizing Tev Aden, she raised an eyebrow, wondering what the authorities wanted with Ambassador L'varren's aide.

Scanning the crowded chamber below, she found the New Republic diplomat huddled in conversation with several Indu councilors, clearly too involved to have noticed Aden's departure, or be aware he was apparently being detained. Indeed, between the shouting of the authorities, the anxious babble of the councilors, and the gruesome spectacle at the head table that kept them all riveted, no one at all seemed to have noticed the two men slipping out. From her spot in the media gallery, Kella had the best view in the room, and her nose for news whispered that it just might be worth investigating.

Taking the gallery stairs two at a time, she activated the beckon call for her hovercam. A transponder in the comlink would tell the hovercam where to find her, and she hoped it would hurry. Downstairs, word of the assassination was making its way through the government building and council aides, functionaries and bureaucrats clogged the corridor trying to get in the chamber so they could see their slain leader.

More authorities arrived, adding to the confusion. Kella weaved through the crush, trying to reach the side corridor where Aden had disappeared. Traffic thinned considerably when she reached the corner, and she paused to glance back for her hovercam, relieved to see it emerge through the main chamber door and float towards her above the sea of bobbing heads.

She headed briskly down the hall with the hovercam whirring at her shoulder, but as she approached the door Aden had slipped out of, it swung open and a burly Authority Officer with a short haircut and an even curter disposition stepped out and blocked her way.

"This section's being sealed," he said, ignoring the bright yellow media badge clearly visible on the front of her vest. "I've got orders to clear the hall."

"Kella Rand, Galactic News Network," she said, tapping the badge anyway and glancing impatiently past him down the corridor. Another 15 meters away, it intersected with another hall, from which there was an exit leading to the hall's south portico and the city streets beyond. "I've got media clearance, and I need to get through."

"Well, consider your frippin' clearance revoked," he retorted. "I told you, this section's being sealed. So move along, or I'll have you removed."

Kella's eyes narrowed. This kind of hassle she didn't need. But following Aden was just a hunch. Maybe she'd do better to worm her way back into the Council Chamber to watch them sweep up what was left of Barayel - - get some on-the-scene reaction, maybe talk to L'varren. On the other hand-

Undecided, she and the guard were still glaring at each other when the distinctive retort of a blaster shot echoed from around the corner. They looked toward it, back at each other. "Stay here," the Authority ordered, drawing his blaster and heading for the corner. He eased an eye around the stone edge, then hurried on.

Kella followed, hovercam whirring behind.

The corridor they turned into was empty except for several closed doors, but there was another intersection 25 meters down. She trotted after the guard, followed him around the next corner-

And came to an abrupt halt. She'd found Aden, but it didn't look like L'varren's aide would be up to an interview anytime soon.

At least his death had been neater than Barayel's. He lay sprawled on the floor, the charred hole in his chest evidence of the blaster shot that killed him. The officer she'd seen follow him out of the Council Chamber knelt at his side while the burly one gave her a hard look and slowly lowered his blaster.

"I told him to stop, but he just kept going," the Authority kneeling by Aden said, staring down at the body with a furrowed brow. "He just ignored me, acted like he didn't hear. Then he turned around sudden-like, went for his pocket..." He shook his head, voice trailing off. "I didn't think I had a choice, y'know?"

"Just sit tight, Darne, we'll get this cleared up," the other officer said, pulling out his comlink and calling for backup.

Kella took advantage of the momentary distraction. "Hadn't you already checked him for weapons?" she asked.

Darne glanced up as if noticing her for the first time, gaze sharpening as he took in her media badge and the hovercam recording the scene. "No," he said. "How could I? I never got close enough."

"I had the impression he was under detention when you left the Council Chamber," she persisted. "That wasn't the case?"

He stared at her, a hint of wariness creeping into his eyes. "No. I saw him leave, and followed. We had orders to seal this section, and that meant clearing out anyone wandering around back here. All I wanted was to catch him and tell him to leave."

Kella opened her mouth but, done with his call, the other Authority stepped forward and brusquely cut her off. "You, be quiet. No more

questions." Holstering his blaster, he squatted down on the other side of the dead aide. "Let's take a look at what he has in there."

