

[Back To Index](#)

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Observations

by [Alison Glover](#)

Author's Note: This was one of the "illo-before-the-story" contributions to Smelly #5. I'd like to thank Nancy Stasulis for both the initial sketch that inspired the story and for the beautiful illo that appeared in the zine.

Let observation with extensive view,

Survey mankind.....

Samuel Johnson

Below the Embassy's beautiful hanging gardens, Rilt the Observer grazed under a sprinkler. He was confused.

And also curious, so he sent one of his drones drifting over to where the Jedi, Luke Skywalker, and the Wookie, Chewbacca, had just emerged from the Embassy's back door, past the saluting guards. They both appeared somewhat uncomfortable about having been saluted, and instead of enjoying the lovely views and scents above and around them, were standing close by the door, half-hidden by a profusely flowering grevillea, as if they didn't want anyone on the balconies above to see them.

Chewbacca peered round the edge of the grevillea, squinting through the dangling flowers, his attitude when he saw Rilt seemingly a combination of relief and puzzlement. His furry head disappeared behind the bush again. Through the drone, Rilt heard him say, "It's okay, Luke. There's still no one out here but that Observer, Rilt."

The Wookie's face re-appeared briefly, and he added, "Who seems to be having a shower under a garden hose."

"Maybe he had even more trouble figuring out how the plumbing here works than I did," said the Jedi.

Rilt had to concentrate to recognise most individual humans; clothing was an irrelevance for his species, and at first he had been very surprised when people had apparently changed colour from day to day, or in some cases from hour to hour. So it had been a relief to meet the Jedi, whose aura was unmistakable no matter what he was wearing (which was currently dark trousers and boots similar to those he normally wore, but instead of his usual high-necked black tunic, he had on a loose, light-coloured shirt).

His expression and body language were also different from the other times Rilt had seen him. Normally, his manner was quiet, reserved and controlled. Now, however, he appeared much more relaxed. He was smiling, and both he and the Wookiee had about them an air of ... Rilt thought about it. Of mischief, perhaps.

It occurred to Rilt that, even by human standards, the Jedi was young. Rilt also recalled that when they had been introduced, he'd made it clear that he preferred to be called just 'Luke'.

Since Rilt would be most distressed to offend him, he should bear that in mind. Luke, then, had turned back to the two guards at the door. One guard was human, the other Saurian, (the reptilian species also native to this system). Both were resplendent in their colourful ceremonial uniforms. Rilt understood that the guards' presence itself was largely ceremonial; in a sector recovering from a devastating war, the real security precautions for visiting dignitaries were covert.

Luke was saying, "If Mon Mothma asks, we'd really appreciate it if you didn't mention you'd seen us." As he spoke, he gestured with one hand, and there was a brief flare in that bright aura.

This was indeed most confusing. Why didn't the Jedi and his Wookiee friend want their whereabouts to be known?

Confusion, Rilt knew, was a normal state for an isolated Observer. Until the Emphathist and Synthesist joined him and he could share his findings with them, Rilt would not truly understand the culture in which he'd so recently arrived. At first, though, the behaviour of the denizens of Gateway Station had made some sense to him.

But not today. Later this evening, there was to be something called a Formal Reception. Lacking sufficient data from which to extrapolate a reliable conclusion, Rilt was unsure whether this event was the result, or the cause of the increasingly incomprehensible behaviour he was faithfully Observing. At first, he'd thought it might be a religious ceremony; that it was occurring at all was apparently by decree of some mysterious 'they', over whose whims even Station

Commander Jenson had no power. For the past few days, she had been loudly muttering things like, "They believe the occasion warrants some formal recognition, do they? All right, if they want formal, I'll give them formal."

However, Rilt had now gathered that 'they' were not interventionist deities. It seemed instead that the Reception was something to do with the contingent representing the 'New Republic', who had arrived at Gateway just after Rilt had. The people of this system had been allied with them in the recent war with the Empire. His hosts had been very concerned that this apparently unexpected influx of visitors had meant that they might neglect him, but he had assured them it was not a problem. In truth, it was much easier to Observe when he was not the only centre of attention.

Commander Jenson had also been muttering, but much more quietly, to her Saurian first officer about the security problems this reception apparently presented. The war might officially over, but it seemed that personal scores were still being settled independently, a concept Rilt found most puzzling. He very curious, too, about a conversation the drones had overheard between Jenson and her security chief.

"If the rumours about his ego are true, this reception is just the sort of event he would find an irresistible opportunity," the security chief had said.

"That's what I'm hoping," Jenson had replied. "That we can use this to flush him out."

Who 'he' might be, and why he needed flushed out was a most intriguing mystery, although perhaps Rilt had watched a few too many of the holo-dramas these people were so fond of, and had mis-interpreted something mundane. Still, it was an additional reason to look forward with interest to the reception, and to immediately assure Commander Jenson that he would be there.

From the attitude of those who had given him his invitation to this Reception (a rectangle of lovely thick cream parchment, edged in gold, and covered in fascinating curly script in scarlet ink; it had tasted delicious), Rilt had understood that he should be honoured to have been invited. There had been a distinct implication that it would have been most bad-mannered of him to refuse to attend, even if he had not considered it an excellent opportunity to continue his prime function. But evidently not all those invited felt the same way about it. Rilt had Observed reactions to those pretty rectangles which had ranged from utter delight to total dismay.

Rilt moved out from under the sprinkler, happy that his green and purple hide was now well-moisturised and would be looking its best. Still hungry, he ambled, with only alternate feet lowered, to prune the dog-roses trailing over the ornate metal trellis that bordered the small horizontal section of the gardens, and closed them off from the shaft around one side of which the Embassy curved. The shaft,

nearly two kilometers long, ran from what had been the fusion reactor core when Gateway Station was first built, up to a transparent cupola far above Rilt's head. The whole structure braced by soaring buttresses and cantilevers, all of them highly polished, and decorated with intricate etchings, or curved into complex scroll-work. It was almost as if they had grown, rather than been manufactured, which made Rilt feel at home. He found this exuberant architecture, with its enthusiasm for making structural components beautiful, a fascinating insight into the culture that had built Gateway.

Above the cupola he could make out the lenses and mirrored solar collectors which beamed the light from the system's star, nearly four light-hours distant, into the gardens that sprawled over the balconies of the Embassy residential quarters. He'd been told that originally the gardens had been an essential part of food production for the then much smaller Station; now they were mainly for enjoyment.

Rilt adjusted his sun-glasses. The light here was brighter, and its spectrum different from that his eyes had evolved to see by, so one of Gateway's technician had helpfully made him these filters to compensate. The Jedi and the Wookiee were still showing no signs of enjoying the gardens. They were making their way very quickly towards one of the maintenance ladders that disappeared down below the level of the gardens. Rilt directed the drone to follow them.

Although Rilt had been told that for safety reasons the ladder gate was always kept locked, the Jedi seemed to have no trouble in opening it. Perhaps Rilt had misunderstood the lock's operation. As they closed the gate behind them, started down the ladder and dropped out of the field of view of the Embassy, the Wookiee sighed hugely, apparently in relief. He gave a big toothy grin at his companion, and inquired as to whether Luke was sure he oughtn't to return to the Embassy, put his uniform back on, and go do his duty?

"No," said Luke, very definitely. "Come on, Chewie. I was brought up in a desert, remember. I learnt a great many useful things from Aunt Beru and Uncle Owen about surviving in hostile environments and fixing second-hand machinery, but somehow they never had time to teach me to dance. Besides, if I go, I'll just have Mon Mothma and Dodonna lecturing me about that Jedi Academy idea again, and the remaining aristocracy shoving their daughters at me."

