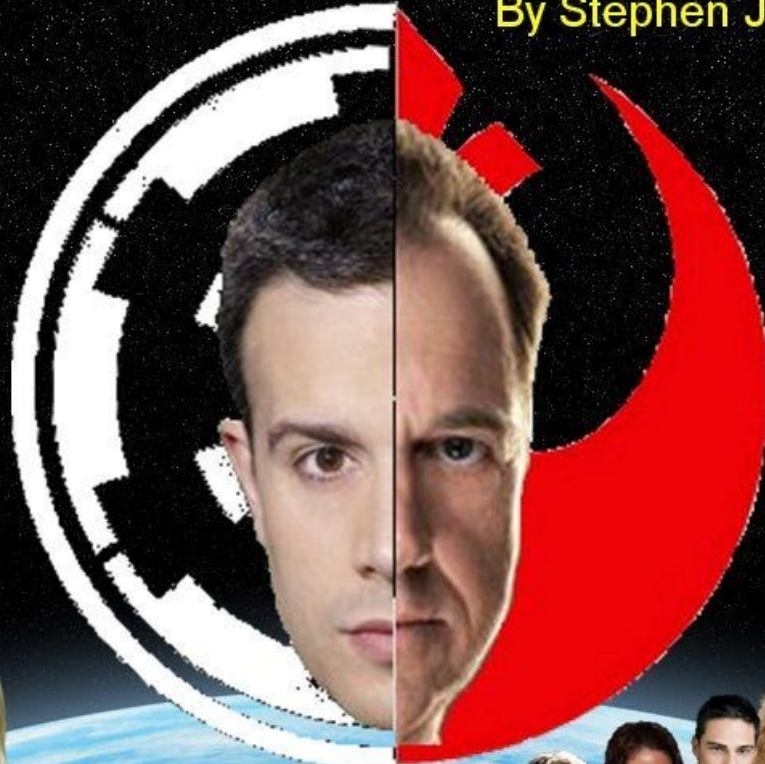


STAR WARS

9-04: Friends in Strange Places

By Stephen J Dutton



9-04
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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 GUERRILLA 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...

FRIENDS IN STRANGE PLACES

LARGE SEIZURES OF ARMS BY LAW ENFORCEMENT POINT TOWARDS AN IMPENDING REVOLUTION ON THE PLANET LORRAS AND GARM AND VAY ARE SENT TO INVESTIGATE. WHEN THEY ARRIVE THERE HOWEVER, THEY FIND THAT IT MAY NOT BE THE ALLIANCE THAT IS PROVOKING REBELLION ON THE PLANET...

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

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1.

“Police!”

The amplified shout was heard just a fraction of a second before a carefully placed shaped charge blew off the main doors of the warehouse and an armoured speeder truck crashed through the wreckage and began to discharge gas canisters. Either side of the vehicle police in body armour and armed with blaster carbines rushed into the building and began firing bright blue stun pulses at anywhere they saw movement. Their helmets were all fitted with masks that not only prevented them from breathing in the gas now filling the building but also enabled them to pick out the body heat of its occupants through the cloud that obscured normal vision beyond a few metres.

Moving in an orderly fashion that had been planned out carefully before the first police officer even set foot inside the warehouse, the tactical team spread out and rapidly secured it. As each occupant was stunned the first wave of police officers reported the position of their target and a second group followed with binders to secure them as they lay helpless and then carried them from the building to be properly processed.

Upon leaving the warehouse, Police Lieutenant Marr removed his mask and looked at the line of prisoners lying on the ground. Drawn from more than one species, these were all still unconscious though some of them were beginning to stir as the effects of the gas and being stunned wore off.

“Sir!” a voice called out from behind him and Marr looked over his shoulder to see another of the tactical team walking towards him.”

“Yes?” he responded.

“We’ve opened some of the marked containers.”

“You’ve found the spice then?”

“No sir. I think you should come and see this.”

Marr frowned and then started to walk after the other officer. He was led back into the warehouse where the gas had now cleared and he saw that several cargo containers had been lined up and one of them forced open. According to the police’s intelligence the containers bearing the marks that were stamped on each of these, they should have been packed with spice being smuggled to Lorras from off world. However, there was not a single gram of spice inside the container, instead it contained four blaster rifles and several power packs lined up beside them.

“Stang.” Marr said as he crouched down to remove one of the rifles. More than a metre in length as opposed to the more modern shorter weapons, Marr recognised the model as a BlasTech DC-15. These rifles had been introduced prior to the Clone Wars and had been standard issue to the old Grand Army of the Republic before it had been disbanded and replaced by the modern Imperial Army and Stormtrooper Corps. Marr was familiar enough with the design to be able to open up the weapon and check its internal components, all of which appeared to be present and in working order, “How many?” he asked.

“Four rifles per container. Sixty containers.” the police officer who had brought him here, “That makes-”

“Two hundred and forty.” Marr said before he could finish, “Two hundred and forty military-specification blasters.”

“So what are you going to tell the captain?”

“The truth.” Marr said as he got to his feet and he sighed, “That we’ve found more of them.”

When Garm Larcus, assistant director of the Imperial Security bureau in the sector arrived at his office he found a young blonde woman also wearing an ISB agent’s uniform sat in his chair with her feet up on his desk.

“Comfortable Vay?” he asked and she smiled at him.

“Yes thanks.” she replied, “I’m not the one who just had a tooth replaced. At least now I don’t need to listen to you pretending it doesn’t hurt.”

“Ah the problems of sleeping with someone who knows my every thought.” Garm said, “So what happened while I was at the dentist? Did any nerf herder agents bring another wookie here for interrogation?”

“No, you’re not going to get punched by another drug abusing alien.” Vay said, “But Director Helios wants to see us in his office as soon as possible.”

“Both of us? I’ve got a bad feeling about this Vay. It normally means we’re about to be sent off to some gods forsaken world on a mission that could get us both killed.”

“I knew it.” Garm said as Vay piloted their shuttle into the atmosphere of Lorras in the Heart, the central region of the sector between the originally settled Trade Corridor where the capital Estran was located and the Shadow Region that neighboured the nearby nebula, “Sent to do the job the locals can’t.”

Like many worlds in this part of the sector Lorras was a populous world, though not quite as developed as

any of the worlds in the Trade Corridor and there remained large areas of wilderness where rebels could hide from the authorities. There were only a handful of cities on Lorras and Vay flew the shuttle towards one of these. Garm could have requested one of the pilot's from the ISB's pool of qualified individuals but he trusted Vay to be able to get them here safely more than any stranger. Plus of course it meant getting to spend some time alone with her while the ship was in hyperspace.

"I'm sure we'll be fine." Vay said, "You've got me with you after all."

"Yes, but I'm just a bit concerned about why when there are more than four hundred ISB agents permanently assigned to this planet we have to come all the way here from Estran." Garm replied, "It suggests to me that there's something major going on."

"Well I'm sure we'll figure it out. Look, there's the tower." Vay said and she pointed to a tall building located near the centre of the city. Whereas most of the city's buildings were made from ferrocrete created from the reddish stone that was common on Lorras this particular building was obviously made from the dull grey construction modules used for most Imperial facilities and the presence of two lambda-class shuttles identical to the one Vay was piloting demonstrated that the roof had been designed to be a dedicated landing pad for the building. Vay brought the shuttle in to land, its wings rising up beside its large tail fin as the landing gear lowered.

