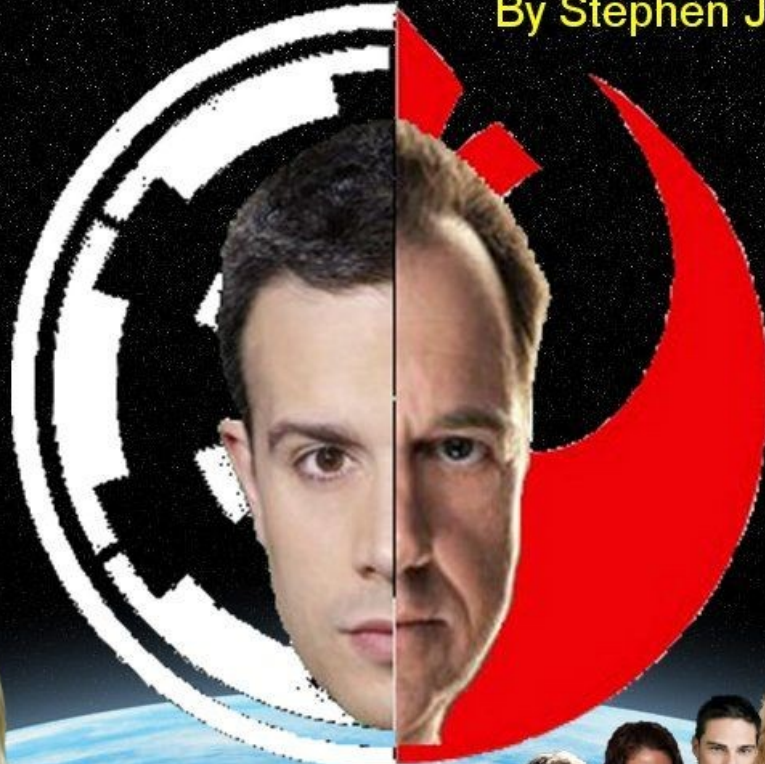


STAR WARS

4-06: Doorway to Beyond

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...

DOORWAY TO BEYOND

A KILLING IN A REMOTE LOCATION ALERTS GARM LARCUS TO THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ALIEN PRESENCE ON ESTRAN. NOW HE MUST FACE AN ENEMY HE THOUGHT HE HAD ALREADY DESTROYED BEFORE A FULL-SCALE INVASION CAN BEGIN...

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

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1.

The rain beating down on the road meant nothing to the driver of the patrol speeder, repulsorlift vehicles did not depend on surface traction for motion. However, the ground car that the policeman spotted ahead in the beams of his headlights did and this one had come off the road for some reason. It was entirely possible that the driver had deliberately pulled off the road, after all the ground car was now positioned at the top of a cliff that was well known for offering an excellent view of the ocean. But there was still the chance that there had been some sort of accident and so the policeman pulled his speeder over as well.

The policeman scowled as he got out of the speeder. The rain was heavy and the moment he was out in it he could feel it running down the back of his neck. Shining a glow rod ahead of him he approached the ground car cautiously. His suspicions that there had been an accident grew as he got closer to the vehicle, he could make out large dents in the front of it and fragments of what he took to be the windscreen were scattered about. Of course this did not give any hint of to what the car had struck, but it seemed likely that a second vehicle had gone over the cliff. If this were the case then undoubtedly its occupants would not have survived. "Hey there!" he called out; hoping to attract the attention of anyone inside the ground car but there was no response so he made his way closer.

Through rain covered windows he could make out the shapes of two figures sat in the front of the ground car and so he headed around to the front of the vehicle and shone his glow rod in through the destroyed windscreen.

He gasped and instinctively took a step back, barely stopping himself from going over the cliff in horror at what he saw. Then the policeman dropped to his hands and knees and vomited. As he lifted his hands off the ground he realised that there was something more than mud on one of them and he shone the light of his glow rod on it. There he saw strands of a strange sticky fibre adhering to his hand. Swiftly he dragged his hand across the ground to try and dislodge it.

A sudden chattering sound from the trees on the far side of the road attracted his attention and he looked up. The undergrowth quivered as something moved within it and the policeman got back to his feet, drawing his stunner.

"Come on out!" he yelled, "Police."

There was more movement within the undergrowth but from a different location and the policeman aimed his blaster in that direction instead. Then there was a crash from where he had been looking and when he turned back to face it he screamed out loud as he fired at the thing charging towards him.

On of the first things Agent Garm Larcus of the Imperial Security Bureau did when he got into the office was activate his computer and check his messages. Normally these were status reports from other ISB agents with a handful of news alerts on subjects he had programmed into his system, items that had the potential to develop into situations that the ISB should investigate or put a stop to.

In today's mix however was a message from one of the world of Estran's local law enforcement bodies. In this case a local constabulary based in an equatorial region. Criminal investigation was not normally a matter for the ISB but occasionally local law enforcement would uncover links to things that were. Selecting the message Garm saw that it was an audio file and he started it playing.

"Agent Larcus, my name is Detective Hinn. Look, I'm not sure what it is that we're dealing with here but we have a dead lawman with some sort of organic compound on his body. Our lab ran a DNA check and the only match was to a file entered by you and restricted. Could you come take a look at this? We're not equipped to handle rebel bio-terrorism."

Garm looked at the message more closely and saw that in addition to the audio file was a second attachment, the results of a DNA analysis. For a moment tried to remember what the original file submitted by himself had been about and then his eyes widened when he realised what it was.

Reached to the communicator on his desk Garm activated the device.

"Vay are you there?" he asked.

"Yes I'm here." The voice of a young woman responded, "Gregor's got me checking out-"

"Never mind that now. I need you to meet me in my office right away. We've got trouble, big trouble."

A few minutes later a young blonde woman in a tight fitting black bodyglove appeared in Garm's office doorway. This was Vay Udra, a force using Imperial agent masquerading as an intern.

"So what's so important?" she asked as she watched Garm transferring files from his computer to a datapad.

"How would you like a tropical getaway with me?"

"I'd love one. But what does that have to do with us having big trouble?"

"Remember those aliens we encountered last winter?" he said without looking up.

"Ugh. Yes I remember." Vay replied, calmly walking towards Garm and wrapping an arm around him as she looked at what he was doing.

"Well some local law enforcement guys may have run into more of them." Garm said.

"More? How?"

"I don't know, but they're asking for help and since we dealt with them last time I thought it may be a good idea for us to go out there and take a look."

"Where's 'there'?" Vay asked.

"Oh some equatorial island popular with tourists. So pack for warm weather."

"My bodyglove is thermally regulated, it's good for any temperature. When do we leave?"

"I want to speak with a couple of other people first. After last time it didn't seem worth us finding out more about these aliens but now it could be useful."

"So where do we find someone who can tell us about dangerous aliens?" Vay asked.

"Easy. The university."

Doctor Jenessa Drame sighed as she read what one of her students considered a reasonable essay on the ancient Herglic Trade Empire. She was relieved when there was a knock at her door.

"Come in." she said, sitting upright.

The door opened to reveal Garm and Vay.

"ISB." Garm said as he stepped through the doorway ahead of Vay.

Fear.

Vay could sense Jenessa's reaction. However she was not overly concerned by it. Most beings reacted the same way when confronted by members of the Empire's internal security force.

"How may I help you?" Jenessa asked.

"We need your professional assistance." Garm said as he sat down in one of the chairs in front of Jenessa's desk, Vay taking another.

"Of course agent – err-"

"Larcus." Garm said.

"Larcus?" Jenessa repeated.

Fear.

Vay frowned slightly; unable to understand why this woman would react in such a way just to Garm's name.

"Yes. We'd like your assistance in identifying an alien species." Garm said.

"Then shouldn't you be trying the xenobiology department?" Jenessa asked.

"We're interested in more than just who they are, we want to know about their behaviour." Garm said,

"Professor Pawecki suggested that you would be the best one to ask."

"He said you were familiar with every alien species found within this region for the last thirty thousand years."

Vay added.

"I am." Jenessa said.

"Good." Garm said, smiling, "Here take a look at these." And he handed her his datapad.

Jenessa took the datapad and looked at it.

"These are all dead." She said, scrolling through the catalogue of images.

"Yes they attacked a settlement a few months ago." Garm replied, "What you're looking at are the corpses left after a COMPForce Assault unit dealt with them."

"You mean you roasted them all without bothering to find out who they were beforehand?" Jenessa asked.

"They had just wiped out the population of an entire town." Vay answered.

"Well it may be that we have another opportunity to get close to them." Garm added, "We have reason to believe that there may be more of them on Estran. If you could assist us in identifying them then it may be useful to us."

"Well I don't have a clue who they are." Jenessa replied, tossing the datapad back across her desk, "Images of mangled bodies aren't much to go on."

