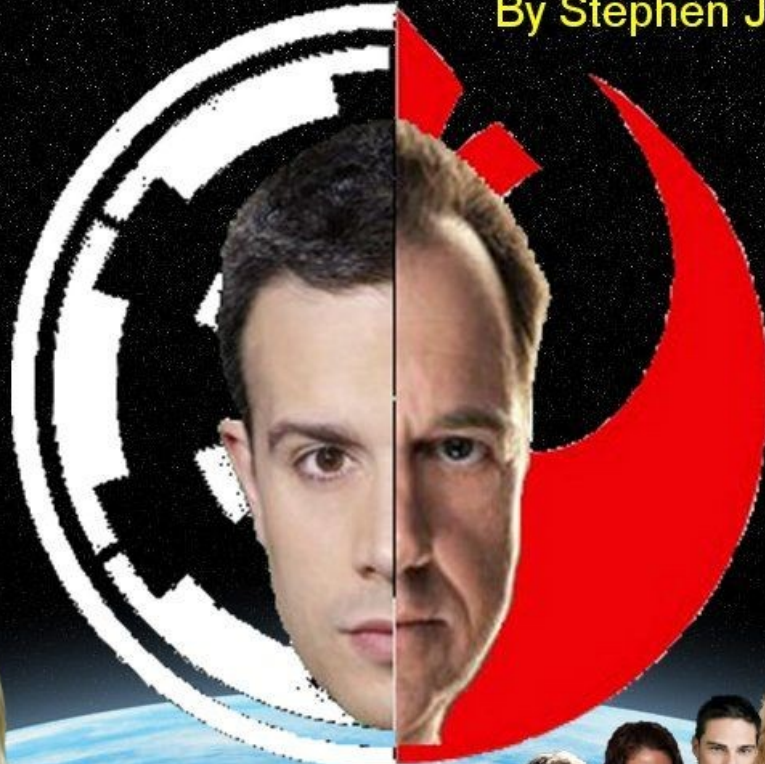


STAR WARS

3-05: Terror From Beyond

By Stephen J Dutton



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Civil war turns father against son

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

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

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

TERROR FROM BEYOND

AN OUT OF CONTROL TRANSPORT SHIP IS SHOT DOWN OVER ESTRAN. BUT WHAT
HAPPENED TO ITS CREW AND WHY HAVE THE INHABITANTS OF AN ENTIRE TOWN
NEAR TO THE CRASH SITE NOW VANISHED...?

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

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1.

The klaxon had been sounding for less than sixty seconds when Lieutenant Mirri Cordall of the Imperial Space Rescue Corps made it to the pilot's seat of her rescue tender. Beside her, her co-pilot was already in his seat.

"What've we got?" she asked as she strapped herself in and began the pre-flight checks.

"Single craft, dropped out of hyperspace when it hit the mass shadow and is on a ballistic trajectory for the planet."

"Any comms?"

The co-pilot shook his head.

"Traffic control's tried, but they've had nothing."

"Well we're ready to go." Mirri said and she activated the intercom, "Standby, launch in three, two, one!"

The sprint-class rescue ship shot away from the orbital facility, its powerful engines being pushed to their limits as Lieutenant Cordall attempted to reach the stricken craft in time to put a rescue team aboard.

The target ship came into view quickly. It was a corellian bulk freighter; just over a hundred and twenty metres long the ship could carry thousands of tonnes of cargo. As the ship began to enter the atmosphere its lower hull glowing brightly.

"Rescue flight four to unidentified craft!" Mirri transmitted, "Pull up!"

If there was anyone aboard then they were either unable or unwilling to respond to Mirri's signal and the ship continued to descend towards the surface of Estran.

"Two contacts to the rear!" the co-pilot snapped, "Skiprays."

Skipray blastboats were heavily armed gunships and if they were here it could mean only one thing; the decision had been taken to shoot down the ship.

"Rescue four this is intercept command," a voice called out over the communication channel, "break off."

"Negative intercept command," Mirri replied, "there's still time."

"Err, lieutenant," her co-pilot said, "there isn't." then an alarm sounded, "And those Skiprays' targeting arrays just lit us up. We need to get out of the way right now."

"Stang!" Mirri exclaimed as she triggered her ship's engines to steer away from the other ship. She looked out of the flight deck's viewport as the two skipray blastboats flew past and there was the flash of weapons fire as they opened fire.

The already damaged ship broke up under the barrage and pieces of wreckage were thrown away from the epicentre of the explosion. These tumbling fragments could not maintain the required trajectory for a successful atmospheric entry and they either burnt or broke up further or flew off into space.

All but one.

Agent Garm Larcus of the Imperial Security Bureau studied the information on his desk carefully, looking up when his office door opened.

"Garm, Gregor wants to see you."

Garm smiled at the young blonde woman standing in the doorway.

"Did he say what he wanted Vay?" he asked.

Officially Vay Udra was an intern from the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order (COMPNOR) assigned to assist the sector moff, Gregor Horatian. Rumours were abound that she was in fact the moff's mistress, however Garm knew that the moff remained happy in his marriage and Vay was far more than an intern.

"Nope." Vay replied, "But that woman's in his office."

"You mean Lynn Sharva?"

"That's her. Looks like you've annoyed her again."

Garm sighed and got up.

"Better look my best." He added, plucking his tunic from the hook on the wall beside him and putting it on as he walked to the door.

As they walked to the moff's office Garm could help but notice that many of the male personnel they passed by glancing at Vay when they mistakenly thought she would not notice. It was hard to miss Vay. The attractive blonde habitually wore a form fitting black bodyglove that was the subject of several rumours about what may be beneath it.

Unsurprisingly the moff's office was located on one of the upper floors of the capital building and on this level the décor was more elaborate, with carved wooden panels covering the typical modular construction used in Imperial facilities.

"Go right in Agent Larcus." The moff's secretary said as he and Vay approached. The pair were regular visitors to the moff's office and the secretary knew them both by sight.

Garm just nodded as they went in and then waited while the doors closed automatically behind them. Moff Horatian sat behind his desk, while just as Vay had warned him Lady Lynn Sharva was sat in front of it. Lynn Sharva was a member of the Estranian Parliament and was fiercely pro-Imperial. This in itself presented no problem for Garm, but unfortunately her predecessor in her constituency was Garm's father who had left Parliament only when he had defected to join the Rebellion and she seemed to think that his guilt extended to Garm also.

"I believe you're still attempting to locate your father." Moff Horatian said to Garm.

"Yes sir." Garm replied, "I think I have a lead regarding the ship he uses for transport."

"Ah yes," Moff Horatian replied, "The YT-1300."

"That's right. I previously thought he was using a more modern YT-2400, but in our last encounter I confirmed he was using a YT-1300. I'm trying to trace the ship through its captain."

"Yes, that is what we wanted to talk to you about." The moff replied.

"Lay off Mace Grayle." Lady Sharva said sternly.

Garm frowned.

"Moff Horatian," he said, "when Vay and I encountered my father he specifically referred to the captain of his ship as Mace and-

"There are tens of thousand of registered YT-1300's in this sector agent." Moff Horatian interrupted.

"And Mace Grayle is not traitor." Lady Sharva added, "Unlike your father."

"I met him-" Garm began before Lady Sharva interrupted.

"I met the real Mace Grayle aboard the Ocean Queen agent." She said, "And if it were not for his actions I would have ended up as a hostage to the rebels led by your father. Now it is clear to me that it is your father using details stolen along with the cruiser the Ocean Queen so that his co-conspirators can impersonate Captain Grayle and destroy his reputation."

"More like yours." Garm muttered. After Mace Grayle had flown Lady Sharva back to Estran she had loudly and publicly announced her gratitude and support. If he were exposed as a member of the Rebel Alliance then it would expose her to ridicule.

"Something to say?" Moff Horatian said.

"No sir." Garm replied.

"Good, because I've another job for you." The moff said, "Young Vay here noticed an unusual report from the Space Rescue Corps and I thought it was right up your alley."

The hangar was a hive of activity. An entire company of COMPForce assault troopers, the combat arm of COMPNOR were carrying out the final check as their equipment was loaded onto a force of gunships.