Avoiding the charred spot, he carefully ran his hands down Aden's front and patted his tunic pockets, then slipped a hand into one and pulled out a small, flat device. Holding it up, he turned it over in his hand thoughtfully.

Kella craned her neck to see what it was, then remembered the hovercam humming over her shoulder. "Close-up," she told it, and a green light on its front panel flashed, indicating acknowledgement. At the sound of her voice, both men looked up again.

"Turn that burnin' thing off," the burly one ordered with yet another glare, but he promptly forgot her as a squad of booted feet thundered around the corner and he rose to consult with its commander.

Moving aside, she flattened herself against the stone wall in hopes of not being noticed. Already, with the discovery of what appeared to be a detonator in Aden's pocket, she'd found an angle none of the other newsnets had. And as the only reporter on the scene, if she stayed quiet and inconspicuous, she might get still more vidclips of the action as it unfolded.

But no such luck. As several of the new arrivals ringed Aden and a few more took up positions at each end of the corridor, their commander turned away from the burly officer and bore down on her. Cool eyes flicked to the hovercam still humming beside her and he ordered, "Cease recording, and clear the area immediately. This section is being sealed."

Kella tried, though she knew it was probably useless. "Kella Rand, Galactic News Network. I've got media clearance for the entire Council building."

"I don't care if you're the late Emperor himself," the man snapped. "Media access has been revoked. You and the rest of you newsfleas can get the down-and-dirty later, at the media conference. So get moving, or I'll have you arrested. Then you won't be able to even go to the conference, now will you?"

She opened her mouth to protest, shut it again as he beckoned to the near guard. "Okay, okay, I'm going," she said, quickly stepping away from the wall and moving away from the group gathered around Aden's body. She hated backing down, but she could hardly file her report from the local lock-up. And it might be hours before GNN authorized funds for her bail - - if the Indu legal system even allowed prisoners to post bail. She'd found out the hard way that some didn't.

Half expecting to be hauled around and escorted from the building, she headed back down the corridor towards the Council Chamber. She'd go, but she wasn't through. There were still sources to contact, leads to follow, facts to confirm, and a media conference to crash.

Kella lengthened her stride, prepared to barge past the guard at the chamber entrance. She'd have to hustle to get it all done before deadline.

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The setting sun was casting a spectacular golden-red glow over the city's streets by the time Kella finally trudged up the steps to the Indu GNN bureau. Rustling through her datatote, she dug out her GNN identi-credcard and slid it into the slot on the door.

The scene that greeted her was in sharp contrast to the media circus she'd just left. Two reporters sat at desks, Juloff reading a datapad and Crislyn typing at her terminal, while over in the corner Nostler had both feet up and was scratching his chin as he watched a holo rising from the pad on his desk. The only sounds were the comm scanner spitting out occasional snatches of City Authority chatter, and the muted music accompanying the report that had Nostler engrossed. He looked up as she came in.

"Hey, Kella. Thought maybe you'd gotten lost," he greeted her.

"No, just stuck," she said, looking around for an empty chair. Nostler pointed to a desk opposite his own, and she slid gratefully into its seat. "You wouldn't believe the crush at the conference - - every two-bit station in the system must have sent someone.

"Not that it was all that exciting," she added. "The Authorities gave us a statement, answered about four questions, and walked out." She shrugged - - what's new? - - then asked, "So, how long do I have?"

"Deadline's at 2200, the droid'll arrive sometime after that." Nostler said. "Have your piece ready to go by then, and I'll give you the newsbank access code so you can transmit any updates direct, right on down to the wire. "

"Okay." She was silent a moment, considering. Roughly three hours to dig up anything more, then her story would have to stand until she could update it with the next scheduled courier droid in four days. Although, with the apparent political scandal brewing, GNN might consider the story hot enough to send a special courier to collect an update sooner-

Nostler interrupted her train of thought. "I hear the assassination's getting pinned on the New Republic," he said.

She looked back up. "Yeah, so it seems. The Indus haven't actually come out and accused them, but everyone's pretty much thinking it."

"Based on what?"

"Nothing conclusive, but it's probably enough," she said. "Almost certainly enough to nix any possibility of an alliance. It'll take a few days for the investigators to figure out exactly how the explosion

occurred, but the Council's already announced its intention to elect a new chief and rush ahead with another vote tomorrow. Sounds like they've made their minds up to me."