"And if you had the chance to examine them up close?" Garm asked.

"The bodies?"

"No, the aliens themselves."

Jenessa smiled.

"I prefer dealing with civilisations that have been dead for a few centuries Vorn."

Garm scowled.

"How do you know that name?" he asked.

Fear.

"I, err, remember Vorn Larcus from the news." Jenessa said, "He defected to the rebellion didn't he. It was just a slip of the tongue. Is he a relative of yours?"

Deception.

"That's not important." Garm answered, "What is important is that we need you to come with us to advise on these aliens."

"I don't think so Agent Larcus."

Vay suddenly noticed a fist sized cube sat on Jenessa's desk. It was of clear crystalline construction and had various metallic components embedded within it. Vay had seen similar objects before.

"Where did you get this?" Vay asked, reaching out and taking hold of the cube.

"That? Oh it's just a souvenir from a dig. It's some sort of ancient data storage device that I've never been able to get working. A pity really, I believe it comes from an era we know precious little about."

"It's a holocron." Vay said, looking at Garm, "The jedi used them." Then she handed the device to Garm, "I'm guessing its faulty, that's why it tingles when you hold it."

"Tingles?" Garm responded, "I don't feel anything."

"Holocrons were invented by the rakata more than thirty-five thousand years ago." Jenessa said, leaning forwards to snatch it back from Garm, "This is a data storage device that has nothing to do with jedi sorcerers."

Sorcerers?

The voice in Vay's head that belonged to one of her distant ancestors, a jedi named Lara Udra was clearly unhappy with that description of the jedi.

For a thousand generations we were the guardians of peace and justice in the galaxy and she just thinks of us as sorcerers?

Vay ignored the voice and just waited for the response she knew Garm was about to give.

"I think I really still ought to seize it for examination." Garm said, "Unless-"

"Unless I agree to go with you?" Jenessa interrupted and Garm just smiled.

The shuttle waiting for Garm, Jenessa and Vay was a standard lambda-class ship, its long wings folded up beside the equally tall tail. However, the pilot was not quite what Jenessa had expected.

"What's the Space Rescue Corps doing here?" she asked when she saw the woman standing on the access ramp waiting for them.

"Lieutenant Cordall was also present at our last encounter with the aliens in question." Garm replied.

"We thought it was just an investigation into a downed transport. I was there because my ship responded to the alert before intercept command shot the ship down." The lieutenant added and then she held out her hand to Jenessa, "You can call me Mirri by the way, I don't stand on my rank much."

"Did you bring your records?" Garm asked Mirri.

"Sure," she replied, "loaded them into this." And she held up a mem-stik, "What are you looking for anyway?" she added as she handed it to Garm.

"I'm hoping that if these are the same aliens they came from the same ship. Your records may indicate how they managed to get off before it crashed."

"So where are the troops Agent Larcus?" Mirri asked, looking to either side of him in an exaggerated way,

"Last time you had a full company of them to hand."

"We're heading to a tourist spot." Garm replied, "I'd rather not cause a panic by landing an entire legion of stormtroopers. General Dern has put a unit on standby if they're needed."

"Okay then." Mirri said, clapping her hands together, "Let's get going. I'll be your captain for this flight. Keep your seats in the upright position and there is no smoking or trolley service."

The distance between Estran City and their destination meant that the most efficient way to reach it was to fly the shuttle into space and then after flying around the planet at a sub-orbital altitude to re-enter the atmosphere above it. However, the re-entry was not as smooth as the ascent to orbit and Garm and Jenessa both instinctively grabbed hold of the arms of their seats as the shuttle shook.

"Sorry about that." Mirri called out, "The weather's a bit choppy here."

"Yes, it's the rainy season." Garm said.

"The rainy season?" Vay asked, "Then why did you tell me to pack for warm weather?"

"Because its tropical." Garm replied, "Even the rain is warm."

Mirri brought the shuttle in to land at a pad located on the roof of a police station.

"Does anyone have an umbrella?" she asked as she shut down the shuttle's systems, "It's pouring down out there." Then there was a flash from the sky followed moments later by a loud rumbling, "Check that, thunder and lightning too."

"Its only a bit of rain." Jenessa said, "I've seen worse than this on lots of digs. Trenches knee deep in water or snow."

"You need a better job then." Mirri said, "There's no rain in space."

"No." Jenessa said, "Just solar flares, asteroid strikes and an unpleasant death from asphyxiation if there's a hull breach."

Garm ignore this and opened the access ramp. Walking down it he stopped while still under the wedge-shaped nose of the shuttle, sheltered from the rain. There was a light from close by as a door opened and a figure stood inside waved to him.

"Agent Larcus! Over here." He called out and Garm recognised the voice of Detective Hinn from the message he had left for Garm."

Garm darted across the rooftop landing pad and through the door.

"Detective Hinn I take it." He said, extending his hand.

"That's right. Thanks for coming so quickly."

Garm looked back at the shuttle just as his three companions were emerging from the ship.

"Yes, I was informed you'd be bringing your own team." Detective Hinn went on, "I arranged the accommodation as your office requested."

"I'm sorry? My office requested?"

"Yes, I got a call from a young lady who asked me to arrange for a private house. It's the rainy season so there were plenty available. Its just as was-"

Garm held up his hand and the detective stopped talking. Then he looked at Vay as she rushed through the door just ahead of Mirri. Jenessa on the other hand seemed un-phased by the rain and was wandering casually towards the door.

"You asked for a house?" he said to Vay.

"Well I didn't think that a hotel was advisable." Vay replied, "We don't want to upset the tourists. You said so yourself."

"Yes I did didn't I?" Garm replied, still staring at her.

He doesn't believe you. Lara told Vay. And why should he? You're lying.

Paying no attention to this Vay just smiled at Garm.

"Are you mad?" she asked.

"No. It's a good idea." He replied then he turned to Detective Hinn, "Detective, can you show us your evidence."

"Of course. Follow me."

2.

Detective Hinn took the group to the local morgue. The building was not far from the police station; the local government was keen to keep such structures together where the tourists would not notice them. The detective waited outside while the others were led into the morgue itself.

Three bodies were removed from storage and lined up in front of the visiting group.

"I hope you have strong stomachs." The morgue assistant said and he pulled back the cover from the first body, that of the police officer. The he just stared in surprise as not one of the four newcomers reacted.

"I've seen the remains of terrorist atrocities." Garm commented.

"Centuries old rotten corpses." Jenessa said.

"Shipboard fires." Mirri added.

"I just don't scare easy." Vay said.

Oh please. It took all your effort to avoid jumping when you saw that.

Vay frowned for a moment, resisting yelling for Lara to leave her alone only because she was anxious for no one else to know about the four thousand year old spirit.

"Are all the bodies the same?" Garm asked.

"They are. The chest has been opened by splitting the rib cage at the sternum and the internal organs removed. Also sections of muscle tissue from the thighs have been removed."

"Sound familiar?" Garm asked, looking at Jenessa.

"Oh there are plenty of species that remove body parts for one reason or another." she replied.

"This lot make stuff out of them." Vay said.

"What sort of stuff?" Jenessa asked.

"Machines." Garm said, "They blend biological components with regular technological ones to achieve what they want."

"And you didn't think to tell me this?" Jenessa asked, "That could be helpful in figuring out who they are."

"Do you want this?" the morgue assistant asked and he held out a small clear plastic flask. Inside this was a bundle of white fibres, "We found traces of these on all of the bodies. The police told me that they found more in the surrounding area, but I just have what you see."

"Thanks." Garm replied, taking the jar and peering at the contents closely, "Look familiar?" he then asked, holding out the jar so Mirri and Vay could see it.

"That ship was full of it I remember." Vay said.

"So we're definitely dealing with the same aliens then?" Mirri asked.

"Everything matches so far." Garm said, "We have a DNA match and the behaviour is similar. Unless someone with access to information and evidence from the original mission is doing this I don't see what else it could be." Then he looked at the morgue assistant, "Thank you, you can put these away for now." He told the man and he looked back at the others, "Well I suggest we check out our accommodation and review what we've got."

Garm, Jenessa and Mirri all sat in the lounge of the rented house looking at portable computers. Garm with the help of Mirri was studying the sensor data from her rescue tender when it had encountered the transport that had brought the first batch of aliens to Estran while Jenessa hunted through reports of alien civilisations that made extensive use of biotechnology.

"Something fell away there." Garm said, noticing the appearance of a second sensor trace in the vicinity of the transport before it was fired on.

"It looks like just a section of hull plating." Mirri replied, "Look, see how it breaks up? I doubt any of that made it as far as the surface."

"What about them?" Garm then asked as yet more signals appeared, a tightly packed cluster of objects dropping away from the transport just before the planetary interceptors opened fire.