Some of them don't need much shoving, observed the Wookiee, grinning even more broadly.

Luke ignored that. "Since I have no intentions of getting married and settling down to raise lots of little Jedi, nor of training anyone else when I'm not sure yet what I can do myself, but nor do I want to mortally offend some family or clan we really need as an ally, it would be a much better idea if I wasn't there at all," he announced. It appeared to Rilt that he was rather pleased with that piece of logic.

He slapped the Wookiee on the back. "Besides, since I'm the last one, isn't it up to me to decide for myself what a Jedi's duties are? So I reckon, now that you and Han have finally got the money, it's my duty to use whatever Force-given insights I might have to make sure you don't get ripped off. Especially if Han is over-estimating the effect his charm will have on Ship-Merchant Brona."

Chewbacca, it seemed, found the concept of his partner having over-estimated his charm highly amusing. He stifled a roar of laughter, then peeked over the edge of the reactor shaft to make sure he hadn't been over-heard. *Han was good at charming Brona's mother. She always had a soft spot for him, and we did a lot of business over the years. Now that she's dead, I hear that Brona is making her own a reputation as a shrewd business-person. Even as a kid, she was always the one telling her mother not to give anyone a discount without getting something in return.* The Wookiee looked up towards one of the balconies. *Wonder how Han's going with explaining to Leia why he can't be at the Reception?*

From the viewpoint of his second drone, Rilt noticed movement on the balcony which Chewbacca was contemplating. A small, white-clad female human was pacing back and forth across it. She turned and yelled at someone still inside, "What do you mean, you forgot and arranged to do something else!?"

Since the members of the New Republic Senate visiting the station were considerate enough to habitually wear their white robes of office, Rilt could differentiate them by size. This woman was Senator Organa.

For a being so small, she was surprisingly loud.

Down below, Luke Skywalker and Chewbacca exchanged amused glances. "I'd say Han's explanation is going down about as well as might be expected," Luke said.

He frowned, looked up and stared directly at Rilt's first drone, which was still hovering above him. Rilt supposed that he shouldn't have been surprised that a Jedi had noticed it, although the drones were silent, semi-transparent, and hard to see against most backgrounds. They were little more than hydrogen-filled membranes with rudimentary sense and digestive organs, normally stored in his lower abdominal pouch. It was a simple matter to adjust the metabolism of his secondary stomach to produce the gas required to inflate them; efficient. Observing was greatly aided by the ability to see from several points of view simultaneously.

Rilt had told his hosts that they were harmless pets, which was in some ways true. That he had access to everything the drones sensed he had been instructed not to mention.

"Hi, Rilt," said the Jedi to the drone. He pulled himself back up the ladder, past the Wookie, with a complete disregard for the drop below him, and waved briefly across the garden at Rilt himself. Then he put a finger to his mouth in what Rilt decided must be a request for silence and ducked back down again.

It was rather amusing, trying to hold a conversation with two people of whom all he personally could see was a mop of fair hair and a blob of brown fur, as if they were trying to impersonate a pair of sea anemones on a rock. Rilt raised the first metre and half of his body from the ground and wriggled his antennae in return (he'd been told that he looked like a cross between a caterpillar and a dragon, although from the holos he'd seen, he didn't bear that much resemblance to the latter; he had no tail to speak of, and the small iridescent vanes on his back were fins, not wings). Then he casually went back to the roses, rather enjoying this conspiratorial feeling, and let the drone drop down beside the ladder.

Luke's next remark was addressed through the drone. "We're going to the pub. The *Photon and Firkin*, down by the Docking Bay One. Come along later, if the Reception gets too boring. I'd love to hear about your ship."

As always when he thought of his ship, Rilt was bathed in a quiet glow of pride and love. The Jedi's interest in her was pleasing.

Chewie was looking thoughtfully from Luke to the drone. "Why're you talking to that? Does this mean that Rilt can hear what that it can?"

"Yes," said Luke, with an air of 'isn't that obvious?'. Fortunately, it hadn't been so obvious to anyone else.

"How did you know that?"

The Jedi looked surprised that the Wookie had asked. "I just knew."

I hate it when you say that. Then the Wookie looked up at the drone again, *So, Rilt, this means you can be both at the pub and at the Reception?*

Rilt had the drone tilt in affirmation. Perhaps later he could trade his silence about this pair's surreptitious exit from the Embassy for theirs about the drones' abilities.

And, Rilt realised, being both at the pub and at the Reception was an excellent idea. Besides, if he sent the drone down to the docking bay, he could more easily share today's Observations with his ship. He directed the drone to follow Luke and Chewbacca. As it did so, the Wookie stuck his head up one last time, glanced at the balcony where Leia Organa was now standing, arms folded, looking not at all pleased, and muttered, *Pity Han doesn't have that option.*

Curious, Rilt moved his second drone to a balcony adjacent to Senator Organa's. He'd heard a number of people talk about Han Solo (Commander Jenson, for one, evidently knew him) and was intrigued. Rilt was unclear as to what relationship Solo, his partner Chewbacca and the Jedi bore to the rest of the New Republic party. Although they were also staying at the Embassy, the three of them had arrived together the day after the others, Solo and the Wookie acting extremely pleased with themselves. Perhaps, Rilt thought, that could be explained by their 'having got the money'.

Money, it seemed, was an extremely important commodity in these parts.

Since they had arrived, the three of them had spent most of their time in the lower levels of the Gateway, down in the docking bays and ship-yards.

The drone alighted on a large tub of mint which the gardeners had said needed tidying. Rilt had not liked to offend his hosts by letting them know that the dead and sometimes (he shuddered) half-decayed organic matter which they had offered him as food was insufficient nourishment. So he'd been very embarrassed when one of the gardeners had noticed him devouring not only the fruit but the leaves and branches of the miniature citrus tree on his balcony, and sending his drones to nibble at the foliage flowing from those nearby. However, they'd been very understanding once he'd explained. Rilt hoped that the current arrangement, in which the gardeners let him know what plants needed tending and he consumed all those that contained tasted good was proof that his people would be able to forge mutually beneficial relationships in this sector of the galaxy.

The gardeners had also supplied Rilt with several varieties of potting mix and fertiliser, which were helping keep at bay the vitamin and mineral deficiencies from which he would otherwise be suffering. But Rilt was still always hungry. His stomachs knew something essential was missing from his diet, but so far he hadn't been able find any substance on the station that smelt right, and he would consume no more than was absolutely necessary of his ship's nutrients.

Prudent Observers always made certain that, no matter what happened to them as individuals, their symbiotic ships and the Observations transferred to them would get back to the home-world. And here, farther from home than any of his kind had ever been, Rilt would take no chances.

"Look, Leia," Solo was saying, "I'm sorry. But I really did completely forget that I'd said I'd go to this -" he apparently decided not to vocalise whatever description he'd been about to use " - Reception. Besides, this meeting is important to me and Chewie. We've been through this often enough. I love you, but that doesn't mean I'm going to spent the rest of my life being the accessory to your career that Mon Mothma and the Council seem to think I ought to be."

"Han, I don't want you to be either. I'd get bored with an accessory. But you said you would go."

"Was I drunk at the time? I've been kind of allergic to formal functions ever since that stupid ceremony on Yavin when Luke and I got medals and Chewie didn't."

To judge by the Senator's expression, she might be in agreement with Solo's uncomplimentary description of the medal-giving. Rilt directed the drone to stay still in its tub of mint. He didn't want it seen. The events leading up to that ceremony were something he wanted to hear more about.