"Looks like we've got a welcoming committee." she commented when she saw a pair of ISB agents waiting for them on the landing pad.

"Think they'll have excuses as to why they aren't incompetent already prepared?" Garm asked and Vay smiled.

"Ten credits says they try and blame someone outside the ISB. Sector rangers or locals." she said.

"Oh they'll definitely blame someone but you can't have both. Cops or sector rangers, one or the other."

Garm replied as the shuttle set down on the pad.

"Then I pick sector rangers." Vay said, shutting off the shuttle's repulsorlift engines and opened the access ramp for them to disembark. Then the pair got out of their seats and exited the cockpit.

"Assistant Director Larcus." one of the ISB agents waiting at the bottom of the ramp said as Garm and Vay walked down it and she smiled, "I'm Senior Agent Calla Akkersyn. Welcome to Lorras. We've prepared you office space and arranged accommodation for the pair of you. You've picked a good time of year to-

"You may dispense with the pleasantries." Garm interrupted, "Director Helios tells me that you've been having rebel problems that you can't cope with."

"We're here to put you back on track." Vay added and Agent Akkersyn snarled at her. The badge on Vay's chest made it clear that she was only a junior agent and as such both of the local agents who had turned out to meet Garm and Vay outranked her.

"This is Agent Martan Saran." Agent Akkersyn added and the man standing beside her nodded his head in greeting.

"There have been a suspiciously large number of weapon seizures over the past few weeks." he said, "The local police seem capable enough of bringing the weapons to us but their intelligence has failed utterly to tell us where they are coming from."

Garm smiled and he held out his hand towards Vay.

"Ten credits." he said as Vay sighed. Then as she reached into her pocket for her wallet he looked at the two local agents, "Agent Udra and I had a bet about how you would try and cover up your failure." he told them and the faces of both agents fell.

Surprise.

Fear.

Vay suppressed a grin when she felt the reaction

"Now to start with, how about you show us these weapons." Garm said.

"Of course sir." Agent Akkersyn replied, "Please come this way."

Garm and Vay were shown to a turbolift that took them down to a basement level of the building that had been divided up into numerous caged sections, each one used to house physical evidence. The cage that the two visiting agents were shown to contained numerous crates and boxes of varying sizes from about half a metre in length up to two large cylinders more than two metres long and half that in diameter.

"These were found over the course of five weeks." Agent Saran said, "Most of it right here in the capital but these two cylinders were air dropped into the ocean equipped with flotation skirts."

"Who found them?" Garm asked as he walked around the various containers and inspected the exteriors before opening a few at random to peer inside.

"A mix. Police mainly during raids for other purposes but the ocean cylinders were witnessed being dropped by a fishing cruiser and the crew changed course to see if they were escape pods."

"More likely they thought that there could be something worth stealing inside them and panicked when they saw they were full of weapons." Vay commented, "So what's in them exactly?" and she reached out to open the nearest case. This held a pair of carbines and Vay took one out to inspect it, "Obsolete but effective." she commented.

"That just about sums up everything in here." Agent Akkersyn said, "It's like someone raided a museum exhibit."

"Museum exhibits tend to be deactivated." Garm said, opening up another of the cases and running his hand over the row of blaster pistols inside, "I'll need a full inventory." he said as he closed the case again, "Along with full details on where, when and how each piece was discovered. I may need to speak to whoever found them as well so make sure that's included. One way or another Agent Udra and I will get to the bottom of this."

Fear.

Vay frowned as she felt a slight tremor through the Force. For some reason Garm's confidence was unsettling at least one of the local agents but she could not tell which one or why.

"Of course." Agent Akkersyn said, "Come with me and I'll show you to the office we've prepared for you."

2.

Garm was pleasantly surprised to discover that the office space provided for him and Vay to work in was not just an unused room that had been given the bare minimum amount of modification to make it usable as an office. Instead a briefing room had been reconfigured with a pair of desks and modern computer terminals connected to the building's network.

"So what do you think?" Vay asked when they were alone.

"That this office space actually makes me think that the locals aren't trying to ignore us and hope we go away." Garm replied.

"I meant about the weapons. Military specification. Obsolete patterns." Vay said.

"And all former Republic issue." Garm added, smiling and he sat down at one of the desks, "I'd say that they are classic weapons for the rebellion. Reliable enough to keep working in the field but not up to the same standards as Imperial-issue weaponry."

"Something about all this scares one of those agents." Vay told him, "I could sense it."

"They have multiple arms seizures and know we're here to make up for their failure." Garm pointed out, "I'd be nervous as well. Now let's see what they do know about the weapons they've seized." and he reached out to activate the computer on his desk. Rather than sit at the other desk, Vay moved to stand behind Garm and rested her hands on his shoulders while he worked.

As promised by the local agents, the computer terminal had been given access to the records of all of the recent arms seizures, detailing not only what had been seized but also the circumstances surrounding each seizure. One thing that Garm did notice, however was that there were no records of serial numbers on any of the weapons.

"Look at this." he said, pointing to a list of weapon descriptions, "They list the make and model of every single weapon but not one serial number. Did you get a look at any while we were in storage?"

"No." Vay replied, shaking her head, "It didn't seem important at the time."

"Go and get one would you? Any will do." Garm said, "I'm going to look into whether there's a pattern to any of the seizures. Times, locations, that sort of thing."

"Sure." Vay replied and she kissed the top of Garm's head before leaving the office and heading back towards the storage area. Once there she made her way directly to the cage filled with the seized weapons and opened it so that she could gain access to one of the cases inside. Picking one of the smaller cases, Vay opened it and removed a blaster carbine that was clearly a forerunner to the modern Blastech E-11 that was near universal in Imperial service. Knowing what Garm wanted she checked the side of the weapon where she knew that the serial number would be marked only to find that it, along with many of the other maker's marks had been ground off to hide the weapon's origin.

Vay then checked the other carbines in the same case and found that they had been defaced in the same manner so she tried another case entirely, this one a larger one that held several heavier rifles.

You're wasting your time Vay. You know what you're going to find.

Vay frowned when she heard the voice from within the Force. Lara Udra had been a Jedi thousands of years earlier and now her spirit was attempting to persuade Vay to follow the Jedi path.

"I thought Jedi valued a job well done." Vay muttered, looking over her shoulder to make sure that there was no-one else nearby who might overhear her.

But not to the extent that we waste our time with the obvious.

Ignoring this, Vay lifted one of the larger rifles from its case and turned it over to see where the serial number ought to have been stamped. Once again though, it had been crudely removed.

Told you so.

With the rifle her hands, Vay walked out of the cage and shut the door behind her. As she was heading for the exit from the room however, a large man stepped out in front of her.

"Hey!" he shouted, "Where do you think you're going with that? That's evidence. You need Agent Akkersyn's permission to remove it."

"I have her permission." Vay said, waving her hand across his face as she used the Force to push the suggestion into his mind, "You saw it on my datapad."