"Ah, Agent Larcus." The commanding officer of the troopers said when he saw Garm. This was Major Dayle Kramm and Garm had met the man before, along with his second in command Captain Kyle Layne. Like many COMPForce officers Major Kramm lacked subtlety, but his men respected him and that was good enough for Garm. Theoretically their ranks were equivalent but, as with their first meeting Garm had tactical superiority, "So where's the moff's bit on the side? Isn't she joining us?"

"Perhaps the moff couldn't bear to be without her." Captain Layne suggested and the two soldiers grinned.

"Actually Vay's right behind me." Garm replied, "This mission is her idea after all."

"Yes, I saw the docket." Major Kramm said, "Chasing after a ship that's already been destroyed. Crash recovery is hardly an assignment deserving of a special forces company."

The major had an inflated sense of his unit's status it seemed. To the military COMPForce was something of a joke, though Garm had to admit that they had a dedication to the Imperial cause second only to stormtroopers.

"Actually it was my idea to bring you along." Garm said and before either of the other officers could ask why he offered an explanation anyway, "The last time she took me off into the middle of nowhere chasing lights in the sky I ended up stuck on an alien planet for weeks. I'm taking no chances this time. My pregnant wife won't let me."

"Whipped." Captain Layne commented and Major Kramm smiled. Then he turned his head slightly.

"Ah, here's the young lady now." He said as Vay approached them.

"So are we all ready then?" she asked cheerfully.

"Just you two left to load your gear." Major Kramm said, "Then we can be off."

"Actually," Garm replied, "there's still one more person we're waiting on."

"Who?" Vay asked.

"Well since we're supposed to be dealing with a crashed ship I thought we should bring along an expert in starship accidents. Don't worry; I'm sure she knows what she's doing. It was her report you saw after all. Look, there she is now." And Garm pointed to the entrance at the far end of the hangar where Lieutenant Cordall had just entered.

"Something bothering you?" Garm asked Mirri as the gunship sped over the ocean.

"What? Oh, it's the walls." And keeping one hand grasping one of the ceiling mounted handholds tightly she pointed at the side of the gunship where it was open to the elements and the surface of the ocean below was clearly visible.

"What walls?" Major Kramm asked.

"Exactly." Mirri replied, "In a spaceship you're sealed up in a solid hull. If we opened our walls to space like this the draft would be even worse. It would be colder too."

"Pilot, where are we?" Garm called out.

"Twenty kilometres from the target zone sir." The pilot told him without taking his eyes off the terrain in front of the gunship.

Major Kramm activated his communicator, setting it to address all of his men simultaneously.

"Two minutes men." He said, "Prep for deployment." And then he took the helmet that Captain Layne handed to him.

"Set us down as close to the settlement as possible." Garm told the pilot then he looked at Major Kramm,

"How long to secure the landing zone?" he asked.

"Assuming no significant resistance we can do it in ninety seconds." The major replied.

"Good." Garm said, "We'll follow you when it's done."

"You know," Vay whispered to Garm, using the sound of the gunship's engines to cover her, "I could protect you if we went in with the troops."

"I know." Garm whispered back, "But there's no need for them to find out what you can do is there?" and Vay realised that he was right. As far as everyone else was concerned she was just an intern.

The five gunships swooped in over the snow-covered coastline, spreading out into a line abreast so that all of them had clear fields of fire should they be needed. A field just beyond the settlement structures offered a suitable landing sight and the gunships descended, hovering about a metre off the ground just long enough for the troops they carried to leap down and begin to spread out, forming a perimeter. While the soldiers on the ground were doing this the gunships rose into the air again and began to circle, ready to provide fire support if it was needed. Though as it happened it was not. Unsurprising considering that this was expected to be friendly territory, but Garm preferred to be cautious.

"Area secure Agent Larcus." Major Kramm signalled from the ground.

"What about the locals?" Garm asked.

"No sign of them." Major Kramm answered.

"That seems odd." Garm said.

"How would you feel if a company of soldiers suddenly dropped out of the sky where you lived?" Mirri asked, "They're probably just staying out of sight and hoping we're not her to arrest them."

"You're probably right." Garm said then he leant over the pilot's shoulder, "Pilot, take us in. Tell the other vessels to follow."

Garm jumped down and heard the snow beneath him crunch as his boots hit it. To protect them against the cold he and Mirri wore thick padded jackets, while the COMPForce troopers had thermal regulators fitted to their armour. Vay on the other hand still wore just her signature bodyglove. The garment had a built in temperature control system that kept her body at the perfect temperature all the time. She looked out of place amongst the heavy clothing and armour of the rest of the company, but such things did not concern her at all.

"Where is everyone?" Vay said as she looked towards the settlement.

"Like I said," Mirri said, "if this lot turned up where you lived how would you react? They'll be inside."

Garm looked at Vay while Mirri's back was turned and Vay shook her head, indicating to Garm that apart from them and the COMPForce troopers there was no one nearby. No one living at any rate. He checked his datapad. According to the information he had downloaded from the census planetary database this was a settlement of over three hundred people, mainly workers associated with the fleet of fishing droids that supplied the processing and canning plant only a few kilometres south of here.

"So where did the wreckage come down?" Garm asked Mirri, "Is it possible that some of landed close enough to kill the people here?"

Mirri shook her head.

"No chance." She said, "We tracked what debris survived entry into the atmosphere as coming down just off the coast and we even got some calls from the locals here reporting it. Nothing landed here. Look at the buildings if you don't believe me, an impact from even a fist-sized lump of debris would smash a massive hole in structures like these. Do you see any damage?"

Garm activated his comlink.

"Major, I need you to sweep the area. Locate anyone left in the settlement and detain them. Under no circumstances is lethal force to be used without my direct order. Do you understand?"

"Copy that agent. Weapons on stun. We're moving out."

At Major Kramm's signal most of the company began to move towards the nearby cluster of buildings, with just a single squad being left behind to watch over the gunships. Garm listened in on the chatter over the communications network. All of it was related to the sweep, with the company and platoon level officers instructing their men as to which squads were to search which builds and the brief, to the point replies that came back as every search revealed only more unoccupied buildings.

"Its too quiet." Vay said.

"I think that's the point of the search." Mirri said.

"No." Vay replied, "I mean the search is too quiet. Have you heard a single breaching charge? Or how about a request to switch a weapon from stun so it can used to blast open a locked door?"

"She's right." Garm said and he lifted his comlink to his mouth, "Major have you had to force entry anywhere yet?" he asked.

"Negative." Major Kramm answered, "Wherever these people went, they didn't bother bolting the doors when they left. Do you want us to abort?"

"No. Continue the search." Garm told him, "But let me know as soon as you find a suitable area to billet us all. I'd rather not camp outside in this weather. Larcus out."

2.

The rest of the sweep offered nothing new. Every building was unlocked and abandoned, though a handful were found to have suffered some minor physical damage such as broken windows or furniture that was clearly recent.

The largest building in the settlement was the fishing droid hangar. This was a simple hollow structure designed to allow the bulky repulsorlift driven droids to be stored and serviced inside when needed. At the moment however the building was empty, with the droids still in harbour being lined up along the docks outside and Major Kramm was quick to set his men to work setting up their tents inside.

"So are we sharing?" Vay asked Garm as the tents were being unpacked and erected.

"No." Garm replied, "I've got a tent of my own. Since you and Lieutenant Cordall are the only two women you'll be sharing with one another."

"What if I need to discuss anything with you in the night?"

"Use your comlink." Garm replied then Major Kramm waved at him from the far side of the hangar, "Looks like I'm wanted." Garm said to Vay and he set off towards the major.

"Your wasting your time." A voice said from behind her and Vay turned to see Captain Layne leaning up against the hangar wall, "He's not interested in you."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Vay replied.

"Of course you do." Captain Layne said, "He probably does as well. But he's not saying anything because he's not interested. The only thing on his mind right now is how his pregnant wife is coping without him, mark my words."

"His pregnant wife?" Vay repeated and Captain Layne smiled.

"He never told you did he? Well that's interesting isn't? Look, if you're after company then why not try someone else?"

"You?"