But Solo had changed the subject. "Besides, you secretly like these affairs." The Senator looked as if she was about to protest, but Solo didn't give her time. "Go on, admit it. You like that sort of dancing, and polite intellectual conversations. I don't. If I go, I'm bound to say something tactless to somebody or stand on the wrong set of toes trying to dance to that boring so-called music. Every time I do go to these things, I find some new way to upset you. It'll be better all round if I'm not there to embarrass you." Solo looked just as pleased as Luke Skywalker had at having what he evidently thought was an excellent and altruistic reason for not attending.

"Maybe." The Senator sighed. "We do need to make a good impression here tonight. And when you go to these affairs, it always makes Mon Mothma and Dodonna nervous, never knowing what you might do next." Solo beamed broadly at that remark, giving Rilt the distinct impression that if Solo was bad for certain people's nerves, it was entirely intentional.

"Besides," the man said, going up to the balcony railing, and looking down, his expression softening. "She's such a little beauty.... I can't miss an opportunity like this." He gazed wistfully down the reactor shaft, approximately in the direction of the main docking area.

Watching him lean on the railing, the Senator's expression also softened. "Just stay out of trouble, then."

He turned and gave her a big kiss. "Sure, sweetheart. I'll try."

"There is no try," the Senator called dourly after him as he disappeared inside. Then she leant on the railing herself, pulling a branch of jessamine down to smell the flowers. Rilt couldn't tell if her expression was of resignation, relief, disappointment, or a mixture of all three.

Rilt had sent the drone back to the rear door of the Embassy. He himself was just pausing for a last nibble at a berry-covered bush (still not what his stomach needed, but very tasty, nevertheless). Movement caught both his and the drone's eyes. He looked up. The two guards at the door were saluting again.

Two male humans emerged, dressed in civilian clothing, although compared with many of the garments Rilt had seen the occupants of the station sporting, these were so tame as to be bland. One of the men was dark-haired and young. The other, older, one had evidently recognised the human guard. He was enthusiastically shaking the man's hand and reminiscing about some battle in which they'd both participated.

Because he had only ever seen them before in uniform, Rilt took a moment to work out that the men were General Reeikan and Wing Commander Antilles. Despite Reeikan having recognised the guard, both of them were acting.... Rilt searched for the right expression. Furtively, he decided.

As Rilt lifted a further set of legs off the ground so that he could reach one last bunch of berries, the two men jumped. It seemed they hadn't seen him until he moved. It occurred to Rilt that, should he ever need to hide, these gardens would be an excellent place to do so. His mottled hide had evolved to blend into a completely different environment, but it seemed to be good camouflage here, too.

Reeikan was saying to the guard, "I'd be really grateful if you didn't mention to General Dodonna or Mon Mothma that you've seen us or know where we're going."

"You're not part of the diplomatic party, then, sir?" the guard asked.

Both the General and the Wing Commander looked slightly embarrassed. "Gods no," the older man said, "I'm a soldier, not a talker. We just came along for a chance to see Gateway other than in the middle of an all-out battle." He gestured up toward the cupola. "I love early Expansion architecture."

The guards were clearly pleased by that remark. "I'd be delighted to show you round later, sir, once my shift is over," the human one said. "Take you some places the formal tours don't go."

The General beamed. "I'd like that. Come down the *Photon and Firkin* when you get off duty. I owe you a drink."

After another glance upwards to check that no one was looking, Reeikan and Antilles bolted for the access ladder and disappeared as Luke and Chewbacca had done. The General, Rilt noted, required a electronic key to open the gate.

Rilt had just re-entered the Embassy, and was heading for the stairs (the building had lifts, but Rilt rather enjoyed the experience of rippling up and down wide marble staircases). Before he got there, Han Solo came charging down them. Although Rilt was still confused by human costume, he was reasonably confident that the man was only half-dressed. At least, all the humans Rilt had seen so far had worn clothing on their upper bodies and on their feet. At the lowest landing

Solo must have decided that running was too slow a mode of locomotion. He leapt on the polished wooden banister and slid the rest of the way down. That looked like an interesting mode of travel; if it wasn't for his doubt that the banister would hold his weight, Rilt would have been very tempted to try it himself sometime.

Solo rushed up to the guards, who were acting as if half-naked men sliding frantically down banisters was an everyday occurrence, although as far as Rilt knew, it was not. "Did Luke Skywalker go out this way?"

The guards looked blank, and then a little confused. "Damn," Solo muttered, with resignation rather than vehemence. "I hate it when he does that."

Despite remaining completely immobile, the guards exchanged a quick glance. Since they apparently did not recollect seeing Luke and Chewbacca, perhaps they were wondering whether to mention General Rieekan's surreptitious exit to Solo, who was pacing back towards the stairs, looking frustrated.

Rilt pattered up to him. "Excuse me, Captain Solo. Perhaps I might be able to help."

Solo stopped dead and stared at Rilt. A big smile slowly spread across his face. "I didn't think I'd ever seen anyone quite like you before. Who are you? Where are you from?"

"I am Observer Rilt, Captain." Rilt held out one right fore-hand, human fashion. "I am delighted to make your acquaintance. My people are native to one of the star clusters out-lying this galaxy. Our ships only recently learned to cover such distances, so I am the first of my kind to reach this sector."

Rilt had not thought it possible, but Solo's smile broadened, and his eyes widened. "You came all that way? By yourself? That's amazing. I'd love to see your ship -" The sound of footsteps made Solo stop and look at himself. "Oops. Sorry, but I think you'd better excuse me before I offend somebody."

"Of course," Rilt said. "I would be more than happy to discuss ships with you at some later time. For now, I merely wanted to tell you that Jedi Skywalker and First Mate Chewbacca told me that they were going to the *Photon and Firkin*." Rilt extended his senses to his first drone, and found that it was having a fascinating time in this pub. It had found all sorts of new behaviours to Observe.

"Chewie couldn't even wait for me, eh?" Solo said, more to himself than to Rilt. He started back up the stairs. "Thanks, Observer Rilt." Then he did a double take and asked, "Hey, when you saw Luke, he wasn't wearing a cream-coloured, collarless shirt that was rather too big for him, was he?"

"As a matter of fact, Captain, he was."

"Damn," Solo said, even more resignedly this time. "I hate it when he does that, too."

Although much of the conversation was incomprehensible, and some of the behaviour he was observing most peculiar, Rilt was enjoying the Reception. He found the music soothing. It was being played by a group of human and Saurian musicians, not a sound system. Rilt's own people loved to make music and he was most intrigued by the instruments. There was also not the normal profusion of the droids of which people had so many. Instead, Rilt had been happy to see some of his gardener friends, all very formally dressed, solemnly carrying trays of pretty crystal glasses full of interesting beverages. The few droids that were present were protocol models. Rilt had been interested to hear one of them complain that he'd rather have been with Master Luke, although it seemed to Rilt that the droid was enjoying translating for the dignitaries of several species.

There was also a profusion of food and drink, which Rilt had been diligently investigating, still hoping to find something to quiet his increasingly unhappy stomachs. He had not understood why the presence of fish pastries might be offensive to the Mon Calamari ambassador. Nevertheless the alacrity with which the feline Trianni had consumed them all in order (they claimed) to avoid a diplomatic incident had been amusing.

