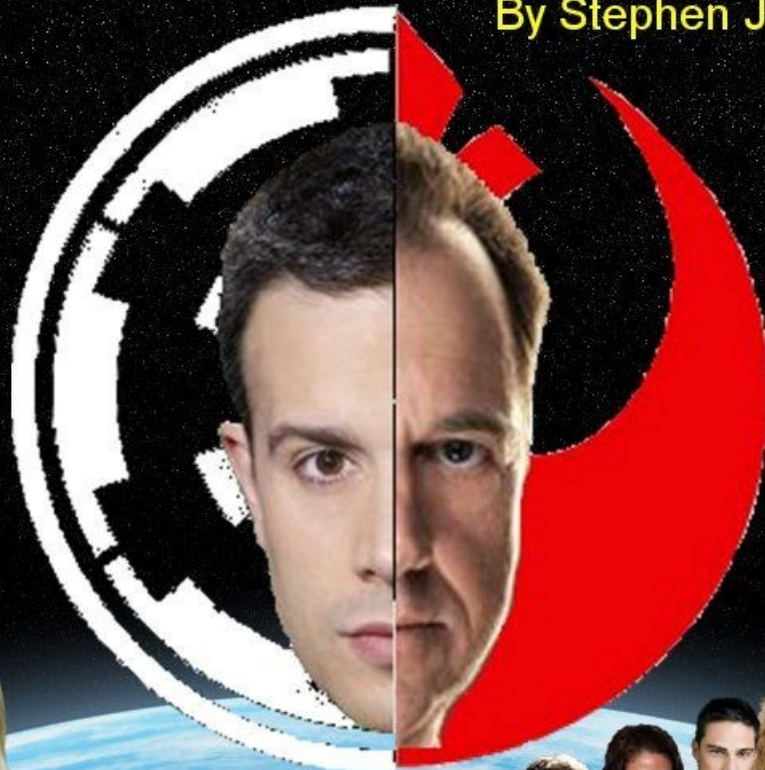


STAR WARS

6-11: A Thousand Years of Pain

By Stephen J Dutton



6-11
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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 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...

A THOUSAND YEARS OF PAIN

ARE THERE JEDI LOOSE IN THE SECTOR? WHEN VAY UDRA BEGINS TO HAVE VISIONS OF JEDI SUFFERING IT LEADS HER AND FELLOW ISB AGENT GARM LARCUS ON A CHASE INTO UNEXPLORED TERRITORY...

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

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1.

"On your knees jedi poodoo." the battle droid commanded and Jedi Knight Kamm Telidor was pushed into a kneeling position. Looking to his side he saw his comrade the duros jedi Mull Parr along with their padawans all kneeling in a row with their arms bound behind their backs.

"It would appear that our mission has failed." Mull said.

"They're going to kill us aren't they master?" Mull's apprentice asked.

"I don't think that the fate they have in mind for us will be quite so easy." Mull replied.

"I think that's a given." Kamm added as he looked the other way, facing the direction that the open topped repulsorlift vehicle they were travelling on was heading. The four jedi had been lined up at the edge of the transport with battle droids positioned behind them, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

The vehicle slowed down and in front of them the jedi saw a second Separatist repulsorlift vehicle pull up alongside them. Unlike the lightweight vehicle they were being transported on this was a more heavily armoured fighting vehicle and as the jedi watched a hatch opened in the vehicle's roof and the Confederate general they had been sent to capture appeared.

"Jedi!" he called out, "You have been found guilty of crimes against the Confederacy, the penalty for which is death. However, despite being the target of your vile assassination plot I am minded to be merciful and rather than death I sentence you to life. Life with no hope of release." and then he disappeared back into the vehicle.

"Okay you heard the general." the senior battle droid told the others guarding the jedi, "Over they go." and then using rifle butts swung at the backs of the jedi, the four prisoners were pushed off their transport.

Twenty-one years later...

Pain.

Terror.

Anger.

Hatred.

"Vay! Vay wake up, you're having a nightmare."

Vay Udra opened her eyes to find Garm Larcus trying to shake her awake.

"What?" she asked.

"You were crying out in your sleep." Garm told her, "It sounded like you were having a nightmare."

Just then there was a tapping sound at the bedroom door and it opened to reveal Garm's young daughter in her nightclothes and clutching a stuffed kowikian monkey lizard toy dressed in an Imperial Navy uniform.

"Daddy I heard screaming." she said, rubbing her eyes.

"It's okay sweetheart." Garm told her, "Vay was just having a bad dream, that's all. Go back to bed."

"Can I have a drink of fizzy glug?" the girl asked.

"No you certainly can't. Now go back to bed." Garm told her, "Now." and without a word his daughter retreated from the room, closing the door behind her, "So what was it about?" Garm then asked Vay.

"What was what about?" Vay asked.

"The dream of course." Garm replied as he wrapped his arms around Vay and pulled her closer to him, "Come on tell me."

"I don't remember." Vay said.

Liar. You know exactly what it was about.

The message came to Vay through the Force, but she heard it as if the words were spoken by someone standing right beside the bed. Unlike the feelings that had been disturbing her sleep she knew exactly where these words originated as well. They came from the spirit of a distant relation of Vay's name Lara who had lived around four thousand years earlier. Lara had been a jedi, unlike Vay whose Force sensitivity had been put to use serving the Empire that had superseded the Galactic Republic. However, it seemed that her ancestors believed that Vay needed redeeming and so through their collective will they had made it possible for Lara to communicate directly with her, something that Vay found to be frustrating at best since her own moral values frequently conflicted with those of Lara.

"Fair enough." Garm said, sighing as he rolled onto his back once more, "Just try not to have any more nightmares okay? I want to get some decent sleep before we have to get up and go to work."

Vay smiled and lifted her hand. Then with a single motion she reached out through the Force and switched out the light.

The nightmare did not return, but Vay could not shake the sensation of someone other than her irritating

ancestor reaching out to her through the Force and the feelings were always the same. Someone was suffering and crying out for help and whoever it was, they were sensitive to the Force.

You're their only hope Vay.

"Their?" Vay said out loud.

"What?" Garm asked as he drove them to work in his landspeeder. Both Garm and Vay were agents of the Imperial Security Bureau, operating out of the sector's Imperial capital building itself. When Vay had first been sent to the sector she had posed as an intern with COMPNOR, the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order. In truth she was an adept of the Dark Side sent to act as a special agent under the moff's personal command. However, when the decision had been taken to remove her from the sector she and Garm had conspired with both the moff and Garm's superior, the director of ISB operations for the sector to transfer her permanently to the ISB and partner her with Garm.

"What do you mean 'What?'" Vay asked.

"You said 'Their'." Garm replied, "What was that about?"

Vay sighed.

"Garm I think that there may be a jedi somewhere in the sector. Maybe more than one." she said.

"Stang Vay." Garm exclaimed, "Are you sure?"

"Not really." Vay said, "But that nightmare last night, I think that it was their way of calling out to me."

Garm frowned.

"So they know you're here? But why would a jedi on the run contact the ISB?" he asked.

Because they're desperate Vay. They need your help.

"I don't know. Maybe they don't realise what I do. But I'm sure that they're out there somewhere."

"In that case we better start trying to figure out exactly where that is." Garm replied as he slowed the landspeeder and lowered the window, ready to present his ID to the automated security checkpoint at the entrance to the capital building's underground parking lot, "Because if there really are jedi on the loose then we could be in for a galaxy of trouble."

Garm and Vay headed straight to his office and turned on his computer. Normally the first thing Garm would do would be to check his messages and determine which deserved his attention the most. However on this occasion he ignored the messaging system entirely.

"What are you doing?" Vay asked.

"Accessing files on military deployments by the Republic during the Clone Wars." Garm replied and Vay frowned.

"What for?"

"Before they tried to stage a coup, the Jedi Order were considered the warrior elite of the Republic." Garm told her.

The Jedi Order never tried to overthrow the Republic and they weren't warriors.

Vay ignored Lara's interruption.

"So you're thinking that the jedi came here during the war?" Vay asked, but Garm shrugged.

"I'm not sure. But it seems like a reasonable place to start." he answered and then he drew his hands back from the keyboard of his computer and frowned.