"That could be it." Mirri said, "I was already pulling away by that point and I doubt the boys from intercept command were bothering about anything that small."

"But what are they?" Garm asked.

"Give that here." Mirri said and she slid the computer across the table and closer to her. Then she adjusted the playback of the sensor records to focus on the area of the freighter that the mysterious objects had fallen from, "They look like cargo canisters." She said, "About twenty or thirty of them and each one's about four metres long."

"Big enough to hold one of our aliens each then." Garm observed.

"Are you suggesting that they could survive a drop from space?" Jenessa asked, looking up from her own terminal.

"The ones we encountered last time managed." Mirri answered her.

"They used some sort of cocoons made out of stuff like this." Garm added and he held up the fibre-filled jar, "If they lined those containers with something similar then maybe some of them survived the fall."

"Well I doubt they landed here." Mirri said, "Even in an area with a low population density like this someone would have reported seeing something. Its more likely they landed out to sea and either the tide washed them ashore or the tide brought them in."

Garm frowned.

"Do you think these things can swim?" he asked Jenessa.

"That's really an issue of biology," She replied, "and I'm not a biologist. I deal with civilisations."

"And can you tell us what civilisation we're dealing with yet?" Garm asked, "Though I wouldn't call dismembering people to use their parts for building machine terribly civilised."

"Really? What about blowing up a planet inhabited by billions of unarmed people?" Jenessa asked in response and Garm glared at her angrily, "There aren't that many candidates." She said quickly changing the subject, "Manipulating organisms to mimic mechanical or electronic functions takes quite a high technology level to begin with and conventional technology tends to be more durable and easier to develop."

"Plus less icky." Mirri commented.

"Yes that too." Jenessa said and then she went on, "Well I have found references to a few species that seem to favour biotechnology anyway. The most common seem to be the ergesh, though even they aren't encountered very often. They're some sort of plant and look like a tree trunk about the same height as a human but bulkier and with tentacles."

"We're after arachnids." Garm pointed out.

"I know that." Jenessa said, "Now there is another species known as assemblers. They're arachnids like we're looking for and apparently they're about three metres tall. Problem is they're very rare. I can't find any reference to a home world at all. Also they seem to be solitary, creating smaller versions of themselves to operate the space-going webs they live in."

"These things aren't solitary." Mirri said, "Though I have to admit I don't fancy the idea of being stuck on a ship with even one of them. Can you imagine trying to hunt it down if it decided to set up a nest in the air ducts and just came out to bite someone's head off every now and again?"

"So they're not assemblers." Garm said, "So what else is there?"

"Nothing certain." Jenessa replied.

"But you've found something?" Garm asked.

"Just rumours." Jenessa said, "There are a few tales about accidents in hyperspace leaving ships stuck in some alternate universe filled with killer arachnids. Most of these seem to be third or fourth hand reports, you know such and such once met someone who's cousin saw them and so on."

"The freighter went missing for the bet part of a day." Mirri said, "It wasn't here and it wasn't in hyperspace."

"It was somewhere else." Garm finished.

"Well since your information seems to tie in with what's written in all these conspiracy theory files I can give you a name. Some of the beings that saw these aliens called them charon, probably a mispronounced version of some sound they made."

"At least we have a name." Garm replied, "Download everything there is on them, it may come in useful."

"Sure." Jenessa said, "Since those reports seem to be accurate maybe I'll read some of the others as well. There's one here saying that Emperor Palpatine is two jawas standing on one another's shoulders."

Garm frowned again.

"Sedition's illegal you know." He said.

"Whereas not having a sense of humour isn't apparently." Jenessa replied.

"Well the housekeeping droid has taken our bags up to our rooms." Vay announced as she entered the lounge, "Now has anyone seen my datapad?"

"You put it down over there." Garm replied and he pointed to a vacant chair near to Jenessa.

"Thanks." Vay said as she picked up the device. Glancing over at Vay a puzzled look appeared on Jenessa's face.

"Where did you find that?" she asked.

"Find what?" Vay replied.

"That datapad. I've seen more modern versions that have been buried for thousands of years. May I-" Jenessa said and she reached out for the datapad.

"No!" Vay snapped and she snatched the device away.

Shocked at the reaction the others just stared at Vay.

Oh very good. Now they all think you're nuts.

"I'm sorry." Vay said, "But it is old and fragile. I'd rather not have people poking at it. Now it's late so I'm off to bed." And before anyone could respond she left the room.

"What the hell did I do?" Jenessa asked as the sound of Vay's footsteps heading upstairs were heard and she and Mirri both looked at Garm.

"Maybe she's just tired. She's right about it being late." He said and the two women continued to stare at him, "Though perhaps I should go find out." And he got to his feet, "If you hear me scream just run and keep on running."

Vay was sat on her bed studying the datapad when she sensed someone approaching and she shut off the device just as Garm appeared in the doorway.

"Vay is something wrong?" he asked.

He mustn't find out about what's on the datapad.

"No I'm just tired that's all."

"Really?" Garm asked, "Because I've never known you act like that before. Mind you I've never seen you with that datapad either."

"I took it from that jedi we encountered." Vay replied.

You shouldn't have told him that. Now he'll get suspicious.

"I was hoping I could use it to find out who had sheltered him these past twenty years." Vay continued, "If there are still any jedi left it could help us catch them."

Garm smiled.

"But you couldn't risk Doctor Drame seeing any of the information." He said, "I get it."

I'm impressed. But you can't let him ask too many questions, change the subject.

Vay set the datapad down on a bedside table and then waved her hand. Instantly the door behind Garm closed.

"What was that for?" he asked and Vay smiled at him.

"I just wanted some privacy." She replied and she took a deep breath as she drew the Force into her. Then she reached out through the Force and used it to pull Garm towards her.

"Whoa!" he exclaimed as he fell across the bed, landing on top of Vay.

"You know this is the only room with a double bed." Vay said and then she wrapped her arms around him and kissed him.

Well I suppose he's not thinking about the datapad anymore.

3.

Only a skeleton staff was present in the police station during the hours of darkness. A handful of uniformed officers and civilian support staff monitored communications with patrol units and maintained the building itself while just one team of detectives was on hand just in case they were needed. Most investigations would be able to wait until the morning.

The desk officer had his feet up on the counter in front of him and he was reading when he heard the sound of something scraping against the front doors. He glanced up from his datapad and stared at the doors, expecting them to open at any moment. But instead there was just another scraping sound.

"Stang." He muttered as he set down the datapad, got up and headed for the door himself. For all he knew someone had been hurt and dragged themselves as far as the door. Perhaps if he had been more alert to the possibility of danger to himself he would have drawn the stunner holstered to his hip. But as it was when he opened the door he did not even have his hand on the weapon.

A civilian aide was assisting a uniformed police woman test comlinks when he thought he heard something. "What was that sound?" he asked.

"What was what? I didn't hear anything." The policewoman replied.

"It sounded like it came from the front desk." The assistant said.

"Leven's there. If he needed help he'd call for it."

"Maybe he did." The assistant said and he stepped out into the corridor that ran towards the police station's main entrance, "Hey Leven!" he called out but there was no reply.

"Leven quit goofing around." The policewoman yelled as she joined the assistant in the corridor but still there was no reply from the front desk and both of them began to walk down the corridor towards it. As they got closer there was another sound, a sort of chattering.

"Wait here." The policewoman said to the assistant and she drew her stunner. Cautiously she advanced to the doorway leading to the front desk and she spun around, aiming her stunner into the room beyond. What she saw made her freeze. A trio of massive aliens each with eight limbs and thick exoskeletons squatted just inside the door while a fourth slightly smaller specimen of the same species had ripped open Leven's ribcage and was removing the internal organs one by one.

"Oh kriff!" she snapped as she brought her stunner to bear. But the aliens saw her first and the three larger ones all leapt up in unison, bounding over the front desk. One paused, perched on top of the desk and turned around and before the policewoman could open fire a stream of liquid shot from the end of the alien's abdomen. She screamed, staggering back as the liquid covered her and bumped into the wall. Trying to move she found that the liquid has set into milky white strands that held her fast. Then the first of the aliens burst through the doorway and with a single swipe of one of its larger clawed arms it ripped her head off.

Watching in horror the civilian assistant turned and fled back down the corridor.

"We're under attack!" he yelled.

More police officers appeared at the shouted warning, some with their weapons drawn while others still had them holstered, assuming that it was some sort of joke. However, as soon as they saw the massive aliens charging down the corridor they too drew their stunners and fired.

The relatively weak stun bolts were intended for use on humans and other similar sized targets and the charging charon were far more massive. Even the fire concentrated on the lead charon did little to slow it down.

