

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 Largus 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...

WAR CRIMES

AN OUTBREAK OF AN UNUSUAL INFECTION ON ESTRAN DRAWS THE ATTENTION OF GARM LARGUS AND VAY UDRA. THEY SOON DISCOVER THAT IT WAS NO RANDOM OUTBREAK, BUT INSTEAD THE START OF SOMETHING FAR MORE SINISTER...

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"Doctor Lordin could you quickly please?" the orderly asked as he poked his head around the doorframe of the doctor's office.

"What is it now?" he replied as he got to his feet, "I've only just got in here."

"We have two more cases."

Another two? But that's nine in the last hour." Lordin said as he got up and hurried towards the door.

"I know sir." The orderly replied, accompanying the doctor form the office towards the emergency treatment unit.

As soon as the pair burst in Doctor Lordin saw the patients he had been summoned to inspect. The pair were both human, one male and one female of similar age – their mid twenties by the doctor's guess. Linking his datapad to the computers built into the treatment stations the doctor called up the details for both cases and saw that they matched exactly what he expected to see. Headaches, fever and blurred vision. As he got closer to the nearest, the young man he saw the red in his eyes where blood vessels had ruptured.

"How long have your symptoms been like this?" he asked the man as he peered into his eyes and shone a light into them.

"Since this morning." The man told him, "It was only when I contacted Krysti and found out she had the same that I though we should come and get it looked at." Then he blinked and from one his eyes a drop of blood came running down his cheek."

"And it's a good job you did." Doctor Lordin announced.

"Is it serious?" the woman named Krysti asked.

"Not yet." The doctor replied, "But it could become if not treated. Tell me have either you travelled off world recently?"

The two young people looked at one another and then at the doctor.

"No. Why?" the young man asked.

"Because the parasite you have picked up is only found in the lakes of one world in this sector. Now I'm going to prescribe you both a course of drugs to remove it from your system and it's important you start taking it right away. The blurred vision and bleeding is from pressure on the optic nerves and unless the parasites can be removed there could be permanent damage." Doctor Lordin explained and he began to enter the prescription into his datapad. When he was done the device bleeped once and the entry on the screen turned yellow. This told him that the prescription had been automatically processed but that the hospital pharmacy was beginning to run low on the medication involved.

Agent Garm Larcus of the Imperial Security Bureau started his day in the same way as he always did, turning on his computer and then going through the myriad of security alerts and messages that had arrived since the end of his last shift. Like all experienced agents he had configured his messaging system to sort the unread messages to pick out those most likely to be worthy to his attention and move them to the top of the list, but it was one further down that suddenly caught his attention. The message had been tagged as a potential nuisance by the filter; apparently it had been bounced around from one agent to another over the last week without any of them taking any action other than to give it to someone else. But Garm took notice of the sender, a Doctor Lordin with a government sending identification.

Garm opened the message and started reading whereupon he saw why the previous agents had all decided to pass it on rather than deal with it themselves. The message described how numerous patients had all come to Doctor Lordin's hospital within a short space of time complaining of symptoms that matched only a parasitic infection not normally found on the world of Estran and the doctor believed that someone was breaking quarantine laws. Typically this would be a job for Imperial Customs or Estran's own local police forces rather than the ISB and Garm's finger hovered over the button to forward it on again, this time to the correct agency.

"Sorry I'm late." A woman's voice said and Garm looked up to see an attractive blonde woman clad in a skin tight bodyglove enter the office.

"Only a few minutes Vay." He said to her, smiling.

"This would be so much easier if we didn't have to keep arriving separately." Vay said as she walked around behind him and leant over him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and kissing his cheek. Then she glanced at the screen, "What's this? Our next mission?"

"No its nothing. I was just about to send it to customs." Garm replied.

This is important Vay.

The warning in Vay's head came from deep within the Force itself in the form of a woman's voice. A voice that Vay now knew belonged to Lara Udra, a distant ancestor of her who had been a member of the Jedi

Order almost four thousand years earlier. Apparently the collected spirits of the Udra family felt that serving the Empire was not what Vay should be doing and were attempting via Lara's intervention to get her to change her ways.

"Wait." Vay said, "Maybe we should check this out."

"A premonition?" Garm asked, aware of Vay's ability with the Force but still unaware of Lara's presence.

"Call it a feeling." Vay replied.

"A bad feeling or a good feeling?"

Bad. Very bad.

"I'll let you know." Vay said.

The emergency treatment unit was not particularly busy when Gram and Vay arrived, but there were still queues of people waiting to be seen. One of these was a particularly large man stood by the reception desk and apparently arguing with the woman behind it regarding the cost of treatment.

"All I need is some krffing skin sealant!" he yelled as Garm and Vay walked up behind him and noticed that there was a deep cut on his forehead. From the odour around him Garm guessed that the man was intoxicated and had injured himself by falling over, "What does it matter how I'm going to pay?" "Only the doctors can-"

"Look you damned rancor-faced-" the man began and Garm decided to step in.

"Excise me sir, but are you aware that under the local penal code offering abuse to hospital staff is grounds for you to ejected from this facility regardless of your medical condition?"

The large man turned to see Garm standing behind him in his ISB uniform with his hand resting on the blaster pistol holstered at his waist and he snarled.

"Big man hiding behind your uniform and blaster huh? Well you better hope I never find you without them." He said, standing up straight so that he towered over Garm. Then he noticed Vay and he smiled, "Hey baby, how'd you like to kiss this better?" he asked, pointing to his forehead.

"No cure for stupid." Vay replied and the man's eye's widened.

"Get over here! I'll teach you a lesson!" and he reached out to grab hold of her.

Knowing what to expect Garm stepped aside and watched as Vay caught hold of the man's wrist with both hands and rotated it sharply, causing him to scream in pain.

"I do believe I'm next." Garm commented as the man dropped to his knees and Vay delivered a kick to his face. Ignoring the brawl Garm then stepped up to the reception desk and lent on it, "Could you direct me to Doctor Lordin please?" Garm asked the receptionist who seemed more interested in seeing the abusive man getting the beating of his life from the slender and unimposing Vay.

