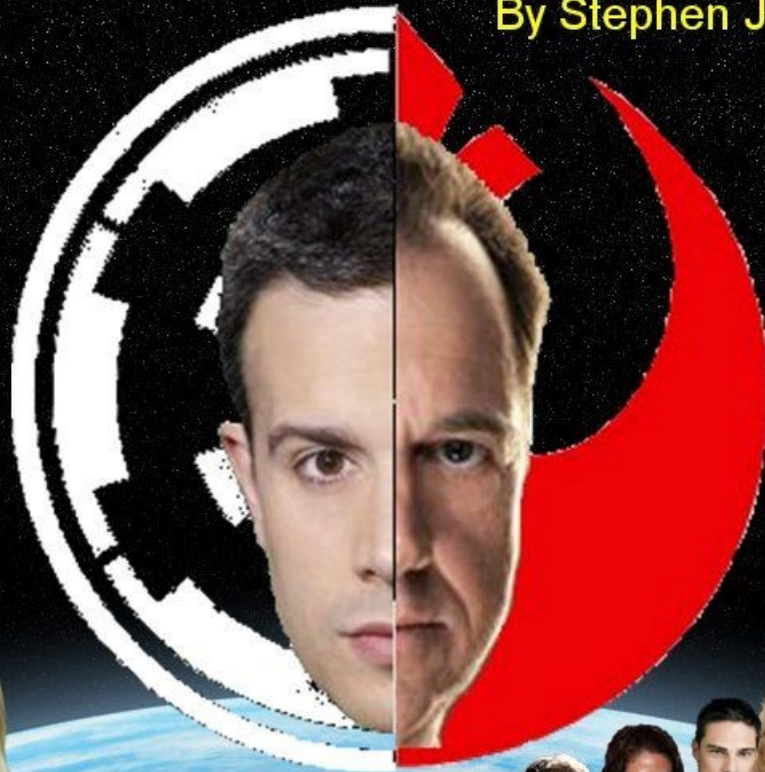


# STAR WARS

## 1-11: Hostage Crisis

By Stephen J Dutton



1-11  
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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...

## **HOSTAGE CRISIS**

NOW WORKING DIRECTLY FOR THE LOCAL MOFF, THINGS ARE LOOKING UP FOR ISB AGENT GARM LARCUS. BUT WHEN TERRORISTS ABDUCT HIS PARTNER HE MUST RISK TEAMING UP WITH A LOCAL BOUNTY HUNTER TO GET HER BACK SAFELY...

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

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# 1.

Vay Udra unzipped the back of her bodyglove and breathed a sigh of relief as soon as she got back into her apartment. The temperature regulator of her garment had developed a fault and she had spent most of the day uncomfortably hot. Now that she was home she wanted to take a bath as soon as she could. She took off her belt and draped it over a chair on the way towards the bathroom where she set the bath running. While the bathtub was filling with water she headed back into the living room and checked her communicator for messages. As usual there were none. She was about to head back to the bathroom when she noticed that her belt was no longer where she had left it. Someone else was here with her.

Vay's first instinct was to draw her blaster, but it had been in a pouch on her belt and that was now missing. However, she had other weapons in the apartment. As quietly as she could Vay made her way towards the bedroom and after a brief glance to make sure that it was empty she went inside and opened a drawer beside the bed.

"Looking for this?" a woman's voice came from the bedroom door and Vay turned to see a dark skinned woman standing there holding up a cylinder about twenty centimetres in length. In her other hand she held a blaster. Vay recognised her face from intelligence reports immediately as Keena Vayal, a bounty hunter who operated outside of the law. Clearly someone had decided that they were willing to pay to remove her. Vay rolled across the bed as the woman fired her blaster. Rather than the red bolt that modern blasters typically fired the weapon produced the blue flash indicating that it had been set for stun. She did not wait for the bounty hunter to come to her, instead Vay got back to her feet and leapt towards the other woman with her hands outstretched.

Surprised by this sudden assault Keena tried to adjust her aim and get off a second shot from her blaster, but Vay slammed into her before she could fire and the shot went into the ceiling instead. Keena collapsed under the impact and both her blaster and the cylinder fell from her grasp. Vay scrambled towards the cylinder while Keena instead reached for the blaster.

Both women reached their chosen weapons simultaneously. There was a snap-hiss as Vay ignited her lightsaber and its crimson blade extended to its full length. At the same time Keena fired again. Normally Keena would aim for the body to give her the best chance of hitting a target. But this time she aimed off, instead aiming for the hand that held the deadly energy blade.

Vay tried to move the blade of her lightsaber into the path of the bolt in time to deflect it away from her, but her position on the floor made it more difficult for her to move quickly and the shot struck her wrist. A full strength blaster bolt from such close range would have taken her hand off entirely, but because Keena had her weapon set to stun it instead just disrupted the nerves running through her wrist. Vay's grip tightened around her lightsaber before her hand went completely numb, she was unable to keep hold of her weapon and it fell from her grasp. As soon as Vay's grip was released the lightsaber's blade collapsed and it clattered harmlessly to the bedroom floor.

"Give up!" Keena yelled from where she lay, her blaster now pointing directly at Vay's head.

Vay ignored her and lunged at her instead. As she leapt up Keena fired and the shot hit Vay squarely in her chest. Vay felt the impact of the blast and focused hard on remaining conscious, but she was still slowed down by the nerve scrambling energy blast and when Keena fired again she collapsed in a heap by the bounty hunter's feet.

Keena dragged herself across the floor away from the unconscious form of Vay, keeping her blaster trained on the young woman and breathing heavily. When she was certain that Vay was no longer a threat Keena got to her feet and retrieved Vay's lightsaber.

Neema Gorord carried her shopping from her landspeeder towards the turbolift. Though filled with vehicles the underground parking lot of her building was deserted and quiet. Her footsteps echoed around the chamber as she walked. Then another sound caught her attention and Neema halted and looked around but saw no one. She continued towards the lift until she heard the sound again, this time closer to her.

"Hello?" she called out, "Is someone there?"

Neema's work as an investigative reporter had earned her enemies and not a month went by without another death threat arriving at her network's offices. These threats had, however, been all the justification needed for the local police force to issue her with a permit for a concealed weapon. She shifted her bags into just one hand and with the other she reached towards the weapon beneath her jacket, her hand resting on the grip of the blaster. Then she continued towards the turbolift, taking her hand from her weapon just long enough to press the call button.

As she waited for the turbolift car to arrive she looked around again but still there was no sign of anyone with her in the vehicle park. Then when the turbolift chimed to indicate that the car had arrived she turned back around just as the doors slid open to reveal a masked figure that promptly slammed a fist into her face. Neema screamed as she fell, dropping her bags and clutching at her nose as blood pumped from it. She reached again towards her blaster but a kick delivered to her abdomen knocked the breath from her. There was the sound of footsteps from the same direction as the earlier scraping and her assailant was joined by a second masked figure. Between them the two beings held Neema down while she struggled to catch her breath.

"Hold still." One of them said to her, "We're supposed to take you in unharmed, but we can't help it if you get hurt all by yourself."

Then there was the sound of a repulsorlift engine and a landspeeder drew to a halt.

"Quick!" the driver shouted at the two masked figures, "Stuff her in the trunk and get in."

Still struggling to breathe, Neema could not cry out as she was lifted up and bundled into the storage compartment of the speeder and its cover slammed shut. Then she heard the sound of doors slamming and felt the speeder move off.