"Well I'm available."

"Now its me that's not interested." Vay said, "Kriff off."

"Such unladylike language." Captain Layne said as he stood up straight and walked past her, "The offer's still open though."

"And I'm still not interested."

"Neither's Garm. Not in you."

He's right. That is a closed path. Try to force it and the only result will be suffering. Maybe his, maybe yours.

The voice calling out to Vay made another sudden appearance, but still offered no clue as to what it was or why it kept coming back.

"And you can shut up too." Vay hissed.

We're not leaving you alone. You'll listen to us eventually. You have to.

"Did you say something?" Captain Layne said, looking back at Vay.

"No. Not a word."

"So what is it major?" Garm asked.

Two of the COMPForce troopers were stood at attention in front of Major Kramm and he pointed to them as he replied.

"These men noticed a smell coming from some of the droids docked in the harbour." He said, "They thought there might be bodies inside them so they took a closer look."

"And what did they find?"

"Oh they found corpses all right, but of fish."

"Fish?"

"Yeah. Which means that those droids came back with their holds full but there was no one around to start the unloading cycle."

"I'll speak to Vay and Lieutenant Cordall." Garm said, "Maybe between us we can pull some sort of timescale out of those droids' memories to narrow down when everyone vanished. But it's getting dark so that'll have to wait until tomorrow now. Is there anything else to report?"

"Just one item." Major Kramm replied, "I'd like to send one of our gunships south."

"Really? What for?" Garm asked.

"Well I had one of the pilot's report in to Estran City and he could barely get a signal. I figure there must be something up with the atmospheric conditions this near to the North Pole."

"What about the local network?"

"They use a wireless system, it's not getting through either. If I send one of our gunships back then it can report in directly and pick up a subspace unit."

"FTL communication? A bit over the top isn't it?"

"Only over the top if we'd got anything else that was working. But we don't, so I figure why use something immune to EM interference?"

Garm nodded.

"I'll go with your recommendation then major." He said, "When do you want to send it?"

"First thing tomorrow. I'd rather let the pilots get a good night's sleep than risk them flying at night in poor weather."

"Very well. Carry on major."

Mirri sat down slowly on the camp bed. It, like the tent she would be sharing with Vay had been one of the first erected by the COMPForce troopers and she wanted to be sure that it had been set up properly. There was a 'click' as something in the bed shifted, but it held her weight and she sighed in relief, this being her first opportunity to sit down since leaving Estran City. Though life in the Space Rescue Corps could sometimes require moments of strenuous physical activity it was rare for missions to last as long as this one - when things went wrong in space people died quickly. She was just taking off her boots when the tent flap was pulled back and Vay stormed in.

"Something wrong?" Mirri asked.

"Nothing concerning you." Vay snapped back.

"Hey, if you're going to be like that then it's going to be a long night. Especially since I'll insist you add ma'am to the end of every comment like that."

"What?"

Mirri tapped the rank plate on her chest.

"I know its only SRC rank, but I still outrank an intern." She said, "Now how about you sit down and tell me what's the matter? Is one of those troopers giving you a hard time?"

Vay was considering how to reply when Garm's voice called out from outside the tent.

"Ladies, may I come in?"

"Yes. Please." Vay replied without waiting for Mirri and Garm entered the tent.

"So what do you want?" Vay asked as she sat on her own bed and there was a 'twang' sound as a spring that should have been replaced long ago gave way.

"I just came to say good night really. But also I'd like your help tomorrow with the fishing droids. From what Major Kramm says we may be able to use them to get a better idea of how long everyone's been gone. Any questions?"

"Just one." Vay said, raising her hand, "If I need you in the night, which tent is yours?"

"One of the ones with a guard outside." Garm said, "All us senior officers get a personal guard according to the major. Anyway, good night ladies." And with that Garm left the tent.

As was typical with any military operation, a watch was set with Captain Layne selecting troops to patrol in pairs throughout the night. An unpopular duty at the best of times, the cold weather made this night even worse. Even the heated armour of the guards did little to raise their spirits. The watch changed every two hours without incident and by the time the final pair of sentries came on duty shortly before dawn there was a sense of confidence that there was nothing to be afraid of.

This was unwarranted confidence.

"Did you hear that?" one of the guards said to the other. They were stood at the end of the pier with cigarras in their mouths, the warmth of the smoke they inhaled helping to ward off the cold.

"Hear what?"

"Sounded like something banging against the pier." The first replied and he walked to the edge of the pier.

"Careful there. I heard if you fall in you'd freeze in under two minutes."

"Yeah, yeah, I know what I'm doing." And the guard knelt down and looked over the edge, "There's something down here." He said and he reached under the pier and felt around.

"Its probably just frozen fish guts." The other one said, looking back around.

"I got it. It stuck though, come give me a hand."

The other guard slung his rifle over his shoulder and clapped.

"Kriff you. Come help me."

The other guard joined his comrade at the edge of the pier and also reached beneath it.

"Stang! That's gross." He said, withdrawing his hand.

"You've got your gloves on haven't you?" the first guard replied and he tugged hard on what he had hold of.

There was a tearing sound and suddenly the object came free, "Got it!" he exclaimed as he pulled it out from under the pier and then added, "Oh kriff!" and he dropped the severed human arm onto pier and scabbled back away from it.

"Oh man that's messed up." The other guard said as they both looked down. The arm had been torn out of its owner's shoulder with no regard for neatness and was covered in fine, glistening fibres of some sort, "We should call this in."

"You think?" the first guard replied as he got to his feet and reached for the control to his comlink headset, "Wait." He said suddenly, "Do you hear that?"

"What now? Wait no-" and the other guard stopped mid-sentence as both unslung their rifles and looked around.

They heard the sound again; it was a sudden chattering and was followed by a scraping sound beneath their feet. Cautiously they advanced on the edge of the pier and looked over, but all they saw was shadows. Then they heard another scraping sound accompanied by a chattering. In their haste they had forgotten to keep watch on the other side of the pier.

Terror.

Pain.

Vay sat upright in her bed when the sudden flare of emotion hit her. Immediately she sprang from the bed and dashed from the tent.

"Vay?" Mirri said softly as she was woken by other woman's sudden movement, "What's wrong?" Then, when she saw that Vay was gone she too got out of bed and left the tent.

Outside in the hangar she spotted Vay running through the tents where the COMPForce soldiers slept. Vay herself headed directly for the tent where Garm slept. It was easy enough to pick out, she could sense the more active minds of the bodyguards outside the three senior officers' tents and she could pick out Garm's sleeping mind from amongst the occupants quite well by now.

"Sorry miss, I can't admit you." The soldier outside Garm's tent said as she rushed up to him, "The agent's orders. He's not to be disturbed."

"Really? Well did he mention me by name?"

"Actually yes he did."

Vay looked straight into the guard's eyes and focused on his mind.

"Get. Out. Of. My. Way."

Silently, the guard stepped aside and Vay pushed past him into the tent. Inside Garm was sound asleep, still wearing his uniform aside from his boots and tunic.

"Garm wakeup!" she yelled and she knelt beside him, shaking him.

"Not now Jennay." He mumbled and Vay scowled at the mention of Garm's wife.

"Garm!" Vay yelled again and this time his eyes fluttered open then widened when he saw her.

"Stang Vay. What the hell are you doing in here?"

"Garm there's trouble. I think the sentries are dead."

"Well that would explain how you got in here."

"What? Oh no, he's a moron."

Garm sat up.

"Okay then, say what you've got to say."

"I think the guards outside are dead. I felt it. Down by the pier."

Before Garm could reply the tent flap was moved aside again and Major Kramm, Captain Layne and Lieutenant Cordall all appeared.

"Is this a private party then?" Major Kramm asked.

"No." Garm replied as he got out of bed and reached for his boots, "Vay was woken by a sound. Have the men stand to major, we'll go and check it out."

"Stand to?" Captain Layne said, "Because this little girl got scared by a strange noise?"

"Do it." Major Kramm said, "It can't do any harm. You take number one platoon out there now, I'll get the rest of the men ready." And Captain Layne nodded before leaving the tent and starting to bark orders.