"What's wrong?" Vay said.

"I just tried running a file search for anything to do with jedi and my terminal just froze." Garm replied and then the communicator built into his desk sounded to indicate an incoming call, "Larcus." he said as he activate the device.

"Garm," ISB Director Corvin Helieos' voice said, "would you mind coming up to my office and explaining why you are so interested in what the jedi got up to during the war?" and then he close the channel from his end.

Garm and Vay stared at one another.

"Oh, I've got a very bad feeling about this." Garm said.

Director Helieos glared at Garm and Vay as they entered his office.

"Don't bother sitting down. Either of you." he said as Vay began to take a seat. Then his gaze went back to Garm, "All information regarding the jedi is restricted." he said, "So why were you poking around in those files?"

Garm and Vay exchanged glances.

"So it's her fault then is it?" the director said, looking back at Vay, "Garm, perhaps you should consider your career rather than whatever favours she grants you in the bedroom."

"Agent Udra believes that there may be one or more jedi at large in the sector sir." Garm replied and the director's jaw dropped. Then he leant forwards across his desk.

"Jedi? Here?" he asked. Then he leant back in his chair again, "No. The jedi are extinct. Their fire has gone out of the galaxy."

"One of them turned up here a year ago." Vay pointed out, without mentioning that the jedi concerned had privately revealed himself to be her father.

"He could have come here hunting for the others already here." Garm said, "If surviving jedi have managed to establish a hideout in the sector then-"

"Then we're in big trouble." the director interrupted.

"Particularly if they make contact with the rebellion." Garm added.

"So where does your information come from Agent Udra?" Director Helieos asked.

"Ah. Err." Vay responded, well aware that aside from Garm, no one in the ISB was aware of her sensitivity to the Force.

"The source is a classified one from when Vay was working directly under the moff sir." Garm said, "Even I don't have access to it."

"Moff Horatian huh?" Director Helieos said.

"Yes sir. Perhaps if you were to check with him then-" Garm began.

"You want me to call the moff about this?" Director Helieos interrupted, "Stang Larcus, you are confident aren't you?"

During Vay's time masquerading as an intern with COMPNOR there had also been numerous rumours that she was the moff's mistress that neither she nor Moff Horatian had done anything to dispel since they offered a fitting explanation for why he kept the young woman close to him. Of course this meant that later on when her relationship with Garm became known it was assumed that she had ended the one with the moff, leaving him for Garm and in turn stories about the moff wanting revenge had also started to circulate.

"Gregor – I mean Moff Horatian will be able to confirm all this sir." Vay agreed.

Director Helieos got to his feet and smiled.

"Very well." he said, "Let's go and see him right now."

The director led Garm and Vay up to the top floor of the capital building where the moff's private office was located. Unlike the usual plain gunmetal grey walls that were characteristic of most Imperial facilities, the walls of the moff's office and the surrounding rooms had been covered in custom wood panels and stepping from the turbolift was almost like entering a totally different building.

"Is he in?" Director Helieos said to the secretary as the trio approached her desk outside the moff's office door.

"He is." she replied, "But Mister Larrs is with him at the moment."

"Can you let him know we need to see him on a matter of the upmost urgency?" the director added and the secretary activated her comlink headset, informing the moff that he had visitors.

"Moff Horatian will see you immediately." the secretary said and the doors to the office swung open as the pair of stormtrooper guards positioned in the office opened them.

Inside Moff Gregor Horatian sat behind his desk and did not bother to stand as his latest visitors entered his office. On the other hand the man sat on the near side of the desk did get to his feet as Director Helieos approached. This was Rodge Larrs, the most senior COMPNOR member in the sector and thus not only the director's immediate superior but second only in authority to the moff himself.

"Good morning Corvin." Rodge said as the two men shook hands.

"Good morning." the director replied before both men sat down, leaving Garm and Vay still standing.

"So what brings you all here this morning then?" Moff Horatian asked, focusing on Garm and Vay.

Director Helieos glanced over his shoulder to make sure that the office door was closed before he answered the moff's question.

"Young Agent Udra believes that there may be one or more jedi loose in the sector." he said and Rodge's eyes widened.

"You can't be serious." he exclaimed and he stared at Vay, "How did you come to this conclusion?" he demanded.

"The source is the same one that I used while an intern." she replied, then looking at the moff she added, "My personal source."

"A personal source?" Rodge responded, "I think you'll find that just isn't-" but then Moff Horatian held up his hand for quiet.

"Are your feelings about this clear?" he asked, looking Vay in her eyes.

"Yes sir." she replied.

"Surely you're not going to trust the gut feeling of a junior-" Rodge began.

"Rodge I've come to trust Miss Udra's 'gut feelings' as you call them." the moff interrupted and then he looked at Garm, "What do you need Agent Larcus?" he asked.

"Access to the restricted files on jedi activity in the sector up to the Clone Wars." Garm replied and the moff nodded.

"Then you'll have it." he replied.

"Moff," Rodge began, "those files are classified for good reason."

"And Agents Larcus and Udra have good reason to be looking at them." Moff Horatian replied, "Now I want to be kept informed of all developments and I'll make sure that whatever resources are required are made available. Understood?" and he looked at everyone present in turn, all of whom indicated their agreement,

“Good. Then I suggest that we don't delay any longer. Agents Larcus and Udra, you are dismissed.”

2.

As it happened rather a lot of jedi had passed through the sector during the Clone Wars. The vast majority of these had been on their way from the Core to take part in the various campaigns in the Outer Rim Territories, but nevertheless Vay had to review their files as well just in case any had survived Order 66 and made their way back to the sector.

"No luck then?" Garm asked when he saw Vay yawn and Vay shook her head.

"I wouldn't know how to tell one member of some of these species from another." she replied.

Come on Vay, you know how to identify them. That piece of technology in front of you is insignificant compared to the power of the Force.

Vay paused as she considered Lara's suggestion.

"Found something?" Garm asked.

"No." Vay answered, "But it occurred to me that I was able to sense the jedi last night then maybe I can do it again."

"Last night you were crying out in your sleep." Garm reminded her, "It didn't seem like a pleasant experience."

Vay smiled.

"You really do care don't you?" she said and then she added, "But I think that its the only way we're going to find them." and she got up from the computer and made her way to the centre of the office, "Lock the door." she said as she sat down on the floor and started to remove her boots.

"What for?" Garm asked with a puzzled look on his face.

"Stang Garm is that all you think about when I remove any item of clothing?" Vay replied, crossing her legs in front of her and then taking a deep breath, "I just don't want to be interrupted. People wouldn't understand what I'm doing." and as Garm locked his office door she closed her eyes and continued inhaling and exhaling deeply, reaching out through the Force.

Pain.

Vay gasped and her eyes opened wide.

"Vay! Are you okay?" Garm said as he rushed to her side.

"I'm fine." she lied, "But you can sit with me if it'd make you feel better." and she closed her eyes again.

Pain.

Terror.

Anger.

Hatred.

The sensations were the same as those Vay had felt during her sleep the previous night, only now that she was focusing on them they were stronger and clearer. But something about them seemed odd to Vay and then it hit her. All of the feelings she was picking up were based on the Dark Side of the Force. Clearly whatever had happened to the jedi she was searching for had altered their perspective of the Force.

No Vay, they won't serve your Emperor. These jedi need your help. You're their only hope.

All of a sudden Lara's words were drowned out by a stronger disturbance in the Force, a vision sent by the missing jedi.

Vay saw three jedi on their knees, all bound and she realised that she was seeing through the eyes of a fourth jedi. Of the three visible to her two were human and one was a duros with the younger human sporting the single long braid that signified a padawan learner. From this Vay guessed that she was seeing through the eyes of a second padawan. At the edge of her vision Vay saw several battle droids apparently standing guard over the kneeling jedi.

"Over they go."

The words were from one of the battle droids and Vay witnessed one of them swing its weapon, striking the duros.

"Master Parr!"

Terror.

Then all of a sudden Vay felt her mind link with another very briefly and this other mind sent her a single clear message.

End it.

Vay's eyes snapped open again and she shrieked.