"I'll summon him." she replied and she tapped at her computer to issue an automated call, "If you could please take a seat." She then said, "I'm sure the doctor will be with you soon."

"Come on Vay." Garm said as she let go of the man and he slumped to the floor.

"Coming." Vay replied and then she looked down at the man and added, "Now be polite to the people who'll have to stick you back together if you speak to me like that again."

It took only a few minutes for Doctor Lordin to arrive and the receptionist pointed out Garm and Vay to him. "Doctor Lordin." He introduced himself, holding out his hand for Garm.

"Agent Larcus, ISB." Garm replied, "And this is my associate Vay Udra. She is an intern from COMPNOR to study ISB investigations in the field."

"So I see. What took so long? I contacted your office a week ago."

"Careful there doc." Vay commented, "Ask him what happens if you're impatient." And she pointed towards the large man whose face was now badly battered and cut.

"Unfortunately your message was caught in our system until this morning." Garm said before the doctor could respond, "We came as soon as we could."

"Well if you'd come with me I'll show you what I need to speak with you about." Doctor Lordin said and he led Garm and Vay to his office where he turned the display of his computer to make it more easily visible from both sides of the desk.

"I understand you suspect a breach of planetary quarantine laws." Garm said.

"Yes I do." The doctor replied and on the computer screen he called up the heavily magnified of a blood sample that contained something other than just blood cells, "Last week we had more than twenty people come in suffering from infection by a water-borne parasite that is not found here on Estran. The larval aquanotris."

"So where does it come from?" Vay asked.

"The Tot-Eh system." The doctor told her.

"Tot-Eh?" Garm repeated, "In the Shadow Worlds? A lot of tourist traffic heads out that way."

"I thought of that. Of the twenty-six cases only three had been off planet within the timeframe for the infection and none were to anywhere in the Shadow Worlds, let alone Tot-Eh." Doctor Lordin said.

"And what does this bug do?" Garm then asked.

"If either the eggs or the larval stage of the parasite get into the blood stream then the larvae make their way towards the cranium where they feed off blood cells from within the bloodstream itself. This wouldn't be too bad, the number of cells eaten is rarely enough to cause anaemia, but when the larva excrete waste they push it into the sides of the blood vessel to prevent blocking the path of their food and this causes internal haemorrhaging. To make matters worse if they get near the optic nerves the pressure and bleeding can damage eyesight, even make someone go blind in an extreme case."

There's more Vay. He's only told you about the larvae.

"Why do I get the feeling that you're not telling us everything?" Vay asked.

"Yes, that's the serious part." Doctor Lordin said, "The larvae will eventually pupate into an adult stage. While the change takes place the chrysalis they create can block some of the smaller blood vessels and cause complications. But the real trouble begins when the adults hatch out."

"What do they do doctor?" Garm asked.

"Well the adult stage has a different diet Agent Larcus." Doctor Lordin began.

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

"As well you might," Doctor Lordin said, "You see the adult aqua-notris is carnivorous Agent Larcus and when it hatches out it generally finds itself surrounded by brain tissue."

"So they eat their victims brains from the inside out?" Vay asked.

"Yes Miss Udra, I'm afraid they do. By this stage it is generally too late to do anything."

"So what can be done about the earlier stages doctor?" Garm asked.

"Well there is a counter agent based on a form of algae that's found in the parasite's native environment that attacks both the larval form and the chrysalis while not harming most host species. But we retain only limited stocks of the agent here. In fact on the entire planet I doubt there's enough to treat more than ten thousand people. We exhausted our stock of twenty-five treatments and had to send for extras from another facility for the final case. We were lucky no one died."

"Doctor I'm going to need a list of all the patients treated for infection." Garm said, "If I'm going to find out how they were infected then I'll need to establish a link between them."

"Certainly." Doctor Lordin replied, "I'll have our admin department forwards their names and addresses to your office."

"Thank you doctor." Garm said, getting to his feet, "Hopefully your diligence will prove to be most beneficial." It took an oath Agent Larcus. I'm just following that." The doctor said as he got up and shook Garm's hand again.

"Didn't we both?" Garm responded.

Doctor Lordin then showed Garm and Vay back to the reception area and as he turned to return to his office a second doctor approached him.

"What was that ISB agent doing here?" he asked.

"Oh Agent Larcus was here about all those cases of larval aqua-notris last week." Doctor Lordin told the other man, "They're going to look into how so many cases suddenly cropped up at once."

"Well someone ought to." The second doctor said before he turned and walked away, making his way to his own office. Once there he locked the door behind him and activated the communication unit on his desk. "What?" the bald-headed human whose image appeared on the screen said sternly.

"Well the ISB finally turned up. I think the Agent's name was Larcus and he had some young woman with him."

"Larcus? Are you certain?"

"Yes. Why? What's so special about him Mister Fallir?"

"He's someone who never let's go, even when he should." Fallir replied, "Hopefully he'll be just efficient enough to solve the part of this we want him to." And then the screen went blank.

"Why do I get the feeling that by the end of this I'll never want to go near water again?" Garm asked on the landspeeder journey back to the capital building where his office was located.

"You could always ask for a transfer to Tatooine." Vay suggested.

"Would you come with me?"

"No."

"Then I guess I'll just have to stay here and risk having my brain eaten by bugs." Garm said and the pair smiled at one another.

"So I take it that we'll be going to visit all those people who got infected." Vay then asked.

"No. Not yet anyway. Maybe later on."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm hoping that we can get more information at the office. If we just ask all those people what they did and where they went they'll probably describe things differently, even if the places and events were the same."

"So how will we find a connection?" Vay asked.

"Using a computer of course. With the names and addresses of the victims we can find employment locations, vehicle registrations and credit details. That tells us where they go and what they do. Then we go and see them once we know exactly what we want to ask them. Keep the questions simple and don't give them the chance to stray from the vital details."

Vay smiled.

"I love it when you get all super secret agent guy on me." She said.

"I know." Garm replied.