"What about us?" Mirri asked as Garm put on his boots and coat and picked up his blaster.

"Stay in the hangar." Garm replied.

"I'm coming with you." Vay said.

"Really?" Major Kramm asked, "Like that?" and Vay realised that she was still in her nightclothes. Both Garm and Major Kramm smiled at each other as Vay then ran from the tent and back towards her own, "Does she ever wear anything that isn't black?" Major Kramm asked.

Garm paused for a moment.

"When we spent the night together she was in orange." He replied.

"Was that the time your old man left you both tied together in your office?"

"Ah. So you've heard about that then?"

"Of course. Everybody has."

3.

"Watch detail report." Captain Layne said as he emerged from the hangar, "I say again, report." Either side of Captain Layne the COMPForce troopers began to emerge, their weapons held ready. Captain looked around to see if he could spot the missing sentries. Just then Garm appeared, his blaster in his hand. "The pier captain." He said.

"What?"

"We should check out the pier." And he began to head towards the pier.

"Okay men, you heard the agent." Captain Layne said, "We're heading for the pier. Keep your eyes open for hostiles, but remember our own men could still be out there. Identify your targets before blasting them." The COMPForce troops made their way to the nearby pier, searching the area for any signs of an enemy and when Garm and Captain Layne reached the pier there was already a pair of troopers crouched aiming their rifles along it.

"So much for them being here." Captain Layne said.

"They were here." Vay's voice said from behind them and they looked round to see her now once again wearing her bodyglove and with a compact holdout blaster in her hand. Then she pushed between them and began to walk along the pier, looking from side to side.

Garm followed her, knowing that if Vay said she had sensed trouble then she really had.

"Can we get some light down here?" Garm called out. The sun had not yet risen and it was too dark for him to make out anything on the pier itself. Captain Layne stepped forwards and held up his glowrod, illuminating the pier as well as the large pool of blood at the far end.

Garm and Vay both made a dash for the blood, each of them searching over one side of the pier for the bodies of the missing soldiers.

"Nothing this side." Garm said, "What about you?"

"Nothing." Vay replied, then she halted, "Wait, hang on a moment and she crouched down by the edge of the pier near to the pool of blood and reached down. When her hand came back up she was holding one of the missing men's rifles, "The barrel's warm." She said, "This has been fired."

"Captain Layne!" Garm called out, "Come take a look at this." The captain had started to move closer as soon as Vay had crouched down and so he was soon standing next to Garm and Vay, "So what do you think?" Garm asked as Captain Layne took hold of the rifle, removed one of his gloves and placed his bare hand on the barrel shroud.

"Its one of ours and its definitely been fired recently." He said, "The gauge says it still got a good charge as well, so not many shots have fired from it. I'd say two or three at most. Recently, in this weather the barrel would cool down pretty quickly."

"Unless the trooper reloaded." Garm suggested, but Captain Layne shook his head.

"They didn't report in." he pointed out, "So they were overwhelmed quickly. They wouldn't have had time to fire off a full clip and reload."

"I think you're both missing the big question." Vay said, "What happened to the man that gun was issued to?" and all three looked down at the pool of blood.

The crew of the gunship ran towards their vehicle unaware that they were being watched. Their orders were simple, fly as far south as necessary to overcome the communications interference, report the situation here and request that a larger force be dispatched to seal off the area. After that they were to return to assist in the search. Clambering into the gunship the crew began their pre-flight checks as they had done hundreds of times before. Not one suspected that this would be the last time they would carry them out. The killer used the noise of the gunship's repulsorlift engines starting up as cover as it ran across the snow covered field to approach the vehicle from behind and leapt into it just as the pilot lifted off.

"Did you feel that?" the co-pilot asked.

"No what?" the pilot replied as he banked the gunship around.

"Felt like something hit us."

The pilot activated the intercom that connected the cockpit with the gunship's two side mounted ball turrets.

"Gun crew, something may have come loose. Can either of you see anything?"

"Port side's fine." One of the gunner's replied.

"Same for starboard – no wait. I can see something moving in the back. I can't tell what it is though."

The co-pilot looked around and into the transport area.

"I can't see anything form here." He said.

"Then go back there and check it out." The pilot ordered and the co-pilot released his harness and got out of his seat.

Steadying himself on the ceiling above him, the co-pilot made his way towards the rear of the gunship. Suddenly he stopped and frowned. There was something sticky on the ceiling and he had just put his hand right in it. Keeping his hand where it was he looked up and saw not only the mass of sticky fibres he had just touched but also what had put them there.

"Stang!" he exclaimed as he drew his blaster.

The pilot turned his head to see what was going on. But all he saw was a blur of movement as something dropped from the ceiling and the co-pilot let out a scream of terror. A fraction of a second later there was the flash of blaster fire as the co-pilot's sidearm discharged. But the killer had knocked his arm aside and when his finger tightened on the trigger the weapon was pointed directly at the pilot.

Garm, Mirri and Vay watched as the company assembled outside the hangar and Major Kramm explained to the men how they were going to conduct a search of the area surrounding the settlement using the gunships for support.

Surprise.

Fear.

The sudden burst of emotion was every bit as powerful as it had been during the night and Vay looked up at the departing gunship just in time to see it wobble.

"Garm." she said, "Look!" and she pointed at the aircraft as it began to spin around.

"Major, the gunship!" Garm then yelled as he too saw the out of control aircraft.

"Oh kriff!" Major Kramm snapped, "Down!"

The gunship dropped from the sky, landing squarely on top of one of the other vehicles still on the ground. The fireball that engulfed the remaining vehicles also detonated all of the ordnance they carried and as the COMPForce troopers sought what cover they could, burning debris was hurled through the air towards them. Several men went down screaming as they were struck, while others rushed to drag them clear of the continuing rain of metal and plastic.

"What the hell happened?" Captain yelled over the sound of men screaming.

"There was something on the gunship." Vay said, "Something that killed the crew."

"Oh really? An how would you know that?" Major Kramm asked.

"Do you have a better explanation?" Garm asked in reply.

"So what do we do now?" Mirri asked as she looked around at the COMPForce troopers as they desperately tried to figure out what was happening.

"We came here to do a job." Garm said, "I suggest we get back to it."

"So what's your big plan then agent?" Major Kramm asked him.

"We go with our original plan." Garm said, "We'll take a look at the droids to see if there's any information about what happened here. We need to know how this started and those droids are all we've got."

Since the hangar was the only building that could be considered secure and had been purpose built to handle the fishing droids one of the bulky machines was brought inside and the inspection covers over its electronics removed. It was a simple fifth degree droid that lacked the ability to communicate directly with human beings, so instead a datapad was connected directly into its processor.

"This is all gibberish to me." Garm said, shaking his head as reams of data scrolled past on the screen.

"Same here." Vay added.

"Wait." Mirri said suddenly, "Go back."

"What? You can read this stuff?" Garm asked.

"Sure." Mirri replied, "Some of it anyway. Its pretty similar to a starship flight recorder's data structure."

"So what did you see?" Vay asked as Mirri took hold of the datapad and scrolled back to the information that had caught her attention, "There, look." She said, pointing to a line of numbers, "Those are map co-ordinates."

"What? The droid's location?" Garm asked.

"Hang on." Mirri replied, switching from the droid's data feed to a map of the local area, "No." she then said, "Not unless that fish around here can walk. That spot is about three hundred metres inland. Right here. The droid's sensors detected something, but by the time it got back here to report it everyone was already gone." Garm smiled.

"I'll go tell the major." He said.

Between the injured and those that had to be left behind to protect them, only about two thirds of the company was available to investigate whatever had caught the attention of the fishing droid. The location was several kilometres further north of the settlement and so, lacking the gunships for transport it was decided that local vehicles would be commandeered. There were plenty to choose from, all of them unsurprisingly already adapted for use in cold weather and half a dozen repulsorlift trucks were chosen to serve as impromptu troop carriers.

Along with Major Kramm and Captain Layne Garm, Mirri and Vay rode in the front vehicle, using the datapad to navigate from the settlement to the mysterious map co-ordinates. They halted the convoy about half a kilometre from the destination so that the troops could be deployed and then proceeded on foot.

