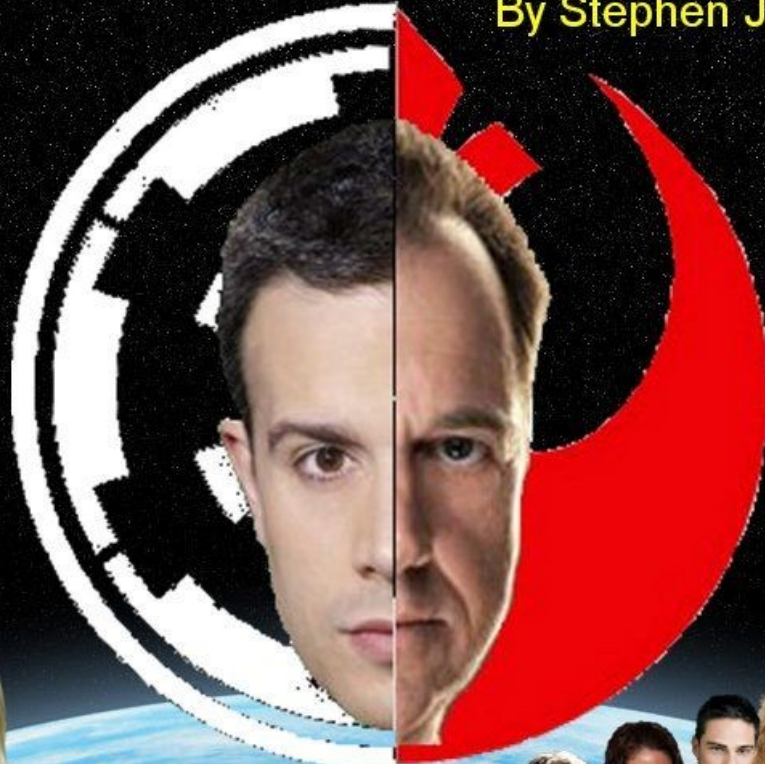


# STAR WARS

## 5-11: Plea Bargain

By Stephen J Dutton



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Civil war turns father against son

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

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

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

## PLEA BARGAIN

TRYING TO TRACK DOWN THE BIOWEAPONS SMUGGLED TO ESTRAN, GARM LARCUS AND VAY UDRA MUST FIND A WAY TO INFILTRATE A RADICAL TERRORIST ORGANISATION. THEIR ONLY HOPE SEEMS TO BE TO MAKE SOMEONE AN OFFER THAT THEY CAN'T REFUSE...

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

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# 1.

The tunic was several sizes too big for her, but Vay Udra put it on anyway before she sat in front of the mirror and stared at her reflection.

"I'm going to need that you know." A man's voice said to her and Vay looked around and smiled at the figure standing in the bedroom doorway wearing the rest of the uniform that the tunic belonged to.

"I was just trying it on Garm." She replied.

"I know." Garm said as he walked over to her and bent down to wrap his arms around her, "But the ISB is pretty strict about its uniform code."

Vay frowned as she took off the tunic to fully reveal one of the skintight black bodygloves she almost always wore.

"I wish I could come back and work with you." She said, "But Ibram's insistent that I stay with intelligence." Sadness.

Vay felt Garm's reaction through the Force and she stared at him as he put his tunic on.

"It really bothers you that they split us up doesn't it?" she asked.

"We don't have the luxury of choosing assignments. You know that." Garm answered and then he kissed her, "I'll see you tonight then? My place this time?"

"Sure." Vay replied with a smile and then she watched Garm leave, waited until she heard the door to her apartment close behind him before getting up to collect the belongings she needed for her own work.

Not everything is about you.

Vay frowned.

"Leave me alone." She said, knowing that the presence in the Force would hear her. The presence was the spirit of a jedi from four thousand years earlier, apparently an ancestor of Vay's called Lara Udra and for some time now it had been communicating with her in an attempt to convince her to turn her back on the Empire.

If you don't believe me then why don't you just go ahead and read his mind?

"Because I know that he'd tell me if something was wrong. Now like I say, just leave me alone, I've got to go to work."

Oh yes, silly me. There's still a galaxy to oppress isn't there?

"Agent Larcus?"

Garm looked up from his desk when he heard his name called and he saw his superior Director Helieos, the Imperial Security Bureau's most senior member in the sector standing in the doorway of his office.

"Yes sir?" he replied.

"Moff Horatian's called a meeting." The director said, "He's asked for you specifically."

"Did he say why?" Garm asked as he stood up and picked up his datapad.

"Well he's calling in senior members of both the ISB and Intelligence, so if he's planning to slap you down for sleeping with his mistress then it's going to be a public beating."

Garm frowned. Vay's had been sent to the sector supposedly as an intern with the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order, commonly known as COMPNOR, but the general belief was that she was the moff's mistress. A rumour given more credibility by the expensive apartment and vehicle she had the use of. Therefore, when people had noticed how close Garm had got to her the rumour had expanded to the effect that he and the Moff were now rivals for her affection. So far Garm, Vay and Moff Horatian had played along with this to disguise Vay's real role as a Force sensitive agent under the moff's personal command.

"Let's go then." Garm said, "If Moff Horatian's planning to kill me let's at least get it over with before lunch."

The two men went up to the top floor of the capital building and from there to the moff's office.

"No plastic on the floor." Director Helieos whispered as the doors to the office opened, "I guess he's not planning on any blood on the carpet today."

There were already two other ISB agents present, both of whom Garm recognised, though he had not worked closely with either of them before. Additionally Rodge Larrs, the head of COMPNOR in the sector and the man regarded as Moff Horatian's deputy sat in front of the moff's desk.

"Do take a seat gentlemen. Help yourselves to a drink." Moff Horatian said and he pointed to the other chairs that had been placed in front of the desk.

"Thank you sir." Director Helieos replied as he and Garm sat down. Garm saw that there were still two empty chairs and he guessed that these would be for the representatives of Imperial Intelligence who had yet to arrive.

"So will Intelligence be joining us today?" Director Helieos asked, attempting to point out to the moff that while the ISB had arrived on time, it's rivals appeared to be running late. But before the moff could respond

the office door opened again and a woman entered. This was Gayal Tharr, Imperial Intelligence's most senior agent in the sector and then behind her came Vay and she and Garm smiled at one another.

"The moff is two metres away." Director Helieos whispered into his ear, "And those two stormtroopers by the door will kill on command."

But it was not the warning from Garm's superior that made his face fall; it was the third figure to enter the room as part of the group from Imperial Intelligence. A gaunt man with a stern expression, Ibram Kellensen did not hide his Force sensitivity like Vay did. The only information that Garm had about the man's background was what he had been able to learn from Vay. He was a former Jedi Knight who had apparently left the Order prior to the purge and so avoided being implicated in the attempted Jedi coup against the then Supreme Chancellor Palpatine. When terrorists from the People's Liberation Army of Estran had killed Garm's wife in an attempt to kill Garm himself Ibram had attempted to prevent Vay from intervening to save Garm. Vay had told Garm that she believed that Ibram had merely foreseen the attack at the last moment, but recently Garm had received information that Imperial Intelligence had had advanced warning and deliberately failed to act on it. Knowing this, Garm could not hide his feelings completely.

Hatred.

Rage.

Vay's smile vanished when she sensed this while Ibram just glared at Garm, not knowing how much Garm knew.

Gayal and Ibram sat down in the vacant chairs while Vay remained standing behind them.

"Well now that we're all here I'll ask Agents Asten and Loy to explain the situation." Moff Horatian said and he looked to the two ISB agents.

"Thank you sir." Agent Asten said and as blinds lowered over the windows of the office a holographic display activated to show an image above the moff's desk, "As I'm sure at least some of you will already know this is the larval aqua-notris." He went on, "An unpleasant and potentially deadly parasite native to the Tot-Eh system."