"You have permission to remove that weapon." the man said, "I've seen your datapad."

"Thank you." Vay said as she walked around him, but as she neared the door she halted and looked around at the man again, "Where is the forensics lab located?" she asked.

"Fourth floor." he answered and Vay smiled at him before she left the room.

Vay then made her way to the fourth floor and followed the signs she found there to the ISB forensics lab where she was immediately approached by one of the analysis droids.

"How may I assist you?" the floating machine asked.

"I need you to examine this blaster." Vay said and she passed the rifle she held to the droid.

"This is a Blastech DC-fifteen." the droid said.

"I know that." Vay told the droid, "But someone's removed the markings that would identify it. Can you recover them?"

"Affirmative. Serial numbers are stamped rather than etched to allow for just such a situation arising." the droid responded, "Please remain here. The estimated scan time is ninety seconds."

The droid then turned on the spot and carried the rifle to a scanner unit on the far side of the laboratory, placing it inside. Vay was then able to watch as the scanner examined the rifle and generated a three dimensional model of it. The image then focused on the part of the blaster where the serial number had been and as Vay watched she saw lines appear where microscopic stress fractures had been detected. These did not make the blaster any less reliable or safe to use, instead they indicated when it had been struck by the punch tools used to mark it with a unique batch and serial number. Vay could not make out the exact numbers but when the droid return to her with the rifle it had the required information.

"Subsurface stress patterns have revealed both batch and serial number." it said, "Shall I forward the full scan results to a particular console or do you have a suitable storage device?"

Vay was about to have the results of the scan sent directly to Garm but then she hesitated.

What's the matter? Don't you trust the people who provided you with a computer?

"Use this." she said, slipping a mem-stick from her pocket and passing it to the droid. The machine took this and plugged it into a port located on its chest. Then moments later it unplugged the mem-stick and returned it along with the blaster rifle to Vay.

"Data transfer complete." it said.

Vay did not bother to thank the machine, instead taking the rifle and mem-stick back to the room where Garm was still reviewing the information provided to him.

"What took you?" he asked, looking up from the terminal and when he saw the rifle he added, "I only need the number."

"Yeah, there was a problem with that." Vay replied, setting the rifle down on the desk in front of Garm, "The serial number wasn't seized along with the weapon. Someone removed it first. I checked two cases, the weapons in both were the same. This was in one marked THX one-one-three-eight."

"That's odd." Garm commented, "The rebellion doesn't generally remove serial numbers. They're pretending to be a real military rather than common criminals so they like to be able to monitor everything they have. You can't monitor something if you don't know what you've got."

"I took it to the forensics lab." Vay went on, "The analysis droids there were able to run a stress fracture analysis that identified the defaced markings."

"Excellent. Have they sent it to my terminal?"

"No. I thought it better to bring it to you myself." Vay said and she tossed the mem-stick to Garm who caught it and then plugged it into his computer.

"Okay, this is good." he said, nodding as he read the information off the screen, "Looks like this is one of the original DC-fifteens. It's older than you are Vay."

"Garm have you wondered why no-one here had their forensics lab run a stress fracture test?" Vay asked.

"It does seem a bit odd." Garm responded, "I'll have to raise it with Akkersyn."

"I don't trust Akkersyn. Or Saran for that matter." Vay said, "I get the feeling at least one of them doesn't want us getting to the bottom of this."

"Now you're being paranoid." Garm replied. Then he looked back at the computer terminal, "Let's see what happens when I run this serial number." he added, opening up the planetary weapons database and copying the serial number Vay had provided him with into it. Then when the result of the search was returned he frowned, "That's odd." he said.

"What's wrong?" Vay asked, moving to stand behind Garm again, "Is there a problem with the search?"

"No. The weapon. It's one of ours." Garm replied.

"Ours?"

"The Empire's. According to this database that rifle should currently be under lock and key in a reserve military store right here on Lorras. This says that it was placed in storage just after the close of the Clone Wars when the newer E-elevens and DLT-nineteens were being introduced. It stayed there until about three months ago when it was relocated to another facility." Garm explained. Then he looked back at the list of seized weapons, "Then somehow the case it was contained in ended up being seized during a routine traffic stop four weeks ago."

"I take it not in a defence ministry transport." Vay commented, "I don't need to be Force sensitive to guess that."

"You're right." Garm replied, "It was a landspeeder with a single occupant who was also armed with an unregistered blaster. He tried to shoot it out with the police and lost."

"So he can't tell us where he got the rifles."

"No. But perhaps we can try finding out more about how come weapons supposedly kept in secure storage

ended up in the hands of criminals without them even being logged as missing." Garm said as he got to his feet, "I hope you don't mind flying again."

"Flying?" Vay asked, "How far away are these supply depots?"

"The ones we're going to visit? About twenty kilometres. But if you don't trust the locals then I don't trust them either and I'd rather you fly us in our shuttle than borrow a vehicle from them." Garm said. Then he smiled and added, "Even if you are being paranoid."

"Did I scare you?" Senior Agent Akkersyn asked when she walked into Agent Saran's office and he suddenly turned around, shutting off his desk mounted communicator as he did so.

"No, of course not." he replied.

"Well I was wondering why I could hear a shuttle launching from the roof just now." Akkersyn said.

"That's what I was just investigating." Saran said, "It's Assistant Director Larcus and that woman. They've just headed off somewhere. The flight controller says they didn't log their course or destination."

"Strange."

"Oh and the woman with him went down to the evidence locker and somehow talked the duty officer into letting her take one of the seized rifles. Then she took the thing to the forensics lab and pulled its serial number. Next thing you know the pair of them are running off on some wild bantha chase."

"I've got a bad feeling about this Saran." Akkersyn said, "I think we ought to arrange to keep a close eye on our guests."

"I was just thinking the same thing." Saran agreed.

3.

The first surplus depot that Garm and Vay visited had been created as an armoury during the Clone Wars and as such was as hardened against attack as such a place could be made in the modern age. Squat buildings were in fact just entrances to larger structures and a mix of electronic barriers, physical obstacles and ditches surrounded the facility to keep out infantry and ground vehicles of all kinds. None of this bothered Vay as she flew her shuttle over the facility and began to circle it.

"There's a pad down there." she said, "But perhaps we should have called ahead."

"If the staff don't know we're coming by now then they're deaf and blind." Garm said, "Take us down."

As the shuttle descended over the surplus depot a single figure emerged from one of the structures and walked towards the landing pad. As Vay set the shuttle down the man was clearly visible through the shuttle's cockpit viewport and something about this grey haired individual looked familiar to her.

"Something wrong?" Garm asked.

"I don't know." Vay replied, "There's something about that man out there. I get the feeling I've met him somewhere before."

Lots of times.

"Oh shut up." Vay said in response to Lara's cryptic comment and Garm frowned, "It was Lara." she said, "More meaningless jedi poodoo."

The figure outside remained stationary as Vay shut off the shuttle's engines and lowered its access ramp. Then as she and Garm walked down the ramp the figure called out to them.

"That's far enough." he said, "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"ISB Assistant Director Garm Larcus." Garm replied, "You can check my credentials if you want."

"And the girl?" the old man asked.