"Is that what I think it is?" Major Kramm said as they looked at what lay at their destination.

"Depends," Mirri replied, "do you think it's the forward section of a bulk freighter?"

The surviving chunk of the freighter had dug a deep channel as it struck the frozen ground and the foremost part of it was buried under ice and dirt, however enough of it remained that it could be clearly identified as having once been the forward section of a starship.

"Could anyone have survived that?" Garm asked.

"Well the structure looks pretty intact. I'm guessing there was just enough power left in the forwards systems for whoever was at the helm to use the forward repulsors to slow down." Mirri said, "Though even with a crash harness you wouldn't just be able to walk away from that."

Garm began to walk forwards.

"Where do you think you're going?" Mirri asked him.

"To take a look inside." Garm replied, "Are you coming?"

Garm made his way down into the channel dug by the impact and then walked up to the rear of the wreck. Here was where the freighter had broken apart in space and so he was in fact looking at an interior section. Just as he expected, Vay was soon standing right beside him.

"Look at this." He said, pointing to a set of marking on a bulkhead, "What do you make of them?"

"Blast marks?" Vay suggested, "But this thing dropped from space, surely there'd be some scorching from the atmospheric entry."

Garm turned to where Mirri was being helped down into the channel by a pair of COMPForce troopers, with Major Kramm and Captain Layne just ahead of her.

"Lieutenant!" Garm called out, "Could these marks here be from this thing's entry into our atmosphere?"

"Hang on, I'll be right there." She replied and as she walked up to them she looked at the scorches, "No." she said, shaking her head, "They're too localised. They're from a localised energy blast."

"So blaster fire then?" Garm said and Mirri nodded.

"Not all of them." Captain Layne added.

"What?" Garm asked.

"Well look at these over here." The captain replied, waving his hand towards a cluster of the marks, "These are too diffused. If a blaster made them then it was in serious need of repair."

"He's right." Major Kramm said, "A blaster bolt is only a couple of centimetres across. Whatever made those had very inefficient containment."

"What about a heavier weapon?" Mirri asked.

"Anything that could make a mark that big would have punched a hole through the bulkhead." Major Kramm said.

"Well then," Garm said, "I supposed we'd better go and take a look inside hadn't we?" then he looked at Mirri, "Can you find the bridge?"

"Sure." She told him.

Garm then looked at Major Kramm.

"We need to secure this area." He told the major, "But I'll need some men to help search this ship as well. One squad should be enough."

"Fair enough." Major Kramm said, "I'll lead the team myself. Captain Layne?"

"Yes sir?"

"Establish a cordon."

"Yes sir."

4.

The interior of the wreck was a mess. While most of the hatchways were open, some of them had clearly been forced or even blasted that way. Here and there some of the bulkheads had been cut through, creating holes large enough to permit a person to step through quite easily. And everywhere there were more blast marks, with the same mix of identifiable and the bizarre larger marks on almost every surface.

Just as she had claimed, Mirri was able to lead Garm and Vay to what had been the ship's bridge, now though it was a scene of devastation. Located right at the front of the wreck, it had borne the brunt of the impact and the forward bulkhead had simply collapsed, burying the front of the bridge in the debris that came flooding in through the hole.

"Well," Garm said as he looked at the wall of dirt, "if there was anyone at the helm when this thing came down then he's probably still under all that lot."

"Well at least this station's intact." Mirri said as she sat down in a seat by a non-descript control station near to the rear of the bridge.

"What is it?" Vay asked.

Reaching down under the console Mirri fiddled for a few moments and there was a 'clunk' before she brought up her hands clutching a cylinder about thirty centimetres long and ten in diameter.

"Flight recorder," She said, "and it looks intact too."

Garm comlink suddenly chimed and he activated it.

"Larcus." He said.

"It's me." Major Kramm's voice replied, "We're in what looks like the main galley. You should come take a look at this."

"What is it?" Garm asked.

"I've no idea." The major replied.

"I'll be there as soon as I can." Garm said and he shut off the comlink, "I don't suppose I need to ask if you're coming too do I?" he said and Vay just smiled at him. Then he turned to Mirri, "So what about you? Are you coming with us? Or would you rather stay here alone until something creepy happens to you?"

"I should get to work on this." Mirri replied, tapping the flight recorder, "Besides, I do have a blaster."

"Two points." Garm said, "Those missing guards had blasters and secondly when did you last fire yours?"

"I have to re-qualify every year. Same as everyone else."

"And in action?" Vay asked.

"Never."

"You're coming with us." Garm said, "That's an order lieutenant."

When they found Major Kramm and his men they were in fact standing just outside the ship's galley, shining glowrods in through the open hatchway.

"Take a look at this." The major said with a smile, "I don't know what it is, but I'm not touching it."

Garm, Mirri and Vay looked into the galley and saw that both the deck and ceiling were covered in a thick layer of gooey fibres and in several places there were wide columns of the substance stretching from the deck up the ceiling.

"So I take that this is not normal for a ship like this?" Major Kramm said.

"No." Mirri replied, "I've never seen anything like it."

Cautiously, Garm drew his blaster and stepped into the room and paused as he felt how the fibres covering the deck beneath his feet reacted.

"They seem solid enough." He said and he took another step. There was a soft tearing sound as he lifted his boot from the deck as the sticky fibres sought to cling to the sole. However, if they had ever been strong enough to hold him, the fibres could not any longer and Garm was able to walk towards the nearest of the columns. He held his weapon out in front of him and used its muzzle to prod the column.

"I think its hollow." He said as the column gave way under the pressure of his push.

"Careful Garm." Vay said as she stepped into the room also.

Major Kramm leant towards Mirri and in a voice loud enough for both Garm and Vay to hear he spoke.

"Five credits says there's something alive and disgusting in one of those."

"There's nothing living in them." Vay commented, only realising what she had said when Garm suddenly glared at her, "I think." She added.

"I need a knife." Garm said and he looked around. Given that this room had at one time been the ship's galley it was unsurprising that cutlery had been stored here and when this portion of the ship had made its uncontrolled entry into Estran's atmosphere the cupboards and drawers holding it had been flung open and scattered their contents all around.

"Here." Vay replied as she found a large carving knife on the floor, caught amongst the fibres. The knife was held quite strongly and Vay had to rip it free before she handed it to Garm. The first thing he noticed was that he now had some of the fibres on his hand.

"Is there any way I can get this stuff off without looking like a little girl?" he said as he first shook his hand, then wiped it on his coat. Keeping his blaster in his hand and now grasping the knife in the other one, Garm gently pressed the tip of the blade against the column and watched as it pierced it easily. The in a single stroke he dragged the knife down and cut a hole in the fibrous structure.

"It is hollow." He said, using the knife blade to peel back the sides of the hole, "There's a lot of room in here."

"So are the meant to hold something then?" Major Kramm asked, "If so, what?"

"I don't know." Garm replied.

Hesitation.

Gram had an idea, Vay could feel it but she could not tell exactly what it was so she decided to prompt him.

"But you've got an idea don't you? You've seen something like this before haven't you?" she said.

"Well? Don't keep us in the dark agent." Major Kramm added.

"Yes I have." Garm replied, "I'm surprised the rest of you haven't. I used to collect them as a kid to freak my sister out."

"Yet you still haven't told us what they are." Mirri said.

"Cocoons." Garm said, "Bug cocoons."

"Bugs?" Major Kramm exclaimed, "Kriffing big bugs if you ask me. I'll warn the men to look out for a two and a half metre butterfly shall I?"

"There are plenty of human-sized insectoid species in the galaxy major." Vay pointed out to him, "The verpine for example."

"They are insects." Garm said.

"The verpine?" Mirri replied, "Of course they are."

"No." Garm said, "Whatever made these. I was wrong. These aren't individual cocoons; this whole room is one big web. We're after arachnids."

Outside the remains of the ship Captain Layne's troop had established a perimeter that also included the repulsor trucks that had carried them here. Inside one of these trucks, currently being used as a sheltered command post Captain Layne waited to hear from the party that had entered the wreck. However, the first signal he received instead came from the men left back at the settlement.