In fact no one in the room needed to be told this. The parasite had been at the centre of a major terror scare a few months earlier when a scientist had found a way to weaponise the parasite and it had been used here on the capital world of Estran. Garm and Vay had been instrumental in exposing this and their reports had been widely distributed amongst both Imperial Intelligence and the ISB.

"Agent Loy and I have been investigating the financing behind Doctor Vissal's program to use the parasite as a weapon and we've come up with some rather worrying results." Asten continued and then he looked to the other agent.

"That's right." Loy said as the display changed to one of a run down looking office building, "This is the registered address of the company that made several large payments to Doctor Vissal and also arranged the shipping of equipment to him. In return they appear to have received several deliveries in return."

"I take it you're thinking that these were shipments of the parasite?" Rodge Larrs asked.

"That's right sir." Loy answered, "They were all delivered to this address and signed for."

"Doesn't look like the sort of place that could store biological agents." Director Helieos commented as he studied the image.

"That's right sir." Asten said, "We watched the building for over a month and there was no activity at all.

Forcing an entry we found that it had been abandoned for some time."

"But deliveries were made to there?" Gayal asked.

"They were." Loy answered, "But upon interrogation the couriers confirmed that they were all handed over to an individual in the grounds of the building who had identification matching that of the addressee."

"Do you have a positive ID?" Garm asked.

"No we don't." Loy replied and Garm and Director Helieos exchanged worried glances.

"But we did get one useful piece of information." Asten continued, "The courier said that the man who took delivery had an accent that places his origin somewhere around the Mortan Lowlands."

"The Mortan Lowlands?" Director Helieos exclaimed, "That's a damned hotbed of PLAE activity. Are you saying that they've got access to this bio-weapon?"

"It would appear so sir." Loy replied, "We had the courier speak to one of our forensic artists and he came up with this." And once again the hologram changed, this time to show a computer generated image of a male human. Then a photographic image of the same face appeared alongside it, "Facial recognition then came up with this." Loy continued, "Karl Sertin. Multiple convictions for minor offences but more interestingly his father was executed for PLAE membership fifteen years ago."

"Treason often runs in the family." Gayal commented, deliberately looking at Garm as she did so. Garm's father Vorn Larcus III had been expelled from the Estranian Parliament for his anti-Empire views and subsequently defected to the rebellion.

"Do we have any idea where this man is now?" Rodge asked.

"No sir." Asten told him, "We know that he rented a room here in the capital for a while, but he left some time ago. Just after Doctor Vissal was apprehended in fact."

"And we've no idea where he went?" Gayal asked.

"He went home." Garm said before anyone else could offer an explanation. Then he looked around and added, "What? It's obvious isn't it? His entire family is sympathetic to this terrorist group. They'll be hiding him and there'll probably be more of his kind out there with him."

"Agent Larcus has a point." Ibram said.

"So we'll arrange an assault." Director Helieos said, "A battalion of stormtroopers-"

"No." Moff Horatian interrupted, "A direct assault will give the terrorists too much time to escape. We don't know where their hiding places are and a military force will need that information to establish a cordon around the area."

"Don't worry sir." Gayal said, "Intelligence will be able to draw up a plan that isn't as simplistic as the ISB's." and she stared at Director Helieos and smirked.

"No." the moff said again and Gayal suddenly turned her head back towards him, "I want to make certain that we don't waste any resources on this. Both Intelligence and the ISB are to co-ordinate their efforts to locate these extremists. I want them exterminated. Do you understand?"

"Of course." Director Helieos replied.

"Yes sir." Gayal added and Garm sighed.

"Is there a problem Agent Larcus?" Rodge asked him.

"Well it's just that interdepartmental operations are tricky at best." Garm said, "These things can easily turn into us asking one another pointless questions in search of information that should have been shared to begin with."

Gayal and Director Helieos looked at one another, both well aware that Garm was right. Each of them jealously guarded their resources and had no intention of sharing anything with the other that they did not absolutely have to.

"Yes I'm aware of the tendency for that to happen." Moff Horatian said, "That's why I asked all of you to come here. You see I've already decided upon the personnel that will be assigned to this case. Agent Larcus you will work with Miss Udra."

Surprise.

Clearly no one in the room had expected the moff to say that.

"Perhaps I should-" Ibram began before the moff cut him off.

"Mister Kellensen," he said, "I have made my choice. It is a fact that Agent Larcus and Miss Udra have already established an effective relationship with one another." Then as several of the others present exchanged glances he added, "Professionally speaking of course. Isn't that so Agent Larcus?"

"Yes, Vay and I can work very well together." Garm replied as Vay smiled at him.

"Then it's settled." Moff Horatian said, "Each of you will provide the other with all the information your respective agencies have and if there is anything else you require then I will authorise it personally. Are there any problems with that?"

Anger.

Vay glanced down at Ibram, sensing his reaction but unsure as to whether it was because she was being paired up with Garm or because the moff had over-ruled him and cut him out of the operation.

Vay lay across Garm's lap as he sat on the small couch in his office and they both read datapads containing reports about Karl Sertin, his family and the area in which they lived.

"I've got a bad feeling about this Vay." Garm said, "Look at this place." And he tilted his datapad so that Vay could see the map of the Mortan Lowlands, "This place is as about off every travel route as it's possible to get. There's no way we can get in there without drawing attention to ourselves. Normally I'd suggest we pose as a couple wanting to buy a home in the area, but nobody moves to the Mortan Lowlands, they move away. Far, far away."

"Well what if we pretended to be descendants of someone who moved out a long time ago, far, far away and that we're trying to trace our family tree?" Vay suggested.

"We'd still be outsiders and I don't think that outsiders are particularly welcome in these parts." Garm said, "What we need to do is find someone that we can send in who will be taken in by the locals."

"But the locals hate everybody from the outside." Vay pointed out.

"I know." Garm replied, but after a brief pause he smiled and added, "But they don't necessarily hate everyone equally."

"What do you mean?" Vay asked.

"I mean that they hate the Empire more than anything else. So we need someone that hates the Empire as well."

"Rebels?" Vay asked.

"No. The PLAE hates the idea of a restored Republic almost as much as it hates us. But I think that we can find someone who right now hates pretty much everyone as well. And she's got good reason to as well."

Garm said and he lifted Vay off his lap and went to his computer where he began to search through his case

records, "Her." He said, turning the monitor so that Vay could see it.

"You're kidding me." Vay replied, "Jaynie Horbid?"

"She tried to turn in my father's rebel team because of what happened when her sister joined the rebellion."

"Yes and then Gayal Tharr labelled her a traitor and stuck her in solitary confinement when it all went wrong and the rebel fleet ambushed our ships around Tarlen." Vay replied.

"Which means that she will be believable as someone with an axe to grind against the Empire." Garm said,

"Vay, we'll need to get Moff Horatian to authorise her release to us."

"But why would she co-operate with us Garm?"

"Because we're going to make her an unmissable opportunity." Garm replied with a smile.

## 2.

A buzzer sounded in the cell Jaynie Horbid had occupied almost constantly since her arrest and the young woman made her way to a line drawn on the floor and stood on it, facing away from the wall with her arms. Jaynie knew exactly what was expected of her by the droids who guarded the facility and she knew that there was nothing to be gained by arguing with them. At the slightest provocation they could activate either the shock collar around her neck or the magna harness that could pin her arms to her sides or her legs together in an instant. The first time she had disobeyed the guards they had done both, leaving her immobile and screaming in agony until they determined that the punishment had been sufficient.

Today though Jaynie's actions were entirely within the rules and when the door opened the two droid guards that entered the cell found her exactly where she was supposed to be.

