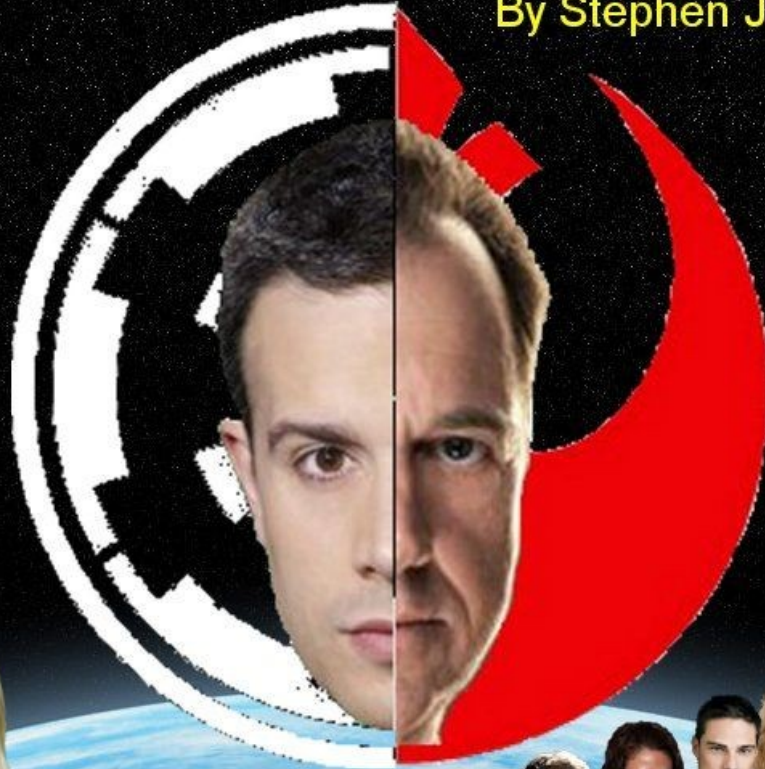


STAR WARS

2-12: Cloud of Darkness

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 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...

CLOUD OF DARKNESS

INVESTIGATING BIZARRE CLAIMS OF LIGHTS IN THE SKY, GARM AND VAY FIND
THEMSELVES FAR FROM HOME...

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

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1.

"What's with the mess?" Vay asked as soon as she entered the office.

Agent Garm Larcus of the Imperial Security Bureau looked up from his desk, where folders and datapads were stacked high. He held a datapad up so that the young woman could see it.

"Bureau of Ships and Services? Are you thinking of buying a starship? A little yacht with just enough room for two perhaps?"

"On my pay? Not likely." Garm replied, "I'm looking for my father."

"Oh." Vay responded and she sat down opposite Garm and looked at the stack of records on his desk.

Garm's father, Vorn Larcus the third, had been a member of Estran Parliament for many years. But he was expelled from that proud institution because of his rebel sympathies and, much to Garm's annoyance defected to the Alliance.

"What really gets me," he began, "is that we had him. On Allastra. Then the moff went and handed him over to that bitch from intelligence who promptly lost him."

The woman Garm was referring to was Gayal Tharr, the head of Imperial Intelligence for the sector.

Intelligence and the ISB saw each other as rivals at best and Gayal had successfully lobbied the sector moff to give her organisation jurisdiction over Vorn when he was captured.

Vay did not reply to this. Though Intelligence had been responsible for Vorn's security when he escaped, Garm was not entirely blameless either. He had requested Vay to go against the moff's wish that she accompany Gayal to Allastra to take charge of the rebel leader. In turn Vay had not only manoeuvred Gayal into refusing to take her along, but had followed on later and seen to it that the base's defences failed just as Vorn was making his escape. Instead she focused on Garm's current plan.

"So what's your plan then?" she asked.

"I saw him on Kelner." Garm said, "He was part of the team that extracted the rebels the garrison caught. I saw him standing on the ramp to the rescue ship."

"A YT-2400?" Vay asked and she held up another datapad that listed the registrations of several such transports.

"That's it. I thought if we could find the ship he's using right now it could lead us to him."

"So what have you found?"

"I've found that despite the YT-2400 being a lot less common than other makes of light freighter, there are a bloody awful lot of them about."

"Well then, since you're not having any luck with this how about you help me out with a little job?"

Garm put down the datapad he was holding.

"I'm listening." He said.

"Ooh, I knew you'd say yes." Vay said as she leapt up from her chair and rushed to Garm's side.

"I haven't yet." He pointed out as she pushed the clutter on his desk away from his computer terminal and began to access it.

"Well you will." Vay replied and she pointed at what now appeared on the computer display.

Garm frowned as he leaned closer.

"Strange lights in the sky?" Garm said, "Is this the best you can do? I know Moff Horatian wanted you to start picking your own cases to investigate, but couldn't you have found something more credible?"

"Oh come on. Let's go check this out. Please. I've got a really good feeling about this."

"Really?" Garm replied, standing up and reaching for his uniform tunic, "Because I've got a really bad feeling about this."

"Told you." Vay said as she followed him towards the door.

"Told me what?"

"Told you you'd say yes. You owe me a drink."

Since Vay had plucked the reports of unusual lights in the sky from an obscure report that no one had bothered to investigate in the months since it had been made, Garm let her drive the landspeeder they requisitioned. As he expected, she had already planned the route.

The report had originally been made by an individual who had claimed to have been just passing through an area well outside of Estran City itself one night when he had seen what appeared to be the running lights of an airborne object pass low overhead. The local police to whom he had reported the incident had described him as 'agitated' and 'unreliable' and instead of investigating it themselves they passed it on to the ISB as an airspace violation. The ISB had read between the lines of the report and seen that the locals thought the man was making it up for attention and were passing the case on to make it look like they had done something about it, they then ignored the report entirely. Until Vay managed to stumble across it that was.

"Well," Vay said as she brought the speeder to a halt, "here we are."
"Indeed young one." Garm replied, climbing out of the vehicle and looking around, "I would be tempted to describe this place as the middle of nowhere, but to do so would falsely suggest it had a central location. What exactly was our nut job doing out here anyway?"
"Nut job?" Vay asked as she too exited the speeder, "The man who reported this is of impeccable character. I checked."
"Well that wasn't what the local cops had to say about him, but do enlighten me."
"It's all in here." Vay explained as she produced a datapad and called up the profile of the man who had made the report, "He's a licensed starship captain."
"Let me see." Garm said, snatching the datapad and looking at for himself, "So he is. Thracken Grammel. Licensed to operate an obsolete ship as far away from the issuing office as possible." Then he tossed the datapad back to Vay, who caught it with one hand without even looking.
"I tell you what," Garm said, "we've come all the way out here so even though there's nothing to see and it's getting dark. I spotted a cantina on the map; it's not much further on. We'll go and see if anyone in there's seen anything."
"Deal." Vay said, "You can buy me that drink you owe me while we're there."
"Fair enough." Garm replied, getting back into the landspeeder, "Just get in and drive."