Rilt was having trouble identifying the human women present. They looked completely different in the long skirts that were apparently appropriate dress for this occasion. The men were easier; most of them were wearing formal uniforms so Rilt could distinguish them by rank. Even Station Commander Jenson (whose remark that she had no time for the Core Worlds' standards of feminine beauty, and that she was not fat, merely cuddly, he hadn't understood at all) had at first been unrecognisable in her long, flowing gown. She was dancing by with her Second Officer (her First Officer had explained that Saurians did not dance as couples in public). Rilt enjoyed watching the fabrics of the women's dresses billow as they moved. It reminded him of the kelps in his home lagoon, softly wafting in the warm currents.

It was odd. After the third glass of something called 'punch' (which, although it wasn't what Rilt's stomachs needed, was producing a very pleasant warm glow in them), he kept having the urge to curl up around Commander Jenson's feet, and put his head in her lap, just as he would have with his Clutch-mother back home.

Sternly reminding himself that he was here to Observe, not be overcome with homesick sentimentality, Rilt looked and listened around. Not all the women were

dressed in gowns. Beside him by the punch bowl, Academician Nosira, one of the station's scientific staff, was wearing what must be the formal version of her Science Academy uniform. Her teal tunic was more ornate than the one she normally wore, and the leather instrument satchel over her shoulder was highly polished, and tooled with complex arrays of curves and spirals and dots. Rilt rather liked the smell of the polish, and her gold filigree ear-rings looked like they would be very tasty...

Rilt told himself to stop thinking about his stomachs, and concentrated instead on the quiet conversation between Nosira, a Trianni engineer (who was licking pasty crumbs from his fingers) and Gateway's Saurian Security Chief (very impressive in his dress kilt, and also wearing an ornate instrument pouch over his shoulder).

Nosira was gesturing at one of her colleagues on the dance floor, as the security chief and the engineer unobtrusively adjusted small devices which up until then Rilt had thought to be table ornaments. "No, I decided not to emulate Talina and cut my bed-spread up to make a ball-gown. Functions like this worry me that the New Republic isn't any better than the Empire at heart, still obsessed with an out-dated aristocracy, and with that ridiculously limiting and over-protective attitude to women."

The Trianni tilted his head to one side, and twitched one pointed ear. "I thought that the Core Worlds societies' restriction on the occupations open to women was due to their low ratio of women to men?"

"Yes, partly. After the widespread use of biogenic weapons in the First Clone War, there was a generation when there were so few fertile woman that it was considered the duty of those there were to be mothers."

"What worries me," the Trianni said, "is that apart from their treaty with those *fish*," he directed a scathing glare at the Mon Calamari ambassador's back, " - this lot seem to be just as anthropocentric as the Imperials."

"And as elitist," the Security Officer said. "Everyone on the station helped fight the Empire, not just those with high ranks and fancy titles." His forked tongue flickered into his drink. The dainty cocktail glass looked very fragile in his large clawed hand. "Still, they're not all like that. I hear that General Reeikan is down the *Photon and Firkin*, talking to the lads from Black Watch regiment."

"Will he be safe there?" Nosira asked. "There's still plenty people on Gateway who feel that we'd have been better off not aiding the Alliance. The Empire might never have pursued the war on this front if the Alliance hadn't been getting ships and equipment from us."

"True. I spent an hour this morning assuring Brona that we haven't given up looking for the Imperial assassin who booby-trapped her parents' ship." The

Saurian hissed in disgust. "Blowing up civilians - a coward's way to fight! But Reeikan's never given himself airs and graces, and he's popular with the troops here. *He's* not a problem; the lads will look out for him. That old fool Dodonna we'll keep safe in here. There's also plenty of people here who haven't forgotten that he couldn't read an Identification Friend or Foe system, and ordered an Alliance cruiser to fire on a squadron of our ships."

" 'Friendly fire' - now there's a contradiction in terms," the Trianni remarked. He lowered his voice further. "I tell you if, we do have any uninvited guests here, and it's Dodonna they're after, I might not try that hard to stop them." As he spoke, he placed the object he'd been fiddling with back on the table, adding quietly, "That's the last of the poison snoopers checked." He raised his voice again. "Anyway, we'd better do our duty here." He struck a pose. "I go to mingle."

While Rilt himself listened to this conversation, the drone he'd brought with him was scanning the room and its occupants from above the dance floor. Commander Jenson had agreed to let the drone attend, provided it stayed still and didn't interfere with her security precautions for the visiting dignitaries. It made its shape as such as possible like one of the simpler light fittings to avoid alarming anyone.

The room itself was well worthy of the attention. It was on an upper level of the Embassy; on one side a large window opened to broad balconies that overlooked the hanging gardens. Opposite that, the blast and radiation shields on the outer wall had been opened to reveal a wide viewport. Whether the station had been oriented deliberately to provide such a spectacular backdrop, Rilt didn't know, but the viewport framed a ringed gas giant, blue-green and massive, its rings sparking and its icier attendant moons shining like jewels with reflected sunlight.

There were other lights glinting in the darkness too; cities on the habitable moons, and orbiting ship-yards and space-docks.

"Beautiful view," observed Senator Organa to one of Rilt's gardener friends as she claimed a glass from his tray. "It reminds me of something....."

The gardener grinned, and leaned closer to whisper to her, "Actually, it's a bit of a joke. That view was at the beginning of each episode of a famous long-running holo-drama series about Gateway. Most of the stories were highly improbable adventures about fighting off Corellian pirates...."

For some reason, the Senator smiled fondly at that.

".... but some of the background about moving Gateway out here from the inner system and the first intrepid inter-stellar travellers taking sub-light ships through a stabilised worm-hole, back before the invention of hyperdrive, is true. So we like

to show visitors the view for real, even if getting it centered in the viewport means the floor ends up at a slightly odd angle."

Rilt hadn't noticed that, but then the cities of his people had evolved from rafts, and floated. It had not occurred to Rilt that a floor should necessarily be horizontal, though it did explain why some of the Reception guests were walking so carefully.

In contrast, the wall opposite Rilt and the musicians was completely blank. Since this lack of decoration was so out of keeping with the rest of this section of Gateway, he asked Academician Nosira why.

"Oh, it's been like that for hundreds of years. It's traditional that we keep it that way." The Gatewayans, Rilt had noticed, took great pride in their traditions, and in the achievements of their culture. Both the humans and Saurians on Gateway were native to this system, which was one of a number in the main galaxy in which spaceflight had developed independently. Here, that development had occurred early, no doubt encouraged by the fact that sentient races had evolved on two planets in adjacent orbits.

Nosira glanced over at the dance-floor, where Senator Organa was now whirling by, taking her turn to dance with the Second Officer. "This is one of the oldest sections of Gateway. We're in what was the original operations room. This was built long before the Core Worlds expansion, or the colonisation of planets like Alderaan." The Academician's normally cheerful expression clouded, and she took a large swallow of her drink.

Suddenly, Rilt had no trouble ignoring both his stomachs and his gnawing loneliness. Nosira's remark was a timely reminder that however beautiful their music and amusing their quirks, humans had technology capable of completely destroying an entire world. That was the reason why, as soon as the rumours had reached his people, Rilt had been dispatched so speedily, but so alone. An Observer as young and inexperienced as he was not perhaps the ideal choice for so crucial a mission. But then again, an older ship would not have made it this far, this quickly, Rilt thought with pride.

Such a horrendous sacrilege as the destruction of Alderaan must never be allowed to occur back in his home cluster. Nothing that might happen to Rilt was important; his dying of some obscure vitamin deficiency would be completely inconsequential, provided he learned enough for his people to devise ways to protect themselves, should the expansion of humans and their allies continue beyond the main galaxy.