"Vay! Vay it's alright." Garm said, taking hold of her hands.

"No, no it isn't." Vay replied, "Garm there are four of them. Two knights and two padawans. Or at least they were padawans during the Clone Wars. Who knows how strong they are now."

Garm just stared at her, open-mouthed. The presence of just a single jedi on Estran had resulted in almost

every military and law enforcement agent on the planet being called in to find him. Four would cause would likely trigger a sector-wide mobilisation.

"Do you know where they are?" he asked.

"No." Vay replied as she got up and rushed back to the computer, "But I have three faces and a name, a duros called Parr." and she began to search through the various data files, hunting for anything on a duros jedi called Parr.

As it happened there was only one duros jedi who had been in the sector during the Clone Wars and it was Mull Parr.

"Found him!" Vay exclaimed as she read through his file and her smile widened as she read that he had been deployed along with a second jedi knight, a human called Kamm Telidor and their padawans Luke Fortay and Jonas Mosta, "According to this," Vay explained, "they were sent here in the first year of the war to try and locate the base that the Separatists were using to attack the sector from inside the nebula. Apparently they took a ship into the nebula and that's the last anyone heard from them."

"Until they started calling out for help through the Force." Garm commented and Vay nodded.

"I think that they were captured by the Separatists Garm." she told him, "So they've probably been imprisoned for about twenty years."

"Imprisoned?" Garm repeated, "So we'd be rescuing them then? That doesn't sound like a good career move to me."

"Garm I think that wherever they're being kept it's changed them. What I'm sensing through the Force isn't how I'd expect a jedi to think. I think that they've become something else now."

"Something like what?" Garm asked and Vay hesitated.

"I think they've gone mad." she replied eventually.

"Four insane jedi?" Garm said, "Vay, I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"Four jedi?" Moff Horatian said as he looked at the datapad Garm had presented to him.

"It seems that they were supposed to be hunting a Confederate leader in the nebula." Garm replied and the moff frowned.

"Jedi assassins." he hissed, "Who knows what chaos they could cause if they make it back here?"
Jedi aren't assassins.

The moff looked at Vay and for a moment she considered the possibility that he had heard what Lara had just told her.

"Do you know where they are?" he asked her but Vay shook her head.

"Only that they are somewhere in the nebula." she replied.

"Sir, we can't overlook the possibility that they could be being held at whatever facility the Confederate fleet our forces encountered last year is based at." Garm pointed out, referring to a large force of Separatist warships that had engaged a naval task force that had been deployed to ambush the rebel fleet. Unfortunately the presence of the Separatists had enabled the rebels to escape and now the navy's sector group had been forced to deploy a significant number of warships to prevent an invasion.

"Without an exact location I don't foresee Fleet Admiral Vretan agreeing to send in a large force." Moff Horatian said.

"Actually sir I was planning on a more discrete operation." Garm said, "A large deployment would attract too much attention."

"Tell me what you're thinking." the moff said.

"Just myself, Vay and a unit of troops we can rely on." Garm said.

"Stormtroopers?"

"No sir. A small force of COMPForce assault troops ought to do."

Moff Horatian nodded and then turned to Vay.

"But can you find them?" he asked.

"I may be able to." Vay told him and then she glanced at Garm, "But Garm's got another idea."

"Really?" Moff Horatian asked.

"Yes sir." Garm answered, "We need someone who has experience in locating targets over interstellar distances."

"A bounty hunter?"

"No sir. I was thinking about a member of the Space Rescue Corps. They're trained to find ships in distress and-

"Yes, yes, I'm aware of their purpose." Moff Horatian interrupted, raising his hand, "The problem is that this mission is clearly dangerous and the SRC aren't military. Not to mention that they don't have the same security vetting as Navy personnel."

"With respect sir," Garm responded, "there is one member of the SRC that Vay and I have worked with before and she has proven herself to be reliable under pressure and also trustworthy. She was security vetted after the incidents with the charon."

"Ah yes." the moff said, "So you're hoping to slip in undetected and infiltrate the holding facility then?"
"That's right sir." Garm said, "A larger force could be detected, but one ship with just a small force aboard may be able to slip through the Confederate defences."
"Very well." Moff Horatian said, "But I want a navy group on standby to provide backup. Understood?"
"Yes sir." Garm replied.

"I assume I've got you two to thank for this." Lieutenant Mirri Cordall of the Space Rescue Corps said as she entered the hangar and Vay turned around to face her.

"It's your own fault." she replied.

"How?" Mirri asked.

"You've proven you can be relied on." Vay told her.

"Relied on to do what exactly?" Mirri said, "Despite having been ordered to come here and put myself at your disposal my superiors won't tell me what I'm supposed to be doing."

"Your superiors don't have the security clearance you do." Vay said and then she turned back towards the starship that was docked in the hangar behind her. It bore a resemblance to the lambda-class shuttle that was standard throughout the Empire. However it lacked the large central tail and was not quite as heavily armed, "So have you flown one of these before?" she asked.

"A mu-class? I flew a lambda for a few months during basic training and this isn't much different." Mirri replied.

"Good." Vay replied, "Because you're taking us into the nebula."

"The nebula?" Mirri exclaimed, placing her hands on her hips and glaring at Vay, "Do you have any idea how difficult it is to navigate a nebula?"

"Very." Vay answered, "That's why we asked for someone who's been trained to pilot a vessel along hazardous hyperspace routes and we're also carrying four probe droids."

Mirri frowned.

"Those things give me the creeps." she said. Then her expression lightened and she continued, "So I suppose that Garm's around here somewhere. What will the three of us be looking for exactly?"

"Ah. It's not just the three of us." Vay told her, "We've got some back up as well."

"Oh you're kidding." Mirri said, "You don't mean-" but before she could finish she saw a group of armoured COMPForce assault troopers marching across the hangar, "Oh great. Them." she added.

"I believe you know Major Kramm and Captain Layne." Vay said.

It was then that Garm emerged from the shuttle and smiled.

"Ah good, everyone's here." he said, "So get aboard and once we're in hyperspace I'll brief everyone."

3.

"You're kidding." Mirri said. She was still sat in the pilot's seat but had turned it around to face into the passenger compartment of the shuttle, "Jedi?"

"Finally." Major Kramm said, "A real job."

"Oh and what would you know about Jedi?" Mirri asked.

"Only what I learnt serving with the Republic's forces in the Clone Wars." Kramm said and then he looked at Captain Layne, "Those guys are hard core." he added.

"You sound almost like you admire them." Garm commented.

"I know not to underestimate them." Kramm said and he looked at the people around him. Then, pointing at them he added, "And I'd advise you don't either. Any of you."

"Well there's still the matter of locating our targets." Garm said and he looked at Mirri and Vay, "And for that I'm going to have to ask you two ladies to get to work."

Vay nodded and got up to join Mirri in the shuttle's cockpit. As soon as she sat down and strapped herself into the co-pilot's seat Mirri sealed the door that separated it from the passenger compartment.

"There you go." she told Vay, "I don't know if those COMPForce heavies know about you."

Vay smiled.

"Thanks." she replied. Though Vay's sensitivity to the Force was a closely guarded secret, she had been compelled to reveal her powers by using them in Mirri's presence on a previous mission they had undertaken together and Mirri had been sworn to secrecy about them.

"So how do we go about this?" Mirri asked, "Can you just sniff out the Jedi and guide us through hyperspace to them?"

"No." Vay replied, "Some Force users can steer a ship through hyperspace using their powers, but that's beyond me. What I'm going to try and do is make contact with them again."

"Again? You mean they'll know we're coming?" Mirri exclaimed, "Isn't that a very bad idea? Supposing it's a trap?"

It's not a trap.

"It's not a trap." Vay reassured Mirri, merely repeating what Lara was telling her without querying it, "But I'll have to wait for us to drop out of hyperspace before I try. Hopefully I'll be able to determine what direction they're in and we can just keep going that way until we find them."

"I get it." Mirri said, "We can make a series of micro jumps through the nebula and scan for nearby systems between them." then she frowned, "What if they aren't in a star system though?" she asked, "Searching for a ship in the nebula is going to be impossible."