The Laughing Hutt Inn was a single storey building that had seen better days. Located far from major transport routes it instead catered to an assortment of local hill farmers and woodsmen. Clearly the owner had decided that keeping the decoration in perfect condition was not his most pressing priority. As soon as Garm and Vay set foot inside the cantina they both became aware that they were being watched, the cantina's staff and patrons making no effort to hide this. Garm was used to people staring at Vay, the attractive young woman had a tendency to turn male heads owing to the bodygloves she preferred to wear. But here he got the feeling that he was being watched as closely as his more eye-catching partner. "What can I get for you officer?" the elderly man behind the bar asked as the pair drew near. "I'll have a fizzy-glug." Garm said then he looked at Vay, "What about you? Remember we're on duty." "The same. But diet." Garm looked at the barman. "None of your fancy city drinks here boy." He said. "Then what do you have without alcohol?" "The door." "Then I guess I'll have a beer." Garm said. "Make it two." Vay added. The barman sneered as he took a pair of glasses and filled them with beer from a tap. Without speaking Garm set a credit stick down on the bar as payment. The barman swiped the stick through his till and handed it back without a word also. Then he made his way to the far end of the bar. "Friendly aren't they?" Vay whispered as she sipped her drink. "Bumpkin land." Garm whispered back, taking care not to make eye contact with any of the locals, "If any of these, for want of a better word, 'people' saw a strange light in the sky they'd probably start worshipping it as a god." "Let's find out shall we?" Vay said as she turned around to face as much of the cantina as possible, "Excuse me." she called out loud, "But my associate and I are here investigating the sighting of strange lights in the sky. Can any of you assist us?" There were groans from all around the cantina. "You see!" a voice cried out from the shadows of one of the cantina's private booths and an elderly grey haired man burst out, "I told you all! I saw them and now they're here to help!" Garm and Vay both looked towards the man and instantly recognised him as Thracken Grammel, the man who had made the original report. "You leave these people alone Thracken." The barman said, "Don't go wasting any more people's time." "But I warned you!" Thracken yelled back at the barman. "Perhaps you should step outside with us sir." Garm suggested, putting his beer down on the bar, "We can discuss this privately." "Yes, yes of course." Thracken said and he strode confidently towards the door. "Nut job?" Garm said quietly to Vay. "Nut job." she agreed, "But someday you're going to be wrong and I want to be there to see it." Garm and Vay followed Thracken outside. Behind them another man got up and headed for a different exit. As he moved he pulled his cloak over the pendant in the shape of an infinity symbol he wore.

Outside the cantina Garm and Vay found Thracken staring up at the sky in the direction of the nebula that neighboured the sector.

"They come from there." He stated when he became aware of their presence, "I've seen them. That's why I came here, I followed them you see but they disappeared. So I waited and watched the skies from the ground until one day I saw them come in and land. So I went to where they'd landed, but they'd already gone by the time I got there."

"Is that when you contacted the police?" Garm asked.

"Yes, the police yes I did. People have to know what danger we're in."

Garm smiled and pulled out his datapad. He called up a map of the area and handed it to Thracken.

"How about you point out where they landed captain?" He said.

"Captain?"

"Well you are a licensed starship captain aren't you?" Garm replied.

"Oh yes, I am. It was here." And Thracken returned the datapad after tapping the display to place a marker on the location.

"Thank you captain." Garm said, "Now Miss Udra and I will go and check this out. You can get back to your drink. We'll be in touch if we find anything."

"Just the two of you? But it's dangerous!"

"We're both professionals captain. Now you just go back inside while we do our job."

"At last!" Thracken exclaimed, slapping Garm's shoulder. Then he rushed back into the cantina.

"So what did you get?" Garm said to Vay.

"I didn't sense any deception." She replied, "But if he's crazy then he would believe what he just told us anyway."

"Forget it." Garm said, "The locals were right, there's nothing to see here. Let's go back, I'm already late for dinner again. Jennay will be mad."

"I'll drive." Vay said, "I didn't touch my drink."

Garm just smiled and got back into the speeder, followed by Vay.

Neither Garm nor Vay spoke as she drove back toward Estran City. The sun had set completely by now and the only illumination of the road came from the speeder's headlights.

"Do you hear something?" Garm asked as they approached the location where they had stopped earlier.

"No, why?" Vay asked.

"Stop!" Garm yelled, "Kill the lights!"

Vay brought the landspeeder to a rapid halt and turned out its lights just as something large passed over head, accompanied by the sound of powerful repulsorlift engines. Both of them watched as the vessel flew off at just above treetop height, its running lights keeping it in view after its silhouette had disappeared.

"You still got that map?" Vay asked.

"Right here," Garm said, pulling out his datapad and looking at the location Thracken had highlighted.

Taking the speeder off road, Garm and Vay abandoned it only when the trees became too dense to risk driving without lights. Blasters in hand, they continued on foot.

"So why didn't traffic control spot them?" Vay said softly as they picked their way through the woods, "Could they have a cloaking device?"

"I doubt it." Garm said, "By starship standards that ship wasn't that big, no ship that small has a cloaking device. Few bigger ones do either. Besides, if it had a cloaking device then we wouldn't have seen it."

"But we would have heard it yes?"

"I don't know. I'm not up to date with cloaking technology."

"Me neither. How far now?"

"About a hundred metres I think. Keep quiet."

Picking their way further forwards, Garm and Vay heard the sound of voices. From this distance it was impossible to tell what they were saying nor to whom they belonged. But it was clear that there were organic beings ahead. When they reached the crest of a hill Garm tapped Vay on the shoulder and held up his hand for her to stop. Then the pair of them crouched down and looked at what lay beyond the hill.

Below them was a large clearing in the trees, with a trail leading off from the far side. The centre of the clearing was dominated by the shape of a light freighter, clearly the vessel that had flown over them on the road, while beside it two much smaller ground based repulsorlift vehicles were parked. One of these was a cargo carrier with an enclosed hold, while the second was a luxury landspeeder with blacked out windows. There were figures standing all around the vehicles and in addition two more stood roughly half way between the freighter and the two ground vehicles. These two seemed to be the source of the voices.

"A trandoshan?" Vay whispered, looking at the two figures. One of them was clearly a reptilian humanoid, whilst the other wore a hooded cloak that hid his identity.

"Looks like it." Garm whispered in reply, "I wonder what they're up to out here?"

Garm and Vay did not have to wait long for an answer to this question, as the hooded figure raised and hand and waved to the figures surrounding the two ground vehicles. Immediately some of them went to the rear of

the cargo carrier and opened it up. There were muffled screams as more figures were then pulled from inside it.

"Garm," Vay whispered, "I think you were right to have a bad feeling about this."

In the clearing, the figures from the back of the cargo carrier were now being dragged towards the freighter. From what Garm and Vay could tell they were human, or at least near human. All of them were hooded and had their hands bound in front of them. They were also completely naked.

"Human slavers." Garm hissed, "The lowest kind of scum. Even the Rebellion won't sink this low."

"What do we do?" Vay asked.

"We don't have time to summon back up." Garm replied, "Our comlinks will be out of range and by the time we get back to the speeder this lot will be long gone. We'll have to stop them ourselves."

"You wait here. I'm going to work my way around to the other side of the clearing. I'll create a diversion and you can sneak up behind them."

"Okay, go. I'll wait here." Vay said, nodding.

Garm got up and began to slowly make his way around the edge of the clearing, pausing periodically to check up on what was happening in the clearing itself. Not surprisingly the helpless slaves were being dragged up a ramp into one of the freighter's side mounted cargo holds. Presumably this hold had been adapted specifically for hauling live cargo.

Suddenly Garm heard a sharp 'crack' from behind him as someone stepped on a twig.

"Vay," he said as he turned around, "I thought I told you to-" then he was cut off as the man who had left the cantina just after him and Vay jabbed him with a stun baton and everything went black.

2.

From her vantage point, Vay felt the sudden sense of surprise from Garm through the force before he blacked out and she turned towards the source of the disturbance. She lifted her macrobinoculars to her eyes for a better view in the poor light. There she saw a human in a cape emerge from the tree line and call out to the other figures in the clearing. She continued to watch as some of them rushed into the trees and then emerged dragging the unconscious form of Garm behind them.

"Oh no." she said to herself softly.

Ustrussk watched his client's men pulling the unconscious ISB agent towards them. He did not know the identity of the human he was dealing with, even the man's own people never referred to him by name. But as far as Ustrussk could discern, he was a senior member of some religious order. Like his subordinates, the hooded human wore a pendant in the form of the symbol for infinity.