"Prisoner four two three seven remain still." One of the droids told her, "Do not speak." And Jaynie resisted the temptation to look around as she heard the sound of the droids approaching her from behind.

"Prisoner four two three seven keep your arms by your side." The other droid added and Jaynie then felt the pull of the magna harness being activated to restrain her arms.

"Hey! What's happening?" she exclaimed and she squealed as she felt a jolt through her collar.

"Four two three seven you are to remain silent." One of the droids ordered and then she caught a brief glimpse of the gag that it held out before it was pushed into her mouth. Jaynie tried to pull away, but the other droid simply grabbed hold of her and held her tightly as the gag was secured and then a hood was pulled over her head.

"Prisoner four two three seven," the droid holding her in place then said, "you will now be transferred out of our custody." And rather than holding her still, the droids began to drag Jaynie from her cell.

"You know I don't think that the rudeness of the locals is the only reason not many people visit this region." Vay said as she got out of the landspeeder and looked at the hotel complex where she and Garm would be staying. Right now there were a handful of other agents from both Intelligence and the ISB present, along with some droids but these would not be staying long. They were here only to help with setting up the next stage of the operation.

The hotel complex consisted of several rows of apartment style rooms and a compact administration building. From the look of the buildings Garm guessed that they had been assembled from pre-fabricated parts and had originally been intended for housing military personnel.

"Oh its not that bad." Garm said.

Deceit.

"You know I can tell when you're lying to me." Vay pointed out, "You hate it as much as I do."

"Yes I do." Garm replied, "It's a dump. But still it'll do for our purposes." And he proceeded inside the administration building and walked up to the reception desk, "I believe that you are expecting us." He told the man sat behind it.

"Mister Larcus? Yes sir." The man replied.

"That's Agent Larcus." Vay said as she came up behind Garm.

"Mister will do." Garm said. Then he looked at the hotel employee again and added, "Could you just give us the key to the room? We've got people with us to carry our equipment."

"Of course sir." The man said and he handed Garm an electronic key.

"Thanks, we'll show ourselves out." Garm then said and he and Vay made their way back outside and to their room.

"I told you so." Vay said as she peered into the interior of the room that looked to be just as dreary as the outside.

"At least it's clean." Garm said as he went inside to inspect it more closely. Then he returned to the door and waved to the other agents, "Over here." He called out, "Bring the gear to this room."

The cases that the agents then carried from their vehicles contained various items of surveillance and tracking equipment, along with a portable computer terminal that could be used to access the Imperial data network and a compact holographic communicator. Garm and Vay had just finished setting up the computer and communicator when one of the agents returned.

"They're here." He said.

"Good." Garm replied, "Tell them to bring her in." and then as he went to sit on the bed he waved Vay over to him.

Moments later a pair of droids appeared in the door and between them they held the still bound and hooded Jaynie Horbid.

Terror.

Vay sensed Jaynie's fear and confusion instantly. Clearly the young woman had been brought here without any idea of why and since the last time that Jaynie had been taken from her cell she had been led to believe that she was being taken to her execution her fear was quite understandable.

"Where shall we place the prisoner?" one of the droids asked and Garm pointed to a nearby chair. Without speaking the droids took Jaynie to the chair and sat her down. Then there was a metallic 'click' as the magna harness bound her legs as well as her arms.

"Key." Garm said, getting to his feet and holding out his hand and one of the droids handed him a control unit for the magna harness, "Good. Now leave us and wait in your vehicle. The agents outside will explain what you are to do next."

"Confirmed." One of the droids replied and both turned and walked out of the room, closing the door behind.

Garm looked down at Jaynie. From beneath the hood he could make out the sound of muffled whimpering and when he reached out and removed it he and Vay saw that Jaynie's face was streaked with tears.

"Let's get rid of this as well shall we?" Garm said as he released the gag and Jaynie gasped as she sucked in lungfulls of air that had been denied to her while her breathing was restricted by the gag and hood.

"Why are you doing this to me?" she pleaded as Garm returned to sit on the bed beside Vay, tears still running down her face, "I did everything you asked me to. I didn't help the rebels I promise."

Garm looked at Vay.

"She's telling the truth." She said.

"Yeah, I figured that." Garm said, "But it's always nice to have confirmation." Then he looked back at Jaynie,

"We know you didn't help the rebels." He told her.

"Then why did you put me in that place?" Jaynie asked.

"Ah." Garm said as he and Vay exchanged glances, "Unfortunately that decision was taken by someone with superior rank to either of us. But now we think that we've got a way to have you set free."

"Then do it." Jaynie said, "I don't deserve this."

"No you don't." Vay replied, "But we will need you to do something for us."

"Anything. Please just let me go."

"We need you to infiltrate a dangerous terrorist organisation and inform on them for us." Vay said and Jaynie's jaw dropped.

"In return you will receive a pardon for the offences you have been convicted of-" Garm added.

"But I didn't do anything. You said so yourself." Jaynie interrupted.

"That's not what your record states unfortunately." Vay pointed out, "You're listed as a traitor sentenced to life imprisonment."

"So if you help us then all that goes away." Garm explained, "Plus we can help you get your life back on track."

"What do you mean?" Jaynie asked.

"Well according to our information you submitted an application to go to university that was rejected because of your family's links to the rebellion. Correct?" Garm asked and Jaynie nodded, "Well we can have your name added to the intake of students this coming semester at the University of Estran and provide you with a scholarship fund." He then went on.

"You'd do that for me?" Jaynie replied.

"Of course, though we will still expect you to help us when needed." Vay told her.

"Help you how?" Jaynie asked.

"Well let's just say that universities tend to attract a certain undesirable element." Garm said, "If you could identify them then it would be most beneficial."

"Just tell me what I have to do." Jaynie said and Garm smiled and used the device given to him by the droid to release her arms.

"Are you hungry?" Vay asked as she got to her feet and she took a plastic container from one of the bags, opened it and handed it to Jaynie. The moment Jaynie saw what was inside she snatched it from Vay's grasp and reached inside, taking out a piece of fruit that she immediately took a large bite from.

"I thought you'd like that after almost six months of whatever processed goop Intelligence feeds to its prisoners." Garm commented and Jaynie nodded, her mouth filled with fruit. Then Garm held up a datapad on which an image of Karl Sertin was displayed, "This man is connected with a plot to bring bio weapons to Estran." He explained, "And we think that he's hiding out not far from here. We want you to travel to his home settlement and find out if he or the weapons are there. Then you signal us with his location and we'll come in and pick him up."

"But why not use a real agent?" Jaynie asked, finishing the fruit and moving on to a sandwich.

"Because the locals don't generally trust outsiders." Vay replied.

"So why would they trust me?" Jaynie asked.

"Because Mister Sertin and his friends despise the Empire and we're hoping that they'll see you as an ally. A criminal on the run after escaping from an Imperial prison transport." Garm explained.

"So I take it that you won't be letting me clean up or get changed?" Jaynie said.



"I'm afraid not." Garm told her, "Right now you look just how we need you to. Now we'll drive you to a point closer to the target settlement in our speeder. The prison transport that brought you here will be moving ahead of us and the droids are being rigged to crash off the road. We'll drop you off there and you just need to make your way to the settlement and act like you're on the run."

"But how will I contact you?" Jaynie asked and Vay smiled. Then she picked up a plain case and opened it to reveal what looked to Jaynie to be a shock collar like the one still locked around her neck. Then as Vay took the collar from the case and approached Jaynie, Garm used the control device to release her existing collar. "Our tech boys came up with this." Vay explained, "It looks just like a regulation shock collar but in fact it's quite different internally."

"How?" Jaynie asked suspiciously as Vay fastened the collar around her neck.