"What does the New Republic have to say about all this?" Nostler asked. "You ought to be able to get the inside story since you know L'varren so well. "

"Not that well," she said, for what felt like the hundredth time since that incident on Corellia last year. Would she ever live it down? "He's shocked, appalled, horrified - - about what you'd expect when your aide's suspected of blowing up the system's leader."

"Uh huh," Nostler said. "Any chance he didn't?"

"The Authorities don't seem to think so. That detonator thing makes Aden look real bad, and L'varren didn't help by claiming diplomatic immunity to keep the rest of his people from being dragged down to the Hall and questioned."

"What do you think?" he asked.

Kella hesitated. "I'm not sure," she admitted. "The circumstantial evidence certainly points to Aden, and if they have any other suspects, they're not telling us. But on the other hand, what's the point? Why would the New Republic want to knock off Barayel?"

"Maybe he was going to vote no," Nostler suggested.

"Yeah, but getting rid of him only means they start over with someone new who might also vote no," she said. "And it's a good bet this whole mess has soured the Indus on the idea of an alliance, anyway. Unless the New Republic plans to storm in and takeover, all it really accomplished is to virtually assure that Indu San will end up staying neutral until the war is over.

"And," she added, "You might find this interesting. Some Indus are even taking it in the opposite direction. I talked to a lobbyist for a business consortium who basically wants to kick the New Republic out of the system and invite the Empire back."

Nostler nodded, unsurprised. "The Empire wasn't all that unpopular here, at least not with some of the people in power," he explained. "Sure, the resistance groups were glad to see them go, but there's also a lot of people who made a lot of credits from the Imperials, and they don't want to give that up.

"Unless," he added, "the New Republic wants to work out the same sort of kickbacks the Imperial governor offered to keep them fat, happy, and loyal..." He shook his head. "No. Probably not."

"Well, it's beside the point now," Kella said. "Looks like they're going to sit the fence like everyone else."

"Can you blame them?"

"Not really," she conceded. "With all the skirmishes still going on, why irritate the Imperials with a big show of support for the New Republic when there's always a chance the Empire might be back in charge someday?" She dug into the datatote, came up with a handful of datacards. "Well, I guess I'd better get busy. Got a booth I can use?"

"Make yourself at home."

"Always do." She grinned her thanks.

Settling into the small editing cubicle, Kella spent the next hour and a half going over the vidclips she'd collected during the past two weeks. In the face of the new direction the story had taken, with the focus shifting from the alliance to the assassination, most of them were unusable, but a perverse sense of curiosity made her study all the ones pertaining to Barayel again.

Perhaps they'd show some clue that revealed the way he'd planned to vote, or some hint he'd known things were about to blow up. Just in case she'd missed anything important-

About halfway through, she discovered she had.

The clip came from the datacard she'd used yesterday when, as usual, after a curt "no comment" from Barayel, she'd gone on to corner his assistant. The hovercam showed that she'd caught him near his chief's chair in the Council Chamber, and they'd spent several minutes chatting.

But as she watched, it gradually dawned on her that the real item of interest in the interview wasn't the conversation itself. Rather, it was what she could occasionally glimpse going on in the background.

Someone was messing around with something at Barayel's place at the table. The place that, a mere 26 hours later, had so messily erupted in the chief councilor's face.

Hitting the hold button, she froze the image and studied the screen. Visible beyond the assistant's shoulder, someone dressed in the blue uniform of Council Authority crouched in front of Barayel's spot at the head of the long U-shaped council table. The back of the chief's comm and voter panel was removed, and while she couldn't quite make out what the man was doing, she did recognize who it was.

On his knees, again, was Darne, the same Authority who had shot Aden.

Kella sat back and frowned thoughtfully at the screen. She'd seen so many of the blue-coated guards at the Council Hall the past few weeks that she'd ceased to even notice them anymore. In charge of security, they were everywhere, all the time, doing all sorts of things. Above notice, and above suspicion.

But given the current circumstances...

Running the vidclip back to where the hovercam had begun recording the interview, she circled a spot on the viewscreen with an editing pen and that section instantly magnified. Though of poor quality, the image was clear enough to see what Darne held in his hand and, heart suddenly pounding, she advanced the clip forward click by click.