"You lie." He hissed, "This place not secure."

"What happened?" the hooded human said to the man from the cantina, "How did he find us?"

"Your reverence," the man replied, kneeling and bowing his head, "there was an old man who had reported seeing the transport ship arriving on a previous night. It was just coincidence that they came here tonight."

"Coincidence?" Ustrussk said, "No good. Not use this place again."

"Quite so." The hooded figure replied and he looked down at Garm, "Wait," he added, "I know this man."

"Known to you? How?" asked Ustrussk.

"He has opposed us before now. He prevented us from taking control of COMPNOR in the sector."

"He see us." Ustrussk hissed, "Maybe recognise you."

"Possibly, we met when he came to my temple."

"Then kill him."

"Yes – No! Wait." And the hooded figure held up his hand as his subordinate aimed Garm's own blaster at him, "Aside from being knocked out he seems fit to work. Strip him and put him with the rest of the cargo."

"You not pay for him." Ustrussk said, "You pay only to move others."

"My church will pay you twice what we re paying for the others. You have my word."

Vay saw the slavers drag Garm up the ramp behind the slaves and then watched as they all retreated to their respective vehicles. The two ground vehicles powered up and drove off down the trail on the far side of the clearing, leaving only the freighter.

Leaping to her feet, Vay rushed across the now deserted clearing towards the access ramp that the slavers had used to embark on the vessel. She cleared her mind and leapt forwards as the ramp began to close and rolled as she landed.

From the woods surrounding the clearing a solitary figure observed everything that happened. As he watched the freighter lift off carrying both Garm and Vay away Thracken Grammel just shook his head.

"I tried to warn them." He muttered to himself, "I've tried to warn everyone."

The room in which she had landed was dark, but she could just about make out a figure that she recognised as one of the ones to have brought Garm aboard exiting it. She reached out towards the figure through the force and without its knowledge plucked a battered datapad from its belt. She caught the datapad as it flew towards her and immediately turned it on.

She smiled as she saw that the datapad contained an inventory of the slaves carried aboard the freighter, with a number assigned to each one. She scrolled down to the end of the list where the name 'Garm Larcus' had been added. Evidently the slavers had either checked Garm's identity card or they already knew him. Switching the datapad off, Vay set it down on the floor so that the next person to come along would assume that its owner had just dropped it there and she headed for the cargo hold she had watched the slaves loaded into.

As the hatchway to the cargo bay opened, Vay saw that it had been extensively modified. Instead of a large open space that allowed the maximum volume of goods to be carried the chamber had been filled with containers packed side to side that were just large enough to contain a human sized being. Each one had a numbered hatchway on one side.

The way was clear, so Vay sprinted through the hold until she reached the hatchway marked with the number that she had read off the manifest beside Garm's name. The hatch itself was a simple lever operated door that appeared to have no locking mechanism of any sorts.

But then, she thought to herself, why should it have? It was not like anyone behind the door could reach it.

Vay therefore simply reached out her arm, threw the lever and stood back. There was a deep hiss as the door's hydraulics kicked in and it swung open to expose Garm.

"Oh god Vay! He exclaimed. His first instinct was to lower his hands to cover himself up, but the binders held firm. Vay smiled.

"Need a hand?" she asked.

"Look, just get me out of here." Garm said. Then, as Vay reached to her belt he added, "Macrobinoculars? Vay this isn't funny."

"I know." She said as she activated the viewing device, "I need them."

"What for?"

"Because they're the only thing I have that can record an image." And she pointed the macrobinoculars at Garm before activating their record function briefly. Then she put them away again.

"So not funny Vay. Get me out of here." Garm said, frowning.

"Not so fast." Vay said and she approached Garm more closely.

"Vay what are you doing?" Garm asked as she stepped through the hatchway and pressed up against him.

"This is the slaver's ship right?" Vay asked rhetorically, "So it figures that it's going either to their base of operations or to meet whoever is buying from them. I intend for us to be there when this ship reaches its destination, so I need somewhere safe to hide."

"Somewhere to hide? Wait. Vay no! This place isn't a safe place to hide."

"Yes it is." She replied, "Who would think to look for me in here with you?"

"Well hopefully not my wife." Garm said.

"Shush. Quiet down I need to concentrate."

"What for?" Garm asked, then he realised what Vay was about to do, "Look, I really don't think this is a very good idea." He added before Vay reached out through the force and found the lever that operated the hatch. There was another hiss as the door swung closed again. As it completed its journey the inside surface pushed Vay further into the tiny compartment and up against Garm.

"Well this is cosy isn't it?" she said as they were plunged into complete darkness.

"What are you doing now?" Garm asked as he felt Vay moving.

"Getting my datapad." She said.

"Why? What do you need it for?"

"Two reasons." she replied, "Firstly the light given off by the screen will let us see."

"And what's the second?"

"I need to set that picture I took as my new background."

Garm sighed.

Vay looked up at the ceiling. She saw that a pipe ran across the compartment and that the binders securing Garm's wrists were passed through a metal hoop welded beneath this. "There's no where to wedge this." She said, holding up her datapad. Glancing at the device Garm saw that she had indeed just set the image of him as her screen background.

"I could hold it for you." He suggested.

"And delete my nice new background? Not likely" Vay replied.

"How did you-" Garm began before remembering exactly how Vay had known what he had planned to do.

"I'll just have to keep hold of it myself." Vay said, "Now let me get my legs around you."

"What?"

"My legs. I'm going to wrap them around your waist and hang onto you. Then you bend your knees and lift your feet off the deck."

"I get it." Garm said, "Then our combined weight hopefully breaks the metal bar I'm cuffed to."

"Well, mainly your weight."

"I know. I'm married remember?"

Vay frowned for a moment and glared directly into Garm's eyes, then she wrapped her arms around him tightly. Then she lifted her legs one at a time to wrap them around his waist.

"I'm so glad Jennay can't see me now." Garm muttered and he slowly bent his knees until his feet were lifted clear of the deck.

Supporting not only his own weight but also that of Vay, Garm could feel the binders digging into his wrists and he gritted his teeth as the pain intensified.

"Try not to think about the pain." Vay said.

"Oh that's so helpful!" Garm replied, "What should I think about?"

Vay paused.

"How about this?" she said and she kissed him. Not just a peck on the cheek, instead she pressed her lips up against Garm's and held them there. Garm's eyes widened in surprise. Instinctively he moved his head back, but Vay just lent forwards to continue the kiss. She stopped only when a groaning sound caused both Garm and Vay to look upwards. Then there was a sudden 'Snap!' and the welding that held one end of the

metal loop to the pipe broke, releasing the binders. With nothing to support them, Garm and Vay dropped swiftly to the deck.

"Ahh!" Garm yelled as he landed heavily, his arms dropping around Vay.

"What are you complaining about?" Vay asked, "That seemed like quite a soft landing to me."

"That's because you're on top of me!" Garm snapped back.

Carefully due to the confines of the compartment, Vay slid from Garm's lap and sat beside him.

"I need you to hold out your hands." She said as she rummaged through the pouches on her belt.

"Err Vay, I'm using my hands to cover myself."

Vay pulled a cylinder from a pouch. It was about twenty centimetres long and four or five in diameter.

"Do you know what this is?" she asked.

"I think so." Garm replied, "I supposed I shouldn't be surprised that you have one."

There was a snap-hiss and a bright red energy blade about a metre long emerged from one end of the cylinder.

"Now I'm going to use this to release you from those binders." She said, "Do you want to hold out your hands or leave them where they are?"

Garm held out his hands.

Slowly, Vay moved the lightsaber blade closer to the binders until they came into contact. There were sparks as the blade melted through the casing of the binders and shorted out the electronics inside. This shut down the magnetic field that held them shut and they promptly sprung open. As the binders fell to the floor Garm withdrew his hands and stared at his wrists to inspect the damage done.