"Don't worry." Vay replied, remembering the vision of the four Jedi on the back of the open topped transport, "They're on a planet and it's habitable. I've sensed that much."

"If you say so." Mirri said.

When the shuttle dropped out of hyperspace the nebula that bordered the sector filled the forward viewport and a proximity alarm sounded.

"I've got contacts." Mirri said as she checked the shuttle's sensor readouts, "Twenty ships all broadcasting."

"Don't worry." Vay reassured her, "They aren't here to threaten us. Just keep flying like you normally would. You know, fly casual." and then she closed her eyes and reached out through the Force.

"Sure. Fly casual." Mirri muttered, "Easy for you to say while you're in a trance and I'm the one staring at all those missile tubes and turbolasers."

Vay ignored Mirri's comment, continuing to reach out through the Force.

Mull Parr. Kamm Telidor.

She focused on the names of the missing Jedi knights, hoping that they would react to them.

*Good Vay, keep focused on your objective. But be careful of-
Pain.*

Vay gasped and opened her eyes as the sudden wave of suffering struck at her through the Force, drowning out Lara's instruction.

So that's what it takes to shut you up. Vay thought to herself briefly.

"Are you okay?" Mirri asked.

"Yes, why wouldn't I be?" Vay responded.

"Oh because you just dug your fingernails into your own hand." Mirri said, "You're bleeding."

Vay looked down at her hand and saw that the SRC pilot was right, there was blood coming from the palm of her hand. Fortunately the wound was not deep and Vay just rubbed it.

"I'm getting close." she said before closing her eyes again and focusing her mind on her task.

*Mull Parr. Kamm-
End it.*

This was what Vay had been hoping for. This communication was a direct response to her call. All that she needed was get the jedi to keep going long enough for her to determine the direction they could be found in. *I'm here to rescue you.*

There is no rescue. There is only suffering.

That was enough. Though brief the message had been direct enough that Vay was able to sense which way it had come from. Of course over interstellar distances even errors far smaller than the approximate course that Vay could suggest would take them trillions of kilometres off course, but that was why a series of micro jumps would be used. Each jump would get them closer until the system where the jedi were being held came within sensor range. However, just as Vay was about come out of her meditative trance there was another disturbance in the Force, this one more primal than the message from the jedi.

Hungry.

Vay shuddered as she came out of the trance.

"That way." she said, pointing into the nebula at an angle.

"Okay I can do that." Mirri said, "No serious gravity wells for at least four parsecs. I'll jump us in three and then you can try again. Okay?"

Vay nodded, barely aware of Mirri's words as she dwelt on the last thing she had sensed.

Hungry.

"Admiral the ship no longer appears on our scopes."

Admiral Lydia Trell looked across the bridge of her victory-class star destroyer to the comscan operator who had just called out to her.

"Did they head back down the spire?" she asked.

"No admiral, the exit vector was into the nebula. Should we pursue them?"

"No." Admiral Trell replied, "That was probably the ship we were ordered to wait for. Stay alert for a signal from them and have the squadron ready to jump to hyperspace with a two minute warning."

When the shuttle next dropped out of hyperspace the space outside was the colour of the gases that made up the nebula rather than the usual pitch black broken only by the scattered lights of distant stars.

"So where are we?" Vay asked.

"Middle of nowhere." Mirri replied as she checked the ship's sensors. The nebula was a source of all manner of unusual energy emissions as well as being littered with cosmic debris that made anything other than short range scans problematic. But the mu-class shuttle was designed specifically for deep space exploration and so the computers used to process gathered sensor data were the best available for the task additionally as an officer of the Imperial Space Rescue Corps, Mirri was well trained in sensor operation, "Wait, there is something." she added, "Looks like a star system at three four seven by sixteen."

"See what you can find out about it." Vay said, as she unfastened her harness and got out of her seat, "I'm going to go and get Garm." and then she left the cockpit.

"What's wrong?" Garm asked when he looked up and saw Vay approaching.

"Nothing." Vay replied, "But I think you ought to come and take a look at this. The lieutenant has found something."

Garm got up and beckoned both Major Kramm and Captain Layne to follow him as they all made their way to the cockpit. The small compartment was cramped with five people inside it at once but they were just about able to gather around Mirri while she showed them what she had discovered so far.

"It's a star system all right." she said, "With a yellow sun and at least seven planets. Now two of them have too much mass to be rocky worlds, gas giants most likely."

"Could any of them have habitable moons?" Garm asked.

Vay considered the vision in which she had seen the jedi and she could recollect no indication that it was showing her events that had taken place on a moon orbiting a gas giant.

"I didn't see any signs of a gas giant nearby." she said. Then remembering that the two COMPFforce officers knew nothing of her abilities or the visions that were guiding them she added, "The intelligence we have indicates a planet."

"Well that leaves the other five." Mirri said.

"And we have four probe droids." Captain Layne commented.

"You're thinking pick the most likely four worlds to launch them at and even if they all come up blank we still know that the fifth world is our target?" Major Kramm asked and his subordinate nodded.

"Why should we take risks when we can have the droids do it?" Layne said.

"Because I'd rather not waste a valuable resource. We still can't confirm that this is even the right system."

Garm replied before looking at Mirri, "Lieutenant, take us in closer. Bring us out of hyperspace on the edge of the system and start scanning each planet in turn. Vay, I want you to look over her findings and see if

anything tallies with your vis-err, your intelligence.”

Though the star system was only a short distance away in interstellar terms, the shuttle's transit time was made longer by the unfavourable conditions inside the nebula that forced Mirri to move the ship more slowly through hyperspace just in case there were any large objects casting mass shadows that she had not detected. But when the shuttle finally emerged back into realspace Mirri and Vay were rewarded with the sight of the bright yellow star they had been expecting and sensor readouts that confirmed the presence of seven planets.

“Okay here goes.” Mirri said, “Tell me if any of these match what you-” and then she suddenly stopped midway through her sentence.

“What’s wrong?” Vay asked.

“Vay take a look at this.” Mirri replied, “It’s an optical image that the sensors have picked up of the third planet. It’s about seven hours old.”

Vay looked at the display in front of her as Mirri sent her the image.

“Is that what I think it is?” Vay asked when she saw what was in orbit around the planet on its night side, “That’s no moon.”

“No.” Mirri added, “It’s a space station.”

An alarm sounded to warn of a ship dropping out of hyperspace on the far edge of the system.

“Is that an Imperial ship?” one of the battle droids stationed at the comscan positions asked when it saw the sudden energy spike.

“How should I know?” another one asked, “I’ve never seen an Imperial ship.”

“Well somebody needs to tell the captain.” the first droid replied.

“Roger that.” the second said.

“Roger roger.” a third added before activating the intercom, “Captain we have visitors.”

Garm looked at the image of the space station closely as it was projected into the middle of the main passenger compartment as a hologram.

“That looks like a Trade Federation design.” he said, “Look, there are the docking ports for the core segments of Lucrehulk-class ships.

“I thought we were looking for a planet.” Kramm commented.

“We are.” Vay replied, “But I think that station is orbiting the planet we’re looking for.

“Why aren’t there any Confederate ships docked here?” Layne asked, “If this is the Separatist holdout base we’ve been looking for then surely all of the ships that got away from our fleet ought to be here.”

“The fleet could be berthed elsewhere.” Mirri pointed out, “The Separatists may have been operating from more than one location.”

“But it does suggest that there was a Separatist presence on this planet during the war.” Garm replied.

“We’ve already managed to detect some structures on the surface.” Vay told him and Garm nodded.

“Then we send in the probe droids.” he said, “One to monitor that space station and another two to scout the surface. The fourth one we’ll keep in reserve for now. Lieutenant, I want you to take us in closer. But do it quietly. That station could be swarming with vulture droids.”

4.

"Report." the neimoidian pirate Nen Tok said as he entered the bridge of his vessel. Though it was crewed completely by battle droids it was in fact a former Republic vessel, a pelta-class frigate that had been captured during the Clone Wars. Since turning pirate after the war he had been able to capture several transport ships as well, some of which now sat outside his frigate while he tried to find someone willing to pay for them but had never even attempted to seize control of a more powerful warship.