"Junior Agent Udra." Garm said.

"Udra? Really? That's a name I haven't heard in a long time. Not since the war. The Clone War I mean. The Udras were jedi. Did you know that little girl?"

"Who are you?" Vay asked, "How do you know about the jedi?"

The old man smiled at Vay.

"I was designated DL-zero zero one three, but I was know as Lucky." he said.

"You're a clone." Garm said, "One of the original clones."

All of a sudden Vay realised where she had seen the man before, or at least a much younger version of him. When she had been a child on Coruscant there had still been a lot of clone troops in service and some of them had taught her combat techniques.

"Not quite son." Lucky replied, "I was about eight when the war started and I only just saw action before it ended. A jedi called Kieran Udra came to Kamino to help train us at one point. Of course after a few more years I got too old to serve the Empire and was retired to run this place. All of us here are clones."

"All of you?" Garm commented and Lucky took a comlink from his pocket.

"It's clear." he said into it and then from the same building that he had emerged from three more figures appeared, all of them wearing antiquated clone trooper armour and carrying DC-15 rifles of the same type Vay had had examined by the analysis droid in the ISB forensics lab. Then as each of them removed their helmets to reveal almost identical faces that differed only in how they had styled their hair and any scars they had suffered after being born Lucky introduced them, "This is Longshot, Uplift and Bookworm." he said, "Now how about you tell me what brings the ISB to our humble little end of the galaxy? We don't normally get any visitors at all."

"Yeah," Uplift commented, "we even have to go into town to collect our post."

"This brought us here." Garm said and he handed Lucky his datapad, using it to show an image of the rifle Vay had taken from the evidence locker. As Lucky took the device Garm looked towards the other clones, focusing on the fact that they carried identical weapons.

"A DC-fifteen. Plenty of those here." Lucky said, "More than twenty thousand in fact. Of course there used to be a whole lot more. But that was before they started being called back to service."

"What do you mean by that?" Vay asked, "The DC-fifteen is obsolete."

"Well someone sent orders to ship a couple of thousand out." Lucky said, "Come and see."

The clones escorted Garm and Vay to one of the underground storage bunkers and inside they found it contained thousands of cases of small arms.

"All in perfect working order." Lucky announced.

"You could equip an army with all of this." Vay said.

"That's exactly what the Republic did." Garm reminded her. Then he looked at Lucky, "So what sort of weapons are in here?" he asked.

"In this silo? Rifles and carbines mainly. There are few hundred pistols and the odd repeating blaster but nothing serious. All of that stuff is stored in other silos." the clone answered.

"And how much has been moved in the past few weeks?" Vay said.

"Two and half thousand DC-fifteens, a thousand DC-fifteen-As and a thousand DC-seventeen pistols." Lucky said, reciting the numbers from memory.

"Exactly the sorts of weapons that the police have been seizing." Vay commented and Garm nodded.

"What about the other silos? How much heavy weaponry has been taken?" he said.

"Nothing. This is the only silo that's been touched." Lucky replied.

"That's odd." Vay said, "If someone was trying to equip the rebels then why not give them heavy weapons as well?" and Garm nodded.

"Yes, they'd be essential for any revolt to succeed. Small arms like rifles and pistols are all very useful but they're not going to win any wars on their own. An army needs heavy firepower, repeating blasters, grenade and missile launchers and laser cannons if it's going to have any chance of success." he said.

"Could they be getting them from somewhere else?" Vay suggested.

"I hope not. Besides which, given the amount of weapons that the police have been seizing, I'd have expected some indication that the rebels here have access to any significantly more powerful weapons."

Garm replied, "But I still want to know why the weapons were released from here." and he looked at the clones standing behind him and Vay, "How did you get the orders?" he asked.

"Scandocs presented by the droid drivers of the vehicles sent to collect them." Lucky replied, "We took copies if you want to see them."

"Lead the way." Garm said.

The clones then took the two ISB agents to the storage facility's command post. This was as out of date as the weapons the facility held as well as its rapidly aged guardians but the clones were familiar with this equipment and it took just seconds for them to produce copies of the files authorising the transfer of the weapons from their facility to another.

"There's no name here." Vay commented.

"That's not unusual girl." the clone known as Longshot said, "Nobody cares about the stuff that's here anymore. When we get orders they tend to be generated by computers or droids. You're the first living visitors we've had for at least five years."

"I'd say ten." Bookworm added.

"I want a copy of these orders." Garm said, handing over his datapad to Lucky and the clone nodded.

"Should just take a couple of seconds." he said as he copied the orders from the facility's main computer to the handheld device.

"Where to next?" Vay asked when Garm was given the datapad back.

"To the facility where all these weapons were supposed to have been sent." he answered.

As the shuttle rose up into the air, carrying Garm and Vay away from the facility the clones watched it leave.

"So what do you think Lucky?" Uplift asked.

"About what?" Lucky responded.

"About them. What else?" Uplift said and Lucky shrugged.

"Not quite the typical Imperial mindset

"What is the meaning of this?" the army officer exclaimed when a case that was supposed to have contained four heavy blaster rifles was opened to instead reveal four lengths of partially corroded metal tubing.

"You tell me lieutenant." Garm said, walking over to another case and opening it up to reveal yet more scrap metal.

"You did sign for this after all." Vay pointed out.

"But the droids confirmed that the shipment was intact. They can't lie." the lieutenant protested, "And no-one has had access to this section. Not even myself."

Like the clones that staffed the storage facility where the weapons had been stored since the end of the Clone Wars, the lieutenant in command of this facility looked much older than a man of his rank ought to have been. However, rather than being due to any accelerated ageing process this appeared to be down his own inability to demonstrate himself worthy of promotion. Even for a member of the Imperial military his outlook was rigid and he showed no signs of being able to react to unexpected events. Garm guessed that he had been posted here to this reserve storage facility keep him out of the way.

"Let me get this straight." Garm said, walking right up to the lieutenant, "You received multiple shipments of weaponry that were explained only by a scandoc that was hand delivered along with the weapons and you never thought to take a look at what it was that you were taking delivery of?"

"But - but the droids-" the lieutenant stammered.

Fear.

Panic.

Vay smiled. It was obvious to her that the man was terrified of being held personally responsible for the loss of the weapons.

He's not afraid because you've uncovered his brilliant scheme though, is he?

"I know that." Vay said in response to Lara's interjection. Then as Garm and the lieutenant looked in her direction she added, "I know that the droids indicated that the shipments were all present and correct but it was your responsibility to check everything that gets delivered here."

Anger.

The lieutenant scowled at Vay as she pointed out his obvious failings.

"Who are you to tell me how to do my job?" he demanded, "The ISB has no authority over the military and your rank is no higher than mine, Junior Agent Udra."

"On the other hand I have the ear of General Julius Dern." Garm commented, "Now how about you do something you obviously haven't done since you got here lieutenant? Your job. I want every single case that you have taken delivery of in the last six months inspected visually. I want you to personally certify the contents of each and every one of them. I want those numbers by the time I get up for breakfast tomorrow morning. After that I'll decide whether or not I need to make a call to Estran and tell the general just how many of his weapons you've lost."