The first police officer they reached was hurled back through the air, landing on a desk left empty for the night before his broken body slid over the far edge.

"Fall back!" someone yelled and the police began to retreat.

Towards the rear of the station both of the night shift detectives rushed towards a sealed door and began the process of opening it.

"We need more firepower!" one snapped at the nearby uniformed officers. The then slid upwards to reveal racks of long barrelled blaster rifles. These were not the compact assault weapons used by the military and lacked the capacity for automatic fire, but they did fire lethal energy bolts and had far greater stopping power than the stunners this department typically issued.

The rifles were just being passed around and loaded when there was a chattering sound. A uniformed officer spun around and tried to aim his rifle. But the weapon was not intended for room-to-room fighting and he found that he could not turn the cumbersome weapon fast enough. A charon stepped around the corner and upon seeing the officer reached out, grabbed the barrel of the rifle and pulled it sharply towards it. Holding out one of its clawed arms the alien slit the throat of the police officer.

A second officer got off a shot, the blaster bolt striking the alien on the shoulder and it gave out a shriek of pain. But before the officer could fire again the charon swung the rifle it still held by the barrel and struck the officer around the head hard enough to shatter the side of his skull.

The other two charon then appeared behind the lead warrior and aware that the police here were more heavily armed than the others they had encountered so far they had chosen to arm themselves. The objects they had taken from the web-like harnesses that were the only thing they wore did not look like any blasters that the police were familiar with but from the way they were held it was obvious what they were.

"Down!" a detective yelled as he dove through the armoury door for cover just before the charon opened fire. The energy blasts fired by the charon weapons were not as refined as conventional blasters, but they still had the strength to tear through furniture used as cover and kill those hiding behind them.

An officer hidden behind a counter that the charon had not yet noticed emerged just long enough to fire a single shot that struck one of the charon in the centre of its chest. The alien warrior let out a brief gasp and then collapsed before its two comrades returned fire and tore apart both the counter and the officer hiding behind it. Then they both turned towards the armoury.

Another shot rang out as the detective hiding in the armoury, now the last of the police left alive here fired. But his shot missed and only served to alert the charon to his presence. As they both looked around at him he swung his rifle to one side and fired a single shot, not aiming for either alien but instead targeting the armoury door's control panel. There was a flash and a shower of sparks from the panel as the blaster bolt struck it and immediately the heavy armoured door dropped shut, keeping the charon out of the armoury but trapping the detective inside.

Outside the armoury one of the charon projected another stream of webbing from its abdomen, coating the bottom of the armoury door. The aliens had no way of knowing if the detective inside would be able to open the door and this ensured that he could not. The pair then walked back through the police station until they came to the smaller one of their number, now engaged in opening up the corpse of a civilian police assistant. All three chattered to one another before the smaller one got up and followed the others to the roof where they stared at the lambda-class shuttle still waiting there and then boarded it.

A banging sound from downstairs woke Garm and Vay the next morning.

"What the hell is that?" Garm muttered.

"You better go find out." Vay replied.

The banging sound continued as Garm got of bed and pulled on his uniform. He was just leaving the bedroom when Jenessa appeared in the doorway of hers. Looking at Garm she smiled.

"Just checking on her again?" she said and then there was more banging.

Garm ignored Jenessa and headed downstairs, just as Mirri emerged from her room.

"What's going on?" she asked.

"I don't know." Jenessa replied, "But it seems Agent Larcus wasn't too happy at being dragged out of bed. Not that it was his anyway."

Garm yawned as he opened the front door to see what the fuss was all about and he found Detective Hinn standing there.

"Detective? You're early." Garm said.

"Well there's been another attack." Detective Hinn replied, pushing past Garm.

"Come in." Garm said, "I'll put some caf on. Now what's happened?"

"Those kriffing aliens just slaughtered a bunch of cops that's what."

"Police? Where?"

"Where do you think? They hit the station. A returning patrol unit found the staff dead, most of them sliced open just like the earlier victims."

"Most?" Garm asked.

"Yeah, looks like these aliens have stepped up to using blasters now as well. We found one man left alive, raving like a lunatic about giant spiders. I've tried signalling you since I was alerted four hours ago."

"I turned my comlink off. I didn't want to be disturbed." Garm said, pouring drinks for himself and the detective, "But why hit the police station? Its one of the few places around here were most of the occupants were armed. There are much softer targets with more potential victims."

"I think I know. They were after your shuttle."

"The shuttle's gone?"

"No. But its been wrecked."

Using a glow rod to illuminate the recesses Mirri inspected the shuttle as the others just watched. It appeared that most of the inspection and access panels had been ripped from their mountings to expose the machinery behind them and in many cases wiring had been ripped out.

"I don't get it." Mirri said, "This all looks a mess, but I could probably get it fully operational again in just a day or two. A fully equipped workshop could probably do it in less."

"Why wreck the shuttle anyway?" Jenessa asked, "Its not like this has stranded us here or anything. We can just take a speeder or call for a pick up."

"Oh we could still just fly this out of here." Mirri said, gazing at the shuttle.

"What do you mean?" Garm asked, a puzzled look on his face.

"Well this ship is still flyable." Mirri said, "I wouldn't rate it for exo-atmospheric use, but if we stuck with the replusorlifts then we'd be fine for flying back to Estran City. Hyperdrive is definitely out of the question. I haven't found it all yet."

That's important.

Vay's eyes widened at the sudden intervention of Lara's spirit.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked Mirri.

"Well there are some parts missing." She replied.

"What parts?" Garm asked.

"Well the motivator and the field guide. Though the alluvial dampers are still there."

"Okay that meant nothing to me." Jenessa said.

"Me either." Garm agreed.

"It means that if we were in hyperspace we could keep going, but we can't get in or out." Vay said, "Right?"

"Right." Mirri replied.

"So the charon have stolen the machinery needed to open up a portal into hyperspace, but they don't have the means to go anywhere if they do?" Jenessa said, "Why?"

"The other place they come from." Vay said.

"You're right." Garm replied, "It's the only thing that makes sense. Whatever universe they come from can only be accessed using a hyperdrive. They must think that they can use those parts to build a machine to open a portal to there."

"But you can't open an entry point to hyperspace on the surface of a planet. Even I know that." Jenessa said.

"Actually you can." Mirri replied, "The safety systems would shut down the hyperdrive and close it right away because you can't fly too close to a planet's gravity well, but the portal would still form and the excess energy would be dumped into hyperspace."

"So they'll open up this portal and then what?" Jenessa asked, "They'll go home?"

"I don't think so." Garm answered, "If they create a gateway to wherever it is they come from then I get the feeling that there's going to be a whole lot more of them for us to worry about."

"That's not a very good feeling." Mirri said.

4.

There were few holographic communication systems available in the local area and the closest of these was located in one of the more upmarket hotels, all of who demanded a large fee for their use. However, Garm was able to bypass this by simply informing the staff of the penalties for obstructing an Imperial Agent in his work. Stepping onto the holopad Garm found himself facing a life sized image of General Julius Dern, Moff Horatian's personal military advisor.

"General." Garm said, standing at attention. Technically he was not required to since the ISB was not part of the military, but Garm thought it better to show the man some respect.

"As you were." The general said, "Now to what do I owe this communication?"

"We've confirmed the presence of the aliens general." Garm said, "And it is our belief that they intend to bring more of their kind to this world."

"More? You need to speak with Fleet Admiral Vretan, he can organise."

"I'm sorry sir." Garm interrupted, "But they won't be arriving via starships."

General Dern frowned.

"Surely you're not suggesting that they possess some sort of teleportation technology?"

"I'm not sure exactly how it will work general, but it is my belief that the aliens intend to open a portal to their own universe."

"Wait, did you just say, their own universe?"

"Yes sir. As far as we can tell they inhabit some sort of alternate dimension. The freighter that originally brought them must have suffered some sort of hyperdrive malfunction that took them there. We think the aliens will try and replicate that malfunction to open their portal."

"But where will they get a hyperdrive from? General Dern asked.

"Ah. Well it seems that they have stolen certain key components from our shuttle for that sir."

The general frowned again.

"I expect you're in need of reinforcements then." He said.

"Yes sir. As many as possible and as soon as possible. We need to organise a full sweep of the area to locate the aliens. They may have retreated for now, but if they succeed then they'll be back and in greater numbers."

"Hang on Agent Larcus. I'm sending an advanced team now and I'll be there in a couple of hours with more." The image of the general disappeared and Garm found himself once again alone in a darkened room.

"So what did he have to say?" Vay asked as Garm emerged from the room and Jenessa, Mirri and Detective Hinn all looked at him expectantly.

"Reinforcements are coming." Garm said.

"How many?" Detective Hinn asked.

"Just a few at first, but more later on. Now I think we should make a start on trying to locate wherever the charon have decided to set up camp."