"Sir a small ship entered the system not long ago." the most senior battle droid present replied.

"Identification?" Nen asked.

"It could be an Imperial code sir." another battle droid answered.

"Roger. Roger." others said in agreement.

"And where is it now?" Nen asked, glaring at the sensor display but seeing no sign of a contact.

"That's just it sir." the first battle droid told him, "It's vanished. They seem to be running silent and with all the interference from-"

"I don't care about the nebula's emissions!" Nen snapped, "Find that ship. It could be a navy patrol."

The four pods containing Arakyd Viper probe droids were mounted on an external rack that had been fixed underneath the hull of the mu-class shuttle. Under instruction from the control unit given to Garm three of the pods triggered their ion drives just as the retaining clamps holding them in place were released and all three shot forwards, heading towards the planet orbited by the space station. Their engines remained active just long enough to accelerate them to a suitable approach velocity before cutting out again to minimise the risk of detection. The pods themselves were as stealthy as it was possible to make them, but the energy wake of an active ion drive would be a dead giveaway so for most of their journey they just coasted.

All three pods fired low energy manoeuvring thrusters to take them into orbit around the planet, conducting brief passive scans of the orbiting space station and the planet below as they passed them by. Then, once they were in eclipse from the space station they became fully active once more. Two of the pods fired their thrusters again, pushing them down into the atmosphere where the heat trail of their entry was hidden from the space station's sensors by the mass of the planet between them. Meanwhile the final pod continued in its orbit around the planet, coming back around towards the space station. However, before the space station became visible again the pod carried out a rapid deceleration and burst open, ejecting the spider-like droid it contained. The pod itself then dived down into the atmosphere, its angle of entry calculated to burn it up and leave no evidence of its presence while the droid continued to loop around the planet towards its target.

There were no sensor or communication emissions coming from the space station as the probe droid approached and the only heat being emitted appeared to be the residual energy that the station had absorbed from the system's sun while exposed to it on the day side of the planet and now being radiated back out into space. A visual scan of the station indicated several small craft docked in a hangar that had been left open to space for an undisclosed amount of time. In addition there were several racks of vulture droid starfighters located externally. There were also several docking ports for larger vessels to attach themselves to the station, but none of these were occupied. In fact, one of them appeared to have been severed at some point in the past. But aside from this minor damage the space station appeared to be fully intact, if disabled and relying solely on its own momentum to remain in orbit around the planet below. Satisfied that the station's defences were inactive the probe droid steered towards the damaged docking port, seeing this as the most likely spot to be able to gain access to the interior.

As expected the interior hatch of the docking port was unsealed and from here the probe droid slipped through into the space station. Although the near total darkness inside the space station did not affect the ability of the droid to see, it still activated a built in searchlight so that the images it was transmitting back to the shuttle would not be blank. These images showed a space station that had long been abandoned. Most of its crew had been droids however and these were still present, frozen at their posts at the moment they were shut down en masse. Pushing deeper into the space station the probe droid came across something more disturbing though. It was natural enough for a space station operated by the Trade Federation to have had a neimoidian command crew. But was not normal was for them to have still been on board when its systems had been deactivated. The bodies of several neimoidians were clustered together in what had once been a crew lounge, all of them looking as if they were trying to rip a ventilation grill from the wall.

The droid moved on, heading for the command and control sections of the station. Here it found more of the same, droids frozen at their posts and a scattering of long dead corpses. Most of the bodies were neimoidian, but there were a handful from other species as well. Some were in environment suits with dials indicating that the oxygen tanks were depleted while the only sign of violence was a single corpse that had a single blaster wound to its head. A pistol lay beside the body and the location of the wound suggested that it

had been self inflicted.

"I've seen this before." Mirri said as she and the others aboard the shuttle watched the footage being beamed back from the probe droid.

"When?" Captain Layne asked.

"I'm in the SRC." Mirri replied with a frown and she waved at the screen, "This is what you get when a ship suffers life support failure. I seen ships where crews have torn one another apart to try and get to the last space suit."

"So that guy who shot himself probably thought the idea of suffocating was less appealing than putting a blaster bolt through his own skull." Garm commented.

"Who cares?" Major Kramm asked, "This place is dead. We're wasting our time."

He's right Vay. You're here to save the jedi, not investigate the deaths of people who are beyond saving.

"He's still being insensitive." Vay muttered in reply to Lara.

I'm surprised you noticed. Maybe the others who are saying that I am getting through to you are right.

Yippee, I get to stay a bit longer.

"What was that?" Garm asked, looking at Vay with the assumption that she had been addressing the others in the shuttle.

"I was just considering how the major hides common sense behind a veneer of gamorrean headedness." Vay replied, "There is nothing here for us."

Garm nodded.

"I agree." he said, "Let's see whether the other droids have come up with anything."

According to both the scans taken from space there was a single energy source on the surface of the planet and the two probe droid pods had steered towards this. Landing in the immediate area of the energy source risked alerting anyone close by to the droids' arrival so each pod instead veered off in different directions as they flew through the atmosphere and they each landed about twenty kilometres away from the energy source. Shortly after the impact of the pods the probe droids themselves rose up out of the craters, established their positions and then headed towards the energy source.

"There were two of them sir." the battle droid reported, "They came in on ballistic courses but then suddenly changed direction less than a minute before impact."

"Imperial probe droids." Nen hissed, "You must have detected their pods exiting hyperspace. Find them. Find them before they find us and destroy them."

"Roger roger."

The first probe droid advanced along a river towards the mysterious energy source. There was a great deal of surface water on this planet in the form of wide slow moving rivers and shallow pools scattered throughout the dense jungle. This was of no hindrance to the droid however, its repulsorlifts kept it clear of the boggy ground and the river provided a clear route through the undergrowth that allowed it to move at speed.

The droid had closed to within a kilometre of the energy source when it came to a sudden halt. Ahead of it, partially concealed by the vegetation along the side of the river there was a pipe running down into the water. The droid focused its sensors on this, running visual and infrared scans to try and identify the nature of the pipe. Then it used a narrow focused laser microphone to conduct an audio scan and from inside the pipe the droid detected the noise of machinery and flowing liquid. Given that the infrared scans detected no temperature differential between the pipe and the river it was logical to assume that the pipe was an inlet, with water being pumped out of the river.

The probe droid advanced towards the pipe, moving slowly to avoid being surprised by any security measures that may have been left in place. Sure enough as the droid neared the pipe it detected movement along the shore and the droid reacted instantly.

A light blaster cannon emerged as the droid rotated to bring it to bear on the riverbank and without waiting for a target to show itself the droid opened fire, sending a volley of blaster bolts into the undergrowth. Amongst the small explosions as the high energy blasts tore through bushes and trees alike there was an electronic squealing sound as a hidden battle droid was struck. In response the remaining droids opened fire, their carbines set to automatic so they could spray as many shots in the general direction of the probe droid as possible. But the probe droid had not just remained in place as it fired, instead continuing to move along the river and the blaster fire coming out of the jungle gave it the opportunity to not only count the number of assailants it faced but also determine their locations. Though blasters possessed both superior hitting power and ammunition capacity when compared to slug throwers the bright glowing plasma trails invariably gave away the firer's position each time the trigger was pulled.

The probe droid's subsequent shots were less random than the first, with short bursts centred around the calculated position of each battle droid in turn and when the sequence was completed there was no further

return fire. However, the droid's audio sensors detected a rhythmic sound that had not been present earlier and as the machine turned back towards the water pipe its logic systems determined that the battle droids along the shore had been nothing but a distraction. Right as a destroyer droid came walking up to where the pipe vanished into the vegetation. The probe droid took aim and fired, but in the time it took to acquire the target the destroyer droid had raised its shield and the blaster bolts just bounced off. In response the destroyer levelled its own arm mounted blaster cannons and opened fire. Caught out in the open the probe droid was an easy target and the first few impacts blew off a pair of the spindly legs that hung beneath its body. Aware that it was at a tactical disadvantage and calculating the odds of a successful withdrawal as low the probe droid took the only action remaining to it.

"What happened?" Captain Layne asked as the feed went blank.

"The droid self destructed." Garm replied, "Standard procedure in the face of defeat to prevent an enemy recovering any key components. Particularly to do with navigation."