"Well I can still move my fingers." He said, wiggling the digits on each hand, "So what's your master plan now then?"

"I figure we wait." Vay replied, "Want to play a guessing game while we're stuck here?"

"Not particularly. I get the feeling you'd be too good at them."

"Yes I would." Vay said. She shut off the datapad to conserve its power and as they were plunged into darkness she leant her head on Garm's shoulder.

The two agents sat in the darkness and waited. At the back of her mind Vay was certain she heard a voice.

Be careful Vay, you are important to us.

"Did you hear that?" Vay asked.

"What?"

"Don't worry, it's probably nothing."

We're not leaving you alone.

3.

Vay thought she had just closed her eyes for a moment, but a glance at the luminous display on her chronometer told her she had been asleep for several hours. The first thing she noticed was that the freighter was motionless, completely lacking in the vibration it had earlier demonstrated while in flight. The second was that a life form was approaching.

"Garm." She hissed, shaking him.

"What?" Garm exclaimed as he woke up also.

"Shush. Someone's coming." Vay told him and she got back to her feet and felt for the lightsaber at her waist, "Stay down." She whispered, "I'll take care of this."

Despite the darkness, Garm could easily picture her smiling. Then he heard the footsteps outside the tiny compartment, heavy as if from sturdy footwear worn by someone who did not care who heard them moving about. Then there was a 'clunk' as the lever outside was pulled again and the door began to open with a hiss to reveal a black skinned iotran. The hairless humanoid turned towards the open hatch and spoke in a deep voice.

"Okay mister agent man, time to see the-" the iotran began, then his mouth just dropped open as he saw Vay and as the iotran reached for the blaster at his hip there was a 'snap-hiss' as the brilliant red blade of Vay's weapon extended and she lunged forwards, extending the tip of the blade before her.

The iotran let out a brief gasp as Vay drove the lightsaber into his neck, just below his jaw line and all of the way through his neck. He let go of the blaster that had just about cleared the holster and the weapon fell to the deck with a clatter. As Vay withdrew her lightsaber the iotran had just enough time to raise both his hands to clutch as his ruined throat before he dropped to his knees and then fell dead beside his dropped weapon. Vay stepped from the tiny holding chamber and looked in both directions.

"Its clear." She said as she shut off her lightsaber.

"Nice work." Garm said, looking at the body of the iotran.

"Thanks, I thought you'd appreciate me leaving his clothes intact."

"I do. Thanks."

As Vay stood watch Garm stripped the iotran's body of its outer clothing and boots and put them on himself.

"What the hell?" he commented as he pulled on the first of the boots.

"What?" Vay asked.

"Oh nothing. I just think we've found the only iotran with feet smaller than my wife's." Garm replied as he dropped the boot back to the floor, "We'll have to find some more later." He dragged the iotran's body into the holding chamber and tossed the boots in after it before closing the door again to conceal what had happened. Finally he picked up the dropped blaster and checked the battered looking weapon.

"So now what?" he asked.

"Why do you keeping asking me?"

"You picked the case, remember?"

"Oh yeah. Follow me then."

Vay led Garm back towards the room she had first gained access to the vessel by. The doorway from the converted cargo hold had been left open by the iotran and as Vay crept towards it she angled her head to see what lay beyond. From what she could see the room was empty and the access ramp was lowered.

"Quickly." Vay said and she ran towards the ramp, Garm following close behind and they both looked out at where the slavers had brought them.

The landscape outside was barren. Relatively level terrain broken here and there by rocky outcrops. Garm and Vay could make out a small cluster of figures including the trandoshan standing not far away.

"Looks like they're waiting for someone." Garm said, "Look, one of them keeps checking his chronometer."

"Then we should get out of here now," Vay said, "before more turn up."

"Good idea." Garm replied, "Look, it looks like the ground dips down over there. If we can get them to look the other way we should be able to make it."

"Leave that to me." Vay said.

"What was that?" one of the slavers suddenly cried out and he pointed in the opposite direction. His companions immediately all turned to try and see what he was pointing at, clearing the way for Garm and Vay to escape.

They sprinted down the ramp and away from the slavers, Garm wincing as his bare feet seemingly finding every sharp piece of rock between the ramp and the dip that offered them cover. As soon as they reached the dip they both slid down it and lay flat on their backs.

"I'm going to say this once only." Garm said, "But ouch." And he grabbed his ankles one at a time to inspect the soles of his feet, "I'd kill for some decent shoes right now." He said, "Wait, I'd kill for a pair of used sandals right now."

"You wouldn't wear socks with them would you?" Vay asked, smiling.

"If I ever do that, promise you'll kill me."

"Deal."

Garm rolled over and crawled up the slope to peer at the slavers.

"Someone's coming." he said, "Do you still have those macrobinoculars?"

"Of course I do." Vay replied and she handed them to him, "But remember I've already copied that picture to my datapad."

Garm frowned as he took the macrobinoculars before directing them towards the freighter and the slavers standing beyond it.

"How do I record?" he asked.

"Triangular button under your left index finger." Vay said, "Light press for a still shot, hold it until you hear a bleep for video. Same button to stop."

Garm depressed the button and held it until the macrobinoculars beeped.

"What do you see?" Vay asked and she crawled up the slope beside Garm.

"Similar to what we saw on Estran." Garm said, "Two vehicles. One a large transport, the other a smaller passenger vehicle, only this one's mounting a weapon."

Vay looked for herself. Even without the magnification of the macrobinoculars she could make out the two approaching vehicles. Both were primitive ground vehicles, with rugged wheels for off road travel. The smaller of the two was open topped and just as Garm had said there was a bulky weapon about the size of a repeating blaster fixed to its roll cage on a pintle mount. The occupants of this vehicle all looked to be human, though the fact that they wore goggles and had cloth wrapped around their faces to protect them from dust made it impossible to be certain.

The two vehicles drew to a halt beside the slavers and one of the passengers in the smaller armed one got out and approached them.

Ustrussk watched as the human approached, removing the crude coverings he used to protect his face while riding in the open vehicle.

"You pay." Ustrussk hissed, "Pay now."

"One moment." The man said, "I was told you were bringing us an Imperial agent."

"Yes. Pay double for him."

"I will pay when I see him."

Ustrussk looked at one of his subordinates.

"Find Krelt, bring agent." He said and the other slaver nodded before heading back to the freighter.

The slaver ran through the freighter to the cargo hold.

"Krelt!" he shouted from the door, "Krelt where are you?"

When there was no reply the slaver made his way towards the holding chamber where Garm had been held and opened it. Then he stepped back in surprise as Krelt's half naked body tumbled out on the floor in front of him.

"Captain!" the slaver shouted as he rushed back out of the freighter, "He's gone! Krelt's dead!"

Ustrussk snarled and the man standing in front of him scowled.

"Quickly!" the man exclaimed, "Get the other slaves into the truck." Then he pulled a thick bundle of banknotes from his pocket and removed several of them before handing the rest to Ustrussk, "Here, this is for the slaves. I'm not paying for the Imperial agent if you've let him escape."

"Agent here. I bring. You pay me."

"Give me the agent and I'll give you the money. Alternatively just hand over the property I've paid for and leave us to catch him ourselves."

Ustrussk snarled.

"Unload the cargo." He hissed at his crew.

Garm returned the macrobinoculars back to Vay.

"Here." He said as he handed them over, "Put these away and keep them safe, they're our only set and we may need them again later." Vay smiled as she put the macrobinoculars back in the pouch on her belt.

"So what now?" she asked.

"When they've finished loading the captives we'll follow them back to wherever they're camped and figure out what they're doing here. Wherever here is."

Vay looked up.

"The sky's a funny colour."