"Last time we met them they were using the sewers to keep out of sight and move about." Vay said.

"The original attacks happened in a rural area with no sewers for kilometres in any direction." Detective Hinn said, "At the top of a cliff."

Garm smiled.

"Detective, these cliffs. They wouldn't happen to have any caves in them would they?"

Standing on a beach Garm and Vay watched the gunship swoop in low and hover just above the ground. As a squad of black armoured storm commandoes leapt out Garm rushed towards it.

"Pilot!" he shouted above the noise of the engines, "Take off and circle the area. I want you to watch for any signs of the aliens moving about above ground. The whole area at the top of these cliffs is wooded so you'll probably have to use thermal imaging. But unless you can positively identify a target as alien you are to hold fire and report in. I don't want any civilian casualties by mistake. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir." The pilot replied simply and as Garm stepped back from the gunship it rose back up into the sky, kicking up sand from the beach and spreading it around. Garm then turned to the storm commandoes. As was typical with all stormtrooper units they bore no markings on their armour and Garm could not say for certain which was their leader, "What are your orders?" he asked and one of the commandoes got to his feet to address him.

"The general has placed us under your command until his arrival sir." The commando said.

"Good, then follow me." Garm said and he led the commandoes up the beach to where the others waited beside a cave entrance, "This is the rest of the team." He added.

"None of these citizens possesses any military rank." A commando that Garm guessed was the same one that had previously addressed him said.

"I want you to treat Lieutenant Cordall's Rescue Corps rank as military for this mission." Garm replied, "And Miss Udra has been given temporary status equivalent to a lieutenant also. Doctor Drame and the detective are here to advise only."

"You mean you expect me to go in there with you?" Jenessa asked.

"Well you could wait out here all alone." Vay replied.

"Looks like I'm going in with you then." Jenessa said.

"I could do with a decent blaster." Detective Hinn said and he drew his stunner to show Garm. Garm looked at the nearest storm commando and nodded to him. The commando promptly took the sidearm holstered on his thigh and handed it to the detective.

"Okay let's go." Garm said and he drew his blaster and advanced into the cave.

Garm soon found some of the storm commandoes moving ahead of him. The squad had split into pairs without any word being spoken that he was aware of and now the elite troops had formed an effective perimeter around the rest of the group. At each junction they encountered the storm commandos would swap positions so that they covered all approaches until after the group had passed. No matter whatever direction an attack came from a storm commando would be the first to meet it. Given that they possessed fully sealed body armour and more powerful weapons than he did Garm found this somewhat reassuring.

"Agent! Ahead of us." One of the storm commandoes suddenly called out and the entire squad came to a halt "What's wrong?" Garm asked as he approached the storm commando.

"Look sir." The soldier replied and he pointed straight down the tunnel ahead of them to where the rock walls suddenly became coated in a white web.

"Okay this is it." Garm said, "Everyone stay alert. Oh and doctor you may want to start taking notes."

"Yeah, because I'm sure they'll come in handy when something tries to remove my internal organs." Jenessa replied.

Advancing more cautiously now the group made its way into the alien web. Unlike more freshly spun material the strands here had set against the walls, forming a spongy white layer that did not stick to the team as they walked on it.

"Why would they do this?" Detective Hinn asked.

"Quiet." Garm whispered, "They could be close by."

"Sorry." The detective said more softly, "But why? I mean it kind of gives them away doesn't it?"

He has a point. The web tells you they're here somewhere.

Vay thought for a moment and in that moment of concentration she noticed something in the force. She could sense Garm, Jenessa, Mirri and each of the storm commandoes individually, but there was more life here as well. It was something alien and Vay could sense the dark side flowing through it strongly.

"They're hidden in the web!" she snapped and all of a sudden there was a tearing sound from behind the team as a charon warrior burst out of the web and dropped from the ceiling. The alien landed directly on top of one of the storm commandoes to the rear and there was a snapping sound as it used its two larger arms to grab him by his helmet and twisted his head strongly enough to break his neck. At the same time the alien raised a weapon and pressed it against the chest plate of the nearest storm commando and shot him dead. A storm commando positioned along the flank turned to fire on the alien, but Detective Hinn also decided to engage the charon and as he stepped towards it he stepped into the commando's line of fire. The delay this caused the commando was enough for the charon to reach out and drive a clawed hand through the detective's chest while simultaneously firing on another commando. But as these two victims fell the alien was left exposed and a barrage of blaster fire ripped into it.

Behind you.

Even without Lara's warning Vay sensed the proximity of more charon.

"They're behind us!" she called out, turning to face this new threat. Her instinct was to reach for her lightsaber, but with Jenessa and Mirri present she had to make do with the tiny blaster already in her hand. A pair of charon warriors charged down the tunnel towards the group and Vay aimed dead centre of the closest charon's chest. But before she could fire the alien unexpectedly leapt straight upwards, taking hold of the web coating the tunnel ceiling and continuing to charge.

An energy blast from one of the charon narrowly missed Garm, but it struck another of the storm commandoes. The man's armour deflected just enough of the energy to stop him dying instantly, but as he fell his grip on his weapon tightened and he fired a prolonged burst into the ceiling of the tunnel. Punching through the layer of charon web to the rock behind it the energy bolts ripped it apart. Smaller pieces of molten rock dropped through the holes created in the web, cooling rapidly but still causing Garm, Jenessa, Mirri and Vay to leap aside to avoid being burned. But more significant was the mass of loosened rock now being held up by nothing more than the charon web.

"The ceiling's coming down!" Garm yelled, hearing a tearing sound as the web came free of the tunnel. The collapse began just behind the group and both Jenessa and Mirri had to dive forwards to avoid being crushed like the only storm commando behind them. However, the collapse was not limited to the area under the blaster-damaged rock. The web ripped away from the ceiling and walls did not tear and so instead more of the web was pulled free and fell into the tunnel. Garm was just beginning to move forwards when another storm commando was hit by alien weapon fire and tumbled back into him. Vay stepped closer in an attempt to help him up but before she could pull him out from beneath the storm commando's body the collapse caught up with them and everything went black.

"Garm? Garm are you awake yet?"

Vay's voice and her hand prodding Garm's side roused him back into consciousness. As his eyes flickered open he caught sight of a charon at work, apparently cutting up the bodies of several storm commandoes. This alien was somewhat smaller than the warriors the team had faced in the tunnel and it had its back to him. At first Garm thought the charon was upside down and clutching to the web coating the ceiling, but then he realised that he was the one dangling upside down from the ceiling and he glanced towards his feet. There he saw that from the knees down his legs were coated in the same web material the chamber he was in.

"Garm?" Vay's voice said softly.

"What happened?" Garm asked and he looked around at Vay. Like him she was hanging upside down from the ceiling, her long blonde hair dangling down beneath her. In addition Jenessa, Mirri and one of the storm commandoes had also been suspended from the ceiling by the charon. The charon had removed the armour from the storm commando, leaving him wearing a bodyglove similar to Vay's. In addition to their captives the charon had also set several glowing globes into the web on the ceiling and Garm guessed that these were some sort of alien lamp.

"Well first the tunnel fell in and then a hoard of alien arachnids dragged us out and stuck us up here." Jenessa said.

"I'm afraid there were too many to fight sir." The storm commando added.

"Okay." Garm said and he began to search through his pockets.

"They took everything." Mirri said.

"Some of our equipment is over there sir." The storm commando added and he pointed towards what looked to be a shelf constructed from stone set in web.

"No weapons though." Jenessa commented, "Looks like they didn't want to have us running around armed if we got loose."

"Garm that's not quite true." Vay then said and Garm looked carefully at the belongings piled up on the shelf. He saw comlinks, datapads and other small items that he would expect to find in someone's pockets. But then he noticed something else poking out from beneath a datapad, a slender cylinder that looked the right size to be held in one hand.

It was Vay's lightsaber. Clearly the charon had not recognised it as a weapon and had therefore left it here with the team's other belongings.

"Pardon me for asking," Mirri said, "but should we really be discussing escape in front of one of the aliens?" and she glanced towards the nearby charon.

"Oh please," Jenessa replied, "I doubt it speaks basic. We could be impersonating banthas and it wouldn't know."

"I think I know where you're going with this." Garm said to Vay, "But what about the security issue?"

"The Space Rescue Corps is subject to the same standards of discipline as the military," Vay pointed out, "so I think we can rely on her silence."

"What about her?" Garm then asked, glancing at Jenessa.

"What about me?" Jenessa added.

"She agreed to come on the mission knowing it was military in nature." Vay replied to Garm's question.

"Agreed? I was kriffing blackmailed."

"Oh that was nothing doctor." Garm said, "If you reveal what you see here today you will be considered a traitor. Do you understand what that means for you and your family?"