"That's right." Vay added, "No point having an intelligence gathering droid that only needs to get hit by a blaster to provide your enemy with a whole load of valuable military intelligence."

"We still got some useful data from that droid though." Garm pointed out, "We now know that there are some hold outs from the Clone Wars still active on this planet. I just wish that we knew more about how many of them there are. That could be their only destroyer droid, or they could have hundreds of them."

"Well we've still got the other droid." Mirri added, "Maybe that one will be able to get us a closer look at what's going on here."

Approaching the energy source from the opposite direction the second probe droid was forced to make its way through denser wooded terrain. Here the mix of dense undergrowth and low hanging vines and branches denied the machine the opportunity to make the most of its repulsorlift propulsion and the going was slow. The vegetation began to become more patchy however as more of the ground gave way to swamp that the probe droid could effortlessly float above. In turn the swamp gave way to an area of ground that had been deliberately cleared of vegetation and concealed within the remaining vegetation the droid began to survey what lay beyond.

There were several structures scattered around the large cleared zone, all of which had acquired a greenish tinge to their naturally grey colour thanks to years of neglect. But what was of more interest to the probe droid's programming was the assortment of starships lined up in the open. Most of them were transport ships and a few showed signs of damage from blaster fire. At the far end of the rows of transports was a single larger vessel, a three hundred and twenty metre long pelta-class frigate that was still painted in its original Republic Navy colour scheme and in contrast to the largely unarmed freighters this ship mounted two large double barrelled turbolasers in addition to the three smaller defensive turrets.

"I think I know that ship." Garm said when he saw the frigate and he tapped the touch sensitive display screen to order the probe droid to conduct a more thorough scan of it.

"What is it?" Vay asked.

"There have been reports of a pelta-class vessel in Republic colours operating as a pirate ship for years." Garm replied, "Its on watch lists for just about every planetary and Imperial law enforcement body for the sector. No one's been able to figure out where its home port was until now."

"So you think that this is the pirates' base?" Mirri asked and Garm nodded.

"Those other ships are probably prizes that they haven't been able to sell on yet." Kramm added.

"What's more," Garm went on, "is that survivors of the pirate attacks have said that the boarding parties are made up of old bee-one battle droids."

"The Trade Federation's standard infantry soldier." Layne said, "No match for us."

"Not one on one no." Garm said, "But there could be hundreds of them in that ship and all we've got right now is a single squad. Hand picked or not, we're still massively out gunned here."

"So what's our next move?" Vay asked and Garm paused to think.

"We need more information." he replied, "But I don't trust that droid to collect it for us." then he looked at Major Kramm, "Major, prepare your men for a reconnaissance mission."

"Yes sir." Kramm replied with a grin.

5.

The white and pale grey armoured uniforms of the COMPForce troopers stood out against the vegetation, but without any advanced warning of the type of world they would be coming to there had been no opportunity to apply any camouflage patterns to them. However, what they lacked in concealability the troopers made up for their field craft and the small force was able to advance towards the suspected pirate base at a fairly rapid pace.

Pain.

Vay shuddered as she felt another disturbance in the Force and then she frowned briefly as she realised that the sensation was not coming from the direction of the base.~

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

Vay remember why you're here. It's not to hunt pirates.

"I think we're going the wrong way." Vay replied.

"The base is straight ahead missy." Kramm said, his voice altered somewhat by the enclosed helmet he wore.

"Yes I know that." Vay said, "But I think that the jedi are in that direction." and she pointed through the jungle.

"Why?" Captain Layne asked.

"We still need to know what the pirates have got on that frigate." Garm said, "If we go off that way just hunting the jedi then we'd be leaving ourselves vulnerable to walking into a trap."

"Okay." Vay said, "But I've got a bad feeling about this Garm."

The COMPForce troopers continued to lead the way towards the base when all of a sudden the troopers right at the front of the group came to a halt and raised a fist to indicate that he had seen something.

"Why are we stopping?" Kramm asked, using his helmet's built in comlink to signal the trooper who had just called a halt to their advance.

"Movement." the trooper answered, "Looks like just a small force though."

"Any destroyers?" Kramm asked.

"No sir. Just regular battle droids."

"This terrain is probably too dense for destroyers." Garm pointed out.

"Okay stand to and take cover men." Major Kramm ordered, "We'll see if these droids just go past us, but if they don't we need to take them out as quickly as we can." then he looked at Garm, Mirri and Vay, "You lot should stay back. My men can handle this." he told them and Garm nodded.

"Very well major. But don't forget that we've got that viper droid for support if you need it." he said before looking around for somewhere to hide.

Unfortunately while the swampy ground did nothing to affect the comfort of the COMPForce troopers in their sealed armour it was not so pleasant for those who needed to find somewhere relatively dry to crouch down.

"What are you doing?" Mirri said when she spotted Vay squat down at the base of a tree that was growing out of the swamp, the water easily coming over the top of her boots.

"She still wears that body glove under her uniform." Garm responded as he found a patch of dry ground behind another tree that was large enough for both him and Mirri to use to conceal themselves while still remaining dry.

"It's better than a diving suit." Vay added with a smile.

"Quiet." Kramm hissed, "The droids are almost here."

The battle droids marched in a double column with the individual machines marked as unit leaders at the heads of the columns. Most carried the blaster carbine that was standard for the B1 infantry model but at the rear of each column were two carrying heavier repeating blasters. Being droids they favoured neither hand so the droids in each column held their weapons ready to respond to an attack from their own side.

"Keep it up." one of the squad leader droids instructed the others.

"It's this swamp." another responded, "It's straining my servos."

"Roger roger."

"Roger roger."

"And keep quiet." the squad leader responded as more of the droids agreed with the first, "The boss told us to come out here so this is where we come to."

Meanwhile the COMPForce troopers were keeping a careful watch on the unsuspecting droids as they continued to march past their position apparently unaware of their presence. As they marched past his position one of the troopers adjusted his stance, edging around the tree he was using for cover so that he could keep the enemy droids in sight at all times. But as he placed his foot on what looked to be a clump of solid dirt it unexpectedly gave way and the trooper collapsed, slamming into the tree and producing a

clattering noise as he fell face first into the swamp.

"It's a trap!" one of the droids snapped as the entire column turned to face the COMPForce position and opened fire.

"Return fire!" Major Kramm yelled, "Take out those repeaters!"

"Sir, one of our patrols has encountered the enemy." one of Nen Tok's droids told him, looking around from the comscan console.

"Where?" the neimoidian demanded.

"Sector seven sir." the droid replied and Nen looked at a larger display that showed the surrounding area.

"Sector seven." he muttered to himself softly and then he smiled.

"That area's too dense for destroyer droids sir." another battle droid pointed out.

"I know that." Nen said, "Order all bee-one and two droid patrols to converge on that location. I want them driven to here." and he pointed to another spot on the map a few hundred metres away from the perimeter of the base.

"But sir, that's where-" a droid began.

"I know what's there!" Nen snapped, "But our uninvited guests won't."

Despite picking off the droids armed with repeating blasters first the remaining battle droids continued to put up a fight and advanced towards the Imperial position. Worse was to come however when there was more blaster fire from deeper in the swamp, this fired at a much faster rate than the B1's were managing and Garm turned to see a squad of heavier B2 super battle droids picking its way through the swamp towards them, their built in repeating blasters firing one volley after another.

"Fall back!" Garm yelled, realising that they were about to become surrounded.

"Behind us!" Mirri snapped as she turned to see a third group of battle droids that had already been able to circle around behind them but had yet to attack.

"That way." Kramm ordered, extending his arm in the only direction now left open to them and the group began to withdraw, the COMPForce troopers laying down covering fire. At the same time Garm took a shot that blasted a droid from its feet and sent it plunging into the murky water of the swamp.

Pain.

Fear.

Vay felt another disturbance through the force as she ran through the swamp and for a moment she thought that it came from one of the COMPForce troopers ahead of her. But then she realised that the troopers were remaining quiet calm as they withdrew and the sensation was coming from further ahead. Then it struck her what likely lay in the direction they were now heading in.

The missing jedi.