"So it is." Garm replied as he too glanced upwards, "Sort of greenish."

"Something in the atmosphere perhaps?" Vay suggested.

"Maybe." Garm answered, "But it seems like a normal type one atmosphere to me. I think that colour is coming from outside the atmosphere and I've got a really bad feeling about what that means."

"Outside? How? What makes that so bad?"

"Because to influence the atmosphere in broad daylight whatever is causing the discolouration would have to be massive and very close. Close enough to overcome the energy output of the local star."

"But what could do that to—" Vay began, then her jaw dropped, "Oh no. The nebula."

"Exactly." Garm said, "I think this planet's on a star system inside it."

"A system inside the nebula? Our star charts don't have any on them do they?"

"Not as far as I know. If the survey corps or navy knows about any they're keeping it quiet. But either way I don't think we can count on a rescue ship."

"So how do we get back to Estran?"

"We hope the slavers have one we can steal. You can fly a ship right?"

"Of course."

"Good, because I can't." Garm said, then as the ground vehicles' engines rumbled into life he added,

"They're leaving, let's go."

4.

Del Juran knelt before one of his masters.

"The Imperial agent was not among the shipment my lord." He said, keeping his gaze low as the alien stood over him, "It seems that he managed to escape. I have my men organising a search for him."

"Them." The alien said.

"My lord?" Del said, unsure of what his master meant and he glanced upwards. The alien scowled as he briefly looked it in the face and Del lowered his gaze quickly, before his master could take offence.

"Them." The alien repeated, "The agent could not have escaped from his cell alone. He had help. Tell your men to look for at least two intruders. Now go, do your duty."

"Yes my lord." Del said and he stood up and turned to leave the room.

"Oh and Watchman Juran-" the alien said just as he reached the door.

"Yes my lord?" Del asked, turning around and casting his gaze at the floor again.

"If the intruders are not in my torture chamber by sundown then you will be."

Del gulped.

"Yes my lord." He answered before he turned and ran from the room.

"Hadral." Another alien voice said from the far corner and Hadral looked in the direction from which it had come to where another of his species had observed the conversation he had had with Del, "What concerns you so much about these intruders? If the trader brought them here then they have no means off this world. We remain hidden."

"Perhaps so Merkra." Hadral replied, "But it may be of benefit to know what led them here and besides, our servants need the occasional reminder of what happens if they fail us."

"Indeed they do."

The trail left by the ground vehicles had been easy to follow, even more so because it was clear that they, or vehicles like them, had made the trip back and forth along that route on many occasions.

Still barefoot, Garm could move only relatively slowly, picking his way between the sharp rocks that littered the barren surface. On the other hand, though Vay could move more easily she chose to remain by Garm's side just in case they were discovered.

"Wait." She said suddenly, grasping Garm by his shoulder.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Get down." Vay said and they both crouched down as Vay reached for her macrobinoculars again, "I think there's someone over there beside the road." She nodded to indicate a direction and Garm looked for himself. Sure enough there was what looked like someone lying beside the road a short distance ahead.

"Whoever it is, they're not moving." Garm said.

"It could be a sniper." Vay said as she raise the macrobinoculars.

"I think not." Garm said and he stood up again and walked towards the mystery being. He kept his blaster trained on whoever it was, just in case.

"Garm wait!" Vay called out, putting the macrobinoculars away again and instead drawing her compact blaster before she rushed after him.

"Just as I thought." Garm said, lowering his blaster, "He's dead."

"Dead? Oh yes, so he is." Vay added.

The corpse had once been a middle aged human male in clothing that was made from crude animal skin and patched in several place. Now he was just an anonymous corpse lying in the sun.

"He looks to have been dead a while." Vay said, "It looks like scavengers have been at his face."

Garm could see what Vay was talking about. The dead man's face was covered in small wounds around his nose and mouth. None of them looked deep and Garm considered it unlikely that they had been responsible for his death. But nevertheless they looked strange.

"Or maybe not." Garm said as he knelt down beside the man.

"What are you doing?" Vay asked as she watched Garm prod the dead man's face and then look closely at his fingertips.

"These wounds are self inflicted." Garm said, "Look." And he held one of the dead man's hands against the wounds on his face. Vay saw that the spacing between the fingers matched that between the wounds. Vay crouched down beside Garm.

"But what made him do that to himself?" she asked.

"Look at his nose and mouth." Garm said and he turned the dead man's head. Then Vay noticed what Garm had seen. The corpse's mouth remained tightly shut as its head was turned and additionally both nostrils appeared pressed closed even though there was nothing pressing down on them.

"An adhesive?" Vay said.

"Yes. Fast acting and quite strong. Someone glued his nose and mouth shut. There are plenty of domestic glues that would do it. Then he suffocated while he tried to claw them open again."

"So he was murdered?"

"I doubt it was suicide. Whoever did this wanted him to suffer."

For a moment neither of them said anything as they looked at the body of the murdered stranger. Then Vay spoke.

"Look on the bright side." She said.

"Bright side?"

"His boots look about your size."

Garm looked at the man's feet and saw that Vay was right. He reached out and began to undo the boots before he paused and looked back at Vay.

"You should take the rest of his clothes." He said, "Put them over you bodyglove. I get the feeling it will help us blend in if we run into any of the locals."

Del threw his rucksack into the air speeder and leapt in after it.

"Keep us at about a hundred metres." He said to the pilot, "We need to be able to spot human sized targets."

"Yes sir." The pilot said and with a pulsing sound the replusorlift vehicle's engine sprang to life and it rose into the air. He flew towards the spot where Ustrussk's slave ship had landed, keeping to the altitude Del had specified. Below them a ground vehicle laden with armed men drove out of the camp's perimeter gate.

"Ground unit ready for orders." A voice stated over the air speeder's comlink.

"Good, follow us and await orders." Del replied. Then he glanced at the pilot, "Slow down." he ordered, "We'll never find them if we just speed straight past them."

He rummaged in his bag and removed a set of macrobinoculars. Not as complex as Vay's, these showed much greater signs of wear and tear. Then he lifted them to his eyes and began to search the ground below.

"Looks like a Tee-sixteen." Vay said, "No weapons evident. You think they're looking for us?" then she lowered her macrobinoculars.

"Its likely." Garm replied and he looked around.

The two Imperial agents had made their way further along the trail left by the ground vehicles that had met the freighter. Now that Garm was no longer barefoot they had made much better progress but they were still located in open country.

"We're too exposed here." He said. They were lying in a shallow dip beside the trail, but Garm knew that it would be of little use in concealing them when the aircraft closed on them.

"Over there." Vay said, pointing, "Those rocks should shelter us."

"Wait no!" Garm exclaimed and he dragged Vay back down just as she began to get up.

"What?" Vay asked.

"We'll never make it." Garm told her, "That air speeder will see us before we get there."

"Then what do you suggest?"

Garm did not reply. He had no idea what to do at all.

"Down there!" Del exclaimed, pointing, "Take us in closer." And he put the macrobinoculars away and instead took hold of the rifle that was lay between him and the pilot, "I want a clearer shot."

The energy bolt struck the ground just in front of Garm and Vay.

"They've seen us!" Vay exclaimed.

"Yes, thank you." Garm replied, "I deduced that for myself." Then another energy bolt impacted the ground nearby.

"Hang on," Vay said, "those are stun bolts."

"So?" Garm asked.

"So if that's a Tee-sixteen then it only has room for two people, the pilot and whoever's got the blaster."

"Yes, so?"

"So there must be another group following to take us back to their camp. We can't do anything about that air speeder, but we can handle some thugs at ground level. We just need them to think we're out cold."

"How do you suggest we do that?"

"You wait for a near miss and just lie still, then I'll run for it."

"But they'll just shoot you."

"Let me worry about that."