Jenessa glared at him.

"Well I suppose you can speak from experience can't you?" she said and Garm glared back at her.

"Hey!" Mirri snapped, "I'd like to get down before my face goes purple forever. Let her try whatever it is she's got in mind."

There is no try. Only do or do not.

"Thanks, that really helps." Vay muttered sarcastically in response to Lara.

"Do it." Garm said.

Vay reached out her arm towards the lightsaber, closed her eyes and concentrated.

"What's she doing?" Mirri asked.

"Shush." Garm said.

"But she's not doing anything." Mirri protested.

"Oh yes she is, but she needs to concentrate." Garm said, "So stay quiet."

"But—" Mirri began before Jenessa interrupted.

"Shush." She said, "I think you're about to witness something that hasn't been seen in the galaxy at large since the end of the Clone Wars."

Carried by the Force, Vay's lightsaber suddenly flew off the shelf towards her and the moment it was in her grasp there was a 'snap-hiss' sound as Vay ignited the weapon.

"Holy kriff I was right!" Jenessa snapped, "A lightsaber."

This attracted the attention of the charon, who looked around just in time to see Vay using the crimson energy blade to cut herself free. The alien let out a sudden loud screeching and charged towards the prisoners dangling from the ceiling.

"Look out!" the storm commando yelled as the alien drew near.

One last sweep of the lightsaber severed the web from around Vay's feet and she dropped straight down.

The charon lunged at Vay even as she was still falling, but the agile young woman was able to turn in mid air and she held out her weapon towards the alien. Effortlessly the blade cut through both of the charon's larger arms and the alien let out an unmistakable scream of agony as it recoiled away from her.

Vay landed neatly on her feet, bending her knees to absorb the impact of her landing and before the charon could react further she thrust the lightsaber through its neck and then watched as its head toppled to the floor ahead of the rest of the corpse.

"I don't believe it." Jenessa said, "She has jedi skills."

Vay twirled around to stare at Jenessa, pointing her still active lightsaber at the woman and holding it so that the tip of its blade was mere centimetres from her face.

"I am not a jedi." She said sternly.

But you could be.

"I said I am not a jedi!"

"Okay I heard you the first time." Jenessa said, afraid that the young woman really would run her through with the exotic weapon.

"Vay just cut us loose." Garm said, "That thing screamed pretty loud, I wouldn't be surprised if more heard it."

"They did, look!" Mirri snapped and she pointed towards the entrance to the chamber where two of the larger warrior aliens had appeared, each one holding one of their bizarre blasters.

Vay was quick off the mark, rushing forwards and holding her lightsaber up in front of her before the charon could fire. When they did fire the charon attacked simultaneously, sending a pair of energy blasts streaking towards Vay. Without breaking stride Vay twisted her lightsaber to put its blade in the path of the energy bolts, deflecting each one away from her. She tried to send one of the blasts back at the charon that had fired it but they lacked the stability of a conventional blaster bolt and Vay miscalculated, instead sending it into the wall beside the alien.

Confusion.

Vay sensed the reaction of the two charon warriors. Having never before encountered a being with abilities like Vay's they had been totally unprepared to see their shots batted aside so easily and with their confusion came delay. Fatal delay.

Vay skewered the nearest charon, thrusting her lightsaber through its chest. Then she rounded on the second alien and as it swung its blaster around for a second shot she ducked and sliced its two from legs out from underneath it. The charon screamed as it fell, but only until Vay stabbed it through its head with her lightsaber and its cry was suddenly silenced.

Vay stepped through the doorway and checked the tunnel outside.

"Okay its clear." She said as she rushed back to where Garm hung from the ceiling and kissed him.

"Ahem. Miss Udra." Jenessa said as Vay maintained the kiss, "Could we get down now?"

Vay stepped back from Garm and still smiling at him she reached up and cut into the web binding his feet.

"Hang on Vay are you sure—" Garm began but his was interrupted by a tearing sound as the web gave way and he plummeted to the floor, landing in a heap at Vay's feet.

"Thanks." He said as he sat up, rubbing the back of his head, "Now free the others." Then as Vay set to work releasing the other prisoners from the web Garm ran to the bodies of the dead warriors and picked up their weapons. Holding one in his hand he examined it closely. The bulky blaster felt strange in his grip, its organic structure had a clamminess that was not present in the weapon he was used to, but it had a muzzle and what he took to be some sort of firing stud set into the grip. Pointing the weapon at one of the dead warriors Garm pressed down on the stud and was pleased to see a blast of energy erupt from the weapon and blow a

hole in what was left of the alien. Picking up the other blaster he turned towards the storm commando now standing close behind him.

"Trooper take this." He said, "Just squeeze that bit there to fire it."

"Yes sir." The soldier replied as he took the weapon and felt the weight.

"Okay so now what?" Jenessa asked.

"First I double check that you understand everything you have just seen here is classified." Garm replied and Jenessa nodded, "Good, then we grab the rest of our stuff from over there and try to find a way out of here. Hopefully the general will arrive soon and when he does I want him to be able to flood this place with stormtroopers."

"Sounds like a plan to me." Vay said, "Now everyone get behind me and let's see if we can actually get out of here."

5.

Both Vay and the storm commando were used to stealthy movement, so these two took a forward position in the group while Garm hung back to watch over the two unarmed members as they slowly made their way through the maze of tunnels coated in hardened alien web. In this part of the tunnel system the charon had set many more of their lights and so the team had no need of their glow rods for now.

Chattering sounds echoed down various side passages alerted the team to the presence of charon down them and they avoided these, choosing instead to keep to the empty tunnels.

"Do we know for certain that there is even another way out of here?" Mirri asked, "It's not like we can go back the way we came after it caved in."

"I wouldn't worry about that." Jenessa replied and she stuck her finger in her mouth briefly, wetting the end before holding it up in the air, "There's a breeze coming from that way." And she pointed down a side passage, one from which they had just moments earlier heard the sounds of charon.

"That's a neat trick." Mirri said.

"Yeah well you get used to these sorts of things when you spend your life digging around in hundred thousand year old tombs."

"So do we risk it?" Vay asked, looking back at Garm.

"I think we have to." He said, "Its only a matter of time before these aliens figure out we've escaped anyway."

"So how do we do this then?" Mirri asked, "We're short of a few weapons still."

"I know." Garm replied, "You and the good doctor will stay behind the rest of us while we advance quietly. Hopefully there won't be too many of the charon down there."

"If there are just a handful of their warriors I should take them alone." Vay suggested, "The last two didn't know what to think of my lightsaber and if we're lucky I could snag us some extra weapons."

"Okay then," Garm announced, "Vay you go first, I suggest shutting off your lightsaber until we know what we're facing. Doctor Drame and the lieutenant will stay out of the way and we'll be right behind you ready to cover you if needed."

The group arranged itself accordingly and Vay began to creep down the side tunnel ahead of the others. This was one of the areas that the charon had chosen to illuminate and from ahead as well as hearing the chattering sounds the aliens used to communicate with one another she saw shadows moving across the walls as they moved. But then Vay sensed something odd.

Life.

The chamber ahead of her was filled with lifeforms, far more than the noise of the charon had indicated. Creeping closer Vay peered into the chamber. Like the one in which the group had been held captive this was lined with charon webbing and had lights set into the ceiling. But this chamber also included a large pulsing mass suspended in the very centre of the chamber by thick lengths of web connected it to the ceiling, floor and sides of the chamber. It was from in here that Vay could sense the strong life force.

From behind her she sensed the approach of the others.

"What the hell is this place?" Mirri muttered as she caught sight of the chamber.

"It's a nest." Jenessa replied and when the others looked at her she added, "What? Have you never seen a spider's nest before?"

"If this is a nest," Garm said and he pointed towards the pulsing mass in the chamber, "then that means that those must be—"

"Eggs." Vay interrupted, "I can sense the life in them."

"But there must be hundreds of them." The storm commando said.

"Then we need to do more than just take out that portal they're building." Garm said, "We need to destroy that nest and make sure no breeding pairs of these aliens can escape."

Beware Vay, destroy these eggs if you must to protect this world but do not forget you are taking life. Beware giving into the Dark Side.

"Err, can I just point something else out?" Mirri said, "There's no way out down here. It's a dead end."

"Not quite." Jenessa said, "Look up there." And she pointed to a spot high up on the opposite wall where there was an opening on a narrow ledge. The passageway beyond was in darkness but some loose strands of webbing that hung from the ceiling nearby were swaying in the breeze blowing in through it.

"That's pretty high up." Vay said.

"Perhaps we can use the web holding that nest up to climb up there." The storm commando suggested.