The first thing that Vay noticed when she regained consciousness was that she couldn't move her arms or legs. She was still wearing her bodyglove and a coldness down her back indicated that her captor had not taken the trouble to zip it up again. She had been placed in a seat in a small spacecraft, Keena's scout ship from the look of it. A quick glance down showed her that Keena had secured Vay in a magnaharness, a set of metal bands fastened around her body and limbs were held together by powerful magnetic fields that immobilised her almost totally. Unless someone held a specially encoded key against the release panel located at Vay's stomach she was not getting out of it. Vay could see Keena sat at the helm of the scout ship looking out over the terrain they were flying over.

"Release... Arrgh!" Vay said, attempting to get Keena to unlock the magnaharness, but unable to complete her sentence because of the powerful electrical shock that suddenly shot through her neck when she began to speak. However, she did attract Keena's attention.

"I've been warned about you miss Udra," the bounty hunter said as she turned her seat around to face her captive, "I've strapped a throat mike around your neck and hooked it up to the slave collar I've locked there as well. Whenever the microphone registers your voice the collar will discharge into you. So I'm afraid that you won't be able to try any of your little tricks on me." and then she turned her chair around once more. At that moment the ship's communication system came to life.

"Vayal are you there?" a male voice asked.

"I'm here," Keena replied, "and I have the package you wanted. Bundled up all nice and tight for you as well. Do you have my money?"

"We've got it." The voice replied, "You'll be paid as soon as you hand her over. How soon can you be here?"

"I'm on approach now." Keena told him, "You should be able to see me coming in from the west."

"Roger that, we can see you now. Over and out." And with that the channel went dead.

Keena turned her chair around to face Vay again.

"Well that's nice," she said, "you'll be out of here in just a couple of minutes."

Vay wanted to know who it was that could have hired Keena to abduct her. Whoever it was appeared to know that she had some training in manipulating the force and as far as she knew the only person in the sector to have that information was the Moff, Gregor Horatian.

The pitch of the scoutship's repulsorlift engines changed as Keena brought it in to land. From where she was sat, Vay could see out of the viewport at the front of the ship where she could see a building of some sorts. She had no idea exactly where she was but the building looked to have been disused for some time, the paintwork was faded and all exposed metal surfaces were tarnished by exposure to the weather. Vay's view was suddenly blocked by Keena as the bounty hunter stood up and walked to the back of the ship's interior.

"This is where you get off little girl." She said and she opened the hatchway.

As the ramp was lowered Vay looked out to see a group of four men standing outside. All of them but one carried blasters of varying types while the last one held a metal case in both hands. Keena grabbed hold of Vay and lifted her from the chair before dragging her to the hatchway and standing her in the opening between her and the four men.

"Here she is," Keena said, "now let me see the money."

The man with the case walked up the ramp and set it down just in front of Vay before he opened it up. Inside were bundles of banknotes.

"Its all there." the man said, "Sixty thousand including your expenses."

"Step back." Keena said and the man backed down the ramp. When he reached the bottom Keena reached for the case and pulled it to her so she could check the money. Satisfied it was all there she stood up straight again and called out to the men.

"Okay, she's all yours." She told them and she tossed a small electronic device to the man who had carried the case of money, "This controls the slave collar."

The man caught the controller and waved to two of the other men. They promptly slung their blasters over their shoulders and dashed up the ramp to Vay and with one holding each of her arms they dragged her down the ramp.

"I know someone who's very keen to meet you young lady." The man with the controller said but Vay just stared back at him without speaking.

"Nothing to say?" he asked.

"She can't speak," Keena called out, "at least not if she doesn't want to trigger her collar. She's learnt that the hard way."

"Oh I've got to see this." The man said and he looked directly into Vay's eyes, "Say something." He said and the men standing either side of Vay let go of her arms.

Vay remained silent.

"You've got a choice," he then said as he held up the controller, "say something and let us see what the collar does or I'll just have to trigger it with this. And if I have to do that don't think I'll be turning it off any time soon."

Faced with the choice of having the slave collar potentially discharging into her until its power cell ran dry Vay chose what seemed like the easier option.

"Why don't you –" Vay snapped before the collar triggered. She screamed and doubled up in pain. With her arms and legs bound she couldn't steady herself and she collapsed onto the ramp. The four men laughed.

"Good work." The man with the controller shouted at Keena, "That should hold her quite nicely. We'll be in touch if we need anything else."

Taking hold of Vay once more two of the men dragged her inside the building. The man who had held the case of money led the way and the final man followed them with his blaster at the ready just in case Vay gave them any trouble. Not that she had any intention of doing so just yet, she could do little while the magnaharness was still in place and she had already found out what would happen should she try and convince her captors to release her from it. For now she would just wait and try to find out as much as possible about where and why she had been taken.

From what she could tell, Vay believed that the building she had been taken to had once been some sort of manufacturing plant, though without any of the machinery that it had once held she had no idea what it would have made. The four men dragged Vay into what at been a small office, its windows blocked out by sheets of plastic taped across the glass and they deposited her in one of two metal chairs that were the only furniture left in the room. Then, without saying a word to her the men left Vay alone.

It was not long before someone else joined Vay, however. She heard the sound of the door behind her slide open and tried to look around to see who had just entered the room. But whoever it was had taken up a position immediately behind the chair in which Vay was sat and she could not turn around far enough to see them properly. As far as she could tell it was a male human of above average height. She shuddered as she felt his hands at the back of her neck before she realised that he was releasing the seal on the slave collar that forced her to remain silent. After removing the device he dropped it to the floor.

"There," the man said, "now we can talk properly without being interrupted by one of us being electrocuted."

Vay concentrated on the man, she may not have been able to see him but she could sense his presence this close by.

"Release me." She said, doing her best to force the idea into his mind.

The man laughed and he walked from behind Vay to the chair that was in front of her.

"I'm sorry miss Udra," Foran Fallir said as he sat down, "but I'm far too strong minded for your little mind tricks to work on me."

Foran Fallir was a wanted terrorist. He was not associated with the Rebel Alliance, he hated them as much as he hated the Empire, but he was every bit as bad as they were. He sought to have Estran secede from the Empire and become an independent world under his control. Vay had encountered him briefly recently when she had been assessing the loyalty and effectiveness of an imperial agent investigating a bombing carried out by Fallir's organisation, The People's Liberation Army of Estran. Though the cell directly responsible for the bombing had either all wound up dead or imprisoned Fallir himself had escaped with the aid of a hoard of construction droids he had gained control over. Somehow it seemed that he had become aware of Vay's ability to manipulate the force.

"I've been studying you carefully recently," Fallir said, "and I think that we can be of great help to one another."

When Fallir stopped speaking Vay remained silent and just stared at him.

"There aren't many people around who still know how to run a midi-chlorian test," Fallir continued when Vay refused to respond to him, "but I know a few who do and I was quite excited when I saw the results of your test."

So that proved it, Vay thought to herself, Foran Fallir did know that Vay was force sensitive.

“At best you will be a lowly servant to your Emperor,” Fallir said, “but join me and together we can rule this world.”

Now Vay really was speechless, Fallir was trying to recruit her to his terrorist group. Though how he thought that he could control her, Vay could not fathom.

“Think about it miss Udra. Surely you’ve been taught that gaining more power is an end in itself and I am offering you more than your current master ever will. To him you are just a tool, nothing more than a thinking blaster. But working with me you will have real power. What do you say?”

At first Vay just looked at him, but then she replied.

“No.” she said flatly.

“Is that it?” Fallir asked, “I had at least expected someone of your potential to have some questions about just how much power you would have. Perhaps you are not as powerful as I had believed.”