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Garm said. Then a blast struck the ground just beside him and he lay flat on the ground, "Like this?" he said without moving.

"Exactly." Vay said and then she got up and ran towards the rocky outcrop she had seen earlier.

The airspeeder swooped down towards her, its passenger firing his blaster. Vay ran in a zigzag pattern and the energy blasts struck the ground close to her, getting ever closer. Then one finally struck her on her hip and Vay fell.

She let the force flow through her, using it to keep her from blacking out. Nevertheless she did not pick herself up from the ground and instead lay still.

"Vay?" Garm called out, "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Vay called back, "Now let's see what they do next."

Del grinned.

"That's both of them." He said, putting the blaster rifle back where it had been stored. Then he activated the airspeeder's comlink, "Ground, this is air." He said.

"Go ahead air." The reply came.

"Two subjects down. Keep following the road, you'll find them about seven kilometres from the camp."

"Copy that air. Be there in three minutes."

Del shut off the comlink and leant back in his seat while the pilot turned back towards the camp.

The men leapt from their vehicle as soon as it stopped. Three headed towards Vay, while the other two walked in Garm's direction. Believing their opponents to have been rendered unconscious, they left their weapons in holsters and slung.

"It's a woman." One of the men approaching Vay said, "A looker too."

"Nice." Another of them said, "I like blondes."

The first man crouched down beside Vay and rolled her over.

"Hello boys." She said and the man's jaw dropped as he saw the lightsaber in her hand. He reached for his sidearm, but before he could even lay a hand on it Vay activated her weapon and the bright red blade extended through his chest.

Their attention diverted towards the brief screaming of their companion, the two men approaching Garm stopped and looked around. Garm took the opportunity presented to him, pointed his blaster towards them and fired. The shot struck one of the men between his shoulder blades and he fell to the ground without making a sound.

Caught between two opponents who were both very much alert, the remaining men all reached for their weapons. Garm fired again, bringing down the second man near to him while Vay leapt to her feet and brandished her lightsaber in front of her. One of the men facing her fired his pistol and she deftly deflected energy bolt with the blade of her lightsaber, sending it harmlessly away. The man fired again and this time she sent the energy bolt back towards him and he fell dead.

Realising that he was outnumbered, the final man turned and ran back towards his vehicle. Vay shut off her lightsaber and extended an arm towards him. Concentrating, she reached out through the force and used it to lift a rock from the ground before hurling at him. The rock struck the man at the base of his skull and with a surprised grunt he collapsed.

Garm smiled as he approached Vay.

"I'm impressed." He said to her, "Now let's see what our new friend over here has on his person shall we?"

The unconscious man had nothing on him to identify who he was and little else in his pockets either. But Garm did find one item of interest.

"Well, well." He said, "A tube of contact adhesive. One that has a nice little warning on it that says 'Bonds skin and eyes in seconds'."

"So this the dead man we found was probably killed by him then?" Vay asked.

"It looks that way. Unless these guys all carry this sort of stuff around with them. So what have you found?"

"How do you know I've found anything?"

"Because I saw you smile when you checked under his shirt. Now what's there?"

"A tattoo." Vay said, "I think you'll find the design interesting." And she pulled down the man's shirt collar to reveal a small tattoo located at the top of his chest.

"An infinity symbol." Garm said.

"Exactly. The Church of Infinity. They must be running this." Vay said with a smile. Garm just looked at her.

"Not necessarily." He replied.

"What else could this mean?" Vay asked.

"All it means is he had their symbol tattooed on his chest. From the looks of it I'd say it's a prison tattoo."

"So what?"

"So all sorts of preachers go into prisons to recruit new followers and try to save their souls. The prisoners tend to lap it up because when it comes to parole hearings they get someone to testify that they've found redemption and will be good if they're let out. Then as soon as they're out of the gates the church never sees them again and they go back to sinning like its on special offer. No, if we're going to accuse anyone of being behind this we'll need a lot more than a tattoo."

“Like a confession?”

“Yes, a confession is always good and I think I know how to persuade him to talk.” Garm replied and he held up the tube of glue.

5.

The man groaned as he began to come around.

"Get up." Garm said sternly and he dragged the man to his feet.

"My eyes," he said, "I can't see."

"Told you." Garm said to Vay, "Bonds skin and eyes in seconds."

"What?" the man exclaimed.

"Oh didn't I tell you?" Garm replied, "That glue you used to kill that man we found? We used it to glue your eyes shut. You may also notice that your hands re stuck together. Don't worry, we found the solvent in your vehicle, so answer our questions and we'll let you go."

"Kriff off. You'd better – Oof!" the man suddenly doubled over as Garm delivered a punch to his stomach.

"You see," Garm said, "while you're like this you'll never know what's coming. Now how about you tell us what you're doing on this planet."

"I don't know what's going on." The man answered, "We don't have anything to do with the work gangs. We just look after the camp. Now get me the solvent."

"Wait here." Garm said to the man, "My partner and I are just going to discuss this. I suggest you stay very still because you're only a couple of metres from a very sharp drop and I'd hate for you to injure yourself."

Then he let go of the man and along with Vay he walked away.

"Well?" Garm said softly.

"I didn't notice any signs of deception in his answer." Vay replied, "But he's not quite as calm as he's trying to let on. He's scared of us."

"Good. Fear is good." Garm said and Vay smiled. Suddenly there was a shriek from the direction of their prisoner. Garm and Vay rushed to where they had left him and looked down. There at the bottom of the cliff they saw his body.

"There's just no helping some people." Garm said and he and Vay looked at one another.

You should have prevented that. The voice in Vay's head told her.

Garm and Vay took the vehicle their enemies had brought. Though unlike a modern replusorlift it's wheeled chassis was not impervious to the effects of terrain, it had been designed for use on surfaces other than prepared roads so Garm steered it off the trail to avoid any traffic they may encounter coming the other way. Driving parallel to the trail, Garm kept going until he saw a structure appear on the horizon.

"What's wrong?" Vay asked.

"Nothing." Garm replied, switching off the engine, "I just thought it might be a good idea to take a closer look before we go driving up to the place, that's all. Come on, there's a rise over there we can use."

Taking some of the weapons they had recovered from the men sent to capture them, Garm and Vay headed for the higher ground further from the road. Upon reaching it they lay down and looked towards the structure that had caused Garm to stop.

"Look's a bit of a mess." Vay said, peering through her macrobinoculars.

The camp was a collection of buildings that varied from commercially available prefabricated structures to several that looked to have been built form locally available materials. Dominating the scene was the structure that had first come into view as they had approached the camp, a tall, hollow tower topped with a storage tank. There were no markings on the tank to indicate what it contained, but Garm guessed that it was the camp's water supply. A few ground vehicles of various types could be seen parked near to some of the buildings, while an airspeeder that presumably was the one that had attacked them earlier was located on a flat landing zone beside a larger vehicle.

"That looks like just what we need." Garm said as he looked at the landing zone, "A lantillian short hauler if I'm not mistaken."

"I'd say so." Vay said as she studied the compact starship, "But if there's a landing pad here then why didn't the slavers use it?"

"Perhaps whoever runs this place doesn't trust them enough to tell them exactly where it is." Garm said,

"Now do you think you can fly that ship?"

"Of course, can't you?"

"No, there's not much call for it in the ISB."

"Look!" Vay exclaimed, interrupting him and she pointed to the far side of the camp where a line of figures was trudging through a gate in the wire fence that surrounded it.

"Looks like there's been quite few deliveries of slave workers." Garm said, "Are they all human?"

"I think so." Vay replied, "But their guards aren't. Here, take a look for yourself." And she handed her macrobinoculars to Garm. He took them and held them to his eyes.