"Emergency! Emergency!" the panic-filled voice yelled, "Under attack!"

Captain Layne reached for his comlink and responded immediately.

"This is Layne, repeat our last signal."

"Under heavy attack sir. Gas."

"Did you just say gas?"

"Yes sir. We don't know where it's coming from, but its everywhere. The casualties are all dead. Only a few of us left, those who already had helmets on."

"Wasn't there any warning?" Captain Layne asked as he picked up his own helmet with its built-in respirator.

"No sir. The detectors didn't register it. Its something new."

"How many of you are left trooper?"

"Seven."

"Stang." Captain Layne muttered to himself. Seven men left out of the almost sixty left behind, "Fall back." He said, "Head towards us, I'm sending a vehicle to meet up with you. Layne out." Then he put on his helmet and rushed out of the truck, "Tarrs, Vedis, Pry, front and centre!" and immediately three of the nearby COMPFforce troopers rushed towards him, "Take one of the trucks and head back towards the settlement." He ordered, "A unit of our men is falling back this way. You are to pick them up and bring them back here. Use caution though, the force has come under chemical attack. Keep your helmets on and your eyes open. Got it?"

"Yes sir!" the three trooper shouted in union and they ran towards one of the other repulsor trucks, donning their helmets as they ran.

"Fifty-six." Garm said, "Fifty six of these, err what would say they were?" he added and he looked at Vay.

"How about 'pods'?" Mirri suggested from the doorway, "Keep it simple."

"Fine. Fifty-six pods. So if each one held just one occupant then we're dealing with fifty six aliens."

"I like those odds." Major Kramm said, "Even with the casualties we've taken we've got them outnumbered about two to one. But could these things really have been used to let something survive the crash?"

"Oh yes." Mirri replied and she picked her way across the web covered deck to the nearest of the pods, "See, they're springy." She said, pushing the pod back and forth with a gloved hand, "There's no reason why they couldn't have absorbed enough of the impact force of the crash to allow an occupant to survive."

"Major Kramm." Captain Layne's voice suddenly came over the communications net.

"Kramm here, go ahead."

"Sir, the force we left at the settlement has come under attack. They say the enemy used poison gas."

"What enemy captain? Did they say?"

"Negative sir. There were only seven men. I've ordered them to withdraw and sent a vehicle to pick them up."

"Good work Captain, I'll be with you shortly." And Major Kramm shut of his comlink.

"Gas?" Garm asked, "I don't have a mask."

"Neither do I." Mirri said.

"And I left mine at the settlement." Vay then added, "Do your men have any spares major?"

"Sure. Same place as yours are."

Then Mirri smiled.

"I think I may have an answer." She said and she looked around the galley, "Ah. There we are." she then said, making her way to a locker that was obscured by thick strands of web, "Can I borrow that knife?" she asked Garm and he went over to her and gave her the knife. Mirri cut through the web to expose the locker door and opened it to reveal a shelf filled with breath masks, "Emergency fire fighting supplies." She said, "Every galley should have them. Not that they all do of course." And she took out three of the masks and gave them out to those without them.

5.

When the repulsor truck returned the driver halted before reaching the perimeter that had been established and waited for a sentry to clear them for approach. When the doors opened and the vehicle's passengers began to disembark Garm and Major Kramm was there to meet them.

"Give your report corporal." Major Kramm barked at one of the seven survivors from the force left behind, "Who attacked you?"

The trooper removed his helmet and looked at the major.

"We never saw them sir." He replied.

"So they just shelled you from a distance then?" Garm asked, but the trooper shook his head.

"There were no shells either sir, just a cloud of gas."

Puzzled frowns appeared on the faces of both Garm and Major Kramm and the two men looked at each other.

"So the gas must have just been released from a container and allowed to drift." Garm said.

"Not very efficient." Major Kramm replied, "Very haphazard."

"I know." Garm said, "The ISB has run some drills for rebel attacks with poison gas on population centres released that way and the simulations always have the attacks being easily contained."

"Garm!" Vay suddenly called out from the truck serving as a command post, "Come see this."

Inside the truck Mirri and Vay had been studying the freighter's flight recorder under the watchful eyes of Captain Layne and when Garm and Major Kramm joined them Mirri had turned one of the strings of numbers into a more readable graph.

"Look at this." Mirri said, pointing to the graph, "This is the power consumption of the ship's hyperdrive. Look right here."

"At that spike you mean?" Garm asked.

"Yes, exactly. The drive power spiked mid flight."

"I thought there was a power spike every time a ship entered hyperspace." Major Kramm said.

"There is." Garm said.

"Yes," Mirri agreed, "but the ship was already in hyperspace when it happened and right after it consumption dropped to zero."

"So it dropped back to realspace?" Garm asked.

"No. The corresponding navigation data gives no known location for this time reference. Then about sixteen hours later there's another massive spike before the levels drop back to normal for FTL flight until the ship crashed out of hyperspace when it hit Estran's gravity well and the readings all go dead."

"So whatever was in those pods probably got aboard the ship during the missing sixteen hours then." Garm said, "But where was it for that time?"

Mirri shrugged.

"Not in hyperspace." She said, "And not in realspace either."

"Well what other space is there?" Major Kramm asked.

"There is none." Garm said, "The navigational systems must have been overloaded by the energy spike that affected the hyperdrive. Now we have an estimate of the enemy's numbers and now we have a possible location for them as well."

"We do?" Captain Layne said, "Where?"

"The settlement." Garm replied,

"Poodoo." Major Kramm said, snorting, "My men searched that place street by street. It's clear."

"Yes major, they searched every street. But they didn't check the sewers."

Garm let the COMPForce troopers move in ahead of him, their armour offered much better protection against gases as well as more conventional means of attack. Major Kramm kept the bulk of his remaining forces with him and Captain Layne, but broke one of his platoons down into individual squads that he then sent to search out secure points into the sewers beneath the settlement. There were manholes scattered throughout the streets of course, but these were narrow entry points that were difficult for an armoured man to pass through, especially if he had to try and defend himself while he did so. What the Imperial troops needed was one of the larger access points intended for providing bulky worker droids entry to the network of tunnels. They had found four of these during the street-to-street search conducted the previous day, but since the simple wire mesh gates covering them had still been locked the troopers had ignored them and moved on. But now Major Kramm wanted to know more. All four squad leaders reported that the gates were still secure and Major Kramm took the decision to move in, accompanied by Garm, Mirri and Vay.

The gate lock gave way to a single blaster bolt as the force moved in. The advanced elements formed two columns, with one positioned to each side of the wide sewer tunnel while the remainder of the force came up behind them.

"Contact!"

The voice came from one of the lead troopers and the entire force ground to halt and prepared for combat.

"What is it?" Major Kramm replied when the communications net remained silent for almost a minute.

"Uh, false alarm major. Sorry." The trooper signalled back, "It's just a dead dianoga floating in the water up ahead."

"Wait." Garm said as he overheard the message, "We should go take a look at the dianoga, I want to see how it died."

"Company hold position." Major Kramm broadcast. Then he looked at Captain Layne, "Captain, take Agent Larcus up to the head of the column."

"What about your lady friends agent?" Captain Layne asked.

"I'm coming with you." Vay said, looking at Garm.

"Well I'm not." Mirri said, "Dianogas are disgusting enough while they're alive."

"Follow me." Captain Layne said and he set off towards the front of the force with Garm and Vay both following close behind.

Just as had been reported the body of the dianoga was floating in the water of the sewer, caught on something below the surface. It was not an especially large example of the species known for inhabiting such places as this and living off the waste that flowed through. This particular one was about the size of an adult human being and showed no signs of physical injury other than blood leaking from various orifices.

"It doesn't look very old." Garm commented, his mask distorting his voice somewhat.

"No and it hasn't been shot either." Vay replied, "Are you thinking poison?" and Garm nodded.

"If the gas was released down here it could have spread through the tunnels before escaping up into the streets."

"Don't be ridiculous." Captain Layne said, "Do you have any idea how much gas it would take to saturate the sort of area you're talking about?"

"I know." Garm replied, "But it had to come from somewhere."

Hatred.