"How that?" Vay asked.

"Tight." Jaynie croaked.

"Good. It has to be." Vay replied.

"The collar includes a one way comlink that uses a throat mike." Garm explained, "You'll be able to transmit, but we won't be able to reply. It's voice activated, all you need to say 'Help me Agent Larcus, you're my only hope' to start or stop transmission."

"That was my idea." Vay said.

A stupid one. You're risking this girl's life and you're making jokes.

Vay frowned.

"What's wrong?" Jaynie asked, noticing the change in expression.

"Nothing." Vay lied, "Now if the terrorists try and activate the shock collar they'll find out it still works."

"Let me show you." Garm said and he raised the controller.

"No!" Jaynie exclaimed and she reached for the collar, hoping to pull it free but she stopped when she felt it vibrating softly against her neck.

"See?" Garm said, "All you need to do is scream."

"Can you do that?" Vay asked.

"Yes." Jaynie replied, "I know how to scream."

"Good." Garm said, "Then I suggest we get moving."

### 3.

Jaynie sat in the back of the landspeeder as Garm followed behind the prison transport. In turn the other agents followed them in their own vehicles. The road ahead had been carved into the side of a steep hill, with trees covering the slope below while the slope above was grassland dotted with rocky outcrops. Then just as the transport was turning a corner it suddenly veered off the road into one of the rocks and then bounced back across the road where it vanished into the trees, an almighty crashing sound being produced as it rolled down the slope.

Garm stopped the speeder and he and Vay got out.

"Come on." Garm told Jaynie, waving her after them and she followed them from the speeder as they headed for the gap created in the trees. Upon reaching it they looked down at the path of felled trees and crushed undergrowth left by the transport as it rolled to the bottom of the hill.

"The rear hatch is open." Vay commented as she saw the door to the prisoner holding compartment hanging open.

"That's good." Garm responded, "It saves us having to force it."

"So what now?" Jaynie asked.

"First we need to make sure you look the part." Garm said and he activated the controller to bind Jaynie's arms to her sides again.

"Hey!" she exclaimed.

"Don't worry. I'm sure the people we're after will be able to release you." Garm said, "This makes you look much more convincing."

"So will this." Vay added as she suddenly pushed the gag back into Jaynie's mouth. Then while Vay fastened the gag and Jaynie glared at Garm he sought to reassure her.

"There'll be agents right here at all times." He said, "They'll make it look like we're conducting a search for you in case the terrorists want to verify how you escaped. If for any reason you can't make contact with them, then just come back here and they'll bring you back in."

"Just don't count on us honouring our deal if you chicken out though." Vay added, "Now down you go." And she pointed down the slope.

Cautiously, Jaynie reached out with a foot but with her arms bound the slope seemed very steep and she looked back to Garm and Vay.

Fear.

"I think she's afraid of falling." Vay said to Garm.

"Perhaps we ought to give her a hand." Garm suggested.

"Good idea." Vay said and before Garm could stop her she pushed Jaynie down the slope.

"That wasn't quite what I meant." Garm said as he and Vay watched Jaynie rolling helplessly down the hill, "What if she gets hurt?"

"Don't worry, I've got her." Vay said reassuringly and she raised her hand, reaching out through the Force to control Jaynie's fall.

"I'm not so sure that you gagging her again was such a good idea you know." Garm added, "What if the PLAE don't take it off? How will she signal us?"

"I thought we were partners." Vay replied.

"We are."

"So why do I have to think of everything?"

When Jaynie finally came to a halt at the bottom of the slope, just missing rolling right into the wrecked transport she staggered to her feet and then looked back up the slope towards Garm and Vay.

"That way." Garm called out and he pointed in the direction of the settlement that Karl Sertin came from.

Jaynie looked around then looked back and nodded before she began to walk away.

"Okay boys secure the area." Garm shouted at the other agents waiting by their vehicles, "Make it look good. We'll be back at the hotel if you need us."

When Garm and Vay returned to the hotel they saw a black landspeeder with blacked out windows in the parking lot and Vay felt a shudder go down her spine as she looked towards.

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

"What?" Garm asked in response.

"That speeder." Vay replied, "I think it's-" and then before she could finish one of the rear doors of the blacked out vehicle opened and Ibram emerged and stared at them.

Anger.

Hatred.

At first Vay thought that the flash of emotion came from Ibram, but then she realised that it had come from Garm the moment the fallen Jedi had appeared and she looked towards him.

"Miss Udra!" Ibram called out, "I require your presence." And then he got back into the speeder, leaving the door open.

"I better go see what he wants." Vay said to Garm and he nodded.

"Yes, can't keep him waiting can we?" he replied, "I'll be in the room." And he got out of the speeder.

Vay got out as well and while Garm headed for their room she instead made her way to Ibram's vehicle and got inside. Ibram waved his hand and there was a brief flash of Force energy as the door shut behind Vay. Fear.

"There is no need to worry Vay." Ibram said as he sensed Vay's reaction, "Though I must admit I did not think you so weak as to be afraid of just talking to me."

"What do you want?" she asked, frowning.

"Only the best for you." Ibram replied, "And with that in mind I have good news for you. Your assignment here is at an end. I have recommended that you be recalled to Coruscant for further instruction and redeployment."

"No!" Vay exclaimed. Then more calmly she added, "I should stay here."

"Why?" Ibram asked.

"Because I'm familiar with this sector now. My knowledge would be wasted elsewhere."

*Deceit.*

"Liar!" Ibram yelled and he held up his hand towards Vay as if he were about to wrap it around her throat.

Instantly Vay was pushed back against the door and she felt her throat tighten, "It's him." Ibram hissed, "That Agent Larcus. Every time you see him I sense your feelings. They are sickening."

"I was taught to act on my desires." Vay croaked.

"Well make the most of your remaining time together," Ibram said, "because after this mission you will never see him again." And then with a wave of his other hand Ibram opened the speeder door again and Vay fell out onto the ground, striking her forehead as she landed. The speeder door then closed again and the vehicle accelerated away leaving Vay bleeding on the ground. Picking herself up, Vay looked at the rapidly disappearing speeder.

You've only yourself to blame you know. If you had just controlled your feelings for Garm in the first place then Ibram wouldn't be sending you away.

"Get out of my head." Vay hissed, placing her hands to her head.

Not until I've saved you.

"Leave me alone!" Vay yelled, attracting the attention of a couple walking past close by, "What are you staring at?" she shouted at them, scowling and they both turned away and walked in the opposite direction. Still furious Vay then ran to the hotel room where Garm waited.

"Vay what happened?" Garm said when he saw the cut on her forehead.

"I fell." she replied before she threw her arms around him.

"Vay tell me what's wrong." Garm said as he wrapped his arms around her as well.

"It's Ibram." Vay told him, "He's sending me away as soon as this mission's over. We'll never see one another again."

*Anger.*

Vay felt Garm's grip on her tighten as she sensed his reaction. Then she realised that she had in fact sensed his anger at the moment she mentioned Ibram's name, not when she told him what he had said and she pulled away.

"Garm every you see Ibram or mention his name I sense your anger building. Why?" she asked and Garm sighed. Then he went to the couch and sat down.

"It's Jennay." He said.

"But she's been dead for more than a year." Vay replied as she approached him.

"Vay. You said that you read Ibram's mind to find out about the bomb right?"

"Yes. He foresaw it and tried to prevent me from stopping it." Vay replied.

"Well what if I told you that I've uncovered evidence that Imperial Intelligence knew about the bomb well before the attack? That they could have stopped it?"

"Oh Garm, be realistic. Imperial Intelligence and the ISB may be rivals, but the idea of them being complicit in an assassination is ridiculous."

"I read it on a file copied from an Intelligence datapad." Garm told her, "It was on the computer belonging to that girl who was in league with my father."