And as she watched, she smiled.

Some beings thought the best way to hide something was to just put it out in plain sight. It looked like Barayel's assassin agreed. Quite by accident, she'd caught Darne placing a tiny but powerful bomb inside Barayel's comm panel. And as far as she knew, she was the only reporter who knew about it, much less had a visual recording of it.

TriNeb, eat your heart out!

Thumping the console with excited delight, she leapt to her feet and flung open the editing booth door. It slammed against the wall, startling everyone into looking up.

"Take a look at this!" she yelled, and disappeared back inside. Juloff and Crislyn glanced at each other questioningly, but Nostler hit the hold button on his holoclip and followed, leaving an Ithorian entertainer suspended mid-warble over his desk. Both reporters strained to follow the conversation filtering out the open door.

"You know that old saying about hiding out in the open?" Kefla asked Nostler. "Well, check this out!"

A brief silence, then - - "What in blazes? Is that what it looks like?"

"It's a bomb," she confirmed. "And that guy there is the same Authority who shot and killed L'varren's aide. The one they found the detonator on," she added significantly.

Out in the newsroom the reporters exchanged glances. "This I've got to see," Crislyn said and got up to stand in the editing booth doorway, peering over the pair's shoulders. Juloff waited a few moments to make sure they were all engrossed. Then, pulling out his comlink, he headed for the bureau door.

Excited by Kella's discovery, no one in the editing booth even noticed that he'd left.

* * *

Satisfaction still sang through her veins a short time later as Kella left the bureau, hovercam humming behind like a tethered vartlett. After some discussion, she and Nostler had agreed they couldn't simply turn the vidclip over to the Council Authorities. If one guard were

involved in the assassination, others could be too, and they didn't want to chance it ending up in the wrong hands.

That left just one other person that Kella thought might be able to help: L'varren. With the New Republic being blamed for Barayel's death, the ambassador might have a certain interest in helping her make sure her datacard - - and its evidence to the contrary - - got to the proper people.

Her report, waiting in the bureau newsbank for the courier to arrive within the next hour or so, included the incriminating clip, and a second copy was nestled among the cards littering the bottom of her datatote. If she hustled, she might have time to add an update.

L'varren and his diplomatic entourage were staying in the same hotel as she was, just a few blocks from the GNN bureau, and paying only cursory attention to the light evening traffic bustling past, Kella mentally ran down her reporter's checklist as she walked. The who, what, when, where, and how of the explosion seemed clear, but not the why.

She was still mulling over possible motives when a blaster shot sizzled a mere meter overhead, cracking against a marbled storefront and spattering hot stone chips down about her shoulders.

Kella was on the ground before it really even registered - - fortunate, since a second, lower shot followed the first, a bright shower of sparks striking the wall where her head had been. A sharp crack to her left made her look, and with a chill, she realized that a stone planter full of perky flowers had just saved her life.

Hissing for the hovercam to get down, she wiggled further into the limited cover and tried to assess the situation. She thought the shots were coming from somewhere across the wide street, but wasn't sure of the exact direction, and didn't dare stick her head up to take a look. Pinned down like this, she was horribly vulnerable. The few pedestrians she could see nearby weren't going to be much help - - like her, they'd hit the walkway, or ducked into nearby doorways. Nobody seemed to be raising an alarm.

The tiny hairs on her arms prickled. Even now as she hesitated, her attacker could be moving into position for the kill. She reluctantly decided to draw her blaster and try to lay down some covering fire while making a desperate dash for safety when, just a couple of meters away, a door swung open and a man in an amazing purple suit stepped out, demanding to know just what in the galaxy was going on out here?

Kella saw her chance. Crab-like, she scuttled past him, scurrying through the ornate doorway and bursting, not into a store as she'd expected, but a fancy eating establishment. A golden droid with a black bow tie gaped at her as she crouched in the tastefully decorated foyer, and well-dressed diners goggled in astonishment as she got to her feet and meandered through the tables toward the back of the building. She caught quick glimpses of fancy red tablecloths and gleaming flatware as

she searched for another door. There should be a rear entrance through the kitchen area, and from there, she could make a run - - where?