Vay picked up on the feeling from further ahead in the tunnel, beyond the range of the glowrods being used by the COMPForce troopers.

"Garm lookout!" she yelled and she pushed him aside just in time. The tunnel ahead was lit up by the flashes of energy weapon fire and three of the COMPForce troopers fell dead immediately.

"Suppression fire!" Captain Layne called out and the troopers returned fire, their weapons set to fully automatic and spraying energy blasts around without needing to pick out a specific target.

Pain.

There was an inhuman shriek as the COMPForce troopers hit something and Vay felt its suffering through the force. At the same time the incoming fire ceased.

"Hold your fire!" Vay shouted, "You got it."

"Whatever it is." Captain Layne said as his men also ceased fire, but kept their weapons at the ready.

"Well let's go find out shall we?" Garm said looking at Vay. Then he looked at Captain Layne, "Give me one of those light sticks." He said, holding out his hand. The captain removed a chemical light stick from his webbing and passed it to Garm who immediately activated it and then hurled it down the tunnel. Ahead was a junction and in the water something floated, unmoving. Something alien," Cover me." Garm said and he began to make his way forwards.

"Captain what's happening up there?" Major Kramm's voice demanded via comlink.

"We came under fire sir. Everything's under control now though. Agent Larcus and the young woman have just gone on ahead."

"Say again. They went on ahead?"

"Yes sir. It was his idea."

"Good. That way it's not our fault if anything unfortunate happens to him."

Upon reaching the body, Garm extending his arm and dragged it to side of the walkway at the side of the tunnel.

"Wow this is heavy." He said as he then struggled to drag it from the water and Vay knelt down to help him.

"Well I think this is our arachnid." She said, "Or one of them at least."

The alien was massive, more than two metres tall if it had been standing and looked to be covered in a thick exoskeleton. Non-humanoid, it had eight limbs consisting of what looked to be four powerful legs protruding from where its torso linked with a bulbous abdomen and two pairs of clawed arms, the upper pair much larger than the lower one. Two large eyes stared up blankly from the sides of its head while a further four smaller ones were set into its forehead.

"So would this have grossed out your sister then Garm?" Vay asked

"This freaks me out." He replied.

A belt made from a substance not too dissimilar to the web strands seen on the remains of the freighter was wrapped around the alien's waist and Garm noticed that it held several strange objects.

"Vay take a look at these." He said as he removed one of them.

"What is it?" She asked.

"I've no idea." Garm answered, "But it looks like it was grown."

"Bio-tech?"

"There are several species that use it, the ergesh for example. Though I prefer their rum to their furniture. Too sticky."

"Well this isn't an ergesh." Vay said, "They're giant plants and this is a giant spider-thing."

"Possibly with more than fifty giant spider-thing friends." Garm pointed out and then he looked back down the tunnel to see how far away the COMPForce troopers were, "Can you sense them?" he asked quietly.

Vay let the force flow through her. In direction she could sense the life force of the COMPForce company, while in another she could feel a strange alien presence. Cold and unwelcoming, each of the aliens seemed obsessed with one simple concept.

Kill.

"That way." She said, nodding.

"Captain!" Garm called out, "Have someone secure this body for examination. Then follow us."

Garm and Vay began to creep down the tunnel leading in the direction pointed out by Vay. They used glowrods to light their way, well aware that an alien killer could be lurking ahead just out of range of the light cast by them. Garm hoped that if this were to happen, Vay would be able to sense the alien before it had time to strike.

"Garm look." Vay said, halting suddenly and she looked down.

Garm copied her, shining his glowrod at his feet and he saw that the walkway was littered with the corpses of rats.

"Tunnels flooded with poison gas?" Vay said.

"It's looking more likely all the time." Garm replied, "Make sure your mask is secure." And then they carried on their way.

6.

It was Garm that stopped next, reaching out and resting a hand on Vay's shoulder.

"Listen." He whispered and Vay concentrated on the sounds in the tunnel.

From behind them she could hear the sound of footfalls on the walkways as the COMPForce company continued to follow them. But there was another sound as well, a sort of low rhythmic throbbing.

"That way." She whispered, pointing down a side tunnel.

"Ladies first." Garm replied, taking his hand from her shoulder.

As they crept down the side tunnel the water became noticeably discoloured and it was obvious to both Garm and Vay what was causing this. There was blood flowing into the water in large quantities.

The tunnel suddenly opened out into a massive junction between several different sized tunnels at various levels. Garm and Vay halted immediately, standing in the mouth of the tunnel and gazing into the chamber in horror. It was filled with the remains of the inhabitants of the settlement above set into a web that covered the walls and ceiling. Many of the bodies looked to have been dismembered to some degree with loose limbs scattered about, some also set into the walls while others dangled on lengths of web from the ceiling. But in the far corner was something far more disturbing.

The machine looked to be a fusion of standard technology and living flesh. What looked disturbingly like human hearts beat to pump water from the sewer into the heart of the machine that then expelled whatever it was producing through hoses that were a random mixture of organic and inorganic to a set of what could only be described as balloons made of skin.

Human skin.

"I'm guessing this is where the gas is made." Garm whispered.

"Yes, but who's making it?" Vay asked and almost immediately they got their answer.

The alien that entered the far side of the chamber looked to be shorter and less bulky than the one killed in the tunnel. Entering from one of the upper tunnel entrances it scuttled across the ceiling, using the entombed bodies of the locals as hand and foot holds. The alien apparently did not need to watch what it was grasping as it went. It appeared that to it this was a very natural way of moving.

It descended by the machine and looked to be inspecting it when suddenly it turned to face Garm and Vay and let out a sudden high-pitched shriek. Garm raised his blaster, but before he could fire the alien suddenly leapt upwards to the ceiling and his shot went low, striking the machine. The alien let out another shriek as it looked down at the damage inflicted by the shot. The regular throbbing sound had stooped, replaced by a strange gurgling that suggested something inside it was broken. The alien came rushing headlong towards them and both Garm and Vay attempted to take aim. However, the alien was too fast and too agile and in moments it was almost right above them. It let out another shriek and suddenly dropped, a thick strand of web trailing from its abdomen to control its descent and it grabbed both Garm and Vay by the throat with its larger set of arms while the smaller ones ripped their blasters from their grips.

But Vay had another weapon.

There was a sudden 'snap-hiss' as she ignited her lightsaber, positioning the weapon so that as the blade extended it burned a hole through the alien's exoskeleton, seared the flesh inside and then burned another hole on the far side of its body. The alien tensed for a moment, its grip relaxing and as Garm and Vay broke free the alien collapsed in a heap at their feet. Immediately Vay shut off her lightsaber and hid it in a pouch on her belt once more.

"What's happening?" Captain Layne called out as he led the led element of the COMPForce troops towards them.

"We found the locals captain." Garm said as he picked up his blaster.

"And another of them I see." The captain replied, looking down at the alien's body, "But how the hell did you do that to it?"

"Oh that?" Garm said as he realised that the captain must have noticed the wound inflicted by Vay's lightsaber. None of the COMPForce troops were authorised to know who Vay really was, few people were, so Garm needed to offer an alternative explanation, "I got off a lucky shot." He said, "Now do you have a grenade?"

"A grenade? Of course. But you're seriously suggesting we use one down here are you?"

"That's exactly what I'm suggesting captain." Garm said, "I want you to destroy that – that whatever it is. I think the aliens are using it to make their poison gas." And he pointed to the strange alien machine.

Captain Layne pulled a grenade from his webbing and removed the pin.

"Cover your ears and open your mouths, you may want to step back a bit as well. Fire in the hole." He said and he hurled it at the machine.

The sound of the grenade blast echoed down the tunnels.

"Captain what the kriff is going on?" Major Kramm demanded using his comlink.

"Agent Larcus' orders sir." Captain Layne replied, "Alien equipment destroyed."

Just then the air was filled with chattering sounds from all around and Major Kramm realised that he was not only hearing it around him, but over the comlink also. The aliens were all around them.

"Incoming!" he bellowed as he raised his rifle.

"Fall back!" Captain Layne ordered as the aliens came pouring into the room from all sides.