Whether they had the means and the desire to so expand was something else Rilt was here to find out.

"Originally," the Academician was continuing, "there was a big titanium mural on that wall, depicting myths and legends about the stars from all our main cultures. When Gateway was first built, it was a symbol of our commitment, after far too many centuries fighting each other, to combining our technologies for cooperative and peaceful ventures thereafter. And since then, we always have." The pride in her voice was evident. "Unfortunately, not all the races we've traded with have been friendly. During one early attack, when the station was blockaded, the titanium from the mural was used to make light-weight alloys for turbine parts and fuel compressors. Afterwards, it was decided that instead of replacing it, or using a holo of the original mural, the wall would be left blank as a reminder. Lots of the other features in this room have similar stories. For instance, see all those crystals on that chandelier?"

Rilt looked up, and the drone across.

"They're old laser rods. You can see the flaws in some of them, where they failed in use."

Commander Jenson came up, looking somewhat flushed after her exertions on the dance floor, to seek sustenance from the punch bowl. She must have overheard some of the conversation, because she said, "Oh yes. We're very proud of our ingenuity and adaptability. It's something we like visitors to Gateway to be aware of."

Rilt raised an additional set of feet off the deck, worried that something in his attitude had prompted that remark. "Commander, I reiterate that my people are non-aggressive."

Jenson looked calmly up at him. "At present, Rilt," she said, "it is not your people to whom I want to make that point. It's to the New Republic delegates. Just because we were against the Empire doesn't necessarily mean we're for them. Their methods are certainly not the same, but some of them seem to be as committed to a mono-culture as the Empire was." She swirled her drink, apparently contemplating the fruit floating in it, and then added quietly, "I rather like young Skywalker, but out here we've always felt that the Jedi were a very mixed blessing to the Old Republic, and had too much control over the direction of scientific research, with their emphasis on the mystic and religious aspects of the Force, instead of on trying to understand it. And the Core Worlds' societies have such a rigid class structure. From our viewpoint, it seemed that they were stagnating long before Palpatine made his bid for power. So simply re-instating the Republic without making some fundamental changes seems to us like just asking history to repeat itself."

While Rilt was pondering that, he checked with the drone down in the *Photon and Firkin*. It giggled and informed him that it was having lots of fun.

Switching perspective to see what it was looking at, Rilt at first thought it had a problem with its optic nerves. But no, its lack of clear vision was because the air in the pub was murky with interesting smokes and scents. There was music there too, but completely different from that at the Reception. It had a very pronounced beat and a strong bass to it, which set Rilt's second hindmost feet tapping. There were relatively fewer humans in the pub. Through the drone's eyes, Rilt looked curiously at the species he hadn't seen before.

As for the drone, its mental tone was positively giddy. This concerned Rilt. Some of the fumes were from Kessel Spice pipes and hookahs, and he'd heard that Spice affected many races. However, once the drone calmed down a little, Rilt understood that its mood was not entirely chemical intoxication. Partly, it just liked being around the Jedi. The drones were of a species symbiotic with Rilt's (in fact, all life on Rilt's homeworld was symbiotic in some way; Gateway's biologists had told him that the most comparable eco-systems on their planets were coral reefs). Having no need for a complex central nervous system, the drone's perceptions were simple. But perhaps because of that, they were very closely attuned to the Web of Life. They'd been feeling sorry for the people they'd met here, who seemed to them to be so isolated.

And the drones were a little afraid, as Rilt and the ship were too, of their own isolation, so far from home.

But now the drone had decided to take the existence of another being whose presence it could truly feel, not just sense, as reassurance that even here, across so wide a void, Mother Ocean could still hear them.

And the drone had made another discovery.

These people loved their ships.

Their ships might be non-sentient, mechanical constructs, but their affection for them was obvious. Even without an Empathist, Rilt felt a glow of sympathy and understanding.

And some ships, it seemed, had more claim on their pilots' feeling than others...

"Trade in the *Falcon!*?" Han Solo was yelling. The mobility of human faces was quite amazing. Although Rilt had been carefully cataloging human expressions, so far he'd never seen anything like Solo's look of horror at that suggestion.

Chewbacca gave a howl that Rilt couldn't adequately translate, the volume of which rattled the large numbers of glasses on their table, and sent the drone diving for cover behind the Jedi.

"Hey, Brona," someone yelled, but good-naturedly. "Stop upsetting the Wookie. Some of us are trying to have a quiet drink in here." Perhaps this person was partially deaf; even without Chewbacca howling, the pub was anything but quiet.

A human woman, who was dressed in a plain jumpsuit and seated beside Luke, and opposite Solo and Chewbacca, made calming motions with her hands. "Guys, guys," she said. "It was a joke, okay? I realise you want a second ship, not a replacement." She turned to the Jedi. "How do you put up with these two?"

"Practice," said Luke Skywalker, leaning on the table with his (or, Rilt remembered, Solo's) shirt falling off one shoulder, ignoring the amount of spilled drink that got on his sleeves, and smiling sweetly at Solo and the Wookie. If it wasn't for that clear, bright aura, Rilt doubted that he'd have realised that this was the same man as he'd met at the Embassy.

Brona smiled briefly, before assuming a business-like expression which Rilt had the impression was her normal one. "But that's it, guys. That's my final offer. I'm running a business here, not a charity. With the rest of my family gone, it's up to me to support my staff, so sorry, I don't give credit. It's strictly cash only. For what you've got, you can afford the ship, but not all those extras you want. I'd be happy to have them retrofitted for you, though, if you want to take the ship now and wait for the rest until you've got more money."

After that announcement, Rilt had two pictures of abject disappointment to add to his catalog of expressions

Luke tilted his head to one side, and asked, "If I told you two that everything comes to those who wait, would that get a drink poured over my head?"

"Yes!" chorused Solo and Chewbacca.

"And you should know that I wouldn't sell a ship like that to just anyone," Brona said. "Ones like her I make sure go to owners who'll appreciate them. Tell you what, how about I buy you all another drink while you think about it. My mother said she always stood you one, Solo, so I guess I should keep up the tradition."

"Thanks."

The woman had eased out of the booth they were sitting in. An interesting point, Rilt thought. Here at the Reception, a number of people around him were complaining about sore feet. In the pub they had the option of sitting down. Solo turned to his partner and said, "Damn. There must be some way we can come up with the extra cash. There's no point in having another ship if she's not fast enough to get out of trouble, or doesn't have the sensors to see it coming." He looked around. "Maybe I can find a Sabac game..."

The Wookiee and the Jedi looked at each other, apparently with growing alarm. *And if you do, maybe we'll end up with no money at all,* Chewbacca growled.

"I won the *Falcon* -, didn't I?"

Yes. But how long was your losing streak afterwards?

"It wasn't that long...." Solo was still looking around. He grinned at Luke and reached across the table to ruffle his hair. "Or perhaps there are a few pocket-ball hustlers in here that could be coaxed into a game or two with an apparently drunk farm-boy?"

Luke leaned towards Solo, speaking so quietly that even the drone's sensitive hearing barely caught what he was saying. "Should ask Mon Mothma whether discussing the ethics of using the Force to win at pocketball should be on that Jedi Academy syllabus?"

However, before the other human could react to that, Chewbacca had a more practical objection. *Not enough money in pocketball. We'd be playing for months in a place like this before we came up with the sort of cash we need.*

"You could ask Leia to lend it to you," Luke suggested.

"No!" Solo glared at his friend with another of those horrified and indignant expressions. Rilt was enjoying watching him. It was so much easier for him when people made it clear what they felt. Rilt had an innate ability with languages, but knowing the words wasn't always much help in understanding what these people really meant. "No way. Chewie and I are doing this on our own. There must be some other way we can get the money."