Bursting through a door at the back, she narrowly avoided a waiter droid loaded down with a tray of steaming entrees. Flattening herself against a counter to squeeze past, she spotted another door, this one labeled "exit" in blocky Basic, and emerged into a poorly-lit alley, startling some leathery-skinned rodent nosing through an overflowing waste bin. Wrinkling her nose at the unappetizing smells wafting up from the sticky pavement, she hurried down the narrow passage with the hovercam whirring along behind her.

There was still no sign of pursuit by the time the alley emptied into a street a few hundred meters later, so Kella stayed in its concealing shadows while she caught her breath and pondered her next move.

With the datacard and its incriminating clip in the bottom of her datatote, it wasn't hard to figure out why somebody was after her. What was a mystery was who, and how they'd found out what she had.

Her thoughts flicked to Nostler, and the other two reporters back at the bureau. She hated to think one of her own might be involved in this, but there weren't many alternatives. Grimly running through her options, she decided to stick with the original plan of contacting L'varren. At least he had a bevy of security officers who could offer some protection while she and the ambassador decided what to do with the vidclip.

Cautiously peeking out of the alley, she uneasily identified at least a dozen potential hiding spots for a sniper. But there was no other way. Hyper-alert to every little flash of movement, she started down the street. Ten tense minutes later, she arrived at the hotel.

Rising majestically into the night sky, it was a thoroughly modern transplant which towered over its surrounding stone companions. While an impressive sight, it was the crowd milling about on its steps which caught Kella's eye. Pausing at the foot of the long sweep of stairs leading up to the entrance, she surveyed the scene ahead.

Placard-carrying protesters provided visual fodder for the hovercams floating up and down the steps, while their reporters interviewed some of the demonstrators - - or lounged around on stone planters, apparently prepared to wait all night, if necessary, to catch L'varren and wring a quote out of him regarding this new development. A few choice placards stood out, and Kella wryly noted that the "Indu Imperialists," as she'd privately dubbed the business consortium she'd talked to earlier, were making the most of the day's events to register their anti-New Republic sentiments. The newsnets seemed eager to help them fan the flames.

We'll just see about that, she thought smugly, starting up the steps. Intent on her destination, hurrying through the lobby and heading for the turbolifts beyond, it didn't register at first.

But then her eyes snapped back in startled recognition to the man standing next to a decorative holosculpt at the front of the lobby. Juloff, one of the reporters from the bureau. And next to him-

Darme.

They'd seen her. Her heart sank with belated realization. Of course, they'd probably been waiting for her. Juloff nodded in response to something Darme said, and as they began to purposefully weave through the lobby toward her, Kella studied their implacable expressions and knew she was in trouble.

Well, that's that, she thought, and bolted for the turbolifts. A car was just unloading as she arrived, and she shoved through the departing passengers, slapping the "close" button as soon as she was inside. A couple who hadn't had time to get off the lift stared in alarm as she drew her blaster and punched L'varren's floor number on the call panel.

As the doors slid shut, she caught a glimpse of her pursuers' angry faces, and as the lift accelerated upwards, Kella pulled out her comlink and did what she'd sworn she'd never do again after that incident last year - - keyed in L'varren's personal frequency.

He answered on the second beep, sounding guarded. "L'varren."

"Ambassador, it's Kella Rand," she identified herself. "Sorry to bother you, sir, but I need to see you right away."

"Kella?" he asked doubtfully. "I'm a bit tied up at present. Perhaps tomor- - "

She recognized the hedge, rushed forcefully to cut it off. "Sir, I apologize, but I need to see you now." Briefly, she wondered how to explain the situation, then just bluntly plowed ahead. "I have some pretty good proof that your aide didn't kill Barayel, and who did, and why. Surely that's worth a moment of your time."

"Proof?" the diplomat questioned sharply. "What sort of proof?"

"A vidclip," she said, "showing the bomb being placed. Not by Aden, either. This guy's very much alive, and after me as we speak. Unfortunately, he's not too far behind." Across the lift, the couple's eyes widened and they shrank back against the wall. "Sir, I'm on my way up. I can show it to you."

"I'd like to see it," he assured her dryly. "Have the Authorities been notified?"

"There's a slight problem with that," Kella told him. "At least one Authority was involved." Briefly she wondered if their conversation was being monitored, decided that at this point it didn't really matter.