At that moment there was the sound of shouting from outside the room. The exact words were distorted but it seemed to Vay that at least one person involved was a woman.

“Ah,” Fallir said, standing up, “I think our other guest has joined us at last.” And he left the room and closed the door behind him.

## 2.

Foran Fallir followed the sound of the shouting to one of the doors to the outside where he saw a trio of masked men pulling a woman from a landspeeder towards him while his own men looked on. The new arrivals had placed a hood over the woman's head so that she could not see.

"Here's the woman, now where's our payment? We're not in this for your revolution." one of the men demanded.

"Go get it," Foran said to one of his own men. The man nodded and disappeared back inside. Then Foran turned back to the leader of the masked men. "Your money will be here momentarily mister Harsner." He said, "I take it that she is unharmed?"

"Yeah she's just fine," the man Foran addressed as Harsner replied, "but she's a feisty one. Ah, is this my money?"

Foran's man had returned with a bag that he held out towards Harsner, who took it from him and looked inside. Then he reached in and pulled out a handful of banknotes and showed them to his companions, "Let her go lads," he said, "we've got what we came for." And he strode back to the landspeeder, followed by the other two masked men after they released their grip on their hooded captive.

"Bring her inside." Foran said as his own men grabbed the woman before she could pull the hood from her head and then he led them to the room where Vay was still sitting alone.

"I've brought you some company miss Udra." Foran said as his men sat the hooded woman down in the chair he had occupied a few minutes earlier and he pulled the hood from her head.

Vay and Neema had met in person only once briefly but they recognised one another immediately. Vay was well known to the press who kept tabs on Moff Horatian and Neema's reporting was well known across the entire sector.

"Who are you?" Neema said, looking up at Foran, "And what is this place?"

"He's a murderer." Vay said, "That's all you need to know."

One of the men who had brought Neema into the room lashed out at Vay from behind and struck her across her cheek with enough force to knock her from her chair.

"Enough!" Foran shouted, "Now get out all of you and wait in the corridor. I'll handle things in here." Without speaking the men left the room.

"I'm so sorry about that." Foran said, looking down at Vay as she lay helpless on the floor, "But you must understand what your Empire has driven my people to. Just ask miss Gorord here." And he indicated Neema.

"What have I got to do with this?" she asked.

"You have been reporting on the corruption and criminality in the sector," Foran answered, "and how has the Moff responded when you've asked him for an explanation?"

"He hasn't." Neema said, "He won't give me an interview at all."

"Exactly." Foran said, turning back towards Vay, "The moff doesn't care enough to listen to those who know how the people are suffering while he lives in luxury and security."

"What is this all about?" Neema asked, the fear evident in her voice, "Why have you brought me here?"

"To ask you to join us of course." Foran replied.

"Join you? Why?"

"Because everyone in the sector knows your face," Foran said, "and they trust you. You can tell them the truth about my organisation."

"And what is that supposed to be then?" Vay said from the floor, "That you've been blowing up them and their younglings?"

"We are the only ones trying to free them!" Foran shouted, "Estran has been enslaved for centuries. First by the Republic and now by the Empire. Even the Rebel Alliance seeks to dominate our world under their own rule."

"Whereas you'll be able to rule it better?" Neema said.

"I will rule in the interests of my people, not some faceless regime on Coruscant."

"Well I think I'll pass." Neema told Foran, "So can I go now?"

"That's two refusals," Vay said, "I think your recruitment speech needs work."

"This is unfortunate." Foran said as he walked towards the door and opened it, "But perhaps you will change your minds after you've had time to think it over."

A group of Foran's men entered the room and picked up both Neema and Vay. Then when Foran walked out of the room they followed behind him, dragging their captives with them.

"What's happening?" Neema shouted, "Where are you taking us?"



"Somewhere you can reflect on your decision without being disturbed." Foran answered as he continued to lead them through the empty rooms and corridors of the old building.

He led them down to a basement level, to a corridor where the floor had several metal hatches in it.

"This one here." Foran said to his men and he pointed to one of the hatches.

One of the men holding Neema let go of her and dashed to the hatch and lifted it open. Neema and Vay looked at what lay beneath, but all that they could see was the blackness of the sheer drop that the hatch had covered.

"Her first." Foran said, pointing at Vay.

She tried to struggle as the pair of men holding her dragged her towards the seemingly bottomless hole, but she was too tightly bound to get free.

"Stop kicking or we'll have to drop you in head first." One of the men holding her said.

Vay didn't stop struggling, but the men were still able to get her feet into the hole and then they let go of her.

Vay screamed as the darkness swallowed her.

"Now her." Foran said.

"No please!" Neema cried out, but it was to no avail. Even though she was not bound, Foran's men had no difficulty in getting her to the hole between them and they pushed her in after Vay.

As she fell Vay could feel that she had been dropped into a circular shaft that was at a slight angle and she was now sliding rapidly down on side of it. Unable to stretch out her arms and halt herself, she had no choice but to wait and see where it took her. What concerned her was that she was still building up speed as she fell and could easily be injured or killed if the drop was far enough, which it seemed to be.

But then the drop seemed to level out. Just slightly at first, but Vay felt the drop become steadily less steep.

Then, just as the shaft seemed to become flat the bottom of it disappeared entirely and Vay was flung through the air before landing heavily on whatever surface lay below. Wherever Vay had landed, it was in total darkness and there was no sound. All she knew was that she felt cold and damp on her exposed back.

Then Vay heard a woman's scream from above and behind her and she realised that Neema was falling down the shaft after her. Not wanting the reporter to land on top of her Vay rolled to the side, getting clear just as Neema landed beside her. Her impact scattered dirt around that Vay felt as it hit her face.

"Hello?" Neema said as she sat up, unable to see.

"I'm here." Vay replied, "Right beside you."

"Where are we? I can't see."

"Neither can I." Vay replied. Then, before she could say anything further there was a quiet rattling from the shaft and a dim light appeared from it, not enough to illuminate the area properly but enough to reveal the location of the exit from the shaft just above them.

The light became brighter until a short glowing rod fell from the shaft and landing between the two women.

"Well it looks like our captors don't mind us seeing our surroundings after all." Vay said as she looked at the chemical light stick. The light stick produced enough illumination to light up an area about ten metres all around it and the two women saw that they were in some sort of circular chamber. The ceiling was too far above them to be able to make out and aside from the hole they had fallen from there was no sign of any exits at all. The floor beneath them was covered in mud of some sort.

Neema got to her feet and picked up the light stick.

"So what is this place?" Neema asked.

"Looks like some sort of storage silo." Vay answered as she tried to look around, "Look, could you give me an hand here?" she then added.

"What?" Neema replied before it struck her that Vay was still bound and she went over to the other woman,

"How does this release?" she asked.

"It doesn't without the correctly encoded key," Vay told her, "and I don't think they'll be dropping that down to us. Can you just help me up?"

Neema set down the light stick and helped Vay into a kneeling position.

"Thanks," Vay said, "now could you zip me up please? There's a draft." And Neema zipped up the back of Vay's bodyglove for her.

"Five minutes later and I'd have been safely in my apartment." Neema said.

"What?" Vay asked.

"If the men that grabbed me had turned up just five minutes later I'd have been home." Neema replied.

"Five minutes later and I'd have been in the bath." Vay said in return, "But never mind wishing things different, take a look around just in case there's anything we can use to get out of here."

"Like what?"

"Anything. Anything at all, just look around and see if there's anything here. I need to concentrate."

"Concentrate on what?"