"Cass Jungan?" Vay said, "But how did she get hold of it?"

"I guess it must have been on one of the datapads she stole. She couldn't read the information herself and it never got to the rebellion, but Director Helios had me review everything we found and I ran it through an ISB decryption system. Vay, Jennay would be alive today if Intelligence hadn't let her be murdered."

No matter what, he'll always be in love with her.

Jaynie struggled for breath as she walked alongside a shallow river. The prison issue dress she wore had been torn in several places during her fall down the hill, but fortunately the damage did not prevent it from covering her sufficiently. Looking at the water flowing past her she realised just how thirsty she was and she considered attempting to drink from it. However, with her arms still pinned to her sides and her mouth covered by the gag the only way she could think of getting the water was to dunk her face into it and she was not confident that that would accomplish anything other than causing her to drown so she continued on her way.

The sun was just starting to set and as the light level in the woods began fading rapidly Jaynie considered the implications of spending the night outside in her current situation. But it was the fading light that first alerted her to the fact that she was not alone. Somewhere ahead of her there was someone carrying a glowrod, the light it was emitting visible through the trees.

All of a sudden she began to have second thoughts about what she had agreed to do. Though it had not sounded like an ideal assignment when first described to her, Jaynie had seen it as preferable to the mind numbing boredom of being locked in a cell with no contact with another being for the rest of her life.

However, now that she was here all alone and helpless the thought of simply wandering up to strangers with a reputation for disliking outsiders filled her with dread. Pressing herself up against the trunk of a nearby tree, Jaynie crouched down and looked in the direction of the light hoping that if she saw the owner of the glowrod before they saw her she may be able to better determine their motivations.

"Kill the light. There's something over there." She heard a man say and the light from the glowrod suddenly vanished.

"What is it?" a second male voice asked.

"I'm not sure, the heat signature's pretty big." The first voice replied.

Jaynie briefly considered trying to run, but she doubted that she could outrun whoever was approaching her for long and that at least by staying still she would be able to watch them as they came nearer. However, with the glowrod now deactivated and the two men apparently remaining quiet she realised that she had no idea exactly where they were and it occurred to her that they may not even be heading in her direction.

Using the tree for support Jaynie stood up again and took a single step forwards, but the moment she rounded the tree she something metal pressed to the side of her head.

"What the kriff?" the voice of the first man exclaimed and Jaynie turned to find herself staring down the barrel of a long barrelled blaster rifle, "Hey Jigger! Get over here!" the man called out as Jaynie took a step backwards, overbalanced and fell to the ground.

"Del, what is it?" Jigger asked as he emerged from the undergrowth close by. Clearly the two men had split up to come at Jaynie from two different directions, a risky strategy for armed men in the dark. Then when he saw Jaynie cowering on the ground his jaw dropped, "Who the hell is that and what the hell is she doing here?"

"How should I know?" Del replied, "But that's a prison uniform she's wearing and I wouldn't be surprised if those were prison issue restraints." Then he slung his hunting rifle over his shoulder and reached down to pull Jaynie to her feet. He was just about to undo Jaynie's gag when Jigger interrupted him.

"What are you doing?" he asked, "What if she's some escaped lunatic. Take that off and she could be biting your face off the next minute."

"Then what do you suggest Jigger? Leave her here?"

"Why not? She's not one of us." Jigger replied.

"Let's take her back with us." Del said, "We'll see what ma thinks."

Jigger frowned.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." He said as he slung his own rifle over his shoulder.

## 4.

Garm and Vay sat together on the couch without speaking as they considered the implications of what each of them had said, Garm pondering a future without Vay and she trying to remember anything about what she had seen in Ibram's mind that would determine whether he had a significant warning about the bomb attack that had killed Garm's wife and badly injured the two of them.

"Can't you just say no?" Garm asked, breaking the silence.

"How?" Vay replied, "Garm he wasn't asking me what I thought, he was telling me what had already been decided. When this mission is over I have to return to Coruscant."

"So who decides this?" Garm asked, "The Emperor? Or Lord Vader?"

"Unlikely." Vay said.

"I thought you'd met them both." Garm commented.

"Oh I have." Vay replied, "But I'm not that important. Those two have far more power than I do. More even than Ibram. I'm just not that important. My reassignment was probably decided on by some petty bureaucrat who doesn't know the first thing about being Force sensitive."

"So we just get in touch with them and ask them to reconsider. Tell them how much good you're doing here with me."

Good? Vay, I hope you don't think that what you do can be considered as 'good'.

"It wouldn't work." Vay said, ignoring the interruption by Lara's spirit, "Remember the story about me being a COMPNOR intern is just that. I'm not really part of COMPNOR at all."

A hint of a smile then appeared on Garm's face.

"Garm what is it?" Vay asked as she sensed the change in his mood.

"I've just had an idea that's all." He told her and he got up and dashed to the holographic communicator set up in the corner of the room.

"Garm what are you doing?" Vay asked, getting up after him.

"I need to speak to Director Helieos." Garm replied, "Then you need to get in touch with Moff Horatian."

"Gregor? But why?"

"Because I get the feeling he likes you and we'll need his help." Garm said.

Jaynie was pushed onto a crude chair located in the kitchen of a farmhouse that as far as she could tell was owned by the mother of Del and Jigger.

"Watch her carefully Del." Their mother said as she walked behind Jaynie, "If she tries anything then just blast her."

"Sure ma." Del replied, levelling his blaster rifle at Jaynie as the woman undid the gag and Jaynie gasped as it was pulled from her mouth.

"Please help me." She said and she tugged at the magna harness, "Get this off me please."

"Now, now dear. Let's not be too hasty." the woman said as she rejoined her two sons, "Now my names Chyan and these are my sons Del and Jigger. Now how about you tell me who you are?"

"My name's Jaynie, Jaynie Horbid."

"And how exactly did you come to be all tied up like this in the woods all alone?" the woman asked.

"I escaped from a prison transport." Jaynie told her and the woman and her sons looked at one another.

"Do you take us for fools?" Del asked, "You don't just break out of a prison transport. Particularly not when you're bound and gagged."

Then before Jaynie could respond the door to the outside opened and two men entered. One of them Jaynie recognised instantly from the image that Garm had shown her of Karl Sertin, while the man standing just in front of him was unknown to her. Jaynie doubted that she would forget him in a hurry though given his exceptional height and shaven head.

"Mister Fallir. We weren't expecting you so soon." Chyan said when she saw the newcomers.

"So I see." The tall man replied as he looked down at Jaynie, "What's happening here?"

"Her name's Jaynie Horbid. She claims to be an escaped prisoner." Del said, "But no one just runs away from a prison transport. Isn't that right?"

"It crashed." Jaynie said, "The doors flew open and I was able to get out."

"Have you checked this?" Fallir asked, looking at the inhabitants of the farmhouse.

"Not yet no." Chyan replied, "My boys just brought her here when they found her in the woods."

"Then they better go and check." Fallir said.

"But it's dark outside." Jigger commented.

"Which ought to make it easier for you to move around un-noticed." Fallir said, "Look if she's telling the truth then the authorities may already know that she's escaped and be looking for her and if they're looking for her

then this place could be swarming with their agents by morning. I don't know about you, but I'd quite like to get as much warning of that as I can." Then after a moment's pause he suddenly snapped, "Move!" and both Del and Jigger swiftly exited the building and disappeared into the darkness. Then Fallir turned back to Jaynie and pulling up another chair he sat down right in front of Jaynie, "My name is Foran Fallir." He said, "Do you know that name?"

"No. Should I?" Jaynie responded.