The names and addresses of all of the victims of the parasites were waiting in Garm's message inbox when he and Vay got back to his office and just as he had explained in the landspeeder he immediately ran these through the public records databases to find out what other information was available about them while Vay simply sat down cross legged on the office floor and closed her eyes to meditate.

"Vay while I'm doing this I need you to get in touch with other hospitals." He said without looking away from the screen.

Vay opened one eye.

"Let me guess. To see if any other cases were seen at any of them?" she asked.

"Exactly. From what Doctor Lordin said it should be an unusual enough condition that they'll remember any recent cases."

Vay sighed and got to her feet before moving a chair around the desk so she could sit beside Garm and reached for the communicator.

"Do you have a list for me?" she asked before activating it and Garm brought up a list at the side of his screen, "Thanks." Vay said, kissing his cheek and then activated the communicator.

Three more cases of infection were reported by other hospitals in the city, none of which had reached the adult stage and the details of those patients were added to Garm's list. At first there seemed to be no link between any of the victims, but when the final new name was added a common source for the infection was finally found.

The man was a petty thief with a string of convictions by local courts. He was the sort of street scum that most people would cross the street to avoid and so the other people on the list would expect only to encounter him as the victim of one of his crimes.

Which was exactly the link Garm found.

The man had been treated by a doctor called to a police station when he began bleeding from his eyes while under arrest for stealing the purse of one of the other victims. The evidence file against him included a security camera feed from a local mall and although it did not show the exact moment the crime took place it did prove how come the just under thirty people had come to be infected by the parasites. The video showed the man watching his victim as she stood in a queue for a bus outside the mall along with numerous other people. All of who happened to be among those infected. All together there was only one victim missing from the queue and he appeared a few minutes later when the bus arrived, empty except for the final victim. The driver. The people in the queue boarded the bus and then the arrested man rushed up and leapt aboard just before the doors closed and the vehicle departed. All this happened two days before the victims were admitted to hospital for the infection.

"That's it." Garm said, "They were infected on the bus."

"And we can use traffic control footage to find it." Vay added.

"Exactly. Come on, before anyone else gets their brains eaten."

"Technically no one's had their brain eaten yet." Vay pointed out.

"The day's not over yet." Garm replied, "But we'll need help. Someone that doesn't need to worry about being infected by waterborne parasites."

The bus driver was in a good mood today. None of the passengers had tried to pay with ridiculously large denomination coins or notes, no one had abused him and nothing had been spilt that he would need to clean up at the end of his run.

Yes today was a good day.

All of a sudden there was the sound of the bus' repulsorlift engines was drowned out by the more powerful sound of the engines belonging to the gunship that flew so low overhead that he and his passengers all instinctively ducked.

"Stang!" the driver exclaimed loudly, an exclamation that would have drawn harsh words from the elderly lady sat immediately behind him with her two young grandchildren had he not also been forced to slam his foot down on the break as the gunship pivoted and touched down on the road in front of his bus.

Stormtroopers in full armour began to spill out of the gunship and the driver steered to try and drive around them. But as the bus began to gather speed again the stormtroopers ran out across the road, waving at all traffic to halt. They waved at the bus as well, but that was not all they did. The stormtroopers aimed their blasters directly at the driver.

Perhaps today was not so good after all.

Terrified looking faces stared out of the bus as the stormtroopers formed a cordon despite the fact that most of them held their blasters low, only those in front of it actually aimed their weapons towards it.

"This is the Imperial Security Bureau!" Garm called out, using the gunship's public address system to amplify his voice, "Everyone is to evacuate the bus and form a single line. Leave your belongings where they are." At first nothing happened and so Garm issued another warned, "Driver open the door or we will open fire." And the door then opened before the driver emerged and one at a time the passengers began to follow him. "Come let's go find out what's on that bus." Garm then said to Vay and they too disembarked from the gunship and headed towards the cordon of stormtroopers.

All of a sudden a young man amongst the passengers broke away from the group and tried to run. "Stop him!" Garm yelled and just as he tried to run between the stormtroopers there was a bright blue flash as one of them opened fire with a stun blast that sent him tumbling to the ground. The two closest stormtroopers were then on him in moments, holding the already incapacitated man's arms behind his back as they bound him.

"Sergeant." Garm then called out to the stormtrooper who wore a red pauldron on his armour to mark him out, "Have your men conduct a search of the vehicle and check the occupants for inspection. No leaves until we know that everyone is clear."

"Yes sir." The stormtrooper replied and then with a few hand signals he indicated which of his troops were to carry out which tasks.

Garm then turned to Vay.

"So now we just wait and see what they find." He said.

"You really think that whatever was used to infect the passengers will still be aboard?" she asked him, "There haven't been any more cases."

"I know. I'm hoping that whatever it was that infected them will have left some traces that the scanners can pick up. Even if it stopped being effective more than a week ago."

As it happened Garm and Vay did not need to wait for the results of the scanner sweep, the low light vision provided by the MFTAS built into the helmets of the stormtroopers revealed the presence of an object behind a vent located at the front of the bus and they removed it and sealed it in a transparent evidence bag before taking it to Garm.

"This was aboard the vehicle sir." A stormtrooper told him, "It does not seem to be part of the standard equipment and the driver denies any knowledge of it."

"What the hell is it?" Garm asked as he peered into the bag without handling it, instead leaving it in the grip of the stormtrooper.

"It looks like a vaporiser." Vay said.

"A what?" Garm said, looking around at her.

"It's the heating element from an oxidiser. They turn the liquid oxygen into a gas before it can freeze your face off. Bigger ones are used in hospitals and starship life support systems when anaesthetic or vital gases are stored in liquid form."

"Let me guess. Once the liquid has been turned to a vapour, that vapour gets sprayed out of that little nozzle." Garm then said, pointing to a small aperture on the device and Vay nodded, "Well this definitely changes things doesn't it?" Garm then said, "Rather than someone just breaking quarantine rules about hazardous materials we've got someone building a device to deliberately infect people."

"You mean bio-terrorism?" Vay asked and Garm grinned.