"Sounds good to me." Garm said as he looked at the various charon present in the chamber. Most were of the smaller type, scurrying about strengthening and repairing the web holding up the nest but he also spotted

one of the larger warriors just beyond the nest itself, perched up on one of the supporting lengths of web, "Now let's go."

Vay stepped into the chamber and crept towards the nearest part of the web supporting the nest. This was about as wide as her waist and she reached out to climb up onto it. But as soon as Vay put pressure on the web the warrior that Garm had seen spun around to face her and let out a screech.

"We've been made!" Garm snapped as the other charon present all turned towards them, "Move." and he ran after Vay.

The warrior made its way swiftly across the web as Vay was still pulling herself up into it. Then she turned to face the charging alien and activated her lightsaber. Used to moving through the webs spun by its species the charon came towards Vay quickly, using the nest's supports to keep out of Vay's direct line of sight. However, the alien was so concerned with Vay that it failed to notice Garm and the storm commando on the cave floor below.

Both men fired their stolen weapons and the crude energy blasts tore through the web. Vay and the charon both leapt into the air. Vay towards a different supporting length of web while the charon jumped back towards the central nest itself. Garm fired a second shot that also missed the charon, but instead ploughed into the mass of the nest itself and there was a sudden flash of flame as it began to burn.

The reaction of all the charon was instantaneous. All of them let out sudden loud screeches and rushed to the nearest section of the supporting web, using it to climb towards the nest as they tried to save it.

"This is our chance!" Garm called out and he waved at Jenessa and Mirri, "Come on! Move!"

As Vay and the charon warrior rushed towards one another and the other charon did their best to reach the centre of the nest the rest of the group began to climb up into the web as well. A nearby charon looked around at them and hissed, jumping across the gap between the different sections of web they were on with its clawed arms extended. Garm reacted quickly and he fired his blaster. The shot struck the alien in mid air and it tumbled, striking the side of the web Garm and the others were on before bouncing back down the chamber floor and landing in a motionless heap.

The web beneath Vay's feet shook as the warrior leapt onto it, landing almost on top of her. Activating her lightsaber Vay held it up to block the first blow the warrior tried to deliver and sliced off its hand. The alien screamed in pain and instinctively backed away. But this took it to the edge of the web and it slipped, stopping itself from falling to the floor only by grabbing hold of the web with its remaining clawed arm while the two smaller ones as well as its legs flailed about. Looking over the edge of the web Vay stared at the alien for a few moments before she swung her lightsaber again and cut through the arm holding onto the web. The charon screamed again as it fell, silenced only when it landed with a 'crunch'.

Focused on the burning nest the remaining charon ignored the team as they climbed across the web towards the opening opposite. The storm commando was the first one to reach it, but even as he was pulling himself from the web to the ledge another charon warrior suddenly stepped out of the darkness and looked down at him. The alien hissed once and then delivered a kick that sent the storm commando falling backwards to the floor far below.

"Vay there's more of them in the passage!" Garm shouted and he fired at the alien. His shot missed and the charon briefly retreated back into the passageway before it reappeared and returned fire.

Garm ceased moving towards the ledge and fired repeatedly. The unfamiliar weapon was difficult for him to use and none of his attacks struck the alien, but that was not his intention. While the charon warrior was focused on Garm it failed to notice Vay leaping from one section of the web to another, circling around to the other end of the ledge. The first it knew of her approach was when she made one last leap aided by the Force that carried her from a higher part of the web down to the ledge and landed right in front of the alien. With a single sweep of her lightsaber Vay cut the charon in half and its legs and abdomen collapsed on the spot while its torso bounced over the side of the ledge.

"Quickly!" Vay called out to the others, "Before more come!" and holding her lightsaber up like a glow rod she scooped up the dead charon's blaster and pointed it down the passageway ahead. It did not take Garm long to reach the ledge and while Vay continued to cover them he helped Jenessa and Mirri up onto it.

"Here, take this." Vay said, handing the charon blaster to Mirri.

"This feels gross." She said as she felt the weapon in her hand.

"It doesn't get much better with time either." Garm told her. Then he looked at Vay, "Would you care to lead the way?" he said and she smiled.

Led by Vay the group proceeded into the passageway and in here they could feel the gentle breeze on their faces that told them the way out was near. But as they made their way towards the outside world Vay suddenly came to a halt and shut off her lightsaber.

"What's wrong?" Garm whispered as they were plunge into darkness and he fumbled through his pockets for his glow rod.

"Shush." Vay said and then she added, "Listen."

All of them stood in silence and listened.

"You know this would be easier if I knew what I was listening for." Jenessa commented.

"Wait, I think I hear it." Garm said, "A humming."

"Yes that's it." Vay said, "I wasn't sure with my lightsaber running."

"But what is it?" Garm asked, "It doesn't sound like any sound we've heard the charon or their machines make."

"The hyperdrive." Mirri said.

"Huh?" Jenessa said.

"Look," Mirri replied, "a hyperdrive needs power and lots of it too. Now the charon didn't take the shuttle's hypermatter fusion reactor so they must have had an alternative in mind."

"One of their biomechanical constructs?" Garm asked.

"Or maybe they're just tapping into the local grid." Mirri said, "They could draw off a small amount of power and let it build up until they have enough to activate the hyperdrive. That hum is coming from the exposed power cable they're tapping into."

"It would explain why they put it up here rather than deep in the caves." Garm replied, "They'd want it as close to their power source as possible."

"Problem is do you think they'd leave it unguarded?" Mirri asked.

"Only one way to find out." Vay said and she reactivated her lightsaber.

At an accelerated pace the group continued along the passageway, alert for more charon. There was a chattering from ahead and the group ground to a sudden halt.

Danger.

"Down!" Vay yelled and she angled her lightsaber to deflect the energy bolt that came flying down the passageway towards her.

6.

Pressing themselves up against the walls of the passageway Garm and Mirri fired back. Neither could see a target so they spread their shots either side of Vay
“Hold your fire a moment.” Vay said, raising a hand and when the shooting stopped she listened and reached out through the Force, looking for any signs of life ahead of them.
Sure enough she felt the presence of several charon in front of them.
Behind you.

The warning from Lara came just in time and Vay spun around and held up her lightsaber to parry the energy blast that came towards her, guided through the darkness by the light given off by the crimson blade.
“We need to move!” Vay yelled, “They’re coming after us.”
“But what about the aliens up there?” Jenessa responded, pointing further up the darkened passageway,
“Are they dead?”
“No.” Vay answered as she batted away another shot from a charon blaster, “But at least they’re not shooting at us.”

Garm pulled out his glow rod and held it up over one shoulder as he began to advance, his blaster pointed directly ahead.

“Get going.” Vay said to Jenessa and Mirri, “I’ll hold them back.”

Vay backed along the corridor, deflecting one energy blast after another. From the darkness in front of her she could hear the sound of the charon warriors pursuing them, but further along the tunnel she could sense the other charon lying in wait for them and she knew that she needed to be the first one to encounter them. You can’t be in two places at once Vay. Unless you can find a way to stop those charon chasing you the others will run into an ambush.

“What am I supposed to do?” Vay said softly.

“Just keep doing what you’re doing.” Garm replied, hearing her and assuming that she was speaking to him. Sometimes the answer is right in front of you. Or sometimes hanging over your head.

Vay glanced upwards but all she could see in the red light given off by her lightsaber. Then she remembered how they had come to be captured by the charon, the roof of the tunnel had collapsed and incapacitated them. That same collapsed had cut off their retreat.

She halted and deflected the next few energy bolts that came towards her straight upwards, punching holes through the webbing and blasting chunks of rock from the tunnel ceiling itself.

“Vay what are you doing?” Garm asked.

“Stopping them from following us.” She replied and she suddenly swung her lightsaber in an arc that extended diagonally upwards in front of her. The blade sliced into the already weakened ceiling and there was a rumbling as it gave way. As had happened in the previous cave in the web lining the tunnel came away from the rock in a large sheet. But this time Vay had cut a long slot in it close to her and so the direction of collapse was away from her, back towards the charon, “Run!” she then yelled as she ran between the others, now heading for the charon she knew to be lying in wait.
Hatred.

“Vay lookout!”

Garm’s warning was not necessary, Vay sensed the charon warrior’s thoughts a split second before it lunged out of the darkness at her and she easily dodged it. As the alien dived through the air where Vay had just been she held out her lightsaber and used its own momentum to slice it in half. The charon’s blaster fell to the floor of the tunnel and Jenessa scooped it up as she passed.

The tunnel widened out into a small chamber that was dominated by a construction that could only be of charon design.

“This is it.” Mirri said as she saw the components stolen from the shuttle, “This is their portal.”