"I see," he said. "Well then, I'll see you in a moment, Kella. I'm looking forward to it."

"Likewise," she muttered under her breath. Shutting down the comlink, she dropped it into the tote, where it made a tiny clink against the incriminating datacard. A quick glance up at the turbolift indicator showed they were nearly there, and she wondered uneasily just how far behind her pursuers were. She hoped she wouldn't have to try to outrun them - - or a blaster bolt - - down the long hallway to L'varren's corner suite.

A sudden idea struck, and she hit the "halt" button on the call panel. Her unwilling passengers tensed to make their escape, but were visibly disappointed when the lift stopped between floors and the door remained closed.

"Hovercam, down," she snapped, digging out the precious datacard. As the device hummed closer to the floor, she flipped up its access panel and pulled out the fresh, unused datacard it was carrying, slipping the other datacard in its place. A light on the hovercam's rim began blinking red, indicating the datacard was full and couldn't record any more information. She routinely fixed all her cards after use, so there was never any danger of accidentally recording over them.

In this case, if she didn't make it to L'varren's suite, the hovercam's blinking light would alert them there was something there to be seen.

Tapping the turbolift's release and flipping the hovercam's panel back down, she ordered it, "Go straight to Suite 44-1." Almost as an afterthought, she reset her blaster's setting to stun. If there was any shooting, she didn't want anybody killed. Dead assassins couldn't confess.

When the doors slid open, she cautiously stuck her head out and glanced both ways down the corridor. The path looked clear. Taking a firmer grip on the blaster, she stepped out, but before she got past the other turbolift's doors, they opened, and with startling speed, Darne lunged out and grabbed her.

He captured her gun hand with professional ease, and pressed a painfully strong arm across her throat, dragging her back into his turbolift. Gasping, Kella saw the hovercam whirring down the hall towards L'varren's suite. The doors slid shut and she gasped again as he wrenched her wrist, sending a white-hot flare of pain up her arm, followed by numbness. She only knew she'd dropped the blaster when he kicked it to the other side of the lift and it skittered to a halt against the wall. With a fresh surge of awareness, she realized he held a vibro-knife near her face.

"How about you be smart and hand over the vidclip, huh?" he said softly in her ear, and she shivered to hear such a cool, conversational tone from a man holding a knife to her throat.

Forcing a calm to her voice that she didn't feel, she carefully agreed. "If you insist on it."

"I do," he said. Switching the weapon to his other hand, he reached around and slipped his fingers into the datatote at her side. Acutely aware of the vibrating blade so close she could practically feel it snipping off strands of hair, she stiffened but kept silent as he conducted his search. Her identi-credcard, datapad, room key, and some local currency were raised for his inspection before being unceremoniously dropped to the floor.

The handful of datacards he kept, shoving her away and stuffing them into his jacket in the same quick motion. Kella stumbled into the lift's wall, turned around, found him scooping up her blaster and pointing it at her. She froze.

"It really won't do you any good, you know," she told him, unable to suppress a sudden spurt of defiance. "Just getting rid of my copy of the vidclip won't get rid of the one I already filed in the newbank. Once the courier picks up the message packet, you won't be able to cover this up, no matter what you do to me."

He smiled, a mere showing of teeth. "The report you filed no longer exists," he corrected politely. "When the newsdroid arrives, there will be no report on this incident at all from the infamous Kella Rand."

She frowned at him.

"A tap of the keypad here, a deletion of a file there..." He shrugged. "It's not so hard to make a report disappear. Especially with the help of someone with the proper access codes."

Juloff, of course. So the bureau reporter truly had betrayed her. Somehow, making her news report disappear seemed even worse than taking potshots at her on the street.

"Why?" she asked. "Why would he do that?"

"Because he's a loyal citizen of the Empire," Darne said flatly. "Just as I am. And no upstart Rebel government is going to set up shop on Indu San, or get its slimy fingers into our people. Not while we have any say about it."

She stared at him blankly, then the why suddenly fell into place and realization dawned. "Is that what this is all about?" she asked.

"Of course," he said. "And it's working brilliantly, too."

And it was.