"Exactly. What we're dealing with here is a weapon of mass destruction and I'm willing to bet that this was just a test run." He said.

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

"Agent Larcus, would you mind explaining why you have dragged us all here?" Gayal Tharr, head of Imperial Intelligence for the demanded when Garm and Vay were shown into the briefing room. Garm had called an emergency meeting the moment he had determined that a bio-weapon was involved and so they were the last ones to arrive. Seated around the table were all of the sector's highest ranking Imperial officials whether from the military, intelligence or the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order that included the ISB and Garm's own superior Director Helios was present. Most significantly though, sat at the end of the table was Moff Gregor Horatian.

"This was discovered concealed in a public bus Miss Tharr." Garm replied, tossing the vaporiser onto the desk in front of her.

"And what is this?" Gayal asked, picking up the evidence bag and examining the contents.

"The delivery system for a biological weapon." Garm said.

Fear

A hint of a smile appeared on Vay's face as she felt Gayal's reaction.

Shock.

Surprise.

The reactions from around the room that Vay sensed were understandable, but it was not necessary to be Force sensitive to notice everyone in the room shifting in their seats slightly at the mention of a bio-weapon.

"Don't worry, the unit is quite safe." Garm said, "Its contents were deployed more than week ago."

"Ridiculous." Gayal exclaimed and she looked towards the moff, "Sir this is just some stupid attempt by the ISB to promote themselves."

"Jealous Gayal?" Director Helios asked.

"Of what?" she responded curtly.

"That one of my agents uncovered something that Imperial Intelligence knew nothing about." The director replied and then he too turned to address Moff Horatian, "Sir this is why counter terrorism is best left to my department."

"The director does have a point." COMPNOR leader Rodge Larrs added in support of his fellow COMPNOR officer.

"Not now." Moff Horatian said and he leant forwards, staring at Garm, "If a biological weapon was used last week then why is this the first I'm hearing about it Agent Larcus?" he asked.

"Because it was just a test sir." Garm replied, "Perhaps to test the weapon or perhaps our response."

"Which if it took a week isn't up to much." Fleet Admiral Vretan of the Imperial Navy commented.

"So what does this weapon do then?" the Imperial Army's General Dern then asked and Garm glanced at Vay.

"It releases a mist containing the eggs of a parasite that attacks its host's brain general. If untreated it is fatal." She explained.

"A doctor at a local hospital noticed a sudden spike in the number of cases." Garm then added.

"So where did this weapon come from?" Moff Horatian then asked.

"The parasite exists only in the Tot-Eh system sir." Garm replied, "The doctor's first thought was a quarantine issue. It was only the discovery of the device that revealed the involvement of a weapon."

"Then you will go to the Tot-Eh system." Moff Horatian said, "There you will locate the source of this bioweapon and neutralise it. You will have whatever support from the military you need."

"Err, Moff Horatian," Admiral Vretan commented, "may I remind you that my ships are somewhat overstretched at the moment. What with the possibility of a Confederate hold-out in the nebula."

"Tot-Eh's in the Shadow Worlds isn't it admiral?" Rodge Larrs asked, "Close enough to react to any threat from the nebula. One star destroyer admiral. That ought to be enough."

"So you're a military expert all of a sudden are you?" the admiral replied with a frown.

"I don't see the need for the navy to be diverting a star destroyer for this mission." Moff Horatian said and he looked at Fleet Admiral Vretan, "Could you spare a couple of lines of smaller ships? A skirmish line to intercept anyone trying to get weapons away from the planet and an attack line of interdictors maybe?" "Of course sir. I can pull those away from other areas." Admiral Vretan answered.

"Excellent. Then while Agent Larcus is heading for Tot-Eh I suggest that the rest of us-"

"Excuse me Moff Horatian." A gaunt appearing man wearing a dark robe who was sat beside Gayal interrupted and everyone in the room looked in his direction. Exactly who this man was remained a mystery to most in the sector, but Garm had noticed that he carried a lightsaber similar to the one Vay kept hidden until she needed it and she had told him that the man's name was Ibram Kellesen.

"Yes Mister Kellesen?" the moff asked.

"Perhaps with a threat this serious it should not be left to just one agency to deal with." The man said.

"Agent Larcus will have back up." Director Helios pointed out, "The marines aboard the navy ships, a unit of COMPForce troops and he'll have the authority to requisition whatever local forces he wants."

"Perhaps so." The gaunt man replied, "But it cannot be denied that Imperial Intelligence has other assets around the sector that may come in useful."

"And who do you suggest should accompany Agent Larcus to Tot-Eh then?" Rodge Larrs asked him. "Me."

Don't let that happen Vay. Keep him away from this.

"I don't think that will be necessary." Vay said suddenly in response to Lara's warning.

"And why not Miss Udra?" Ibram asked glaring at her and Vay sensed his attempt to probe her mind. Better for him to track down the people who used the weapon here.

"Perhaps it would be better for you to remain here on Estran to track down the people who carried out the test attack." Vay replied, hoping that Ibram would continue to be unable to detect Lara's presence.

"As Director Helios has already pointed out, such counter terrorism is best left to the ISB." Ibram replied, "No. I believe that my skills will be best employed dealing with the source of the weapon. Wouldn't you agree Moff Horatian?" he then added and he looked around at the moff.

"Yes I would." The moff replied and after a slight pause he went on, "I want reports from everyone on how well placed we are to deal with a full scale attack in the near future. That includes the availability of counter agents."

"The counter agent also comes from Tot-Eh." Garm commented.

"Then you'll have to arrange for more to be supplied." Moff Horatian said, "Now go. I want this dealt with before it becomes public knowledge. The last thing we need is panic."

The meeting then broke up, with each person heading back to their office to prepare the information demanded by the moff. However, as Vay was following Garm out of the door she felt a hand on her shoulder and turned to see Ibram standing right behind her.

"What is it Ibram?" she hissed.

"Why did you attempt to keep me from this mission?" he asked.

"Because I saw no need for you to go on it." She told him.