Sure enough the figures that appeared to be standing guard over the returning slaves were not human. The green skinned beings stood about two metres tall and had eyes that stuck out from either side of their elongated heads. As Garm observed them, the aliens led the slaves into a collection of crude buildings that were located in a part of the camp that was surrounded by a wire fence to separate it from the rest. Garm guessed that this area was where the slaves lived.

"I don't recognise the species." Garm said, "But they definitely seem to be in charge. Look, even the humans with guns don't look them directly in their faces."

"I guess that's why that guy said he didn't know what was going on here. The aliens take the slaves out to work and the other humans never get to see what they're doing."

"Sounds reasonable." Garm said, "Now we just need to figure out how to get to that ship."

Beside him Vay began to remove the jacket she was wearing over her bodyglove.

"What are you doing?" Garm asked as she tossed jacket away and began to remove the trousers.

"How would you feel about tying me up?" Vay said, looking him in the eyes.

"I think the last time I did that I ended up tied to you for almost a full day." Garm replied.

Vay sighed.

"Well I can't promise you'll be that lucky again."

In the dim light of dusk, the guard at the main gate spotted the vehicle approaching. It was immediately clear that not all of the men who had taken it out were returning it and the guard peered through his rifle scope for a better look. Instantly he saw that of the two people sat in the vehicle neither of them were from the group that had left earlier on. Dropping to one knee he aimed at the approaching vehicle.

"Halt!" he cried out and the driver of the vehicle brought it to a complete stop still several metres from the gate.

"What's the matter?" Garm called out.

"Get your hands up!" the guard shouted as he got back to his feet and advanced, keeping his weapon trained on Garm.

"Hey look," Garm said as he lifted his hands above his head, "it's just me."

"Shut up!" the guard shouted as he stared at Garm. Then he stopped and blinked.

"Are you okay?" Garm asked.

"I, err-" the guard said, lowering his weapon. Looking at Garm he realised that he was looking at the man who had been driving the vehicle when it had come past him before, "Sorry." The guard added, shaking his head, "I didn't recognise you there for a moment. Must be the light."

"That's alright buddy. Look, can I lower my hands now?"

"What? Oh yes." The guard said and Garm placed his hands back on the steering wheel. The guard then looked at Vay. She was sat in the rear of the vehicle and had her wrists and ankles bound, "Who's she? And where are the others?" he asked.

"We only found her." Garm replied, "But the guys in the airspeeder said they shot two so the others stayed behind to look for the other one while I brought her back here."

"Well you better get her inside." the guard said, "I'm sure the overseers will want to question her before they rip out her tongue and set her to work with the rest."

"Sure thing." Garm said as the guard stepped back and he drove through the gateway. Then, when he was sure that the guard was out of earshot he said, "So what did you make him see?"

"The man who was driving when this vehicle left to look for us." Vay replied, "It was easy, he was thinking about him so I just made him think that you were him. Do you think he was serious? About ripping out tongues?"

"It would explain why the guy we questioned didn't know what was going on here." Garm said as he steered the vehicle into the gap between two buildings, "After all it would be pretty easy for a guard to bribe a slave, but a slave with no tongue can't answer any questions."

You have to help them.

"Shut up." Vay muttered.

"What was that?" Garm asked as he brought the vehicle to a stop.

"Oh nothing." Vay said, "Just remembering something I was told once."

Garm climbed down from the vehicle.

"Well if we're going to find a way off this rock we'll be better off on foot." He said.

"Help me down." Vay replied, sliding towards the back of the vehicle.

Garm reached up and pulled her over his shoulder then lowered her to the ground.

"Thanks." Vay said, pulling her hands free and reaching down to untie her ankles.

"Hey!" Garm exclaimed, "I thought you couldn't use your abilities to untie yourself. So how come I had to lift you down if you can?"

"Garm," Vay said as she stood up straight again, "getting out of those ropes had nothing to do with my abilities with the force. You're just not very good at tying people up. If we have time on the flight home I'll let you practice on me if you want."

"No thanks, the ISB issues binders anyway."

"Then if we find some binders you can practice with them instead."

Garm sighed.

"Here's your gear." He said, pulling a bag from beneath one of the benches in the back of the vehicle, "Now let's get a move on, my wife will be wondering where I am."

Vay frowned as she pulled her utility belt and a blaster carbine from the bag. Still wrapping the belt around her waist, she followed Garm as he walked to the corner of the building.

"See anything?" she asked, standing right behind Garm while he looked around the corner.

"Not much movement." He said, "I guess the slaves are all tucked up for the night and the guards are relaxing too- Wait, get back." And he stepped back towards Vay.

"Ow!" she cried out as he stood on her foot.

There was a sudden cry of alarm in an alien language.

"Oh no." Garm said. Then he added, "Run!" and he ran back away from the corner.

"What is it?" Vay asked, hobbling after him.

"You know those weird aliens?"

"The ones with the tall heads? Yes."

"Well there's about a dozen of them that heard you."

Ignoring the pain in her foot, Vay picked up her speed.

Hadrak closed his eyes and leant back.

"Say that again." He said to the warrior standing before him.

"There were two of them sir." The warrior said, "We believe that they entered using a vehicle taken from the party sent to retrieve them."

Hadrak opened his eyes again and leant forwards over his desk.

"And how exactly did they manage to get past the guard on the gate?" he asked.

"The guard was tricked sir. He claimed that the man he saw driving the vehicle was one of the missing party."

"This trick, it was one of the mind yes?"

"It was sir." The warrior answered, smiling.

"Then despite the guard's failure we may have just been given exactly what we need." Hadrak said and he stood up and reached for the jacket that hung on the wall behind him, "I will co-ordinate the search myself." He said as he headed for the door. As it slid open he paused and looked back at the warrior, "Oh and the guard that failed us..." he began.

"Yes sir?" the guard asked when Hadrak paused mid sentence.

"He still failed us. Remove his tongue and put him with the other slaves." Hadrak said, then he left the office.

6.

Garm and Vay took cover behind a stack of empty crates.

"How many?" Garm asked.

Vay closed her eyes and breathed deeply.

"I can't tell." She said, "There must be hundreds of slaves in those huts, I can't pick out the human guards against them and there's something odd about the aliens."

"What about them?"

"I don't know. I can feel them in the force all right, but it's as if they don't have a proper presence there. I'm not strong enough to pick up on exact numbers."

Garm peered out from behind the crates and saw a group of figures. Despite the steadily diminishing light, the glow rods they carried made them stand out in the night.

"Well I can see four of them from here," he said, "plus two humans who won't look them in their sticky out eyes. Humans subservient to aliens, its not natural I tell you."

The sound of rapid footsteps made Garm duck down again just as a group of armed humans rushed past.

"That was close." Garm whispered.

"Too close." Vay said, "Look, we need to get out of here."

"Oh I agree." Garm said and he glanced around the crates once more, "Over there." He said softly, "The compound where the slaves are kept. I can't see any guards moving about. If we cut through the fence—"

"You mean if I cut through the fence."

"Yes alright. If you cut through the fence then we can cut between the slave quarters and get to the landing field."

"Lead the way." Vay said and without a word Garm stood up and dashed towards the fence that isolated the slave quarters from the rest of the camp.

Vay followed him, both of them continuously looking back and forth for any sign that they had been spotted by either the human guards or their alien masters. Garm stopped short of the fence and slid the last few metres, throwing up a cloud of dust as he came to a halt just in front of it. Meanwhile Vay came to a more controlled stop and crouched beside him.

"Right," she said as she pulled her lightsaber from her belt, "Let me know when the coast is clear and I'll cut through." And she held the weapon against the wire mesh fence.

Garm looked around. He could see no one, either human or alien and he was about to tell Vay to cut the fence when he spotted something at his feet.

"Vay wait!" he hissed.

"What is it?"

Garm pointed at the furrow in the ground where he had slid across it. In the nighttime gloom a smooth, rounded surface was just about visible at the bottom. Garm reached down and knocked against it with a knuckle.