"If you came from this world you would." Foran answered, "I'm part of the People's Liberation Army of Estran. No, I am the People's Liberation Army of Estran and under my leadership this world will be free from the Empire, the Alliance and anyone else who seeks to enslave it. Now if what you have told us checks out then we may be able to use you Jaynie Horbid. In return for us giving you shelter you can help us win our freedom as well. But if it doesn't-" then Foran stopped.

"What?" Jaynie asked and Foran smiled in a way that sent a shiver down Jaynie's spine.

"If you've been lying then I'll assume that you're a spy sent by our Imperial oppressors to watch what we're doing and report back again. To stop you doing that I'll have no option but to pluck out those beautiful brown eyes of yours and cut out your tongue before I have them sent back to your masters while I seal you in a very small box and bury you alive. How does that sound?"

Del and Jigger could hear the sound of repulsorlift engines from up ahead and they saw a bright beam of light shining down as an airspeeder flew past conducting an aerial search.

"Maybe she was telling the truth after all." Del said.

"Or that thing's up there searching for us." Jigger replied, "Look, her tracks come from this direction. Let's keep moving before that speeder comes back."

As they continued on their way the two men heard voices in the darkness and Del raised his rifle to look through its thermal imaging scope.

"This is it I think." He said, "There's about a dozen of them all milling about near a wreck."

"What sort of wreck?" Del asked.

"I can't tell. It's too cold for me to get a good image."

"But why not try and follow her?"

"Look around you Del. It's dark. No one but us could follow a trail through this. They're waiting for first light. Come on we've got to get back and warn the others. We need to evacuate."

Garm was sat watching the hotel room's video player while Vay lay on the bed reading when his comlink sounded and he reached out to where he had set it down.

"Larcus." He said.

"Agent Larcus, it's Agent Trow." The voice of one of the ISB personnel Garm had left establishing the fake security cordon around the wrecked prison transport responded.

"Go ahead Trow."

"Sir we've just monitored two individuals approaching our location from the direction you sent the girl in. Both of them were armed but they didn't open fire on us. We think that they had some sort of passive scanning device and that they scanned us before withdrawing. Shall we follow them?"

"No, absolutely not." Garm replied, "If they spot you then you could expose the whole operation. Besides even if they are from the PLAE and you follow them to their hideout then they may just release the bio weapon. Stay right where you are Agent Trow and warn the air unit to alter its search pattern to keep it away from them as well."

"Yes sir, I'll see to it now." Trow replied and then the line went dead.

Garm and Vay looked at one another.

"Well it looks like she's made contact with them." Garm said.

"But she's not checked in with us." Vay pointed out, "Could they have killed her?"

"I doubt it." Garm replied, "I expect that whoever those two were, they'd been sent to check on her story. Trust me Vay, this is going to work."

Jaynie had been left in the kitchen while Chyan took Foran into another room, leaving her watched over by just Karl Sertin. The man did not speak or even make contact with Jaynie, instead he sat on the far side of the room for some time until he decided to get up and begin searching through some of the cupboards in a search for something to eat. It was then that Chyan and Foran reappeared.

"How many times do I have to tell not to go taking food without asking?" Chyan asked angrily.

"I was hungry." Karl replied, "What was I supposed to do? Leave her here alone?"

"Never mind any of that now." Foran said as he held up a datapad that had clearly been modified, "This should at least tell us whether that magna harness and collar are real." And then he tapped once at the datapad. Instantly Jaynie felt her legs pulled together and held in place by the same magnetic force that held her arms, "So far so good." Foran said before looking at Jaynie and added, "I'm sorry but I need to test this

as well." And he tapped the datapad's interface again. This time Jaynie felt the fake collar vibrate as Garm had demonstrated back in the hotel room. Jaynie reacted by letting out a fake scream and twisting the chair. But she moved too far to one side and with her arms bound she found herself falling to the floor. However, this was enough to convince Foran that both the harness and collar were real and even as she landed she felt both shut down.

"Thanks. I think." Jaynie said as she flexed her arms for the first time in hours and then picked herself up, "So you trust me now then?"

"Oh I wouldn't say that." Foran answered, "But at least with this I know I can keep you under control." And he shook the datapad in her direction.

Just then the door to the outside opened again and Del and Jigger burst in.

"The Empire's on its way!" Jigger snapped.

"What?" Foran responded, his eyes wide.

"We saw the wrecked transport just like she said." Del told him, "And there were agents all around it. Plus at least one airspeeder. We tried to disguise her trail on the way back but it's only a matter of time before the Empire finds her here."

"Then we need to move quickly." Foran said before turning back towards Jaynie, "And since it's your fault that the Empire is about to come here I think you ought to help." And then she felt Karl grab hold of her arm.

"Hey, not so tight." She protested, but the man ignored her as she was dragged from the farmhouse.

Pulling Jaynie along with them, the PLAE terrorists headed across open country.

"Ow!" Jaynie exclaimed as she found herself standing on another sharp stone in the dark, "I'm not wearing anything on my feet remember?"

"Perhaps you'd prefer it back in your cell?" Karl replied, "Because that's where you'll end up if we can't get out of here before the Empire arrives."

The shape of a low structure appeared as a silhouette in the darkness and the group headed towards it.

Having grown up on a world where farming was the main industry Jaynie recognised a waste-processing unit when she saw one. Animal, vegetable and even human waste would be pumped or delivered to this and then recycled as fertilizer. Some units could also separate off the methane gas released by the waste and use it to generate the power that they needed to operate. However, what Jaynie could not figure out as she was dragged towards this particular unit and Jigger bent down to open up the access cover to the underground storage tank was why terrorists would be interested in one.

"Down you go." Karl said when he and Jaynie were the only ones left above ground and hesitantly she went to the open hatchway and looked down into the darkness below, "Hurry up or I'll just push you in." Karl added and Jaynie took hold of the ladder.

As she descended Jaynie saw that this particular waste-processing unit was not operational. The above ground part of the structure had been left in place to disguise the fact that beneath it the storage tanks had been connected together and then expanded to form a vast underground space and in this space the PLAE had stockpiled the weapons and equipment they made use of in their attacks. At the far end of the storehouse Jaynie saw that there was another entrance, this one much larger than the hatch she had just climbed through and it was clear that this other door was intended for the various vehicles she could see dotted around.

"Get those transports loaded!" Foran yelled as he waved his hands at the terrorists already in the hidden base, "The Empire's closing in on us."

"Come with me girl." Chyan said when Jaynie reached the bottom of the ladder and she took her to a stack of boxes not far away, "These need taking to the skiffs over there." She said, pointing to a row of parked repulsorlift vehicles that already had several figures loading what looked like crude home made missiles onto them.

"What's in them?" Jaynie asked.

"Never you mind. All you need to know is that they need to be taken to the skiffs." Chyan replied as she grabbed a box and began to head for the skiffs.

"I need to know if there's anything dangerous in here." Jaynie pointed out but the woman ignored her.

Frowning, Jaynie then picked up a box as well as followed Chyan towards the skiffs.

When she reached the nearest vehicle she handed the box to the terrorist standing in it. Then she watched as the man put it down beside several sealed cases, all of which were labelled 'DAGER – BIOHAZARD' and Jaynie remembered what she had been told about the PLAE importing biological weapons.

Walking calmly away from the skiff Jaynie ducked behind a stack of cargo pallets laden with gas cylinders rather than heading back to the stack of boxes she was supposed to be using.

"Help me Agent Larcus you're my only hope." She whispered. There was no reaction from the collar but Jaynie knew that it was not designed as a receiver and so she continued, hoping that the signal could get through from underground, "The terrorists have taken me in." she said softly, "They sent someone to investigate the crash and now they're convinced that they're about to be raided so they've got me helping them load their gear onto transports. I think I've seen the bio weapon containers and they're already loaded

aboard a skiff. One last thing, their leader seems to be a man named Foran Fallir, he's really tall and creepy and-

"What are you doing back here?" Chyan demanded as she appeared beside the pallet.