"How to get us out of here."

"How?"



"Asking questions isn't looking." Vay replied, frowning.

"Okay, I'm going." Neema replied and she began to look around the silo for anything that could be of use. The reporter took the light stick with her and Vay watched as the glow moved about in the otherwise complete darkness of the silo. If she found something that could be used to release Vay from the magnaharness, however unlikely that was, then there was a fair chance that Vay could get them out of here. Though to do so she would run risk of revealing her proficiency with the force to Neema and if that happened then she would have to kill the other woman herself to protect her secret. But in the meantime Vay focused on things as they were now. She visualised the appearance of the exterior of the building they were being held in, as well as as much of the layout as she had seen. Then she focused on someone who would be able to help them.

Garm Larcus awoke when he felt the force of the blow. Opening his eyes he saw his wife Jennay leaning over him in their bed. She held the pillow that she had just struck him with, upraised ready to deliver another blow to him.

"Say that again, I dare you." she said.

"Say what?" Garm asked, puzzled.

"Her name." Jennay answered.

Garm didn't understand.

"Whose name?"

"That woman you work with, Vay. The one who came here. You were calling her name out in your sleep."

"No I wasn't." Garm replied, then realised that he actually had no idea if he had been, "Was I?" he added.

"Yes you were. The alarm was bleeping away and you were just lying there moaning and saying her name over and over again."

"The alarm?" Garm said and he looked at the alarm clock beside the bed, "Oh crap!" he cried out, "I'm going to be late for the meeting." And he leapt out of bed and grabbed his uniform from where he had hung it before rushing into the bathroom to get ready.

"Yes, you've got to be there on time to see Vay haven't you?" Jennay called out after him.

When Garm emerged from the bathroom Jennay was no longer in the bedroom. As he went down the stairs he heard her moving around in the kitchen and he found her there preparing breakfast for their daughter.

"I don't have time for anything." He said, "I've got to go."

"Where are you going daddy?" his daughter asked.

"Daddy has a meeting," Jennay told the young girl, "he's so excited about it that he's been dreaming about it."

"I can't help what I dream about." Garm said as he walked past his wife and kissed her, "I love you."

"I know." She replied.

### 3.

When Garm reached the administration building he paused on his way up to the meeting suite on the top floor at a drinks machine, intending to grab himself a hot cup of coffee before he went in, the machine had a notice pinned to it that read 'People obtaining drinks without paying for them by shooting this machine will be prosecuted'. Some time earlier someone had discovered that with this particular type of drinks dispensing machine it was possible to get a free drink by shooting it with a blaster set on stun, the magnetic pulse effect triggering the mechanism. It seemed that the building staff were not happy about this.

Rather than shooting the machine with his issued sidearm, Garm inserted his credit stick and made his selection. After taking his drink and retrieving the credit stick he lifted the cup to his mouth and took a sip. The drink was disgusting.

Garm winced as he tasted what someone had dared to describe as coffee before dropping the cup in the nearby bin. He made note that instead of the machine, he would rather shoot its designer and not necessarily on a stun setting either.

At that moment he was interrupted by his comlink and he pulled it out.

"Larcus." He said.

"You're late," A voice said. Garm recognised this as Director Corvin Helios, the man in charge of the Imperial Security Bureau in the sector and his superior, "we're about to begin."

"Sorry sir, I'm on my way up now." Garm replied as he began to rush towards the turbolift cluster.

"Well you're not the only one," Director Helios told him, "that girl isn't here yet either. I was starting to wonder if you'd run off together. Just get up here as quick as you can."

"Be there in two minutes." Garm said.

Garm headed up in the turbolift to the top floor and stepped out into another reception area. As soon as he stepped from the turbolift a pair of stormtroopers who levelled their weapons at him when they saw his blaster holstered at his hip met him.

"Larcus." He said to the soldiers and he held out his identification.

The stormtroopers relaxed, returning their weapons to being held across their chests as Garm walked by.

"Go straight in mister Larcus," the young officer sat behind the reception desk told him, "they are expecting you."

Garm nodded in reply and went into the room beyond. This was a roughly circular chamber that was dominated by a large round table with seats all around it. There were several people here already, all of whom Garm knew at least by reputation.

Nearest to him was Moff Gregor Horatian, formerly senator and now governor of the sector. Opposite him sat Director Helios who nodded slightly at Garm as he entered. There was an empty seat next to the ISB sector chief for Garm. On one side of Moff Horatian, between him and Director Helios sat a pair of military officers, General Julius Dern commanded the Imperial system army here on Estran and Fleet Admiral Praus Vretan who commanded the sector's naval forces. When Garm entered Admiral Vretan was arguing with the final person in the room and the only woman. This was Gayal Tharr, the head of Imperial Intelligence.

The subject of the argument was one that seemed to Garm to be a constant source of friction between the two, that of the data gathered by the many probe droids that the navy launched into space each week.

Admiral Vretan held the droids to be a navy resource that gathered information for navy use, while Gayal was claiming ownership over all intelligence gathered. Garm knew better than to get involved in this. The ISB and Imperial Intelligence were rivals themselves and he intended to follow Director Helios's example of letting the military and Imperial Intelligence bicker while they got on with their job.

"Don't worry," Director Helios whispered to Garm as he sat down, "you haven't missed much."

In truth Garm would not have missed much had he been absent from the meeting entirely. The intention was to discuss how the counter insurgency program against the rebellion was running in the sector, but at the moment the rebels seemed to be lying low. There had been a major offensive by them following the destruction of the sector's main communications hub on Allastra a few weeks earlier, but since then things had quietened down somewhat.

Vay's absence was unusual. From what Garm knew of the young woman she was rarely ill and from what Director Helios had said it seemed that she had not called in to explain herself.

The meeting broke up with little being agreed upon and most of the participants seemed eager to leave the room when they finally got the chance. Garm on the other hand remained behind with Moff Horatian.

Recently Garm had been pulled off general field investigation and transferred to the Moff's staff as a special advisor and personal investigator. Given his chequered history of being the son of a traitor and having killed a fellow agent Garm doubted that his department would be missing him.

"So is there anything you want me to look into sir?" Garm asked Moff Horatian.

"Nothing we've discussed today my boy." The Moff replied, "But there is something troubling me."

"What is it?"

"Vay." Moff Horatian answered.

Unless she was undertaking an assignment for him, Vay was rarely seen far from the Moff and the general impression held by most people was that the two were having an affair. Garm had even mocked Vay regarding this when they worked together, though she had never responded in a way that would confirm or disprove the rumours.

"May I ask where she is this morning sir?" Garm asked.

"That's the thing Agent Larcus," Moff Horatian replied, "I don't know. My secretary has tried communicating with her, but there has been no reply from her home. I want you to go there and confirm that everything's all right. I'll lend you a key so you can get in."

Garm smiled as he recalled his wife's reaction to his mentioning Vay's name in his sleep and considered how she would react to hear that he was now rushing off to her apartment.

"Something funny Agent Larcus?" the moff asked him.

"Just that my wife was somewhat annoyed this morning." Garm replied, "Apparently I was calling out Vay's name in my sleep."

"Were you dreaming of her Garm?" the moff asked.

This surprised Garm. Not only by the question itself, but also by the way that the moff switched to calling him 'Garm' instead of 'Agent Larcus.' Perhaps he was concerned that Garm would become a rival for Vay's affections Garm thought to himself.

"I don't know sir." Garm replied, "Is that important?"

"It could be." The Moff answered him, "Go to her apartment now and let me know what you find there."