"Perhaps you have forgotten why I remained in this sector to begin with. To keep an eye on you." Then he glanced in the direction Garm had gone, "You and him now."

"So you're going along to chaperone us?"

"In a way yes." Ibram replied.

He's lying Vay. He's hiding it well but he's lying to you. There is something on Tot-Eh that he thinks he can use to advance himself with his Emperor.

"You're after the parasite aren't you?" Vay said and for a brief moment Ibram was silent.

"A naturally occurring biological weapon. Such a thing could be of great value to the Emperor and the Emperor rewards those who bring him such things. Help me and together we can share his reward." Vay pushed Ibram's hand from her shoulder and without speaking she walked after Garm.

"I should have known it." Garm said, frowning as he watched the company of COMPForce trooper loading their equipment aboard the shuttles that would carry them up to the navy cruisers waiting for them in orbit. "Hello Agent Larcus." The commander of the COMPForce troopers said in reply when he looked in Garm's direction.

"Major Kramm." Garm said, then he looked at the major's second in command and added, "Captain Layne."

"Agent Larcus." The captain said, "The blonde not with you this time?"

"I thought you two were joined at the hip." Kramm added.

"That wasn't the part of their anatomy I was thinking about." Layne commented, "But not far out."

"Vay is just checking on some of our supplies." Garm replied, "And I'll remind you both that as far as you are concerned, she outranks you."

"She's an intern." Layne commented.

"A little girl." Kramm added.

"I was actually trying to be kind to you both. Before you do something stupid and you make her angry. You wouldn't like her when she's angry." Garm said before he noticed Vay arriving accompanied by Ibram and a loading droid carrying a large pallet.

"Oh look, she's brought her grandfather." Layne said and both he and Kramm smirked as the pair approached.

"What the hell is all that?" Kramm asked, looking at the pallet.

"Bottled water." Vay replied.

"No way we're drinking anything from Tot-Eh." Garm said, "Not after the medical advice we've had."

"The drinking water's not dangerous is it?" Kramm asked.

"Probably not to you." Ibram then replied before Garm could make a similar comment, "Now hurry up and get your men and your equipment loaded. We do not have time to waste while our enemies prepare to strike again."

"Yes sir!" Kramm responded and he and Layne both snapped to attention as something about Ibram's demeanour told them that he was not a man to be taken lightly. Then as the pair marched away Ibram turned to Garm, "Time for us to get aboard as well I think Agent Larcus." He added and without waiting for a reply Ibram walked aboard the nearest shuttle.

Tot-Eh, primary world of the system of the same name was an unimpressive world from orbit, most of its surface appearing as either dull grey or green from orbit with only the shallow oceans standing out as dark blue. Quite close to its star, the atmosphere was hot and humid when Garm disembarked the shuttle and he began to sweat almost immediately. Vay had no such difficulties, her bodyglove featured full temperature control and with the turn of a dial set into her belt the atmosphere became irrelevant. The COMPForce troopers were largely unaffected as well, their all-enclosing armour possessing the same environmental control and protection as stormtrooper armour or Vay's bodyglove.

Enquiries made about the parasite and the algae known to be lethal to it led Garm to a water treatment plant. He was surprised to discover that the locals actually drew water from the lakes where the parasite lived to supply their settlements. What did not surprise him though as he went along with Ibram and Vay drove to the plant were the large signs put up around the lake itself that carried the simple warning 'NO SWIMMING.'

"Agent Larcus?" a man in the uniform of a plant worker said as Ibram exited the speeder.

"No that's me." Garm replied as he got out after Ibram, "I'm the one who called you."

"Well I'm Devid Tarr. You want to know about the bugs in the water I hear."

"That's right. I'm afraid that someone may have taken some to Estran and we've had a number of people taken ill."

"Well I wouldn't worry too much Agent Larcus. They're voracious little buggers alright, but they're very delicate as well when it comes to reproduction. Unless you can maintain the water temperature and PH balance just right, like it is here, they won't lay any eggs to be swallowed."

"So only this world is suitable for the aqua-notris parasite to grow?" Ibram asked.

"That's right." Devid answered.

"I see you get your water from the lake the parasite lives in." Vay commented, "Isn't that dangerous?"

"Not at all." Devid told her, "We draw our water from the shallows where algae grows."

"Is this the same algae that's used to treat infection?" Garm asked.

"That's it. We draw water from there because the parasite can't survive in it. They live in the deeper water on the far side of the lake. Then we filter out the algae and process it into tablet and liquid forms for treatment for anyone who either falls into the lake or decides that the warning isn't for real and goes for a swim. We still get a few fatalities every year of course. But no more than a dozen or so."

"We're going to need a large amount of the counter agent. Enough for the population of Estran City at least." Garm told Devid, but the man shook his head.

"Can't be done." He replied.

"You will find a way." Ibram then said sternly, "Or else."

"Look, I don't care what sort of threats you make it just can't be done. Come on inside and you'll see." Devid told him and Vay sensed his irritation.

The worker led the trio of Imperial agents into the treatment plant. Inside the water from the lake was pumped through the purification system to where it was then sent on to the nearby settlements. As it came into the plant the water had a distinct greenish colour to it, but by the time it was treated it was as clear as the water in any other modern settlement around the galaxy. Devid led his guests to where the main pipes had several smaller ones projecting out from them that in turn led to some storage tanks.

"This is were the algae is removed." He said and climbing up a ladder that led to the top of one of the tanks he opened up a hatch and reached inside. When he removed his hand it was covered in a thick green slime, "This is what we make the treatments from." He added as he descended the ladder and held out his hand towards Garm who subconsciously backed away from the foul smelling sludge.

"And how many treatments would what you have there produce?" Ibram asked.

"Treatments?" Devid replied, "There isn't enough here for a single tablet. You see the active agent in the algae is only a small part of its physical makeup and it spoils rapidly when the algae dies because of the decomposition. We need to extract that active element and then concentrate it so that it has a decent shelf life. The IV liquids tend to last longer because we can store a small amount of live algae in it, but even then it goes off after a couple of years. It's not a problem in the lakes because the algae is continuously reproducing, but it's a different matter for industrial production. That's why just ramping up production isn't viable. We need to process tens of thousands of litres of water to produce enough to treat even one person." And you're the only people who can make it?" Vay asked.