"But you ask the impossible!" the lieutenant complained, "I need more men."

"You have a staff of eight. You can work all night if you have to." Garm said, "Trust me lieutenant, the general is not as forgiving as I am."

4.

Leaving the army personnel at the storage facility busily opening every single container of weapons they were responsible for to inspect their contents, Garm and Vay headed for the hotel that they had been booked into. Hotels that provided sufficient landing pad space for all guests to be able to arrive directly via their own shuttles were few and far between and the costs were astronomical. Therefore, Vay flew the shuttle back to ISB headquarters where a landspeeder waited for them instead.

"There they go." one of a pair of figures sat in another vehicle close by said as Garm and Vay drove off towards the hotel, "Shall we go after them?"

"Yes, but not too close. We don't want to tip them off. I'll let the others know that our source has come through." the speeder's female passenger replied and then the driver set off.

Not knowing the extent of the relationship between Garm and Vay, the local ISB had checked them into separate rooms in the hotel but these were located next to one another and when Garm came out of the shower he found Vay sat on the edge of his bed wearing a plain black dress and smiling at him.

"The security system here is really bad." she said, "It took me less than twenty seconds to override the lock on your door."

"Alternately you could have waited until I was out of the shower and I'd have opened the door for you." Garm replied, "So are we going to one of the restaurants for dinner or shall we get room service?"

"I was thinking that we'd eat out then come back here for dessert." Vay replied and Garm smiled back at her.

"Sounds good to me." he said, "I suppose you've already picked out where you want to eat."

"There's a restaurant on the second floor that does Alderaanian style cuisine." Vay replied.

"Ah," Garm said, "so that's why you changed out of your uniform. You don't want an Alderaanian chef spitting in your food." and Vay nodded.

Funny how blowing up someone's planet can upset them isn't it?

Vay frowned.

"What's wrong?" Garm asked when he saw this.

"Lara sticking her nose in where it's not wanted." Vay told him, "Come on, get changed and let's go."

"Sure." Garm replied, "I have some civilian clothes in my luggage." and he started to make his way towards his suitcase before he paused and looked at Vay, "But for the record I'm taking you for dinner. All the ghosts of your dead relatives can go and find somewhere else to eat."

With Garm wearing a civilian suit he and Vay made their way to a turbolift where they found that they were not the only ones wanting to use it. Another couple were already stood waiting and they smiled at Garm and Vay as they approached.

"I hope you're not too hungry." the man said, "This thing's going so slow you'll starve before it gets here."

"Strange." Garm commented, "It was working fine when we came up to our rooms." and he jabbed the call button even though it was already lit.

"Rooms? So you're not together then?" the woman asked.

"Officially no." Garm replied, "But we're both here from Estran."

"Business then?" the man said, "Who do you work for? I do a lot of business on Estran, I may have heard of them."

Deception.

Vay sensed that the man was not being totally honest but could not place what he was concealing. The most obvious answer was that he had no connection to Estran but was hoping that Garm could become a contact there that he could do business with.

The turbolift arrived just seconds after Garm pushed the button and as soon as the door slid open Garm stepped back to allow the couple who had been waiting longer to enter first.

"Thank you. Such a gentleman." the woman said and as she turned her head Vay noticed the telltale wire coming from an earpiece just about visible beneath her hair that otherwise concealed her ears. Again, this was something that could have a perfectly innocent explanation. Some crude models of hearing aid, especially those used for deafness that was considered temporary still made use of such things and some people were so obsessed with portable entertainment devices that they wore their headsets permanently, though again most modern types of earphones were fully wireless.

Following the other couple into the turbolift Garm and Vay stood closer to the door and Vay made sure to stand with her back up against the side wall so that she could watch them both.

"What floor?" Garm asked.

"First." the man answered.

"Same here." Garm said and he pushed the button. Immediately the turbolift doors slid shut and the car

began to move.

Vay continually glanced at both the man and the woman, looking for any signs of odd behaviour and it was while she was doing this that she noticed the woman sliding her hand into the split down the side of her dress.

Danger.

"Garm lookout!" Vay yelled at the same moment as the man suddenly lunged forwards.

Garm turned and stepped out of his way but the man was not aiming for him in any case. Instead he reached out his hand and slapped something onto the turbolift's control panel. This was just a tiny peg with an adhesive rim designed so that it would press whatever button it was placed over and keep it held down unless someone prised it loose again. The button in question was the emergency alarm and the turbolift ground to a sudden halt as an alarm began to sound.

At the same time as the alarm started the woman suddenly produced a compact bladed weapon from beneath her dress where it had been stuck to her leg and activated the rapidly vibrating blade. She thrust the vibro-shiv directly at Vay, obviously intending to try and gut her, but she had not counted on Vay's years of training and expertise in close quarters fighting and she dodged the attack. Grabbing hold of the woman's wrist, Vay pulled her forwards so that the blade passed by her and ended up being thrust into the metal wall of the turbolift. This was sufficiently lightweight that the vibrating blades were able to cut through it but when Vay then twisted the woman's arm sharply there was a loud grinding sound as the blade tried to tear up the metal all around the hole. Vay knew that the blade was not designed to go through solid material in this way and as she twisted the blades they deformed just enough that each motion caused them to rub against one another. The friction this caused was more than either the blades or the motor in the weapon's hand grip could stand and at about the same moment one of the blades broke about half way along its narrow length and the motor cut out as it overheated. Vay twisted the woman's arm again, only this time she was focused on the damage she would do to the woman rather than anything she held and she let out a scream as Vay broke her wrist.

Meanwhile at the other side of the turbolift Garm reached out to grab the man by the back of his collar and he pushed him up against the opposite wall. In response the man elbowed Garm in his side and Garm gasped as he let go of the man long enough for him to turnaround and draw a vibro-shiv of his own. Before he could activate the weapon though Garm lunged at him. The move was intended to tackle an armed assailant out in the open, forcing them to the ground but with so little room available inside the turbolift he instead pushed the man up against the wall again. The force of the impact was insufficient to make the man drop his weapon and Garm reached out to try and wrestle it from his grasp. With the deadly blades vibrating rapidly neither man wanted to have them facing towards him and so the weapon was pushed sideways to point away from them both.

Even with her wrist broken the woman did not give up and she lashed out with her foot, intended to use the narrow pointed heel of her shoe to stab Vay in her own foot. This came close to being successful and Vay winced as she was barely able to move her foot out of the way to avoid the heel and instead just had her foot stamped on by the woman's toes. The woman then lashed out with her uninjured hand to try and strike Vay in her throat but she was hampered by her injury and Vay was able to push the clumsy attack aside and responded with a much better one of her own, landing a blow to the woman's face that sent her falling backwards into the far wall where Garm and the man had been just moments earlier.

Now Garm continued to wrestle with the man for control of the vibro-shiv and Garm used his position in relation to the man and the rear wall of the turbolift to good effect, slamming his body up against the man as hard as he could. Garm did not do this just once, he repeated the move several times in succession. Realising that he was at a disadvantage in being pressed up against the wall the man tried to move, stepping out of Garm's path but his movement was limited due to both he and Garm both having their hands wrapped around the grip of the vibro-shiv and he could not move as easily as he wanted to be able to. As soon as Garm saw what the man was doing he extended a foot to try and trip his opponent but he too was limited by refusing to let go of the vibro-shiv and when the man fell Garm was dragged down with him, the pair of them watching in horror as the vibro-shiv came up towards them.