The chemical light stick was growing dim now and the area it illuminated did not extend much beyond where Vay and Neema had sat all night. Not that this mattered to Vay; she had kept her eyes shut as she meditated. Neema shook the tiny stick to agitate the chemicals it contained further and try to squeeze out some more light.

"How long do you think we've been here?" Neema asked.

"About ten to twelve hours." Vay replied with her eyes still shut.

"How do you know?"

"Because you've just shaken that light stick and that's about how long they last. Now keep quiet."

"Why?"

"Because I'm trying to get us out of here?"

"How? By just sitting there?"

"I'm thinking," Vay said and she opened her eyes to look at Neema, "and thinking will get us out of her quicker than your yammering."

Before Neema could reply there was a faint grating sound from far overhead and the two women looked up to see a small circle of light appear above them as a hatch was opened at the top of the silo. The light that it let in proved that it was now daylight outside and it gave them a rough idea of just how deep underground they were.

"I trust you slept well." Forna Fallir yelled down through the hole.

"Why don't you come down here and say that?" Neema shouted back up at him.

"No thank you." he replied, "Now have either of you given any more thought to my proposition?"

"Forget it Fallir!" Vay responded loudly, "A night in the dark isn't going to turn me into a traitor. You'd do better to just let us both go."

"I'm afraid I can't do that." Fallir shouted down at his prisoners, "So you'll have to stay down there a little longer. Don't worry though, this hatch leaks enough to let in water for you to have something to drink."

There was the grating sound again as the hatch was pushed back into position and the silo became dark again, with only the fading light stick for illumination.

Garm had been to Vay's apartment building before when he had driven the young woman home. However he had refused her invitation up and so this was his first time inside the building. Located in the up market section of the city, it was obvious that Vay was not paying for it herself. Garm had noticed that she seemed to have collected quite a few expensive items from male benefactors, though she had never openly told him their names. She had just hinted that they were rich and powerful men on Coruscant the capital of the Empire.

The inside of the building was every bit as lavish as Garm had expected though he was surprised to find a pair of uniformed police officers inside talking with a tough looking man in a long coat.

"Are you here about the assault as well?" one of the policemen asked Garm as he came through the front doors and they saw his uniform.

"What assault?" he asked, immediately doubting that the commission of a crime at the same time as Vay disappeared was a co-incidence.

"The concierge on duty last night was attacked." the man in the long coat said, "I think by someone I'm hunting myself."

"And who might you be?" Garm asked him, "You don't look like you live here."

The man reached into his pocket. Normally an action like this would have Garm reaching for his blaster, but the policemen did not react so Garm assumed that the man had already satisfied them that he could be trusted. Though as he moved his coat aside Garm noticed that the man was armed himself.

"Marshas Decken." The man said as he produced an identity card and held it out. Garm took the card and looked at it.

The card was an Imperial Peace-Keeping Certificate that bore Marshas Decken's image on it. Garm grinned for a moment and then gave the card back to the man.

"So who are you after bounty hunter?" he asked.

"A woman called Keena Vayal," he replied, "she's an unlicensed bounty hunter. I think that she was here last night, but I can't figure out why."

"I may know." Garm said, concerned that Vay may have been the target of the criminal that Marshas Decken was hunting, "A friend of mine that lives here hasn't been seen since she left work last night. I was sent to see if she's all right."

"If Keena Vayal's got hold of her then she's in a lot of trouble." Marshas said before adding, "Her methods don't go by the code." In reference to the supposed code of conduct that licensed bounty hunters operated under.

Garm took the key to Vay's apartment from his pocket.

"Come with me." He said to Marshas.

In the turbolift on the way up to Vay's apartment Garm studied this bounty hunter. Members of his profession varied widely both in character and capability. Marshas Decken had mentioned another bounty hunter who did not follow the supposed code of conduct that most operated under, suggesting to Garm that he did follow it. What was more the way he stood and spoke projected an air of confidence that gave the impression that he knew what he was doing. Though Garm had reservations about bounty hunters in general he decided that this man was trustworthy and that having him with him could do no harm, especially if there was the possibility of running into trouble in Vay's apartment.

"After you." Marshas said to Garm when the turbolift door slid open, "After all, you know the way."

"Actually this is my first time up here." Garm replied as he stepped out of the turbolift car and he looked at the sign on the wall opposite indicating which way apartments of particular numbers were, "Looks like its this way." He added, pointing down the hallway.

As the two men reached the door to Vay's apartment Garm produced the key that Moff Horatian had given to him. Garm reached for his weapon as soon as Marshas produced his.

"Take it easy," Marshas said, "its just in case." And Garm relaxed.

"Just warn me next time okay?" he said and he placed the key against the sensor beside the door.

"Vay." Garm called out as he entered her apartment, "Vay, are you here?"

There was no answer and he and Marshas began to look around.

"Over here." Marshas called out and Garm went to see what the bounty hunter had found. He was standing at the door to the bedroom and Garm immediately saw that unlike the rest of the apartment that was spotless and tidy this room was a mess.

"Looks like there was a fight here." Marshas said as he went into the room.

"Someone fired a blaster in here." Garm said and he pointed at a scorch mark on the ceiling.

"Yes," Marshas replied as he too looked at the mark, "though I'd say it was set to stun. A full strength shot would have taken a chunk out instead of just burning the paint a bit."

"Then she's alive." Garm said, "Wherever she is, she's alive."

Using his authority as an ISB agent Garm had the building security staff turn over the security recordings from the previous evening to him and took them back to his office. He also allowed Marshas Decken to accompany him just in case the bounty hunter he was looking for was on them.

"That's her," Marshas said when he saw the dark skinned woman appear on Garm's computer display, "Keena Vayal."

"She came from the parking lot." Garm said, noting the door that she had stepped from when she came into the field of view of the camera. A moment later the recording showed her assaulting the guard and concealing his body behind his desk. Then she got into the turbolift.

"Let's see the recording from your friends floor," Marshas said, "we'll see if she gets out there."

"I do know what I'm doing," Garm said as he accessed the file that Marshas had told him to, "I'm actually trained to do this."

"So am I." Marshas said.

"Really?" Garm said, pausing in his search of the recordings, "Where from?"

"Naboo," Marshas answered, "I joined the Royal Security Force near the end of the Clone Wars. Then the war ended and they didn't need so many soldiers any more but there were plenty of criminals to be caught so I took up bounty hunting."

"Naboo?" Garm said, "Isn't that..."

"Where Palpatine came from?" Marshas interrupted, "Yes. In fact I met him once."

"You met him?" Garm asked in amazement.

"Yeah, when I was in high school he came to visit us. He was just a senator back then of course. He came to give us some talk about the way the Republic worked."

"So what did you think of him?" Garm asked. He had met a few others who had come into contact with the Emperor on occasion, but none of them had been just common citizens of the Empire they had been noblemen and high ranking military leaders.

"It's weird," Marshas answered, "there was this kid who thought it would be funny to shoot a spit ball at the back of Palpatine's head while we were all posing for the official image of the visit."

"I'll bet that went down well."

"You have no idea. The kid's aim was spot on and the spit ball hit him right on the back of his head and Palpatine turned around to see who had done it. The teachers were furious of course, but Palpatine just laughed it off. But right as he turned around I swear that the look on his face was one that scared the living daylights out of me. I thought he was going to rip the kid apart."

"So the kid got off lucky then?"

"I suppose so."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that the kid wasn't around much longer anyway. It turned out he was sick, really sick but no one knew. He died of some undiagnosed respiratory ailment a few weeks later."

Garm refocused on the security recordings.