"Oh no. There are several other treatment plants as well but not enough for what you need." Devid told her. Then he paused.

"There's someone else isn't there?" Ibram said.

"Maybe." Devid replied, "Come with me." And after taking a towel from a nearby dispenser to clean his hand

with he led the agents to an office where he went straight to a computer, "Some guy started buying some of the algae itself about six months ago." He said as he accessed the computer, "I think we was looking to either create the treatment synthetically or find alternatives. Ah yes, here it is. He bought a total of five gallons over as many months before stopping entirely."

"So he either progressed or gave up." Garm commented, "We're going to need his address."

Doctor Torr Vissal's home was unusual for the world of Tot-Eh. On a planet where the population tended to avoid the lakes filled with potentially deadly parasites the doctor had acquired a house mounted on a repulsorlift platform and deployed it right over the deep water where the parasites swarmed and multiplied. A walkway wide enough to take a landspeeder connected the building to the land and Garm kept to the middle as he led Ibram and Vay across. At the front door he activated the intercom and waited.

"Yes?" a voice that Garm took to be the doctor asked.

"ISB. Open up." He said.

"Do you have identification?"

Garm was about to reply when Ibram spoke up first.

"Doctor Vissal. Open the door before I do it myself. Consider that an order."

The intercom went silent and Garm was just beginning to think that Ibram's threat had backfired when the door slid open to reveal a white haired man.

"You are Doctor Torr Vissal?" Garm asked.

"I am."

"Then we need to discuss your work." Garm said.

"Of course, do come in." the doctor replied, stepping aside, "So what interests you in my work?" he then asked as the three Imperial agents walked past him.

"You purchased algae from the local water treatment plant." Vay said, "Rather a lot of it."

"Yes. I wanted to see if there was a better way to produce the counter agent to the aqua-notris parasite." The doctor answered.

"And is there?" Ibram asked.

"Unfortunately no. You see the problem is that the algae is a disposable product available in almost limitless quantities. When I bought some I was only really paying for the containers and shipping."

"But you did find an alternative?" Garm said.

"Yes, easily."

"How?" Ibram asked.

"Well the algae multiplies depending on its food source, just like any other life form. So by providing a concentrated growth medium I was able to promote growth of the algae in the lab at a much faster rate than occurs in nature. I was even able to harvest the chemical they produce that kills the aqua-notris without killing the algae. From an algal colony that would fit in a bathtub I was able to produce enough of the chemical for a full treatment every single day." The doctor explained.

"I don't see the problem." Vay said.

"Money." Garm said.

"That's right Agent, err I didn't catch your name." Doctor Vissal said.

"Larcus." Gram replied, "And my associates Miss Udra and Agent Kellesen."

"Thank you. Well Agent Larcus, as you said the issue is money. The water treatment plants do not need to pay for the algae, provide it with any nourishment or growth medium or maintain a controlled environment. All of which regrettably I have to do. Since the number of cases of aqua-notris infection each year is very small it just wasn't economically viable to set up a production plant."

"Doctor how long would such an operation take to set up?" Ibram asked.

"Like I said it isn't-"

"The Empire will pay the costs doctor." Ibram interrupted, "Your work has become a matter of Imperial security and your co-operation is not up for discussion."

"Imperial security? But why?" the doctor asked, looking at each of the three agents in turn, "Wait has the aqua-notris been found somewhere else? No, it's more than that isn't it? A natural colony would just be a public health matter, not security. Someone's found a way to weaponise it haven't they?"

"That's classified information doctor." Garm told him, "Under Imperial authority I am ordering you not to discuss this with anyone else without prior permission."

"Yes of course. But I will need to speak with suppliers for the equipment we'll need."

"Just so long as you don't tell them the reason doctor." Ibram said sternly.

"We'll need to do a security sweep of the area." Vay said and she looked at Ibram, "Perhaps Agent Larcus and I should handle that task while you return to the starport and inform the moff of our status." She added. Anger.

Vay noticed the brief flash to emotion when she told Ibram what she thought his role ought to be, but it soon vanished and was replaced by a fake smile back at her.

"That seems appropriate." He replied and then he looked at Doctor Vissal, "Good day doctor. Keep me informed of your progress."

"Certainly." The doctor replied and he followed the agents to the door to show them out. Then as soon as they were gone he headed for his communication unit and requested a connection to Estran. He waited while the link was made and a bald man appeared on the screen, "Mister Fallir." He said with a smile, "Good news. We're going to be rich."

Keeping as far away from the water's edge as they could get while still being able to inspect the shore line Garm and Vay made their way along the muddy lakeshore to look for places that could be used to mount an attack on the house. The lake itself was tidal and at that time the water level was close to its lowest, leaving wide muddy flats around much of the water that would become flooded when the level got higher.

"So why are we here Vay?" Garm asked, "This is a job for Major Kramm's troops. As much as I hate to say it they could do this better than us. Their sealed armour would let them get right up to the water safely. I don't know about you but I'm not going anywhere near it."

"Because I knew that Ibram wouldn't want any part of it. He'll think it's beneath him." Vay replied.

"So this is just an excuse for us to be alone together? Because I can think if better places to take a romantic lakeside walk."

Vay smiled.

"Really? Because that sounds nice."

"Vay just tell me why we're out here."

"Doctor Vissal knows more than he's telling us." Vay said and Garm came to a sudden halt.

"What? How do you know?" he asked then he sighed, "No wait, you sensed it. But how come Ibram didn't?" "Perhaps because he was looking for evidence of being lied to and as far as I could tell the good doctor was being truthful in the information he gave. He just left a few things out."

"Like what?"

"Like how much he knows about the use of the parasite as a weapon. He raised the possibility of its use in that regard, but he wasn't surprised. Garm, he was expecting it to happen."

Garm's head whirled back to face the house.