"What? Oh, I took a wrong turn." Jaynie lied, but Chyan just glared at her.

"I heard what you were saying." She said and she reached out to grab Jaynie by the arm, pulling her back towards the skiffs, "Comrade Fallir!" she yelled, "Come quickly."

"What's wrong?" Foran asked as he came rushing over accompanied by several other terrorists.

"I found her hiding back there behind the tibanna tanks." Chyan replied, "She as talking to herself. I think that she was transmitting something to the Empire." And then the other terrorists all glared at Jaynie.

"Let me see that collar." Foran said, staring at her throat. Jaynie took a step backwards as Foran took out his modified datapad, but he reacted by reactivating the magna harness and Jaynie squealed as she found herself falling to the floor when her arms and legs were all suddenly rendered immobile. Foran then released the collar and bent down to pick it up. Holding the collar in one hand and the datapad in the other he triggered it on the minimum setting.

"Well isn't that interesting?" he said as he felt the collar vibrating in his hand but no electrical jolt at all. Then he dropped the collar and stamped on it repeatedly until the casing broke open to reveal the internal workings.

"That doesn't look right." One of the other terrorists said as he looked at the smashed electronic components on the floor.

"No it doesn't." Foran agreed, "In fact I'd say it looks rather like a wireless transmitter coupled with a vibrator motor from a point to point link." Then he scowled at Jaynie, "Put her out of the way somewhere until I get back." He said.

"Where are you going?" Chyan asked.

"I'm taking a swoop. We need more help to load the heavy equipment. Then I'll head towards the transport crash and see how far off the Empire is. Who knows, maybe I'll be able to draw them off." And then he turned around and strode towards a nearby swoop, climbing into the seat and then starting it up.

Garm looked at Vay as the transmission from Jaynie was suddenly cut off.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." He said, "I think we better see what the general can tell us."



## 5.

General Julius Dern strode onto the bridge of the orbiting warship.

"You summoned me captain?" he said to the vessel's commanding officer.

"Yes general." The captain answered and he looked at his comscan operator, "Put them through." He ordered and all of a sudden life sized holographic images of Garm and Vay materialised in front of the general.

"Ah, Agent Larcus. Miss Udra." He said.

"General our spy seems to have been uncovered." Garm said, "She was cut off mid-transmission. Can you determine her exact location from there? All we can get is a bearing but no range."

General Dern looked to the captain who in turn turned to his comscan operator in the crew pit again.

"I have a fix sir." The man said, "Co-ordinates sixty-one fourteen point one eight by twenty-seven point four four."

"She's confirmed the presence of the bio weapons general." Garm added, "Tell your men to be careful."

"Don't worry Agent Larcus." General Dern replied, "My men are trained for this sort of thing."

"Oh and she's also confirmed the presence of Foran Fallir, the leader of the PLAE. So let your men know that his capture is a priority."

"Of course. Is there anything else?" General Dern asked.

"Just that our agent may still be at the target location so warn your men to keep an eye out for her. She is not to be harmed. Vay and I will stand by to hear from you. We'll meet you there as soon as the bio weapons have been secured. Larcus out." Garm said and as his image faded the general looked at the captain again.

"Captain, I need clearance to launch." He said.

"You have it general. Good hunting."

"Good hunting indeed." The general said before he turned around again and strode back off the bridge.

Less than five minutes later four large box-shaped shuttles were lowered into position in the warship's launch bay before suddenly dropping free of the vessel. Following slightly different courses, the four shuttles ignited their engines and headed towards the location in the Mortan Lowlands now identified as the terrorist base.

Ignoring Jaynie as she lay bound on the floor, the remaining PLAE terrorists hurriedly continued loading the contents of their storehouse onto the various transports. It was obvious to everyone that there was not enough room aboard the vehicles to take all of the supplies and here and there arguments were starting over which items should be given preference. Amongst all of this they seemed oblivious to the fact that despite promising to send extra help, Foran had seemingly just vanished into the night.

Lying on the floor meant that Jaynie was the first to notice a vibration that affected everything in the storehouse, with stacks of containers quivering briefly and the terrorists were suddenly distracted from their task as they looked about in confusion.

"What's happening?" one asked out loud.

"Never mind." Another replied as the vibration stopped as quickly as it had begun, "Just keep working." And the terrorists returned to their tasks.

'Thud.'

Again Jaynie felt the impact through the floor and she lifted her head to see if anyone else had noticed it as well. But as far as she could tell none of the terrorists was aware of it.

'Thud.'

'Thud.'

'Thud.'

"Walkers! Imperial walkers on the north ridge!" a voice cried out from the ladder leading up to the surface.

"Arm yourselves!" one of the terrorists yelled. Then Jigger pointed to Jaynie.

"Grab her!" he shouted, "We'll use her as a hostage."

"What? Wait, no." Jaynie replied as she was picked up off the floor and dragged towards the ladder.

Still bound, there was no way that she could climb to the surface herself, so the terrorists tied a length of syntherope around her ankles and then simply dragged her up the ladder after them before pushing her back to the ground outside.

The sound of the approaching walkers was more noticeable now and as Jaynie turned her head she saw the imposing shapes of two AT-ATs heading towards her.

In the cockpit of the lead AT-AT General Dern studied the tactical display before him.

"Closing on enemy location now general." The pilot informed him before there was a flash of blasterfire as someone outside either out of defiance or desperation fired a hand held blaster at the vehicles.

"Locate the source of that." The general ordered.

"Small structure to the east general. Two storey building, shots came from the upper floor."

"Then let's show them what we mean by the might of the Empire shall we?" General Dern said as he lowered his targeting periscope into position, "Target, maximum firepower."

The night sky lit up as the AT-AT opened fire and the terrorist surrounding Jaynie all recoiled as the massive walker's main weapons opened fire and a nearby farmhouse was reduced to burning rubble in one go. Another volley of fire from a different direction alerted the terrorists to the approach of another AT-AT.

"There's one over there as well!" one of the terrorists yelled, pointing and as the others looked around they spotted a fourth one. With two AT-ATs to the north, one to the southeast and another to the southwest the terrorists were effectively hemmed in on all sides.

There was the sound of a replusorlift engine and from the other entrance to the storehouse a skiff emerged, the one that Jaynie had witnessed being loaded with missiles and it flew towards the closest walker. There was a sudden 'whoosh!' as one of the occupants fired at the AT-AT followed by a dull 'crump' as the missile struck one of the walker's forward knees and detonated. But even though it had struck one of its most vulnerable spots the AT-AT was too heavily armoured to be seriously damaged and its head turned towards the skiff. There was another volley of energy blasts, followed by a second as the pilot of the skiff was able to avoid the first. However, his luck did not hold for long and the third volley blasted the lightweight transport apart.

"What do we do?" Del cried out, panicking as he looked around at the AT-ATs getting even closer.

"We're almost there general. The other units are reporting the same as well." The pilot said and General Dern turned to the junior officer standing at the rear of the cockpit.

"Your men may begin their assault." He ordered and the other man snapped to attention and then left without a word.

All of a sudden the four AT-ATs came to a halt and the terrorists looked around at them.

"What are they doing?" Del asked but before anyone could reply the answer became obvious.

From under each AT-AT synthrope lines were dropped and the shapes of Imperial stormtroopers appeared as they slid down them. In well practised manoeuvres the stormtroopers ran clear of the towering walkers' feet and began to advance. As soon as they signalled to the pilots that they were clear the AT-ATs then began to stride after them.

Del crawled forwards and took up a position just behind a hedge then poked his rifle through it.