The pointed blades struck Garm's opponent in the chest and the pitch of the vibrations changed as the blades went from vibrating in the air to cutting through flesh and bone as they pierced the man's ribcage and he was stabbed through the heart with his own weapon. In the brief moment as he realised what was happening but before he died the man's eyes widened before he suddenly coughed up a mouthful of blood and then went limp, releasing his grip on the vibro-shiv that had been intended to kill Garm with but had instead taken the life of the man himself.

Garm pulled the weapon from the dead man's hands and spun around on the spot just in time to see the woman fall backwards and land against the side wall of the turbolift. Looking at Vay he saw her raise a hand and point it towards the woman's throat even though she was well out of reach and he realised what Vay was about to try.

"Vay no!" he shouted as Vay called upon the Force to finish the task of killing the woman.

Vay no!

Using the Force to directly inflict injury or kill an intelligent being required calling on the Dark Side and Lara repeated Garm's warning for a vastly different reason. Whereas Garm was concerned about killing a potential source of information, Lara was instead concerned about the corrupting influence of the Dark Side. The woman began visibly choking, clawing at her collar with her uninjured hand as she tried desperately to draw in breath.

"Vay!" Garm snapped and he stepped in between her and the choking woman, breaking her line of sight as well as her concentration.

Vay released her hold on the woman and she slumped sideways while Vay looked at Garm.

"What did you do that for?" she asked, "We've both killed before."

"But not when we can use someone for information instead." Garm pointed out and then he turned to the woman and crouched down beside her to check on her condition, "She's alive I think." he said.

A lucky escape. A jedi uses the Force for knowledge and defence. Never for attack.

Garm then turned his attention to the body of the man who had fallen on his own vibro-shiv and began to search inside his pockets.

"No ID." he said and he looked around at the unconscious woman, "I'm betting that it will be the same with her as well. They sanitised their possessions before coming here."

"Wait a moment, I think she might have something we can use." Vay said and she crouch beside the woman and felt around her ear for the headset she had noticed in passing when getting into the turbolift, "Yes, here it is." she added as she unhooked the earpiece and began to follow the trailing wire down past the low profile throat microphone located under the woman's collar and then further down under her clothing until she located the comlink device strapped to the inside of her arm where she could activate it using her other hand. "Excellent." Garm said while he watched Vay removing the device from the woman's arm, but then he hesitated.

"Garm, what's wrong?" Vay asked.

"Think about what we know so far Vay. Someone issued genuine looking orders for weaponry to be transferred between two different storage facilities. The first is remote and almost entirely forgotten while the destination is run by a man obviously incompetent. Now we have these two, who conveniently knew where we were staying down to the turbolift we'd use to go to dinner. Now they could have followed us from ISB headquarters but they needed to know who we are in the first place. That takes inside knowledge Vay." Garm said.

"Akkersyn or Saran. Or both of them." Vay said, "I knew I didn't trust them."

Garm nodded.

"It seems likely. Though what I don't understand is if they are working for the rebellion, then why not provide them with heavy weapons as well?" he said.

"So what do we do now?" Vay replied and Garm looked down at the comlink Vay had taken from the woman. "Well we can't take this to the ISB forensics lab without tipping off whoever it is that's helping the rebels." he said.

"Where then? The civilian police and sector rangers' systems are probably being monitored." Vay pointed out.

"Most probably yes." Garm agreed, "But the military's systems shouldn't be. There's a naval communications relay station about five kilometres from here. That's only a short cab ride."

"A cab ride? But we have our own speeder." Vay said.

"Yes, one that was provided to us by the local ISB and could be how we were tracked here. It's important that whoever sent these two after us thinks that they succeeded." Garm said and then he walked over to the control panel and removed the tab that was holding the alarm button down. As soon as this was released the turbolift began to move again and Garm watched the floor readout decrease steadily.

"When the door opens we run." he said and Vay nodded as she kicked off her shoes so she could move faster and then picked them up to carry them.

The readout reached one and the doors slid apart as soon as the turbolift stopped moving. Outside a member of hotel staff was telling a small group of people that maintenance droids were on their way to determine what was wrong with the turbolift but he was interrupted when a woman saw the bodies and blood inside the freshly arrived turbolift and let out a loud scream.

"Go!" Garm snapped and both he and Vay pushed their way through the group outside turbolift and broke into a run, heading out across the hotel lobby towards the main doors at the front.

"Stop them!" the hotel employee shouted and just inside the doors a pair of security guards rushed to block Garm and Vay's escape. However, while hotel security staff were perfectly adequate when it came to dealing with the occasional recalcitrant guest or trespasser neither of them had the expertise to deal with an ISB agent, especially Vay and both she and Garm floored the two guards without even breaking their stride before running through the doors into the hotel grounds.

"Over here." Garm said, taking Vay's hand and pulling her towards a carefully maintained garden.

“A garden? But Garm, the cabs are all over there.” Vay pointed out.

“The police aren't here yet. We'll need their help if we are to make this work.” Garm replied.

5.

The first police speeder arrived less than two minutes later, an ordinary patrol group that had been in the area when the hotel staffed called for them. This was followed by two more speeders, each of which contained another pair of uniformed officers who immediately began to seal off the area of the lobby surrounding the turbolift until a pair of detective, recognisable by the blasters they had holstered on their belts beside silver badges arrived to begin the investigation.

"This is it." Garm said and he stepped out from behind the bushes before calling out to the two detectives, "Officers, over here." he shouted and he waved them towards him.

Keeping their hands resting on their sidearms, the detectives walked over to where Garm and Vay stood.

"Can we help you sir?" one asked and Garm presented his identification, "I'm sorry deputy director, I didn't."

"Never mind that." Garm interrupted, "Inside you're going to find two dead bodies with no ID on them. I want you to call in that you found this room key on one of them." and Garm gave them his room key, "Then add that the room belongs to ISB Deputy Director Garm Larcus and that you believe the two dead people are him and his associate Junior Agent Vay Udra. Have you got that?"

"Yes sir. But-"

"Never mind 'but', just do it." Garm said and then he and Vay turned around and started to walk away, making sure that his path kept him away from the large glass doors at the front of the hotel.

The cab dropped the two agents off just outside the perimeter fence of the communications relay station, its massive subspace monitoring antenna extended up into the air above them. A pair of fleet troopers guarded the entrance and they watched as Garm and Vay approached.

"This is a restricted facility." one of the guards said from the other side of the power fence when Garm and Vay stopped right outside, "If you don't leave then you'll be arrested."

"ISB." Garm interrupted and both he and Vay produced their identity cards, "You can check that if you want, but make sure to send the request directly to naval headquarters at Estran. We believe that the local division has been compromised."

The guard stepped back from the power fence and while his comrade continued to watch Garm and Vay he used his comlink to speak with his superiors. Then after a few moments he reached out to activate the controls that opened the gate.

"You can wait inside sir." he said, "I'll show you in."