The stolen hyperdrive components were set into a tower of flesh that pulsed as several of the smaller charon scuttled around it apparently making adjustments. A strange fleshy tube ran from this construction to a hole in the ceiling through which fresh air entered the cave system. Unlike the dark pink flesh of the machine in the centre of the chamber this tube was paler, almost white and there was a faint glow coming from it. The sudden appearance of the humans in the chamber seemed to startle the charon who glared at the intruders and hissed.

“There are more of them than us.” Jenessa commented.

"Yeah, but we've got all the blasters." Garm said and he raised his weapon and took aim at the nearest charon, one standing right in front of their machine.

"No!" Mirri yelled and she pushed Garm's arm aside just as he fired. The blast went wide, striking the wall behind the machine. Briefly the charon gazed at the hole blasted in the wall before turning back towards the humans. However, they remained where they were apparently waiting to see what they would do next.

"What are you doing?" Garm demanded.

"You'll hit the hyperdrive." Mirri replied.

"So?" Vay asked, "Aren't we here to destroy it?"

"We don't know how long they've been charging that thing up." Mirri explained, "Destroy it and all that stored energy has to go somewhere."

"You mean 'boom'?" Jenessa asked.

"Big boom." Mirri replied.

"So what do we do then?" Garm asked.

"Might I suggest getting out of here?" Mirri said and she gestured towards the exit.

"Okay then, everyone follow my lead. Nice and slow." Garm said and he began to edge towards the hole. As the group moved the charon moved as well, keeping themselves between the humans and the machine they had built.

Upon reaching the hole Vay shut off her lightsaber and simply leapt straight up, landing on the ground above right beside the hole.

"Take my hand." She called out down the hole and lying beside the hole she extended an arm downwards. Jenessa was the first to be pulled up, followed by Mirri and finally Garm. As soon as he was standing up above ground there was the familiar chattering of charon voices and movement from below. Garm reacted by firing two shots down the hole and though they hit only the floor of the chamber below it did convince the charon not to follow them for now.

"How long do you think we have before they manage to find another way out?" Vay asked.

"I'd say not long." Jenessa responded, "Even if they can't dig their weapons are powerful enough to blast chunks out of rock."

"Then we need to be gone." Garm said, putting his glow rod away and instead taking out his comlink, "Pilot can you read me?" he spoke into it.

"Agent Larcus this is General Dern." The general's voice replied, "We're on final approach. What is your situation?"

"Located somewhere in the woods at the top of coastal cliffs sir. There is an alien nest immediately below us that has got to be destroyed."

"Copy that agent, can you paint the target for us?"

"No sir –wait. There may be a way." Garm said and he turned to Mirri, "How big an explosion will that hyperdrive make?"

"Big." Mirri replied.

"Big enough to be seen from the coast?"

"Easily."

"General standby." Garm said, "After extraction the target will be marked for you." Then after a pause he repeated his earlier call to the gunship pilot, "Gunship pilot can you read me? We need immediate extraction."

"I read you Agent Larcus. I'm heading in now." The pilot replied and soon after there was the sound of repulsorlift engines overhead.

"He's here." Jenessa exclaimed, waving her arms above her head to try and attract the pilot's attention. The gunship swooped down to hover just above the treetops and a moment later a syntherope ladder was dropped.

"Everyone up!" Garm snapped, backing away from the hole while keeping his weapon trained on it. Vay simply repeated her earlier Force-enhanced leap to propel her into the hovering gunship while the others instead climbed up the ladder, Garm being the last one up once again.

"Are there no more of you sir?" the pilot asked Garm as he was helped aboard by the gunship's co-pilot.

"No." he replied, shaking his head "The troopers are all dead. Now I want you to mark the spot you just picked us up from. Swing around and fire everything you've got at it. But be sure and keep your altitude above one hundred metres." Then he glanced at Mirri, "Will that do?"

"If he pulls away quickly it should."

"One hundred metres it is then." Garm said, "One strike and then break off."

"Copy that." The pilot said, "Find something to hold onto." And then Garm felt the gunship suddenly start to move.

The gunship first gained altitude in a straight line and then it began to bank around in a tight circle. Inside the passengers all found themselves leaning as the vehicle tilted. Then there was a sudden lurch as the pilot angled the gunship into a steep dive.

"Open fire!" he commanded and in one single powerful salvo the full complement of the gunship's weapons were fired towards the hole in the ground.

The high-powered energy beams easily sliced through the covering layer of dirt and rock above the chamber below and opened the way for the accompanying missiles to detonate right next to the portal device the charon had constructed. The dull 'crump' of the missile detonations was drowned out by the overwhelming roar of released energy when the portal device exploded. Mirri had been accurate in her assessment of the damage that destroying the device would cause and even though the gunship's pilot had already begun his ascent the vehicle was buffeted by the blast wave that reached up more than a hundred metres into the air, just ahead of the fireball.

"General Dern?" Garm yelled into his comlink over the noise of the engines and the blast, "The explosion is your target. Everything in the ground below as far out as the coast must be destroyed."

"Affirmative Agent Larcus, we're setting down now." The general replied and outside the gunship Garm saw a group of massive boxlike transports descending over the ocean.

All the transports halted and hovered while gargantuan doors in their bellies slid open and massive four-legged walking machines were lowered down into the ocean. The water came up just past the knees of the AT-AT and one at a time they began to wade towards the shore.

In the control cabin of the lead AT-AT General Dern himself lowered a targeting scope and surveyed the cliffs ahead. His attention was immediately drawn to a cave on the beach where he noticed a single arachnid alien stagger out of the darkness.

"Target, maximum firepower." He ordered, locking the location of the cave into the AT-AT's fire control system.

The general's AT-AT fired a single volley of fire that collapsed the cave entrance and buried the charon on the beach alive under tonnes of rubble. Then all of the heavy walkers opened fire together, sending volley after volley into the cliffs with devastating results.

The rock struck directly by the energy blasts first melted and then boiled, creating fissures filled with rapidly expanding and superheated gas that had the effect of shattering the rock around it. This continued for less than a minute before the entire cliff face gave way and collapsed.

From inside the gunship Garm and the others watched the scene of destruction below them. With nothing to hold it up the wooded ground at the top of the cliffs had simply fallen away and left a massive gouge in the ground that went out as far as the ocean. What was inside this was impossible to see, the collapse had created a cloud of dust and smoke that not only filled the hole but also spilled out into the surrounding area. Still more than two hundred metres out to sea even the AT-ATs were barely visible above the cloud.

"Take us down!" Vay shouted to the pilot, "I need you to make a slow pass over that." And she pointed to where the charon nest had been.

"Vay what are you doing?" Garm asked, "It could be dangerous."

"We need to know Garm. We need to know if any charon survived and I'll be able to sense them if they did, but we need to get closer."

"Do it." Garm ordered the pilot and the gunship descended towards the cloud.

"This is as low as I dare go sir." The pilot announced as the gunship skimmed the upper edge of the cloud, "The altimeter won't function properly in the cloud."

"Is this close enough?" Garm asked Vay and she nodded.

Vay then closed her eyes and reached out through the Force. Every charon she had encountered so far had been filled with hatred and such strong emotion would be easy for her to read. But below the gunship the Force was empty.

"It worked." Vay announced, "They're all dead."

"That's what we thought last time." Mirri commented.

Jenessa sat on her couch at home and watched the wall mounted chronometer, wondering how long it would be before her guest arrived. After what felt like much longer than the fifteen minutes she spent staring at the wall the doorbell chimed and she got up to answer it. Standing on her doorstep was a young blonde woman. At first glance it may have been possible to mistake her for Vay Udra, but where Vay's demeanour was cold and aloof this woman's was warm and friendly.

"Kay come in." Jenessa said, "Were you followed?"

Kay Laren was the handmaiden to Lady Lynn Sharva, a member of Estran's Parliament and staunch Imperial loyalist.

"No – I mean I don't think so." Kay replied as she entered Jenessa's home while Jenessa herself looked out into the street, watching for any signs of anyone watching them back, "How would I know?"

"I don't actually know." Jenessa said and she shut the door, "Come with me." She then said and she led Kay into the lounge, "Here take this." She said, picking up the holocron from the table and handing it to Kay.

"I've seen this before." Kay said, "Aboard the *Ocean Queen*. What is it?"

"It's a holocron."

"A what?"

"An advanced data storage device. Now the last time you held it you told me it tingled. Do you still feel that?"

"Yes why?"

"Sit down Kay." Jenessa said as she took a seat and waited for Kay to copy her.

"Okay so now what?" Kay asked.

"Kay, have you ever had weird feelings about people or events? Like you knew what was going to happen before it happened?"

"Sometimes. But everyone gets that now and again don't they?"

"Yes, but I'm guessing that you get it a lot more than most."

"What are you trying to tell me Doctor Drame?"

"Kay, I think you may be Force sensitive."