"Garm!" Vay called out, turning towards him.

"Just keep going." he replied.

"But Garm, the droids are driving us towards the jedi."

"What?" Mirri exclaimed, "Why would they want us to find them?"

"Perhaps so whatever defences are in place to guard the jedi can be used to deal with us." Captain Layne suggested.

"Okay captain," Kramm said, "take a section of men and go on ahead. Try to find out what's waiting for us."

"Yes sir." Layne replied and he waved to a group of troopers for them to follow him before they rushed ahead, ignoring the droids behind and either side of them.

As the group continued to fall back away from the droids the amount of blaster fire began to slacken off, though this was not because of any reduction in the numbers of droids around them. In fact according to the reports of the COMPForce troopers the number of droids was in fact increasing.

"Why aren't they attacking?" Vay said as she looked through her macrobinoculars, confirming for herself just how badly they were outnumbered.

"Perhaps whatever's protecting the prison is hazardous to them as well." Garm suggested.

"Like a minefield?" Kramm asked and he activated his helmet's comlink, "Captain Layne, report."

"It looks like we're coming up on the edge of the swamp now sir. There appears to be a clearing up ahead."

"Must be the detention facility. Advance with caution captain, there may be mines." Kramm warned.

"Copy that sir, I've sent Miclos on ahead. He should be-" but before Layne could finish his sentence he was interrupted by a sudden scream that flooded the channel, "Miclos! Miclos report." Layne ordered but there was no response.

"Captain hold your position." Kramm ordered, "We'll be with you soon."

"What's wrong?" Mirri asked, without activating her comlink she had no idea of what had happened.

"Captain Layne's scout is down." Kramm told her, "We need to reinforce him before he can risk advancing further."

"I didn't hear a mine." Vay said, "Something else must have killed him."

"That's what worries me." Garm replied.

The soldier isn't dead yet. He'll live for a long time yet. Unless you do something about it that is.

"Well if we don't move then those battle droids are bound to kill us." Mirri said, "Perhaps we should keep moving."

"Agreed." Kramm added.

Still firing short bursts of blaster fire towards the battle droids, the small Imperial party pressed onwards until they met up with Captain Layne and the men he had taken on ahead.

"Captain." Garm said, "Can you tell us any more?"

"Afraid not Agent Larcus." Layne answered, "There's no sign of any movement, we've heard no weapons fire and there has been no attempt to dislodge us from this position."

"Look. The battle droids." Mirri said suddenly, pointing back towards the battle droids that had been pursuing them. Now though not only had the blaster fire from them ceased but they had halted their advance. Or at least the front rank had. Behind them more droids could be seen approaching to reinforce them.

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Garm said as he looked at the droids, not even bothering to try and count them. Beside him Kramm raised his rifle and fired two short burst that blasted a handful of the droids apart but all that happened was four more stepped forwards to take their place.

"We'll never fight our way out through that lot." he said.

Garm looked around in the direction that they had been travelling, the direction that Trooper Miclos had been sent.

"I think that they're afraid of whatever's that way." Garm said.

"Droids don't feel fear." Kramm pointed out.

"No but they have self preservation programming." Garm replied, "I think that whatever is up ahead of us poses too great a danger to them for them to risk following us without a direct order from their controller."

"So what do you suggest?" Mirri asked.

The answer lies ahead of you Vay.

"We keep going." Vay said and Mirri frowned.

"Oh I just knew you were going to say that." she said.

"Major, we're advancing." Garm said, "Cautiously."

Obediently the COMPForce troopers began to move towards the clearing beyond the swamp, staying alert for any signs of an ambush. As they reached the edge of the clearing identified by Captain Layne's party the lead trooper stopped and crouched down.

"It's Miclos'." he said as he pulled a standard issue Blastech E-11 blaster rifle from a pool of muddy water.

"Everybody watch out." Kramm ordered, "Whatever happened to Miclos it happened here."

Pain.

Fear.

Anger.

Vay spun around, staring towards the centre of the muddy clearing where the ground became raised above the level at the tree line.

Hunger.

"Over there." she said, "Whatever is going on, it's centred over there." and she began to walk towards the raised ground.

"Looks like we're going that way." Garm said as he followed her.

"Move." Major Kramm ordered and the COMPForce troopers began to advance as well.

All of a sudden a tentacle rose up out of the mud at the feet of one of the troopers and coiled around his leg. Then he screamed in panic as he was lifted up into the air and pulled towards the centre of the clearing.

Right above the raised ground the tentacle released him just as something resembling a massive beak rose up from a hidden crater and swallowed him whole before vanishing back into the ground.

"Sarlacc!" Garm yelled and he looked around, trying to determine where more tentacles could be hiding.

Sarlaccs were massive underground dwelling predators as much plant as animal. Living for thousands of years they could become so massive that they became immobile, dragging prey into their mouths with the numerous tentacles they extended out into the surrounding ground. What looked like a beak was in fact a part of the massive creatures tongue that had evolved to make swallowing prey easier. But worse than being swallowed by one of these creatures was what was said to happen afterwards. According to the few studies carried out a sarlacc would keep its victims alive, entombing them in one of its stomachs and providing them with the nutrients they needed to remain alive while they were slowly digested over the course of a thousand years.

"That's what the Separatists did." Vay said, "They fed the jedi to a sarlacc."

And you need to save them Vay.

"There's no getting them out." Vay muttered.

That's not what I mean Vay. You have to end their suffering.

"We don't have the weapons to kill a sarlacc." Vay said.

“And there's an army of battle droids that way.” Mirri added, pointing back the way they had come.
“Time to call for help.” Garm said and he took out his comlink and activated it. But rather than lift it to his mouth to speak he just sent a preset data burst back to their shuttle. In turn this caused the shuttle's inboard systems to activate the subspace transmitter and a second data burst was sent.

“Admiral we have the signal.” Admiral Trell's comscan operator called out.

“Do you have a fix?” the admiral asked in response.

“Yes ma'am. Six parsecs inside the nebula.”

Admiral Trell turned to look out of the forward viewport of the bridge.

“Forward the co-ordinates to the rest of the squadron.” she ordered, “All craft are to execute the jump to hyperspace now.” and in response to her order twenty warships jumped into hyperspace, all following the signal sent by Garm.

6.

Falling back to the treeline the remaining members of the Imperial party waited to see what would happen next. Facing them was an army of battle droids that was still growing in number while behind them the sarlacc waited quietly, unable to sense any prey.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Captain Layne said publicly rather than keeping it on the COMPForce private channel.

"I agree." Major Kramm replied, "Those droids must realise that we're here."

Then as if in response to the major's words the front rank of battle droids stepped forwards in unison, closing in on three sides.

"Here they come." Garm said and he fired a shot from his blaster pistol at the droids defiantly.

"How many do you think there are?" Mirri asked as she drew her own sidearm.

"Too many." Kramm replied before the first shots from the droids flew over his head.

Garm looked in the direction of the sarlacc and then back at the droids.

"We need to get around that sarlacc." he said.

"Are you insane?" Layne exclaimed.

"If we can get past it then we're in the clear." Garm said, "The droids will have to follow and the sarlacc will pick some of them off. Even if it does eventually spit them out again."

"And just how do you suggest we get past that thing?" Kramm asked.

"Move slowly and together." Garm said, "Create as little ground disturbance as possible in one place.

Hopefully the sarlacc won't be able to pick us out as individuals."

"Can I just go on record as hating this plan?" Mirri asked.

"Fine." Vay replied, "Stay here and wait for them." and she pointed to the battle droids.

"Okay men." Major Kramm said sternly, "You all heard the agent's plan. We move slowly and together.

Anyone goes running off and they won't need to worry about what I'll do to them. Understood?"

"Yes sir!" the troopers replied in unison.

Carefully the group began to retreat away from the edge of the clearing. Alternatively looking between the trees for droids and at the ground for the tell tale signs of the sarlacc's tentacles. There was a 'squelch' from near Garm's feet and he froze, looking down just in time to see the ground shift as a tentacle moved close by his foot. Breathing a sigh of relief he aimed his blaster downwards, hoping that if the tentacle attempted to ensnare him then he would be able to prevent it. Then he gently lifted his foot off the ground and stepped over the tentacle.