"He's part of this?"

"Maybe. Maybe he just realised that it was a possibility and that's why he went looking for a way to mass produce the treatment." Vay replied.

"So why not tell Ibram about this?" Garm asked, "I mean I know you don't like him any more than I do, but he could help us."

"Because I don't trust his motives either." Vay answered, "Garm, I think that he wants to find a way of making us fail."

Making you fail? What, don't you think he'll object to the Empire getting its hands on the parasite as a weapon?

Vay frowned briefly, but Garm was facing the other way and he did not notice.

"So basically we need to find a way of finding out exactly what Doctor Vissal knows and what he really wants out of all this." Garm said, "And the answer probably lies in a house floating over a lake filled with the very parasite that's the reason for all this."

"Pretty much yes." Vay said.

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Garm commented. Then he began to walk back towards the house.

"Where are you going Garm?" Vay called out after him.

"To get some answers." Garm replied.

Rather than return to the house to question Doctor Vissal again, Garm began to walk back along the road in the direction of the starport with Vay walking alongside him. Ibram had taken the landspeeder when he left ahead of them and so Garm and Vay had no choice to proceed on foot instead.

"I need everything on a Doctor Torr Vissal." He said into his comlink, "I don't care how trivial it seems I want it."

It was then that there was the sound of a repulsorlift engine and a pair of troop carriers with COMPForce markings came into view. As they drew closer Garm waved to flag them down.

"Agent Larcus?" the commander of one of the vehicles said as he emerged from a rooftop hatch, "Shouldn't you be at the home of Doctor Vissal? Mister Kellesen sent us to provide a security detail."

"I've business elsewhere." Garm said, "And I want you to be careful when you deploy. Place a couple of men at the house and then keep the rest out of sight along the lakeshore. Most important is that whatever you do you are not to stop anyone from approaching the house unless they present a clear threat. Just make sure that you record everyone who pays the doctor a visit. I want to know who his friends are.

"You sound like you don't trust him." the vehicle commander said.

"I don't." Garm said, glancing at Vay as he spoke.

"They won't need these APCs." Vay said softly.

"No they won't." Garm replied and then he looked back up at the commander of the lead vehicle, "Have your men dismount lieutenant. They can proceed on foot. One of your vehicles can stay here to act in support of the troops if they come under fire if you want, but I'm commandeering the other to take me and Vay back to the starport."

"You know you've got COMPNOR troops all around your house?" Devid told Doctor Vissal as he stepped from the submersible into the module attached to his house and concealed beneath the water level. Only a narrow vertical access shaft connected the module to the main house and there was insufficient room between the house and the water for it to be visible from the shore.

"Yes, I thought they were planning on deploying some. I think they're worried that the people making the bio weapon will attempt to murder me." The doctor replied.

"Speaking of which. How's it going?" Devid asked.

"Come and see." Doctor Vissal told him and he led him into the next room.

The room was configured as a hybrid of laboratory and manufacturing area where a row of droids assembled vaporiser units from piles of components. Meanwhile on the far wall were rows of transparisteel tanks into which water from the lake was being kept. This water had a particularly cloudy appearance and monitors placed next to each one displayed heavily magnified images of the tiny creatures that swarmed within. "It looks like this half of the operation is coming along well enough." Devid said as he studied each display in turn.

"Oh it's coming along perfectly. Just like I promised you and our backers on Estran. They'll get their cheap bio weapon right on schedule and then we'll all make a fortune selling an overpriced treatment to the Empire. Who knows, maybe we'll be able to find some more groups who want the weapon. For a premium of course, the PLAE funded this set up so they deserve a discount. The Rebel Alliance maybe, they've got money. I know they claim to abhor such things, but haven't all terrorist groups in history said such things?" "Your backers are certainly experts at saying one thing and doing another." Devid commented, "Are you sure we can trust them?"

"Of course not. But if they try and double cross us then we can just use the weapon against them can't we?"

"Agent Larcus, why do you have my men skulking in weeds instead of establishing a visible perimeter?" Major Kramm demanded the moment that the APC's rear hatch dropped open, "And what's all this about not stopping people from approaching the house?"

"Major Kramm." Garm replied, "Do I need to remind you that this is my operation? You and your men are just here to provide muscle. Nothing more and nothing less. In short, you do as you're told and nothing more. Understood?"

"Actually Agent Larcus this is a joint operation between the ISB and Imperial Intelligence." Ibram's voice called out and Garm turned to see the gaunt looking man striding towards him, his cloak wrapped around him to hide the lightsaber Garm guessed he would still be carrying, "And considering that my rank in Imperial Intelligence supersedes yours I am amending your order and instructing the major's men to move in closer. Anyone approaching within one hundred metres of the doctor's home will be turned back. Anyone who refuses will be shot."

Major Kramm smiled and glared at Garm briefly.

"In the spirit of interdepartmental co-operation I shall pass on the new orders sir." he then said to Ibram and saluted him, lowering his hand and marching away without bothering to wait for the salute to be returned. "So your rank supersedes mine does it?" Garm asked, "Care to discuss what that rank is and how you got it?"

Ibram turned to Vay.

"Keep him quiet Vay. If you can't then I will." And then he too turned around and walked away.

"Well so much for keeping tabs on who pays the doctor a visit." Garm said to Vay as he watched Ibram's departure.

"The troopers could still provide a list of everyone that they stop." Vay pointed out.

"Yes, but we'd have no idea if they were going to see the doctor or if they were just passing by. Somehow I doubt the sorts of people we're interested in would just say that was where they were headed to." "So what now?" Vay asked.

"We continue with the investigation the way we were planning. I can't see Kellesen having cancelled my request for everything we can get on Doctor Vissal. Let's go and see what's turned up."

In addition to the starport facilities that they had requisitioned, the Imperial forces had brought with them numerous prefabricated components that had already been assembled into a command and control centre, providing communications and planning systems that were superior to anything that the limited forces normally deployed to the world had access to. In addition it meant that Garm had access to an office and computer terminal that was not used by anyone else and it was here that the results of the background check on Doctor Vissal was sent. As was typical when Garm sat down to use the computer Vay instead opted to sit and meditate on the floor in front of him.