"There she is all right." He said as the recording showed Keena exiting the turbolift on Vay's floor and then forcing an entry into her apartment, "I'll fast forward and see if we can see anything more."

The image blurred as Garm increased the playback speed until it showed Vay stepping out of the turbolift and Garm paused it.

"There's Vay." He said.

"You work with her?" Marshas asked as he looked at the image of Vay standing in the hallway wearing her customary bodyglove, "If I worked with her it wouldn't take her being attacked to get me up to her apartment."

Garm grinned and held up his left hand.

"Married." He said, pointing at the ring on his finger, "Besides she likes rich men. The Moff if you believe the rumours."

"Oh." Marshas replied, "Let's see what happens." And Garm set the recording playing again at a slightly increased rate. After what would have been several minutes of real time, the door to Vay's apartment opened again and Keena stepped out carrying Vay over her shoulder. The image clearly showed that Vay was now restrained and she appeared to be unconscious.

"You were right about her being alive." Marshas said, "You don't tie up a corpse."

Garm paused the image and looked at it. Before either man could say anything more the door to Garm's office slid open and Moff Horatian entered, flanked by a pair of stormtroopers.

"Don't get up." The Moff said as Garm began to stand, "I just came to see if you'd found anything."

"Yes sir we have." Garm answered.

"We?" Moff Horatian replied and he looked at Marshas.

Marshas reached for his licence but halted when the stormtroopers aimed their weapons at him.

"It's all right." Garm said, "Moff Horatian may I present Marshas Decken, licensed bounty hunter. This man has been pursuing the woman we believe to have abducted Vay."

"Abducted?" the Moff repeated.

"I'm afraid so sir." Garm replied and he rotated the display so that the Moff could see it also, "As you can see this woman..." Garm began, but then he suddenly stopped.

"Are you alright?" the Moff asked and Garm realised that everyone was looking at him.

"What? Oh yes, it's just I suddenly got a flash of an image as if I'd seen her before." Garm said.

"Have you?" the Moff asked him.

"No. Never." Garm replied.

"She's known to the authorities, perhaps you've seen a report on her." Marshas suggested.

"No." Garm said, "I've never read any reports about bounty hunters."

"Would you mind giving us a few minutes mister Decken?" Moff Horatian asked and immediately one of the stormtroopers walked over to where the bounty hunter sat.

"Of course." Marshas said, standing up, "I could do with stretching my legs for a bit."

Moff Horatian waited for the office door to close behind Marshas and the escorting stormtrooper before he sat down where Marshas had sat and looked directly at Garm.

"Did you dream of this woman last night?" he asked.

Garm was shocked.

"No," he said, then he paused, "At least I don't think so." He added.

"Concentrate," Moff Horatian said, "take a good look at the woman and think about when where you saw her."

"On her ship." Garm said abruptly.

"You've been on her ship?"

"Of course not. Wait, yes I have. Or least I remember seeing her sat in the pilot's seat. How is this possible?"

"These are Vay's memories." The Moff said.

"They can't be." Garm replied, "How could they be?"

"Because miss Udra is a very special young lady," Moff Horatian told him, "and she has many talents that are, how should I put it? Unusual."

"What are you saying?" Garm asked, leaning closer to Moff Horatian.

"I'm saying that what you may think are the random images from a dream are in fact pieces of a message from young Vay. All you need to do is remember what she told you. Though I must warn you, if mister Decken suspects that there is anything special about Vay you must kill him. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

"Good, then I'll leave you to your work." And with that Moff Horatian stood up and walked out of the office, followed by his remaining stormtrooper bodyguard.

A few minutes later Marshas returned to find Garm now clutching a datapad and stylus, scribbling on its touch screen.

"What did the old man have to say?" Marshas asked as he took his seat again.

"Information from a classified source." Garm said, bending the truth somewhat but avoiding an outright lie, "Vay was taken to a starship. But it doesn't look like she was taken off world. I'm trying to put together the information given to me."

"Well I don't think that your friend was the only person abducted last night." Marshas said, "While I was leaving you and your boss alone I saw a news report and apparently Neema Gorord didn't turn up for work this morning."

"Neema Gorord?" Garm said, "The reporter?"

"The very same. Her network is saying that the circumstances are suspicious." Marshas replied.

"Two high profile abductions on the same day is a bit too convenient." Garm said, "But could Keena have taken down two targets in rapid succession?"

"No." Marshas said, "I doubt there was enough time, which suggests someone else working for the same person that hired Keena to grab your friend. Would your classified source know anything about that?"

"No. Our source only applies to Vay."

"Well I'd like to check out some sources of my own." Marshas said, "What do you say we go see him together?"

"Sounds like a plan." Garm said.

"Good, change first though. Your uniform will just scare off the people we need to see."

## 4.

"I don't talk to cops." The bartender said when Marshas waved him over.

The cantina was exceedingly run down and Garm suspected that if it ever did have health inspections the results were paid for in cash. Unfortunately this meant that Garm stood out, even though he was in plain clothes. He was just far too clean.

"You're not talking to the cop." Marshas said, "You're talking to me." And he slid a bank note across the bar. "What do you want to know?" the bartender asked as he slipped the money below the bar, taking care that none of the bar's patrons noticed.

"I want to know if anyone's been contracting out." Marshas said to the bartender.

"Somebody's always contracting out." The barman answered, "And someone's always getting paid to do someone else's dirty work for them. You'll have to be more specific."

"Two women have gone missing. They had help in disappearing from people working for someone else."

"One of them that reporter?" the barman asked.

"You've heard about that then?" Marshas asked in return.

"I've heard about it yes. And helping you find a celebrity is worth more than a fifty."

Marshas slipped another bank note to the barman.

"That's better." The barman said, "I had some swoop gangers in here earlier celebrating a windfall. When the news came on about the reporter not showing up for work they went real quiet and watched the broadcast as if they were interested in more than just a casual way."

"Swoop gangs aren't known for their interest in current affairs." Garm commented.

"Exactly," the barman said keeping his gaze on Marshas, "which was why it caught my attention."

"Did they say anything about her?" Marshas asked the barman.

"No. They left soon after."

"Do you know who they were?"

"No, just that they were gangers."

"Where were they sat?" Garm asked.

The barman just looked at Marshas.

"Go on." The bounty hunter said.

"Over there." The barman replied, nodding towards a booth at the side of the cantina, "Its not been cleaned up yet."

"Thanks." Marshas said and he and Garm headed towards the booth.

Reaching the booth Marshas began to rummage through the litter left behind on the table by the swoop gang members, while Garm crouched down and looked at the floor under the table.

"There's nothing useful here." Marshas said, "This rubbish could have come from anywhere."

Well I think I've got something." Garm said and Marshas crouched down to see what he had found.

"See here," Garm said, "the gangers had mud on their boots that they left behind." And he took a clean handkerchief from his pocket and wiped it across a footprint that appeared to come from a swoop ganger's boot, "With any luck this will tell us where the gangers have been recently." He added.

Back in Garm's office he and Marshas studied the results of the tests performed on the dirt from the boot print.

"Salt?" Marshas said as he looked at the breakdown of what was in the mud.

"Sea salt to be precise. So it comes from a coastal location. That narrows down our search area a lot." Garm replied.

"We don't know for sure that they took the reporter to that place though." Marshas said.

"No," Garm admitted, "but it tells us that they went to the coast for something. And we know Vay was flown out so all we need to do is access the air traffic control logs for last night and see whereabouts anyone flew to on the coast." And with that Garm began to call up the data he wanted.