Some of the aliens looked to be the smaller version like the one that Vay had just killed, but most were the larger kind and carried weapons that spat crude energy blasts at the Imperials, cutting down another of the COMPForce troopers before they could react.

Along with Garm and Vay, Captain Layne's advance unit began to fall back towards the main body of the company. An alien suddenly leapt from a side passage, jumping up to the roof and shooting a length of web from its abdomen that caught on a trooper's rifle and pulled it from his grasp. Before the startled trooper could even try to recover his weapon the alien dropped from the ceiling and tore through his armour with its claws.

Garm fired, putting a blaster bolt into the alien's head but it was too late to save the trooper and they left him where he lay as they continued to fall back.

"Friendlies! Don't shoot!" Captain Layne called out as they reached the bulk of the COMPForce company.

Major Kramm had positioned his men at the entrance to side passages, preventing the aliens from suddenly appearing in their midst and there were several alien bodies floating in the water. But the sound of chattering could still be heard in the darkness around them.

"I'd say we got about twenty." Major Kramm said as Gram reached him.

"So that's almost half then." Gram replied, "Assuming our original estimates of their numbers was correct."

"Unfortunately they seem to be keeping just out of sight now." Major Kramm said, "We can't be sure exactly where they are so we can't risk moving and rushing into an ambush."

Vay leant to Garm and whispered to him.

"They're close."

Garm just nodded.

"What did she just say?" Mirri asked.

"She suggested using more grenades." Garm lied.

"What do you mean more grenades?" Major Kramm asked, "What fool's using grenades down here?" then he noticed the empty spot in Captain Layne's webbing and he glared at him.

"I told him to use it major." Garm said, "At a main junction to destroy the machine that I believe was being used to make the alien's poison gas."

"So there's no more gas then?" Mirri asked, reaching for her mask.

"Hold on." Vay said, taking hold of Mirri's arm before she could remove the breathmask, "We destroyed the machine that makes the gas, but there could still be traces of it about. We don't know enough about it."

"Major we need to chance using grenades." Garm said, "We don't know what resources the aliens could bring to bear on us if we stay here."

"How exactly are we going to escape if the roof comes down on us?" Major Kramm asked and Garm smiled.

"What's so funny?" Major Kramm asked him.

"I've got an idea." Garm replied, "We're going to bring the roof down. Or at least a part of it."

Everyone nearby just stared at him.

"We can't get to the exit right?" Garm said, "So we just need to make one of our own. We'll need a rifle."

Major Kramm smiled too.

"I get it now." He said and he lifted his rifle to his shoulder and aimed upwards. With a 'click' he set the weapon to fully automatic, "Stand clear!" he called out and then he pulled the trigger and held it back. The sound of the blaster echoed in the sewer as Major Kramm fired one long burst of high-energy bolts into the tunnel ceiling. The first few shots tore chunks of masonry free and steam rose from the water below as the heated debris fell into it. The material not directly struck by the continued burst of blaster shots began to heat up also and as it did so it expanded, exerting pressure on a wider area as its expansion was blocked.

Eventually the stream of blaster shots and the pressure of the expanding ceiling became too much and there was a sudden crash as an entire section of the tunnel ceiling gave way and light flooded in from above.

"Get a line up there!" the Major yelled, "It's time we were leaving."

One of the troopers began to feed a length of syntherope from a dispenser at his waist and clipped a compact grappling hook to the end. Hurling it up through the hole he tugged on the line to make sure that it had caught properly.

"Line secure major." He said.

"Captain Layne take a squad up and make sure its clear." Major Kramm ordered and immediately Captain Layne began to scale the syntherope line.

"Area secure major." He transmitted when the squad had joined him and they had deployed around the hole. "You lot next." Major Kramm said, looking at Garm, Mirri and Vay. The three ran for the line and Garm waited while the two women climbed it first before heading up after them. Once out of the hole they ran the short distance to the ring of troopers keeping watch. Then they turned to see more COMPForce troopers climbing up out of the hole. Major Kramm was one of the last to leave the tunnel, looking back down into the hole as soon as all his men were clear. "Now what?" he said to Garm, who threw a glance at Vay. "They're coming." She said and from within the hole came the sound of chattering and alien screeches. In Vay's mind she could sense the thoughts of the aliens as they charged onwards with one singular thought. *Kill.* "Time for the grenades I think major." Garm said. "Oh I agree." Major Kramm replied as he backed away from the hole. When the first of the aliens emerged a barrage of blaster fire that sent it's lifeless body tumbling back into the darkness below met it. "Now! Grenades!" Major Kramm yelled and the COMPForce troopers began to hurl grenades into the hole. The dull booming of the grenade detonations could not entirely block out the screaming of the aliens as they died and when the screaming stopped Major Kramm held up a fist to signal his men to stop. "Anything?" Garm asked Vay quietly and she shook her head.

As the star destroyer approached the upper reaches of Estran's atmosphere a shuttle dropped out of its hangar and unfolded its wings. Then as the shuttle began to descend the star destroyer banked around and headed back into deep space.

In a hangar located in a remote facility Moff Gregor Horatian straightened his tunic.

"So do you know him personally Vay?" he asked.

"No, we've never met." She replied.

"The men are ready sir." An officer announced as he approached the moff and Vay.

"Thank you Colonel Williams." Moff Horatian replied, "You may carry on."

"Yes sir." The colonel replied and he walked away, moving past the rows of troops assembled as an honour guard and taking up a position in front of a group of military personnel from various branches of Imperial service but all wearing dress uniforms and holding musical instruments.

"Here he is." Vay commented as the shuttle came into view, its wings folding for landing.

The craft flew into the hangar and settled down on the deck, a hissing sound indicating that the ramp had been unsealed and was about to be lowered. As soon as Colonel Williams heard the sound of the ramp hitting the deck he lifted his arms and the band began to play a stern martial tune.

Moff Horatian and Vay both got down on one knee and looked down as the shuttle's sole passenger disembarked.

"Good day to you my lord." Moff Horatian said when he noticed the newcomer's boots in front of him, "I trust your trip was-

"You may dispense with the pleasantries." The man interrupted, "Stand."

Both Moff Horatian and Vay got to their feet and looked at the hooded figure in front of them. He was a good ten centimetres shorter than the moff, but there was something about him that made the moff uncomfortable. The man reached up to pull down his hood, revealing a gaunt looking face.

"I am Ibram Kellensen." The man said, "I believe you have something to show me."

"Of course." Moff Horatian replied, "I've had a meal laid out, if you'd like to accompany me I can have the items brought-"

"No." Ibram said, interrupting the moff for a second time and he looked directly at Vay, staring into her eyes, "You will take me to them now."

Vay looked at the moff, who just nodded.

"Come with me." She said.

She took him to a room where several pieces of alien manufacture were laid out under sealed transparent covers. Every one looked to have been grown from some unknown biological source.

"We've kept them quarantined here." She said as Ibram looked at the artefacts.

Disappointment.

Vay felt Ibram's reaction immediately.

"These aren't what you were expecting are they?" she asked.

"No." Ibram replied.

"Then what were you hoping for?"

"Something else."

"So what will you do with these now?" Vay asked.

"They will be placed in storage." Ibram said, "The Emperor has places to keep curiosities such as these."

"Of course, I can arrange for them to be turned over to you and-"

"These objects are leaving young one. I am not." Ibram said and he turned to face her, "I was sent to evaluate more than just these objects you recovered. I was also sent to evaluate you." And he smiled.
Fear.

Vay tried to hide it, but Ibram sensed it immediately.

You are right to fear him Vay. This man is beyond help. The voice in Vay's head warned her.

The couple walked hand-in-hand along the tropical beach, watching their children play. Their daughter was knelt by the tree line collecting flowers while their son ran on ahead along the shore.

"Mom! Dad! I found treasure!" the boy called out and he waved to his parents.

Smiling they approached their son.

"Let's see son." The father said and he looked down to his son's feet where a tube-shaped cargo container had been deposited on the beach.

Smiling the boy leant down and opened the container, revealing an interior that was filled with strange glistening fibres.

Behind them the young girl paused her flower picking and looked up as she heard a chattering sound from within the trees. Her parents suddenly turned around when they heard her scream.