Brona, the drone noticed, had stopped to talk to someone on her way back from the bar. Or rather, stopped for a man to whisper in her ear. What he told her was inaudible, but Brona gave a grim little smile and said quietly, "So Security think he'll be there, too, do they?"

"How're you going to get in, Brona?" the man asked.

She balanced the tray of drinks she was carrying against her hip, as she fiddled with one of her ear-rings. Nervously, Rilt thought, although she hadn't struck him as the nervous type. She glanced over at Solo and Chewbacca, her smile this time more amused than grim. "I think I've got my way in." The smile was quickly replaced by her business-like look, and she continued back towards the table, dodging nimbly through the throng. As she passed one particularly inebriated customer, she said firmly, "I'd try turning round if I were you, Zilnik. I've always found it easier to score at darts if I face the board."

As she put the tray of drinks on the table, she began, "I've been thinking Solo. I might be able to give you an additional 5% discount on that ship, if you can do something for me."

But then the drone felt a sharp pain, and was falling.

"The dart-board's that way, Zilnik, you intoxicated idiot," it heard Brona yell.

After that, there was a blur of sensations from it. The room spinning, hands flapping at it, an unpleasantly high-pitched voice screaming, "Get that thing out of my hair!" and a painful thud as it was flung onto a table.

"And now get that thing out of my drink!" screamed the same voice.

"Where'sh my dart gone?" That inquiry was in very slurred tones.

"It's in my drink too, you moron."

Held by one edge, the drone was lifted off the table. Completely disorientated, it was radiating nothing but pleas for assistance. It was very happy to see the Jedi moving towards it even if, from the drone's perspective, he was upside down.

"This your jelly-fish?" another voice asked.

"No, but I'll look after it."

The hand holding the drone jerked, as if whoever it was had been about to object and snatch it away, but then the grip loosened, and the drone fell into the Jedi's out-stretched hands. It tried, not very successfully, to crawl up his sleeve.

"It's all right," the Jedi was said soothingly, stroking the drone. Then he added, "Hey, it's warm. And I thought it would be all slimy, but it's not. It feels almost silky." The drone cooed and continued hanging onto Luke with all its cilia.

Above it, a large furry face loomed. *It's not dead, then?*

"No. It just got a puncture."

Rilt was relieved that the drone had encountered only a sharp object, not something too hot. It wouldn't have survived the explosion if its hydrogen had ignited, rather than leaked, and Rilt wasn't sure how much damage it would have done to pub and patrons.

As a very last resort, that was another reason drones always accompanied Observers. They could be effective weapons.

What should we do with it? Chewbacca was saying. *Take it back to the Embassy?*

"Perhaps that would be best. Only I have this dark, dire premonition that if I show up at that Reception, getting out again won't be so easy." The Jedi's voice brightened. "I know. Let's take it back to Rilt's ship."

Relieved that the drone would be safe (deflated, they were hardly mobile at all), Rilt returned his attention to the Reception. He'd had been pleasantly surprised at how easy it had been to carry on conversations while so much of his attention had been with his drone. Indeed, a recorder hung round his neck with a brief explanation of who he was, and some inquiring 'yes, really?' noises, would probably have served just as well as Rilt himself.

He looked around for Alliance personnel who might be susceptible to his best dumb herbivore impression, and be persuaded to talk about how they'd destroyed the Death Stars. Rilt had heard Gateway's people discuss that, of course, but he wanted first hand information as well. Filling two glasses with punch, he advanced on Mon Mothma, who was surreptitiously leaning on a table. It appeared that her feet hurt, which was not surprising, since the shape of her shoes bore no relation to that of a human foot. Rilt had no idea why so many of the females in the room were subjecting themselves to such unnecessary discomfort.

Beside her, a tall youngish-looking man, whom Rilt had been told was named Smytherton, was nibbling at a little cake (they were very pretty, but too sweet for Rilt's taste). Smytherton had been introduced as an 'aide', which had not been very helpful. Rilt hadn't figured out yet what aides did. He probably wouldn't have noticed the man at all, except that when Smytherton had entered the room through the unobtrusive security scanners, one of the guards at the door had looked surprised, and muttered to his colleague, "I didn't know Smytherton had an artificial hand." The idea of mechanical limbs and organs made Rilt feel a little queasy, but nevertheless he was curious, and was trying, without being obvious about it, to tell which of the man's hands was prosthetic.

Smytherton had been looking thoughtfully at Mon Mothma as Rilt approached, but smiled cheerfully as she turned to Rilt. "No matter," he said, "plenty of other lovely ladies to flirt with here."

For some reason, Mon Mothma's face went rather pink at that remark. Rilt filed it in his large mental folder of other, incomprehensible comments that seemed to have something to do with humans' mating habits. From what Rilt had heard so far, most of the men present did not regard Councilor Mothma as a particularly

desirable mate, although her being dedicated, extremely hard-working, and indispensable to the setting up of the New Republic sounded very worthy to him.

Why that made her boring, Rilt didn't understand, but he did not expect to comprehend such social nuances without an Empathist.

Still, until this evening, Rilt had thought that humans were still too novel to him to be anything but fascinating, but although he had tried hard to pay attention, some of the conversations he'd been having had been just a mite tedious.

Some time later, Rilt realised that the second drone, although continuing to impersonate a light fitting, was now rather closer to the chandelier that Nosira had been telling him about earlier, and was urgently directing Rilt's attention to it.

Oh.

Rilt excused himself to Mon Mothma and looked around for Nosira. Ah, there she was, talking to General Dodonna. Rilt could move very quickly when he chose to; she had just made eye contact with him when he was standing beside her. "General, if you could excuse me. I have urgent business with the Academician."

Rilt was probably being rude, but he put one fore-arm round her shoulders and hustled her away. To his surprise, she hugged him. "Thanks, Rilt. I was desperate to get away from him. I thought he might be worth talking to, but -" She threw up her hands.

It occurred to Rilt that he might not be the only one whose agenda for the evening included finding out about the New Republic's plans and resources.

"Nosira," he said, "that chandelier. What did you say it was made of?"

She looked up at it. "Several types of early laser crystals. Some of them are similar to the natural gemstones we wear as jewellery, which is where the idea of polishing them up and using them for decoration came from. Those red ones are ruby; the pinkish ones are titanium sapphire, and those clear ones are probably some type of garnet. Yttrium aluminium garnet most likely; it was a very common solid-state laser material when they were first developed, and something similar is still in use today."

"Yttrium...." Rilt tried to recall what he had learned about this sector's chemical nomenclature.

"Yes." Nosira grabbed a napkin, and scribbled on it. "Our chemical notation probably won't mean anything to you, but that's its energy level structure." She grinned. "Early photonics is a hobby of mine."

The energy level diagram didn't mean much to Rilt, but those clear crystals smelt right to the drone. "Would it be possible to for me to obtain some?"

"Sure. In fact, hang on -"Nosira rummaged in her satchel. "I've got a rod here, out of a faulty welding droid, that I've been meaning to take down to Crystallography to check why it failed." As she opened the pouch, Rilt noticed that inside it was a medical scanner, which was switched on. And also a small blaster.

"Here you are," she said, unwrapping a tissue from rectangular slab of almost clear material.

Rilt took it, and licked at it, dubiously at first, because it smelt a little odd, and had a strange initial flavour. But after that, it tasted wonderful, just what his stomachs had ordered. They were already sending him messages of thanks.