Nostler had said that before they'd been forced out, the Empire's rule hadn't been that unpopular; and Kella had seen for herself that the Empire still enjoyed some support, such as that from the business consortium she'd so aptly dubbed the "Indu Imperialists." By actively

supporting the Empire, the Imperialists made more credits, both through excess profits gouged from their own citizens, and from contracts and contacts gained through Imperial intercession.

Here was a group that would clearly adore seeing the New Republic discredited. What better way to accomplish that than to pin an assassination on them?

Kella briefly remembered the grisly scene in the Council Chamber. "But why kill Barayel?" she asked. "All indications were that he was going to vote no to the alliance."

Darme snorted. "He might have - - or he might not. He's been a slippery worrt all along. This way was better."

She tried another tack. "But what about what the people want? A lot of them seemed happy that the Empire was gone."

"The people!" he said scornfully. "The people don't know what's best for them. Lower the prices, and they'll follow anyone, anywhere. They don't understand how it works."

But now, she did. Like the Empire he admired, Darme clearly thought in terms of profit and loss - - the bottom line, not right and wrong. She opened her mouth to speak again when the turbolift abruptly shuddered to a halt, as if its power had been suddenly cut off. Darme's eyes narrowed with anger, and he cursed as he slapped at the call panel, then tried opening the door. It wouldn't budge.

Kella looked up at the indicator, which showed they were stopped between floors. Keeping Kella's blaster pointed at her and snarling "Don't move," Darme brought out the vibro-knife again, and carefully pried at the seam where the doors joined in the center. When he'd pried open a crack, he used it to pull the doors open, exposing the flat wall of the turbolift shaft. Sticking his head into the small space, he studied the shadowy wall and grunted in satisfaction upon seeing a service ladder within reach.

Then he turned back to her, a cold glint in his eye.

Alerted, Kella ducked to the side, but there was nowhere to go. As the blaster beam struck her in the side and she fell to the floor, her last thought was to be grateful she'd reset her blaster from "kill" to "stun."

* * *

She woke to a rising sensation. Just as her brain cleared enough to realize that the turbolift was again on the move, it stopped, and her stomach lurched. Blearily, she raised her head as the scarred door opened and a forest of legs rushed in and knelt down around her.

"Kella! Are you all right?" L'varren asked, helping her to a sitting position. Still groggy, she nodded and glanced around. Besides

two of his own officers, she recognized the red-seamed pant legs of hotel security standing just off the lift.

"You saw the vidclip?" she asked, looking up at him.

"We did, and we've got the suspect, too," he answered. "Security caught him prying his way out of the shaft a few floors down. He's been arrested and, I expect, will be charged with Barayel's murder.

"Thanks to your sharp eyes, my aide and the New Republic have been cleared of suspicion," he added.

Kella smiled weakly. "Just doing my job, Ambassador."

The words seemed to echo in her head, and she felt a sudden jolt of alarm. "What time is it?" she asked, freeing an arm from L'varren's grasp and checking her chronometer. In horror, she saw it was 2354.

Was she too late to catch the newsdroid?

"Where's the clip?" she demanded, scrambling to her feet and heading off the lift on startingly woozy legs. L'varren and the troops followed, the diplomat eyeing her with concern.

"In my suite," he said. "Along with your hovercam."

"I've got to do a whole new report!" she told him urgently. "The one I filed earlier was deleted and there's nothing on the assassination for the newsdroid to pick up. If it hasn't already been here." She scowled fiercely at the thought.

Not waiting for permission, she barrelled through the door to his suite. Finding the comm unit, she hurriedly keyed in Nostler's frequency, leaping on him without preamble when he answered. "Has the courier picked up yet?"

"Kella! Where are you?" Nostler yelped back. "Something big's going down at L'varren's hotel. They're sealing it off, aren't letting any reporters in, but maybe--"

"I'm already here," she cut him off impatiently. "Robbe. The newsdroid. Has it picked up yet?"

"No! You still have time for an update," he assured her. "Little close to the wire, but it'll dump its message packets before uplinking our reports. You'll still get the scoop, if you make it quick."

Kella cut off the transmission and beckoned to her hovercam, mind racing over what had to be done next. Grab a quick statement from the local law enforcement, get a few quotes from some Indu councilors, maybe a hopeful prediction from L'varren about tomorrow's vote, do a quick re-edit -- all at lightspeed.

With a tight smile, she keyed in her newsbank access code and got to work.