"Del no!" Jigger snapped, but he was too late to prevent his brother from firing at the stormtroopers. Even in the darkness Del's aim was good and one of the stormtroopers fell backwards with a smoking hole through his chest plate, "You laser brain!" you've given us away!" and in reply to Del's single shot the remaining stormtroopers opened on fully automatic and the air was filled with blasterfire.

Three of the terrorists were cut down immediately while the rest dived to the ground, seeking whatever cover they could find. The hedge between them and the stormtroopers offered no protection against their blaster rifles and the multi-frequency targeting and acquisition system built into their helmets enabled the stormtroopers to pick targets out even behind the barrier.

Jaynie screamed as she felt the heat of the blaster shots passing close over her head and this served to remind the terrorists of her presence among them.

"Use the spy!" Jigger snapped and another of the group crawled over to Jaynie and pressed the muzzle of his blaster to her head.

"Cease your fire!" the man yelled, "We've got one of yours here!" and he dragged Jaynie to her feet, holding her up between him and the stormtroopers, "I'll kill her! I'm serious!" he added.

The stormtroopers came to an abrupt halt and most trained their blasters on the terrorist and Jaynie.

"Sir we have positive ID on the agent." One of the stormtroopers signalled to General Dern's AT-AT, "One of the terrorists is holding her hostage and threatening to kill her."

"Squad leader, do you any of your men have a clear shot?" the general asked.

"Yes sir."

"Then take it."

A flash of bright red light dazzled Jaynie and she felt a burning sensation from the top of her head as a blaster shot passed close by. Then she smelt burning flesh and squealed as she found herself falling backwards, pulled down as the dead terrorist collapsed in a heap.

"Let's get out of here!" one of the terrorists yelled and several of the group got up to run.

"No you fools!" Chyan shouted at them, but it was too late and another volley of fire from the stormtroopers cut them all down as they tried to flee. Chyan turned to face Jaynie, "You little bitch! This is all your fault!" she snapped and she drew a knife and lunged at Jaynie. Grabbing her by the throat, Chyan rolled Jaynie onto

her back and lifted the knife high. Jaynie screamed but before Chyan could bring the blade down there was more blasterfire and Chyan fell to one side, the knife falling from her grasp and landing beside Jaynie. "Ma! No!" Del called out and Jaynie closed her eyes as he swung his blaster towards her. Unable to see what was happening, Jaynie heard the blaster shots and the screams that went with them but she knew that she had not been struck herself. Cautiously she opened her eyes again and she saw a figure dressed in white armour standing over her.

"Are you injured?" the stormtrooper asked, his blaster pointing aside and Jaynie shook her head, "She's safe." The stormtrooper then told the rest of the squad, "Bring a stretcher and get her aboard the AT-AT." While their comrades secured the handful of PLAE terrorists that had not been killed a pair of stormtroopers loaded Jaynie onto a stretcher and carried her back towards General Dern's AT-AT, waiting while a line was lowered. Jaynie then felt herself being lifted up into the vehicle where the general himself was waiting for her. "Here, let me release you." He said as he activated a control device to not only deactivate the magna harness but also release the clasps that held it in place. For the first time in months, Jaynie felt the harness drop free.

"Thank you." She said softly as the general helped her to her feet and handed her a jacket.

"Where are the bio weapons?" he asked.

"Inside the storehouse." Jaynie replied, "It's underground. If your men just search around the processing unit they should find one of the access points. The other entrance is at the other end, it's where that skiff came from."

"Okay." General Dern replied, nodding, "You just wait here. Take a seat and feel free to take food or water from the dispensers over there. I'll see that this is taken care of." Then the general turned to head back to the cockpit but paused, "I take it that Foran Fallir is inside the storehouse?" he asked.

"No, not any more." Jaynie replied, shaking her head, "He took a swoop. He said he was going to send help for the terrorists but it never came. At first I thought he'd just run away, but when you arrived I assumed that you'd already caught him."

"No." the general replied with a frown, "We haven't seen him either."

## 6.

From a safe distance Foran watched the Imperial troops as they forced their way into the storehouse through a pair of macrobinoculars. By pushing the swoop to its maximum he had been able to get away from the area just as he saw the heavy lifter shuttles depositing their lethal cargoes. This was by no means the first time that he had been forced to flee, but it did not make his defeat any easier to swallow and Foran let out a low growl. Then he noticed a group of repulsorlift vehicles approaching and focusing on them he watched as they headed for an AT-AT that was in the process of kneeling down so that its occupants could disembark more easily.

Four figures emerged from the AT-AT, two of them stormtroopers. The other two Foran recognised as Jaynie and General Dern, a man whose appearance was well known to him even though the pair had never met. Foran liked to know his enemies. Then from one of the landspeeders he saw two other figures disembark and approach the general and Jaynie and Foran scowled.

"Larcus!" he hissed as he recognised Garm and Vay and in his head he tried to count the times that these two had foiled him. Then he leapt back onto his swoop and accelerated away.

"What is the situation general?" Garm asked as he and Vay approached General Dern and Jaynie.

"My men have secured the underground storehouse." The general replied, "And the bio weapons have been removed for testing."

*Testing. Not destruction. Vay are you going to let the Empire develop this weapon for itself?*

"What about prisoners?" Vay asked, ignoring Lara's question.

"We have some, though most chose to fight to the death." General Dern replied.

"And as Foran Fallir amongst them?" Garm said.

"He left as soon as he found out you sent me to spy on him." Jaynie said, "He took a swoop."

"I've got scouts searching the area but speeder bikes are no match for a swoop when it comes to speed." General Dern added.

"The main thing is we have the bio weapons in our custody." Garm said, "Foran Fallir would have just been a bonus. I guess we'll just have to wait until another time to deal with him."

"What bout me?" Jaynie asked, "What happens now?"

"We had a deal didn't we?" Garm replied, "Your record will be cleared and you start university in two weeks. But just remember, you work for me now."

Vay left the offices of Imperial Intelligence with a box containing the few belongings she had kept there in her arms. She headed for the turbolift and got in. Just before the door could close she felt a tremor in the Force and Ibram appeared, leaping into the turbolift at the last moment.

Anger.

"I suppose you think you're being clever." He said and Vay smiled.

"Well I outsmarted you." She replied.

"This means nothing. Moff Horatian answers to higher powers."

"I know." Vay said, "But it's like you said yourself, I'm just not that important. I doubt that anyone wants to risk the effect that replacing a popular sector governor could have just to get to me."

"And just what do you hope to achieve with this?" Ibram asked, "Do you perhaps intend to make believe that you and Agent Larcus can lead a normal life together?"

"Maybe." Vay answered just as the turbolift door opened again and then as she stepped out she added, "Or maybe I'll just help him prove how you knew about how his wife was going to be murdered with time to do something about it."

Jaynie looked around the lecture hall at the start of her first lecture at the University of Estran. She had spoken briefly with several of her fellow students already, but as of yet she knew little about any of them and she began to wonder if any of them would be harbouring the rebel sympathies that she was supposed to watch for. Then she saw that two members of staff had entered the room and she turned to them as the human woman left the male devaronian standing by the door.

"Good morning class." The woman announced, "Welcome xenoarchaeology one-oh-one. My name is Doctor Jenessa Drame."

The tunic fit Vay perfectly as she sat in front of the mirror and studied her reflection. New outfit, same motives.

"How does it feel?" Garm asked as he watched her pin the rank badge of a junior ISB agent to the front of it,  
"Missing the bodyglove?"  
Vay smiled.  
"I'm wearing it underneath." She replied.  
"Well come on, you don't want to be late for your first day do you?"  
"No definitely not. I've heard my superior is really strict."  
"Well you could just try sleeping with him."  
"I already am." Vay said.