"You act like it was delicious," Nosira said. She seemed to be finding Rilt's expression amusing. "Doesn't it hurt to eat something that hard?"

"No. It has a very pleasant crunchy texture. And it *is* delicious. It was just the outside that tasted peculiar."

"Maybe that was the anti-reflective coating."

While preoccupied with this dietary discovery, Rilt had stopped paying attention to the other guests. So he was somewhat surprised when he looked around and noticed Senator Organa's expression. Her mouth was a round 'o' of astonishment, and her eyebrows were drawn down into a distinct 'v', which Rilt decided was disapproval. She was completely ignoring what Smytherton, with whom she was dancing, was saying to her, even though to Rilt it sounded very complimentary.

However, behind her, Commander Jenson was still happily chatting away to her current dance partner, and no one else seemed to have noticed anything untoward. Curious, Rilt turned to see what she was staring at.

It was Captain Solo, who was talking animatedly to a human female. Since Solo was now fully dressed, and in similar garb to the rest of the human males present Rilt couldn't understand why his appearance was cause for such a reaction. Hadn't Senator Organa wanted him to be present?

Solo waved at the Senator and at Commander Jenson. "Hi, Leia! Evening, Clarissa. You look gorgeous."

Rilt had to file the expression the Senator pulled at that as something to decipher later, when he understood humans better. The Commander beamed broadly at

Solo, although when she noticed his companion she looked less happy. The two women nodded at each other.

Solo's female companion didn't look remarkable to Rilt, so he had no idea whether she might have been the cause of Senator Organa's reaction. The only difference between her and the other woman present that Rilt could distinguish was that the top half of her costume was even briefer than most. Or maybe there was not any less material - perhaps it was just better filled.

What was much more interesting than her clothing (what there was of it) was her jewellery. As Nosira had said, these people liked to wear polished stones and crystals for ornament. Senator Organa herself was wearing such ear-rings. But all the other jewellery Rilt had seen glowed only with reflected light. Rilt nudged his sun-glasses up, and blinked. Perhaps it was the lighting? No, there was still something odd about the decoration the woman was wearing in her hair. To Rilt's senses, it was behaving more like a simplified version of Nosira's medical scanner than the head-bands and tiaras of the other woman.

Somehow, Rilt didn't think this was just a different fashion in personal adornment.

And those ear-rings were familiar. Now that he concentrated, Rilt recognised the woman. It was Brona, the Ship-Merchant.

It seemed that the 'something' that Solo could do for her must have been to take her to the Reception. Only..... Rilt reviewed his earlier Observations. Brona had not struck Rilt as the sort to have much time for a function such as this, and what relevance this event had to the price of a space-ship was beyond him.

Brona was looking past Captain Solo, rather than at him and she didn't appear to actually be listening to him, despite the fact that he was still enthusiastically talking about hyperdrive upgrades and extra fuel cells, custom heavy-duty alluvial dampers and additional lateral thrusters, all of which Rilt would have expected she'd be keen to sell him.

As they crossed the room, she also seemed to be having trouble walking. In fact, she'd lurched into a couple of other men. Although they did not seem at all upset by this, that also struck Rilt as odd. Surely someone who'd spent all her life around spaceships wouldn't be having trouble with the apparent angle of the floor? Maybe she was drunk? But the drone hadn't noticed her consume much in the pub, and although she was sipping at the drink in her hand, the level of it was not noticeably decreasing.

And although she looked so unsteady, no matter how close she came to women or non-humans, she didn't stumble into any of them.

This was most intriguing.

And also rather exciting. Rilt wondered what he should do. He was most curious (if just a little nervous) as to what was going to happen. Perhaps he should inform Commander Jenson about this?

It seemed that Solo also thought there was something odd about Brona's behaviour. He was propelling her towards the balcony.

Overcome with curiosity, Rilt sent the drone after them. It hid behind a tub of rosemary.

"Okay, Brona," Solo was saying. "How about telling me what all this is really about?"

"Just a little family business," she said. "Nothing that need concern you, so please don't feel obliged to chaperone me for the rest of evening."

"Which means 'go away', right?"

"That would be a good idea. There's no need for you to get involved, and I can look after myself."

"Not until I know what you're planning to do, and what you mean by 'family business'." His voice grew gentler. "Brona, I know that it was selling ships and parts to the Alliance that got your folks killed." His next words, though, were said in more cautious tones. "I'm just not sure what that means you're going to do about it."

Brona stared up at him, looking straight into his eyes, although prolonged direct eye contact was something with which most humans had appeared to be somewhat uncomfortable. Then she almost giggled, although she hastily suppressed it. It dawned on Rilt that she was something more than merely nervous. "Well, I never, Han. You really are getting sentimental in your old age, aren't you? So there's two people now, as well as Chewie, that you worry about. But don't worry, I'm not after your precious Princess...."

Brona's tone was rather less sarcastic than her words, but it was nevertheless unfortunate that Senator Organa picked that exact moment to emerge onto the balcony.

She did not seem to be at all pleased to have overheard that remark, nor to see Solo holding Brona firmly by the arms, his face very close to hers. The Senator's fingers whitened on the stem of her glass. "Excuse me," she said, her voice a few degrees above absolute zero, before whirling round and stalking away.

"Oh, hell," said Solo, releasing Brona. "I knew I shouldn't have let you talk me into this. Something like this happens every time I go to one of these bloody things."

Although still tense, Brona smiled. "Every time?"

"Yeah," groaned Solo, collapsing onto a bench. "Every single bloody time."

Brona raised a disbelieving eyebrow. "In that case you'd better go after her."

"Not until you tell me what you're up to here."

Brona thought about it. "Okay. Here's the deal. Another 5% discount if you keep quiet about why I'm here."

"Okay. Deal."

"I've heard that the assassin who put the bomb on my parents' ship will be here tonight. They say this is just the sort of challenge he wouldn't be able to resist - all these visiting dignitaries, elaborate security precautions to foil."

Solo looked anxiously back inside. "Doesn't Station Security know that?"

"Of course they do. But let's just say I have even more motivation for dealing with him than they do, and I like to do things for myself."

"Can I help, then?"

"Probably not." Brona grimaced with frustration. "I don't even know what he looks like." She adjusted the band in her hair. "But he has a rare blood disorder. Something like diabetes. Incurable, but manageable - and one of the ways to diagnose it is by chemicals in the breath." Brona frowned. "An excess of exhaled ketones, compared with normal, or something. I don't understand all the biochemistry. I just brought along a modified medical scanner set up to detect it."

"I see." Solo touched the band. "But for that to work, you have to get close enough to people to analyse their breath. Isn't that a bit risky? Does he know what you look like?"

"I don't know. Even if he does, he might not recognise me in these clothes. For some reason, if I dress like this, it's not my face men look at."

Solo mumbled something incomprehensible.

Just then, a woman, evidently one of those having trouble with the angle of the floor, stumbled into Rilt, and stood on one of his middle feet.

He yelped and revised his assessment of high-heeled slippers. They were not just an obscure form of masochistic penance for the wearers, They were offensive weapons.

By the time the woman had apologised, and Rilt had lied through his teeth about it not having really hurt, Solo and Brona seemed to have come to some agreement.

"You go back inside first," Brona was saying. "That should look better to your Princess than if we go back in together."

As Solo came back inside, and headed quickly towards Senator Organa, Rilt noticed another couple heading for the balcony; Smytherton and Mon Mothma.

It occurred to Rilt that he couldn't think of a man in the room who looked less like a professional assassin than the verbose, foppish Smytherton.