Just as the group was passing by the raised ground where the mouth of the sarlacc was hidden the first of the battle droids appeared.

"Look out!" a trooper yelled, firing at the droids. But his use of his blaster produced a flash of light bright enough that the droids flanking the group were able to get a fix on his position and a burst of blaster fire came in from the side to take him off his feet.

"Oh kriff!" Vay exclaimed before the body of the trooper could hit the ground, knowing exactly what would happen when it did. The moment the corpse slammed into the ground the sarlacc realised that there was prey nearby and its tentacles suddenly rose up out of the mud, flailing around as they searched for more.

"Everyone down!" Garm yelled as he ducked the tentacle he had just stepped over, firing a single shot into it. The attack had the desired effect, causing the tentacle to retreat, but there were still plenty more.

A high pitched scream attracted Garm's attention and as he looked round he saw Mirri being pulled off her feet, a tentacle wrapped tightly around her legs and pinning them together.

"Help me!" she yelled as she was pulled back towards the pit where the sarlacc waited. Captain Layne turned and fired at the tentacle, putting two shots into it. But rather than making the sarlacc release Mirri, it lifted her off the ground and pulled her back through the air before brining her back down nearer to its maw.

Screaming again, Mirri dug her hands into the mud in a vain attempt to gain some leverage against the sarlacc. However on this occasion luck was with her and as she delved into the soft mud she felt something solid that she grabbed hold of and as the sarlacc tried to pull her into its mouth her hands were revealed to be holding onto a tree root that had grown close to the sarlacc.

Vay, you can save her.

Vay looked around at the flailing tentacles and at Mirri as she clung on to the root for her life.

"Garm I can save her." Vay said, "I think I can save us all."

"Are you sure?" Garm asked in response.

"What the kriff are you talking about man?" Kramm snapped as he fired first at a nearby tentacle and then at a pair of battle droids that had just stepped into the clearing, "If the girl has an idea then let's hear it."

"Okay Vay, do it." Garm said and he looked at Major Kramm, "Major, what you and your men are about see is

highly classified and is not be discussed with anyone. That includes your superiors do you understand?" "What are you talking about?" Kramm replied. But before Garm could explain further Vay produced a cylindrical object about thirty centimetres in length from a belt pouch and then there was a 'snap-hiss' as she ignited the bright red blade of her lightsaber. "Holy kriff!" Layne exclaimed as Vay charged towards Mirri, casually swatting any tentacles that came near her. Each swing of her lightsaber sliced straight through a tentacle, leaving only a charred stump that retreated back towards the sarlacc's mouth. Sliding to a halt beside Mirri, Vay swung her lightsaber downwards and sliced straight through the tentacle pulling her towards the sarlacc. "Get back!" Vay snapped, pulling Mirri further away from the sarlacc as yet another tentacles took a swipe at them both. Then she turned just in time to deflect a blaster bolt that came from the direction of the battle droids and sent it right back at them.

The twelve victory-class star destroyers and eight Corellian corvettes dropped out of hyperspace in unison and watching from the bridge Admiral Trell saw the space station orbiting their target world and recognised its design as being from the Trade Federation.

"Lock all weapons." she ordered, "Fire turbolasers."

"Admiral that station does not appear to be operational." the comscan operator replied.

"And I intend to ensure that it stays that way specialist." she said, "Gunnery, open fire."

There were flashes of green light from the prow of the admiral's star destroyer, joined moments later by more from the other Imperial warships under her command. All were directed at the derelict space station and against a totally unshielded target the effect was dramatic. The space station was ripped open, with what remained of its reactor fuel erupting in a massive ball of fire that bathed the planet below in light.

"Excellent." Admiral Trell said, "Now can someone please tell me where Agent Larcus is?"

"Sir we're under attack!" the droid exclaimed as it watched the destruction of the orbiting space station.

"What? By who?" Nen demanded.

"Star destroyers sir." the droid replied, "Victory-class. Twelve of them."

"Star destroyers!" Nen snapped, "Quick! Get us out of here."

"But sir, we still have several hundred battle droids out-"

"I don't care about them! Just get us off the ground and around the other side of the planet. Maybe we can use it as a shield against those star destroyers."

There was a distant rumbling sound and Garm looked up at the sky.

"That doesn't sound like thunder." he said.

"That's because it isn't." Mirri replied, "That's a starship taking off." and at that moment the pelta-class frigate rose up into the sky, becoming visible over the trees before turning and flying off in the other direction.

However, despite the unexpected departure of their leader and his ship the battle droids continued to execute their last instruction, advancing into the clearing in an attempt to force the Imperial troops into the waiting sarlacc.

Unfortunately for that plan Vay's lightsaber was proving to be quite effective at keeping the tentacles at bay and the Imperial party had been able to put the sarlacc between them and the droids. That left the droids with only one option, to overrun the Imperial troops and physically throw any survivors into the sarlacc.

"Surround them!" a droid with officer markings ordered, waving to either side of the Imperial party and two groups of armoured super battle droids began to spread out in each direction, joining up with the flanking units of droids. But there was a sudden flash of green light from the sky and one squad of the droids was consumed in fire.

"Enemy fighters! Take cover!" the droid officer snapped as a pair of TIE fighters swooped down low over the clearing, blasting a channel through the droid formation.

Behind the fighters came a sentinel-class landing craft, its wings folding up alongside its tail as it descended and the access ramp lowered. However, rather than a stormtrooper marine platoon rushing down to reinforce the remaining COMPFORCE troopers just a single navy crewman stood at the top of the ramp.

"Come on!" he yelled, waving at Garm's group, "The admiral's expecting you."

"You heard the man." Garm said before he got up and ran up the ramp.

Vay followed him, remembering to shut off her lightsaber and return it to its pouch before the crewman could get a good look at it. When the entire party was aboard the crewman retracted the ramp and as the hatch was closing Captain Layne approached Vay.

"I always figured there was something odd about you." he said to her softly.

"So there won't be any more bad dreams then?" Garm then asked Vay.

"What triggered them anyway?"

"I'm not sure." Vay said, "But my guess would be that as the sarlacc absorbed the four jedi it gained control over some of their powers and it couldn't help transmitting them to me."

Then Mirri turned to Garm.

"Agent Larcus." she said out loud, "May I ask a favour?"

"Go ahead." he replied.

"The next time you've got a problem with aliens from another dimension or jedi hiding in the stomachs of sarlacc pits, go ask someone else for help." and Garm grinned.

"I make no promises." he said and she sighed.

"I had a feeling you'd say that." she said.

Aboard Admiral Trell's flagship Garm, Mirri and Vay were shown straight to the bridge where the admiral herself was waiting for them.

"I'm afraid that the enemy frigate escaped into hyperspace before we could intercept it." she said.

"No matter." Garm replied, "It'll surface again eventually. Besides, we didn't come here to hunt pirates admiral."

"Ah yes, your secret mission." Admiral Trell said, folding her arms, "I take it that it is completed and we can be going?"

You can still save them Vay. If you don't then they'll keep calling out to you. So will that creature.

"Not quite admiral." Vay said, "There's just one more thing that needs doing."

"There is?" Mirri said, "What?"

Vay smiled.

"I need a missile strike on the location your shuttle picked us up from." she said.

"A missile strike?" Admiral Trell repeated.

"Do you have a problem with that order?" Vay asked.

"Coming from a junior agent if the ISB, yes." Admiral Trell replied, "You may want to remember that you have no authority on my ship."

"Well on behalf of the SRC I'm all in agreement with the request." Mirri said, "Especially after almost being eaten by that thing."

"You don't have any authority here either lieutenant." the admiral said.

Garm looked at Vay.

"Admiral, we can only be certain that our mission has been a success if the site is destroyed." he said.

"Oh very well." Admiral Trell said and she turned towards the weapons control stations, "Gunnery, I want a single concussion missile set for a ground burst and fired at the location where the surface team was picked up."

Minutes later Garm stood beside Vay as she looked out of the bridge viewports and smiled as she saw the flash of the missile detonation.

That was the only way to free them. They're one with the Force now. Well done Vay.