"Do you know how many ships fly in and out of this city each hour?" Marshas asked as Garm worked.

"Lots." Garm answered, "But we can narrow down the search to private vessels not leaving the atmosphere before touching down again in a coastal location within a thousand kilometres of here. Ah here we go." And Garm pointed to a list of starships that had taken off the previous evening, "These four are the only ones that meet our criteria and here are the places they flew to."

"These are scattered across the continent," Marshas said, "which one do we start with?"

Garm looked at the list of ships. It gave the departure times and types of vessels. One of them was a Siemar Fleet Systems Lone Scout, a survey ship designed to be flown by a single pilot but that had limited cargo and passenger space also.



The image of Keena Vayal at the controls of her ship flashed into Garm's mind once more and he recognised the view from the forward viewport as being similar to the one from an Imperial TIE fighter's cockpit, another vessel type manufactured by Sienar Fleet Systems.

"This one." He said, pointing at the entry, "Departure trill herf xesh one one three eight."

"How do you know?"

"I've got a good feeling about it." Garm said as he copied the information to his datapad and stood up, "Come on, we're going for a drive."

Garm fed the landing site's location into his landspeeder's navigation system and allowed it to guide him and Marshas to where the vessel carrying Vay had landed, an old chemical processing complex built on the coast to make use of the ocean. Garm pulled up his landspeeder short of the main gate. He pulled out his datapad and compared the appearance of the building to that of the one he had sketched based on the image sent by Vay.

"This is the place. We'll go in on foot." he said and the two men got out of the vehicle.

Rather than walk along the road Garm and Marshas cut across the coastal terrain until they reached the rusting perimeter fence.

"I can't see any movement." Garm said as he looked towards the dilapidated building.

Marshas did not reply immediately. Instead he reached beneath his long coat and produced a compact set of macrobinoculars that he used to enhance his view of the complex.

"Something's landed there recently all right." He said, "I can see the depression in the ground from its landing gear. But it's gone now."

"Then we've missed your target." Garm said.

"Looks like it, but I'd put money on there being someone in there who could tell me how to get closer to her. Plus your friend is likely in there along with that reporter woman."

Garm drew his blaster and began to stand up.

"Hold on a moment." Marshas said, grabbing Garm before he could stand up fully and pulling him back down, "I can see someone down there."

Through his macrobinoculars Marshas watched as a pair of humans emerged from behind an old piece of machinery and walked towards a door in the main building. Each one had a weapon slung over their shoulders.

"Looks like a couple of sentries." Marshas said, "Well armed but not professional. Getting in there's possible, but there's a good chance we'd give ourselves away."

"If that happens they could kill Vay and Neema." Garm said, "We can't let that happen."

"So what do you suggest?" Marshas asked.

"This is a hostage situation." Garm said, "Standard procedure is to send in the troops."

"Got an army in your pocket?"

"No. Just a comlink and a line to Moff Horatian."

Moff Horatian listened as Garm explained what he and Marshas had discovered and he made a note of the location of the building.

"Well done agent Larcus." He said, "Now I want you and mister Decken to pull back while I make the necessary arrangements. We can't risk you being detected. Understood?"

"Yes sir." Garm replied, "There was a fork in the road about five or six kilometres back. We'll wait there for reinforcements. Larcus out."

When the channel went dead Moff Horatian activated his communicator again.

"General Dern," he said, "could you come and see me immediately please? I have a job for you."

Garm and Marshas had been waiting by the road junction for just under half an hour when they heard the sound of repulsorcraft approaching overhead. Turning around they saw the unmistakable outline of five Low Altitude Assault Transports/Infantry flying in at extremely low level.

"They look a bit low." Marshas said, "I hope the guys flying those things know what they're doing."

"The moff will have sent the best." Garm replied.

The five aircraft slowed as they approached the two men and one of them touched down.

"Agent Larcus," a voice called out from the open doorway of the gunship, "if you get aboard quickly please, we'll be on our way."

Garm and Marshas rushed towards the gunship and some of the occupants reached out to help them aboard. Garm now recognised the man who had shouted out to him moments earlier, it was General Julius Dern. Unlike the previous time Garm had seen the general he was wearing an armoured vest and helmet instead of his standard duty uniform. As soon as Garm and Marshas were aboard General Dern turned towards the pilot.

"Let's go." He said and the LAAT/i gunship rose up from the ground.

Marshas looked around the troop-carrying bay of the LAAT/i focusing on the soldiers that it carried. Like most citizens of the Empire Marshas was familiar with stormtroopers and had encountered them on many occasions, not least earlier that day. But these were different. The helmets they wore were more reminiscent of those worn by scout troopers even though their armour covered their entire bodies like that of a regular stormtrooper. But what really stood out was the colour of their armour. While many units would apply camouflage in the field they did not maintain their armour in these colours so they were generally brilliant white. The stormtroopers that accompanied General Dern however all wore jet-black armour. These were not just stormtroopers they were storm commandoes. The elite of the elite.

"As I understand it," General Dern began, "we have an unknown number of hostiles holding a high value captive in an enclosed area."

"That's right general," Garm replied, "but we think that there's also a second hostage."

"So noted," General Dern answered.

"I'm afraid we don't know the layout of the building," Garm said, "we just looked at it from the fence."

"Not to worry." General Dern replied and he held up a datapad that showed a building schematic on it, "I've already pulled the plans from the planetary records. My men will have full access to it when they go in."

"So your plan is to go in there and shoot the place up then?" Marshas asked.

"My men are the best." General Dern said, "The hostages won't be harmed."

"It's not the hostages I'm worried about general." Marshas replied, "I need information about a ship that landed there last night and corpses can't answer questions."

"My orders come from the moff himself," General Dern said dismissively, "and they didn't include doing a bounty hunter's job for him."

Marshas was about to protest further when the pilot interrupted them.

"Target location ahead sir." He said.

General Dern turned to a storm commando beside him.

"Tell your men to prepare for ground assault." He told him before turning back towards Garm and Marshas,

"Well gentlemen, it looks like we've arrived." He added.

"General I want to go in with the troops." Garm said.

"Me too," Marshas interrupted, "it looks like the only way I'll get someone able to answer questions is if I capture them myself."

"Very well." General Dern answered, "You'll find extra sets of armour behind you. But remember to keep out of the commandoes' way."

## 5.

Foran Fallir was staring at a map and had a datapad in his hand listing all known scheduled public events that would make suitable targets when he heard the sound of approaching engines. Instinctively he looked upwards, even though there were no windows in the roof above and he could not see into the sky.

At that moment the door opened and one of his men burst in.

“Foran!” he shouted, “There are Imperial aircraft overhead, they found us!”

“Well don’t just stand there!” Foran yelled back at him, “Get everyone ready.” And he picked up his blaster carbine from where it lay.

There were several vehicles parked behind the building complex as the LAAT/is flew over.

“Take those vehicles out!” Garm shouted and a brilliant beam of energy lanced out from one of the gunship’s forward cannons and sliced through them. None of the vehicles were armoured and each one exploded as they were hit.

The gunship Garm and Marshas were on continued to fly over the complex before turning around for another run. The others however, all came to a halt in the air above the building and ropes dropped from each side of the gunships as their doors opened. Moments later one black armoured form after another appeared from within the aircraft and slid down the ropes to the roof below.

As the storm commandoes made their drop a door opened on the roof and a pair of men rushed out brandishing blasters towards the aircraft. One of them let off a shot that was absorbed harmlessly by the armour plating of one of the vehicles before blasts from the side mounted ball turrets brought both men down.