It then occurred to Rilt that he had a very bad feeling about this.

Maybe he wasn't the only one. They were all moving quite casually, but there seemed to be something concerted about the way in which Commander Jenson, her Security Chief, Nosira and the Trianni engineer were acting.

Nosira had gone up to Mon Mothma, calling something about an urgent message for her, and taking her by the arm, was walking her away from the balcony.

Smytherton was continuing outside, still looking perfectly composed, as if he were just going to enjoy the view. Perhaps, Rilt thought, if he is the assassin, he has some escape route planned that involves scaling the gardens, or a hidden repulsor pack, just like in the holo-dramas.

As Smytherton walked out onto the balcony, Rilt saw, from the point of view of the drone, still in its tub of rosemary, Brona tense, and straighten her hair-band. As she fiddled with her hair, she pulled a jewelled pin out of it. The man, on the other hand, did not tense, but somehow Rilt was sure that he'd noticed that Brona had. His expression remained cheerfully vacant, as she levered herself off the railing as if drunk, and collided with him.

"Sho shorry," she said, putting her hands on his shoulder to push herself off him. He was also pushing her away, one-handed. As he did so, the drone saw his other hand clench and then relax, and then there was the tip of a blade in it.

The man wasn't holding it. It was just extending from his right fore-finger. So that answered the question of which hand was artificial.

Neither Rilt nor the drone really thought about it. The drone simply ejected gas as fast as it could, and flew out of the rosemary bush at Smytherton's arm. Despite being so light, its velocity gave the drone enough momentum to jerk his arm, so that the blade missed Brona, who did not, as Rilt was sure he would have done, scream and gibber about having nearly been stabbed, but promptly jabbed the man in the neck with her pin.

"Well, actually," she said, "I'm not sorry at all."

Rilt wasn't sure when the urge to intervene had come from. Perhaps he'd watched a few too many holo-dramas. Or maybe it was because the notion of people blowing up ships made him and the drone so mad.

Then again, maybe it was more to do with all those glasses of punch.

Smytherton lifted his left hand towards his neck, but froze before he could touch the puncture. Brona pushed him towards the railing. He staggered against it. "What....was....that?" he asked, obviously finding it hard to speak.

"Poison, of course. A traditional Saurian one, if you'd like the details." Brona said. "I couldn't figure out a way to get a blaster past the security screens, and there's nowhere in this outfit to hide a knife. But not a very quick acting poison, I'm afraid. It just induces paralysis. Shortly, though, that'll make it very hard for you to breathe. Bit like being on a holed spaceship, I suppose."

She glanced over the railing. "Or I could just push you. It's a very long way down. Only -" she looked at Jenson and the Security Chief, who were standing quietly, blocking the doorway back into the Reception room, holding their blasters so that those inside couldn't see them. "Only, I suppose I'm going to get a lecture on how even a bastard like you ought to stand formal trial."

However had the Commander managed to hide even as small a blaster as that in her dress? Rilt wondered

There was a rustle in the bushes on the adjacent balcony, as the Trianni engineer and Captain Solo stood up, both also aiming small weapons at Smytherton. It seemed Commander Jeneon must trust Solo, since he hadn't been relieved of his weapon at the door.

Nosira squeezed past the Commander, pulling the medical scanner and a probe out of her satchel. She delicately pressed the probe against the trickle of blood that was running down Smytherton's neck. "DNA analysis confirmed. His matches the traces found after the Level Two cargo bay decompression."

"He did that too?" Brona asked.

"You're not the only with scores to settle with this guy," Jenson said quietly.

"The poison is spreading through his system, but I can counteract it. If any one wants me to, of course," Nosira announced. She raised Smytherton's right arm, and turned the scanner on his hand, from which the blade still extended. "Interesting piece of work," she said. "Not only a nice sharp edge, but its hollow." She frowned, and adjusted the scanner. "I'm detecting Kirillian pneumonia virus."

The Saurian security chief opened his mouth, bearing a large number of sharp teeth, in an expression that was decidedly not a smile. "Very clever. That has a three-day incubation period, and is normally incurable once the symptoms develop. A neat way of taking out lots of people without it looking like murder." He turned to Brona. "We don't believe our friend here worked alone. And if you push him off that balcony, it'll be hard to get him to tell us who his associates are."

Brona looked at Smytherton, and then, for what seemed to Rilt like a very long time, back over the railing at the drop down to the reactor core. Then she shoved the man towards the Security Chief, whose claws took a firm grip of him. "All right. But I'm coming to keep an eye on him, okay?"

Inside, the music was still playing and the dancers still whirling round the floor, and the buzz of conversation had never dropped.

The Security Chief and Brona were supporting Smytherton towards the exit. "Terrible, isn't it," Brona was saying, loudly, "how some people can't handle drink."

Commander Jenson was talking to her chief medical officer about tests and inoculations. Nosira and the Trianni were checking the poison snoopers, presumably to make sure that the refreshments hadn't been infected. Nosira grinned at Rilt. "Come down to my lab tomorrow. I'll organise some more yttrium for you."

"And what exactly was that all about?" Senator Organa was demanding of Captain Solo.

Solo appeared to be trying to look innocent. "Guess he's just drunk."

The Senator did not look at all convinced. "Han....."

Solo spread his arms. "Yup, that's me. Now I'm here, don't you want to dance with me?"

The final snippet of their conversation that Rilt overheard was the Senator saying, "That little beauty you were referring to earlier - it was the ship you meant, wasn't it?"

"Sure it was. I wouldn't say Brona was little."

Rilt ducked out on the balcony to retrieve the deflated drone, and stored it safely back in his pouch. It was fortunate that the balcony was broad, because just then there was a mental cry of delight from Rilt's ship, so loud that it drowned out the physical sounds and so sudden that he jumped six of his feet clear off the floor.

Rilt, Rilt! He can hear me! The Jedi can hear me! I can nearly talk to him.

Hastily switching point of view again, Rilt found the other drone down in the docking bay, healed, re-inflated and floating above the nose of his ship. The Jedi was standing underneath it, both hands on the ship's lowest dorsal fin, eyes closed.

Beside him, Chewbacca shuffled, coughed and crossed his arms, and a small astro-mech droid beeped insistently. The Jedi just stood there, expression rapt.

After a few moments, the Wookiee walked around behind him, sniffed at the ship, stared intently at both ship and Jedi, and then waved a paw in front of Luke's face. *You're not going all mystical on me, are you, littler brother?*

Luke opened his eyes and smiled up at the Chewbacca. That was another new expression for Rilt to add to his collection. He'd seem plenty of humans smile before, but not as radiantly as that. "Chewie! The ship - she's alive. I can hear her."

Not words yet, the ship was saying to Rilt. But I can understand him. She radiated smugness. He thinks I'm beautiful.

*You **are** beautiful.*

"No," Luke was saying to Chewbacca. "I'm not getting words, just images... I think it must be their home-world. Warm shallow seas, coral reefs, shoals of brightly coloured fish, forests of seaweed, and the whole galaxy shining in the night sky. It's lovely."

He seems very well-balanced, the ship added to Rilt, for someone who was raised in Hell.

Rilt shuddered at the image of Tatooine that she projected, and hastily swallowed an consoling carafe of water. Then, making his apologies, he left the Reception, and headed as fast as all ten legs could carry him down to the docking bay.

Someone who knew about the Death Stars, and who, unlike those who used only spoken words, couldn't lie to Rilt's people.

Perhaps Luke could be persuaded to add ambassador to his list of a Jedi's duties.

end

[Back To Index](#)