"It's warm." He whispered, "Probably pressurised tibanna gas for heating the buildings."

Vay's face fell.

"I think I'll move a bit further away before I activate my lightsaber." She said and she began to shuffle along the fence.

"Good idea." Garm said, "I don't want to be blown all the way back to Estran."

Now certain that they were not being watched and that they were not crouching on top of a pipe filled with highly flammable gas, Vay activated her lightsaber and slashed through the fence. Then she shut off the weapon before its red glow could give them away. Garm reached out for the break in the fence then withdrew his hand, shaking it as he touched the hot tips of the severed wire.

"I think we should give it a moment or two to cool down." He said.

"Good idea." Vay replied.

"Can you confirm that?" Hadral asked, holding his comlink in front of him.

"No lord," a human voice replied, "it was very brief. A red flash then nothing. But I heard nothing, so I don't think it was a blaster shot."

"But it came from near the slave quarters?"

"Yes lord."

"Good, then I will head there now." And Hadral shut off his comlink and put it away. Then he looked at Merkra, "What is your assessment?" he asked as they began to walk towards the slave quarters.

"Could they plan to free the workers?" Merkra suggested.

"Perhaps." Hadral replied, "But to what effect? They have no means of getting them off world. Perhaps their proximity to the slave quarters is purely coincidental, they may be trying to reach something beyond them. But what?"

Merkra considered the layout of the camp with regards to what lay on the opposite side of the slave quarters from the intruders suspected location.

"Our primary tibanna gas reserves." Merkra said, "The landing field. The morgue—"

"Wait!" Hadral said suddenly grinding to a halt, "The landing field. They're trying to get off world. Quickly, we'll head there and cut them off."

For buildings filled with people, the slave quarters were eerily quiet. But then again, Garm thought, people who had had their tongues ripped out would not make the best conversationalists. Distracted by this thought, he almost blundered into Vay when she stopped right in front of him.

"Hey." She said softly, "Stop treading on me."

"Well stop stopping." Garm replied, "Why did you stop anyway?"

"Look." Vay said and she pointed ahead.

The fence surrounding the slave quarters was barely ten metres away and beyond that lay the vast smooth surface of the landing field. Garm smiled as he looked at the transport ship located there, but his smile disappeared when he saw movement beneath it and the distinctive high-headed shape of one of the aliens came into view.

"A guard?" Garm said.

"Or a pilot." Vay replied.

"That would be useful. If there's an access code he's bound to know it."

"You think he'd tell us?"

"He will when you cut off a few bits of him after his first refusal." Garm answered and he looked around for any signs of more guards, "No one else about." He said, "Let's go."

The pair rushed to the fence and lay flat beside it. Garm aimed his carbine at the figure beneath the transport while Vay held her lightsaber to the fence.

"Now." Garm whispered when the alien looked away and there was a brief snap-hiss as Vay activated the lightsaber, angling the weapon upwards to slice through the fence instantly before deactivated it once more and returned it to her belt, "Okay, I don't think he saw us." Garm said, "We're all clear."

After giving the broken fence time to cool down, Vay crawled through the gap and Garm followed her. Then, keeping low they dashed towards the transport with their weapons aimed at the figure standing beneath it. They were just about there when all of a sudden wide area glow lamps illuminated the landing field.

"Humans!" an alien voice cried out, "Surrender now!"

Garm and Vay halted and looked around to see a group of aliens marching towards them. One looked to be a leader, he wore clothing of the same basic style but more decorated and his weapon was still in its holster while his subordinates all pointed theirs towards Garm and Vay. From the shadows all around the now brightly lit landing zone more figures, both human and alien emerged and took aim at the pair.

"You are our prisoners!" the alien leader called out, "Drop your weapons."

Garm looked down at the blaster carbine he was still holding.

"Garm," Vay said, "if they're about to rip out our tongues then there's something I want to tell you. I—"

"I know." Garm said, "But save it." And he lifted his carbine.

"Garm no!" Vay cried out and she reached out towards him a split second before he fired at one of the massive gas tanks just about visible beyond the landing field.

The night sky lit up as the tank exploded. Instantly the explosion spread to the adjacent tanks and in a massive chain reaction they all detonated.

Instinctively, Hadral began to turn towards the explosion to see the damage for himself. But before he saw what had happened he felt it as the shockwave lifted him off his feet and hurled him through the air. His broken body landed in a heap against a parked ground transport moments before it too was flipped over by the expanding fireball.

"Move!" Garm shouted at Vay and he raced towards the transport. The alien standing beneath, though shaken by the sound of the explosion, recovered and reached for a weapon. Garm fired twice and took the creature off its feet.

"Inside!" he shouted and he slammed his fist against the hatch control panel.

Nothing happened.

"It's sealed!" he exclaimed, "Vay can you get this open?"

"I'll try." Vay said and she dropped her blaster and began to study the control panel intently.

In the meantime Garm crouched down by one of the starship's landing struts and observed what was happening in the camp. The explosion of the gas tanks had caused widespread havoc. Most of the guards were rushing back and forth, trying desperately to locate fire-fighting equipment that would be of use against

such a massive blaze. Two of them spotted Garm and Vay and headed towards them, yelling for them to surrender. Garm lifted his blaster and fired a sustained burst that cut them down.

"Hurry." He said.

"I know." Vay replied.

There was another explosion as the fire reached a storage hut near to the landing field. This was followed by several more as a number of compressed gas cylinders stored inside burst open. One of them erupted through the flimsy roof and headed skywards at the head of a blast of escaping gas. As the pressure was reduced the cylinder fell back towards the ground, now above a row of parked vehicles. It landed on a vehicle that was connected to a refuelling tank and ripped the fuel hose free. As the flammable fuel spilled out it reached a small piece of burning debris from the initial gas tank explosion.

"Garm what are you playing at?" Vay demanded as she ducked at the sound of the latest explosion, "This isn't a fireworks display you know."

"Better than Empire Day." Garm said, "Besides that wasn't me, now get that hatch open."

The fire now spread across the parking lot, with one vehicle after another catching fire, and Garm began to get nervous as he watched the flames get ever closer to their position. Then disaster struck.

As a simple safety feature, the tibanna gas storage tanks were fitted with flame arresters that prevented the fire from spread down the distribution pipes, but when the T-16 airspeeder exploded a piece of metal was flung out in a path that sent it hurtling into one of the pipes where it came up above the ground and punctured it. The metal shard was pushed back out by the high-pressure gas within the pipe that then began to leak out through the hole left behind it. The jet of gas grew in size until it came into contact with a flame and there was a flash as the gas ignited. Travelling back down the jet, the flames made their way into the pipe itself and ignited the gas still inside. Starting from the point where the pipe was punctured, the entire network of gas distribution pipes exploded. Garm and Vay were both blown over by the first of this next wave of blasts as every building in the camp connected to the network of pipes now burned furiously.

"Run!" Garm yelled.

"But the ship-"

"No time!" Garm snapped and he grabbed hold of Vay and ran towards the nearest point on the perimeter fence, "Cut through!" he yelled. Vay sliced the fence from top to bottom with her lightsaber and the pair dived through it before continuing to run.

"This'll do." Garm said as he skidded to a halt where the ground dipped and he lay flat in the dip, Vay joining him.

"But we need that ship." Vay said before there was a massive explosion that shook the ground even where they lay.

"I think that was it exploding." Garm said. He lifted his head and looked in the direction of the camp.

All he could see were flames, not a single building looked to be intact and the lantillian short hauler that he and Vay had hoped would take them away from this world was now nothing but a pile of twisted metal.

They're all dead. The voice told Vay.

Vay raised her hands to her head.

"So now what?" she asked.

"I think we may be here a while." Garm said.