“Two targets down on roof.” A voice said dispassionately over the communications net that Garm and Marshas could hear now that they were wearing the comlink headsets in the helmets provided to them. More ropes were thrown from the roof of the building by some of the storm commandoes who then leapt down to windows that they smashed their way through and more reports began to come in.

“Third floor, three targets down.”

“Second floor, one target down.”

“Third floor, target sighting. Pursuing.”

“Pilot, take us in.” General Dern ordered and the gunship’s pilot angled the vehicle down towards the area in front of the building.

As soon as the gunship set down the storm commandoes it carried leapt out and rushed towards the door of the building, well-aimed burst of blaster fire ripping it from its frame and allowing them access. Eager to take at least one enemy alive, Marshas rushed in after them and Garm followed with him.

Foran pressed himself up against a wall. He could have sensed the approach of the Imperial troops even without the noise they were making. Sure enough, a moment later the door was blown in and a burst of blaster fire almost cut one of his men in half. The smell of burnt flesh filling the room.

Foran levelled his own gun just as the first storm commando stepped through the door and fired from point blank range. The armoured trooper did not stand a chance and he slumped dead to the floor. Foran then ducked just as another burst of blaster fire came from outside the room, this time punching through the wall where he had been stood and flying over his head. When the second storm commando entered to see what effect his shooting had had Foran shot him in the head.

Foran now paused. He could hear the sounds of blaster fire coming from all over the building and he knew that his men were being cut down by the vastly superior Imperial troops. It was clearly too late for any of them. However, he could still escape.

Marshas ducked as the booming sound of a projectile weapon alerted him to the presence of one of the terrorists on a walkway overhead. Ahead of him a storm commando was knocked from his feet, but he immediately bean to get back up as his armour absorbed the force of impact.

There was a flash of blue as Garm fired his blaster from behind Marshas. As a favour to the bounty hunter Garm had copied Marshas in setting his weapon to stun. It also made the two men less hesitant about shooting just in case they hit a hostage. Garm’s shot hit the man and he fell from the walkway.

Running over to where the man hit the floor, Marshas checked his pulse.

“Damn it!” he cursed as he felt nothing. Clearly the man had been killed by the fall. Then more weapons fire made him run for cover.

Foran could hear gunfire directly ahead where several of his men had barricaded themselves behind the remains of some of ancient machinery and were making a last stand. Unfortunately for him, Foran wanted to go that way to escape the building.

He looked around and tried to think of an alternate route. Realising that he could get around the battle in front of him by cutting across the floor above he turned around and headed for the nearest staircase.

Garm ran to where Marshas was taking cover and crouched beside him.

"I take it that the guy didn't make it then?" Garm said.

"No," Marshas answered, "it looked like he landed head first and broke his neck. I'll be lucky to come out of this with any leads."

Garm bobbed up from behind their cover to fire a couple of more blasts at the terrorist hiding at the far end of the room. Their position was becoming less tenable all the time as the storm commandoes continued to press forwards. Garm estimated that at least third of the terrorist were using either firearms or low powered civilian blasters that lacked the hitting power to punch through the commandos' armour. He and Marshas still had to be careful, however.

Then another movement above caught Garm's attention and he looked up to see a tall bald man running across the walkway that he had shot a man from earlier. Garm recognised the man immediately.

"Foran Fallir!" he yelled, "Stop right there and surrender! You are under arrest!"

Foran paused and looked down at Garm. The terrorist leader grinned and fired a burst from his blaster carbine at the ISB agent and bounty hunter before turning around again and continuing to run.

"He's getting away again!" Garm shouted, "Come on, let's get after him!" and he jumped up and ran in the direction that Foran had headed in.

Foran ran down the stairs. Somehow it figured that the ISB agent had accompanied Vay Udra when Foran had first encountered her would be here now trying to rescue her. Foran could not help but wonder if the young woman had used her abilities to reach out to him and guide him here, if so then the effort he put into bringing her here and containing her in such a way that she would be unable to determine her exact location was for nothing.

The sound of footfalls alerted him to the approach of Garm and Marshas. Foran turned and fired just as they appeared around a corner, forcing them to duck back or be shot. Then Foran turned and ran again.

Garm reached around the corner and fired his blaster twice without looking then ran around to see if he had hit anything.

"Come on." He said to Marshas before running after Foran.

The terrorist leader led them down another flight of stairs into the basement level of the building. Down here the long corridors and wide rooms were replaced by a maze of narrow passageways and chambers filled with rusting machinery and the two men were forced to stop while they tried to determine which way Foran had gone.

"We need more men to search this place." Marshas said.

"I agree." Garm replied and he activated his comlink, "General we're in the basement. How many ways in and out of this place are there?"

"Just a moment." General Dern replied and after a brief pause during which he looked at his schematic he added, "Just the one. A set of stairs in the north corner."

"Good," Garm said, "then we have Foran Fallir trapped down here. Once your men are done clearing the rest of building have them meet us here."

"Roger that." General Dern replied.

"Now we just wait." Garm said to Marshas, "Fallir's got no way out."

Foran brought his carbine up to his shoulder and fired, keeping his finger depressed on the trigger. The rapid pulses of energy ripped through the large pipe easily given its poor state of repair and when Foran delivered a sharp kick a section of it fell away.

He looked into the pipe and listened. From below Foran could hear the soft lapping sound of the ocean and he smiled. Then he grasped the edge of the pipe and lifted himself into it. Then he let go and allowed himself to slide down.

Briefly Foran was in complete darkness, but soon light came from ahead of him as he neared the end of the pipe before he was dropped into the ocean with a large 'splash.'

"It looks like Fallir made his own exit." General Dern said as he, Garm and Marshas looked at the damaged pipe, "And there's been no sign of the hostages either. Perhaps your information was wrong."

"No." Garm said, "They're here somewhere. Have your men search the place again. Bring in a scanning team if you have to."

Then he spotted something, an access cover on the floor.

"Where does that go?" Garm asked, pointing at the cover.

General Dern glanced at his datapad again.

"Underground storage silos." he said, "There are several of them surrounding the building." And Garm grinned.

"Get the covers off." He said.

The storm commandoes levered the covers off the access pipes to the storage silos one after another.

"Hello?" Garm shouted down each one, "Can you hear me?"

The first couple brought no response, but on the third try a voice shouted back up out of the darkness.

"Help us!" it cried out, "We're trapped down here."

Garm looked at General Dern.

"General," he said, "I think we've found them."

Lifting equipment was brought in so that Neema and Vay could be brought up from the outside access hatches to the silo. By this time the local media had been informed about the troop movements and broadcasting vans were lined up outside the perimeter fence where General Dern's storm commandoes were holding the reporters back.

"General, what's happening here?" one yelled.

"Just a few words general." Another shouted, but General Dern ignored them all as he watched the soldiers lift Neema Gorord out of the silo.

Neema took the hand offered to her by a soldier, followed by a flask of water which she gulped down. Then she noticed the cameras outside the gate.

"Excuse me general," she said, "I've work to do." And she rushed towards the van that carried her network's logo on it.

A minute later the winch brought Vay to the surface, strapped to a stretcher.

"Are you alright?" Garm asked as he placed an electronic key against the front of the magnaharness and released her from it.

"I'll be fine," she said softly, "I knew you'd find me."

"I had help." Garm replied, glancing at Marshas.

"What about Fallir?" Vay asked.

"He got away." Garm replied, "But a lot of his men didn't"

"Yeah," Marshas interrupted, "but I'm not getting paid for any of them."