Garm and Vay were shown inside the communications relay station to the guard room where four more fleet troopers were stationed, monitoring the feeds from the facility's security cameras. Then shortly after this an officer entered and saluted Garm.

"Deputy director." he said, "Fleet Admiral Vretan has ordered that we extend every courtesy to you."

"Thank you commander." Garm said, getting to his feet. Then he handed the officer the comlink that Vay had discovered on the body of the woman in the turbolift, "This was taken from a suspected rebel who attacked us. I need you take a look at the frequencies it uses and the transmission protocol. If you can use your systems here to run a sweep of the band that would be even better."

"Of course sir, I'll have my technical people take a look at it right away." the base commander replied, "In the mean time feel free to make use of my base's facilities. Any of my staff can direct you to my office if you need privacy."

"Actually some uniforms would be nice." Garm said, "I don't expect you've got ISB colours but military ones will do."

"So how do I look?" Vay asked when she entered the commander's office wearing the closest thing to a uniform that would fit that was available. Though Vay was reasonably tall for a woman, there were no female personnel at the monitoring station and she had been given a spare male uniform. Her slim build meant that the all black uniform hung off her and when Garm looked at her feet he smiled.

"Lose the high heels." he suggested.

"Perhaps you're right." Vay replied as she took her shoes off again, "At least this is only temporary. The quartermaster said that they're getting a delivery first thing tomorrow and he's arranged for a properly fitting uniform to be included."

"ISB?" Garm asked, wondering whether he should ask for a white tunic himself rather than the black one he wore.

"No." Vay answered, shaking her head, "To keep up the pretence of us being dead the commander isn't asking for anything not part of navy equipment."

"Smart man." Garm said, "Much smarter than that nerf herder lieutenant who's probably had to take his

socks off to help him count past ten.”

“Then let's all hope he doesn't have more than twenty of anything.” Vay said with a grin and Garm winced. Then he turned the computer monitor he had been looking at before Vay arrived and showed her the information he had been looking at.

“The ISB here on Lorras has been requesting information on military readiness every week for the last two months.” he said, “Each time the focus is on how rapidly forces can be deployed to key installations around the planet in the event of an isolated or co-ordinated uprising taking place without off world support. Obviously we're looking at the naval response here, but you'll notice that someone was very keen on how fast marines could execute combat drops from the squadron in the system.”

“That's strange isn't it?” Vay asked, “The primary role of the navy is provide orbital and air support. Not land stormtroopers to do the army's job.”

“Yes, but look at the list of installations that have been highlighted Vay. One of them is the planetary shield control centre. If the rebels could take that then they could raise the shield and all the navy's capital ships and most of its starfighters in the system would be caught outside it.” Garm pointed out.

“Hey presto, no air or orbital support and the rebels could sit and wait under their shield for months if they had to.” Vay said.

“More than enough time for the rebellion to send a battlegroup to challenge the navy.” Garm said in agreement and then he sighed.

“What's wrong?” Vay asked.

“All this. We're talking about the rebels actually taking control of one of our planets and being able to directly challenge our fleet. How did we fall this far Vay?”

The galaxy hasn't fallen, it's rising. Join them.

“We'll be fine. As long as we're together there's nothing we can't achieve.” Vay said as she dragged a chair towards the desk before she sat down and put her feet up so that they were almost directly in front of Garm. Turning the monitor back towards himself, Garm appeared about to return to studying the requests for information that had been coming from the ISB recently when unexpectedly he instead reached out towards Vay's feet and tickled the sole of one.

“Garm no!” she exclaimed as she pulled her feet backwards and promptly overbalanced, falling to the floor.

“What's the matter? Are you ticklish?” Garm asked as he knelt down and tickled her feet again.

“You know I am. Stop it!” Vay shouted.

“Excuse me sir.” the base commander said suddenly from the doorway that had opened while the two ISB agents were distracted and they both froze.

“Yes, what is it commander?” Garm asked, getting back to his feet and avoiding eye contact.

“Deputy director, my technicians have managed to slice into the comlink you provided us with.” the commander said, “We're running some surveillance sweeps now and I think you may want to see this.”

“Of course.” Garm said, “Please lead the way.”

The communications relay station's main command centre was much like another other for a base of this size, not surprising given that the Empire had always made use of modular construction methods that meant anyone familiar with one facility could easily adapt to working in another similar one. Therefore, as Garm and Vay were shown into the command centre they immediately knew where they needed to be to watch the technicians monitoring for rebel communication activity. The base commander escorted them to a set of consoles where four technicians and another officer were using what they had found during their examination of the comlink to filter out matching signals detected by the communication relay station's advanced antenna array. The officer looked up as they approached and then pointed to a monitor that had been used to display a map.

“The comlink had a hard wired encryption module in it.” he said, “There's some sort of key that makes it unique to that device that we haven't been able to crack yet but we know enough to be able to pick up other signals in the same format. As you can see more than ninety percent of the exchanges have a node here.”

“We've picked up more than fifty transmissions already.” a technician added.

“Someone's being very talkative.” Vay commented.

“Where is that?” Garm asked as he looked at the map. Though he had briefly studied the geography of Lorras he was not sufficiently familiar with it to know whereabouts on the planet he was looking at.

“It's an old survey station about a thousand kilometres from here. The nearest settlement ” the base commander told him, “The planet is dotted with them. All the equipment was removed when their job was done but the structures weren't worth scrapping so they were just abandoned.”

“All it would take is a generator and few bits and pieces and you'd have a fully functioning rebel base.” Vay commented.

“We can't actually be certain who is there.” the communications officer pointed out, not wanting to give a definitive answer that could be held against him if what he said triggered what turned out to be a wild bantha chase.

"That's it, the rebels are there." Garm said with certainty and he turned to the commander, "Commander I'll need a strike team putting together for a surface operation. I believe that a company of marines can be put together in twenty minutes, yes?"

"Correct. I'll put in the request to Admiral Neston now." the commander replied.

"Good. Tell him I want an orbital sensor sweep of the area but no aerial flights that might alert the rebels to our arrival." Garm said. Then he glanced down at Vay's bare feet, "Oh and ask for the marines to bring along a pair of boots for Agent Udra." he added.

"I'm a seven." Vay said, smiling.

6.

There was a clap of thunder from the sky above the survey station but rather than lightning that accompanied it, it was a turbolaser blast that descended through the clouds and struck one of the outlying buildings, destroying it utterly. This had held the base's generators and in an instant all of the high powered equipment, including a small shield generator, that the rebels here had been able to gather was rendered inoperative. Only some of the smaller equipment remained operational on battery back ups but that was inconsequential as several small craft followed the turbolaser strike out of the clouds. The first of these were a flight of TIE fighters that flew over the base and fired on the various speeders scattered around it, making certain that the rebels would not be able to flee in the face of what was following them.

Half a dozen assault shuttles folded their wings upwards as they came in to land and the moment they touched down their access ramps lowered and the occupants came charging out. Four of the shuttles carried stormtrooper marines from the same cruiser that had destroyed the generator shed while a fifth carried the company's command elements and the sixth a number of specialist personnel sent along to deal with any ordnance that needed to be made safe.

Garm and Vay accompanied the command section, still wearing their all black fleet uniforms but now with the addition of armoured blast vests and helmets provided to them by the navy.

"Over there!" Garm shouted as soon as he got his first look at the survey station in person and saw that there was a communications dish that could be used to piggy back signals onto the various orbiting satellite networks. This was connected to one of the larger structures and Garm guessed that this was the rebels' command post.

"Third platoon divert to secure structure to the west marked by the communications dish." the company commander ordered as Garm and Vay also headed that way.

Though the Imperial forces had established total surprise, the rebels were now beginning to get themselves organised and now blaster fire headed came towards the advancing stormtroopers rather than just coming from them. On the flanks of their advance teams of stormtroopers erected tripod mounted repeating blasters and as soon as these were powered up they unleashed a massive torrent of fire towards the rebel positions. Powerful even individually, the blasts from this weapon churned up the ground and any lightweight structures being used as cover before incinerating the rebels hiding behind them.

A single rebel emerged from a small building as Garm was running past it and both men saw one another at the same time and took aim. Garm was slightly quicker than his opponent and single shot from his blaster pistol sent the rebel sprawling back through the doorway he had just emerged from. Ahead of him and Vay the first of the stormtroopers had reached their target and one of the white armoured troopers fell dead as the rebels inside the structure fired through the thin sheet metal walls in their desperation to hold back the Imperial forces.

"Cover!" the platoon commander ordered and the stormtroopers threw themselves to the ground. Rather than returning fire in kind, an action that would risk damaging the contents of the structure the stormtroopers held their fire while their leader examined the building more carefully.

"I want a grenade through that window there." the officer told a nearby stormtrooper armed with a grenade launcher.

"Yes sir." the trooper replied as he raised his weapon and then there was a loud popping sound as he fired it. The round was dead on target and the grenade smashed its way through the window before detonating inside the building. Rather than a fragmentation or incendiary grenade that could also destroy potentially important intelligence, the concussion grenade produced a shockwave that was powerful enough to kill in close proximity while stunning targets further away and this caused the blaster fire from inside the building to cease long enough for the stormtroopers outside to be able to get back to their feet and charge the rest of the way to the building.

Garm and Vay followed the stormtroopers into the building and found that Garm's guess had been correct. All around them were the signs that this place was being used for a major rebel offensive. Maps on walls had been annotated with details of Imperial strengths and schedules while datapads were scattered everywhere among the bodies of the rebels who had died trying to defend this place.

"Looks like they didn't get the chance to destroy any of this." Vay commented as she looked around and Garm nodded then picked up a nearby datapad and looked at it. Then he frowned and quickly grabbed another.

"This isn't right." he said.

"What's wrong?" Vay asked as she dashed to his side.

"Look at this Vay." Garm replied and he held out the datapad for her to see.

"It's a deployment schedule." Vay said.

"Yes but it's wrong. Vay I saw this schedule at the relay station and the timings were all different." Garm explained and then he tossed the datapad onto a nearby table and darted over to one of the wall mounted maps, "This is the same." he said, pointing to the annotations on the map, "Vay every key deployment and response time is wrong. This would play right into our hands."

"What do you mean?"

"I meant that if the rebels staged their attacks based on all of this information then they'd be slaughtered. Look here, they've identified the shield generator as their number one target. But their notes say that the minefields around it have been scaled back when they haven't. Plus there's no note of the platoon of security droids held in permanent reserve there. If the rebels attacked the place they wouldn't even get in through the front door." Garm said.

Vay picked up another datapad and looked at the information on it herself. Though she had not seen any of the original detailed response time reports the datapad she now held described the security procedures at the communications relay station that she and Garm had come from and she saw that it did not match with her own observations. No base commander would understate his readiness to his superiors so the only explanation was that the figures had been altered by someone before the rebels got their hands on them. Then something else caught Vay's eye and she smiled.

"Garm over here." she said as she hurried to the other side of the room to a table set against a wall and moved aside numerous sheets of flimsiplast that had fallen from the wall when the concussion grenade had gone off. Underneath this was a portable computer that was still active and Vay quickly located the built in messaging system.

"What have you found Vay?" Garm asked as he joined her.

"Proof." she replied.

"Hello Calla." Garm said as he and Vay marched into the senior agent's office, still wearing their borrowed uniforms and accompanied by a unit of stormtroopers.

Surprise.

Fear.

"Deputy director!" Akkersyn exclaimed, "But I thought you were-"

"Dead?" Vay interrupted, "Now, now Calla, you of all people should know that not all the information passed in reports is accurate."

"Of course even giving doctored information to the rebellion without clearance can be considered treason." Garm added, "And if you were cleared for such an operation then I'd know about it." Garm then looked over his shoulder at the stormtroopers, "Wait outside." he told them and they left the office Garm sat down opposite Agent Akkersyn, "So why don't you explain what you're really up to."

"I'll know if you're lying." Vay said.

"Yes, she will." Garm added, "Now start talking like your life depends on it. Which it does of course."

Akkersyn hesitated.

"It's a trap." she said eventually, "I was setting them up."

"That much is obvious. But why? What did you hope to gain from this?" Garm said, "Did you want to be a hero?"

"Of course not." Akkersyn protested.

Deception.

"Yes you did. See, I told you I'd know if you were lying." Vay said.

"How long have you been passing information to the Alliance?" Garm asked.

"They aren't part of the Alliance." Akkersyn said, "The Alliance has only a limited presence here on Lorras but there are a lot of local rebels. I planned to wipe them all out in one fell swoop by encouraging them to stage a major uprising that could easily be crushed. For that they needed weapons so I arranged for large quantities of arms to be moved in such a way that they could intercept them."

"But it was all small arms, nothing heavy enough to support a full uprising." Garm commented and Akkersyn nodded her head.

"I told the rebels that I couldn't make that sort of equipment disappear without it being noticed but that I could tell them how to steal it at the start of their uprising. Of course I was lying. The storehouses I was sending them to didn't hold any weapons at all."

"Did it occur to you that even given the extent to which you were undermining the uprising it would still cost hundreds of Imperial lives and take weeks to put down fully?" Garm asked and Akkersyn frowned.

"Collateral damage." she said, "An acceptable rate of loss compared to what we'd gain."

The wholesale slaughter of people who just want to be free.

"Look, if we do nothing then the Alliance will continue to gain sympathy across the sector and eventually there will be an uprising here, one that could very well succeed if the Alliance puts a few of those warships they've managed to acquire over our heads. I'm stopping that before it can begin." Akkersyn continued, "But it needn't end now. Join me and we can put an end to the insignificant rebellion here on Lorras."

Well this is interesting Vay. Enforce your Empire's laws and you potentially help the Alliance. Or break your own rules to cause hundreds of deaths in the cause of preventing a genuine effort to liberate the planet.

Garm got to his feet without saying anything.

"Deputy director, surely you can see the benefit of my proposal. From a certain point of view-" Akkersyn said but Garm ignored her as he walked over to where Vay waited.

"You know what to do." he told her.

Do you Vay? Do you know what to do?

"Yes I know." Vay replied and then she drew her blaster and shot Senior Agent Akkersyn through the chest.