"Well the doctor was right about his research not being financially viable." Garm commented as he took a quick glance through Doctor Vissal's bank records. These were helpfully separated into personal and research accounts. Clearly the doctor did not want to attract the ire of the Imperial Revenue Service by mixing them together.

"Uh-huh." Vay commented without opening her eyes.

"In fact I'm surprised he's stayed here at all. The money he was awarded to do his research ran out over a year ago. Since then there's just been the occasional payment in while his outgoings kept steady." "Uh-huh."

"Then they just stopped."

"What do you mean stopped?" Vay asked, opening one eye.

"I mean all of a sudden eight months ago Doctor Vissal stopped spending any money at all from his research accounts." Garm said, "No cash withdrawals either. The account has been static since then."

"But didn't that guy at the water plant say that he purchased algae from them in the last six months?" "Yes he did and Doctor Vissal backed up the claim that he paid for it. Even if he did say it was a trivial amount."

"But neither of them showed us a receipt or invoice." Vay pointed out as she got up and approached Garm. "No they didn't and we never asked." Garn replied and then he paused, "Come to think of it why would anyone need to pay for the algae? All you need to do is go up a shallow bit of the lake where it grows and dip in a bucket. Job done. But the guy at the plant wanted us to know about the doctor and he wanted us to go and see him. So the simple question is why? What could be in it for him?"

"An investor maybe?" Vay suggested, "We practically told him that we were desperate and he would have known that the Empire would be willing to stump up the cash to pay for something that no-one else would buy."

"No." Garm said, shaking his head, "The doctor got his money from the usual sources for research funding. No private investors." Then Garm got to his feet.

"Where are you going?" Vay asked.

"You mean where are we going? We're going to see Devid Tarr. I want to know how well he knows Doctor Torr Vissal and since we've not got the doctor's communications records yet, we'll just have to ask the question face to face."

Devid was at home when Garm and Vay caught up with him.

"Agent Larcus?" he said as he opened the door to his apartment, "I didn't expect to see you here."

"Sorry to bother you at home Mister Tarr, but I'm afraid I have to ask you a few more questions." Garm replied.

Fear.

Vay remained silent when she felt Devid's reaction, not wanting to give anything away to the man and when he stepped aside to allow Garm in she followed him and just smiled at Devid.

"So what do you want to know?" Devid asked as they all sat down in his living room.

"Its just a few basic security questions really." Garm replied, "My associate will being making notes."

"Yes, we need a record of your answers." Vay added as she took out her datapad.

"But I thought I'd already given you everything you need." Devid then said, "I can't offer you any more help in sourcing the treatment than I already have."

"Actually this concerns anything you may know about Doctor Vissal." Garm explained, "Since this is a matter of Imperial security we need to be aware of exactly who we're dealing with."

Fear.

There it was again and it was more than the discomfort that many citizens suffered from when confronted by the authorities. A person's fear of being tricked into making themselves look guilty even when they hadn't done anything was understandable, but Devid was clearly hiding something and it had something to do with his connections to Doctor Vissal.

"Very well. Ask away." Devid said.

"How well do you know Doctor Vissal?" Garm asked.

"Not very well. We only really spoke about his work. Nothing else."

Vay did not sense any specific lies, but at the same time she could not help but feel that Devid had been very careful with his response.

"And when did you last see the doctor?" Garm then asked.

"Oh about a month ago I think. When he made his last purchase."

Deceit.

There it was. Vay sensed the lie and reached up to scratch her nose. Garm noticed the action and was immediately alerted to the fact that she had just picked up on something.

"Did you ever happen to see him anywhere else?" Gram asked, "Even just notice him across the street?" "Oh no. From what I understand he's a very wealthy man. We just don't mix in the same circles." Deceit.

Again Vay scratched at her nose, making sure not to look at Devid as she did so and risk him noticing what she was doing.

"Very well. In that case I have just one more question for you." Garm said.

"Go on." Devid replied.

"Before we arrived on this planet had you ever heard anyone mention the possibility of purposely infecting people with the aqua-notris parasite. Even something that you could have taken to be a joke?"

"No. No, I've never heard that said." Devid answered.

Deceit.

"Agent Larcus," he then went on, "everyone at the plant understands how dangerous the parasite can be and we just don't make jokes like that."

"Of course not. I'm sorry but I had to ask." Garm said and he looked at Vay, "Did you get all that?" he asked her.

"Every word." She replied.

"Good, then we can leave Mister Tarr to his own business and get back to ours." Garm said, getting to his feet," We'll show ourselves out." He then added.

The moment the apartment door closed behind them and they were heading for the turbolift Garm glanced at Vay.

"Well?" he asked, "I saw you signalling that you sensed something."

"He was lying left right and centre Garm. About where and when he last saw Doctor Vissal and about using the parasite as a bio weapon."

"Do you think he knew about the weapon?" Garm asked.

"I don't know. But he knew about the parasite's potential to be used as a weapon and had heard people talking about it." Vay told him and Garm smiled and took out his comlink. Checking it was set to the local law enforcement frequency he raised it to his mouth and activated it.

"This is Agent Larcus of the Imperial Security Bureau. I have an urgent request for a communications intercept. Sector fourteen, block eleven, hab unit thirty-eight. I want all incoming and outgoing calls traced and recorded and I need records for the last year."

Garm then waited for a response.

"Copy that. Data will be forwarded to local ISB field office under your name Agent Larcus."

The local field office of the ISB was not even as large or well equipped as the modular command centre that Garm's force had brought along with them. Apparently there was little subversive active within the area and so the ISB devoted few resources to it. What the field office did have was about half a dozen agents, three of whom were present when Garm arrived, a private office for only the most senior of these and a single interrogation room.

In the absence of the office's most senior agent Garm promptly commandeered his office for himself and Vay while they waited for Devid's communications records to be patched through to them. When this finally happened just over an hour later Devid was in the middle of talking to someone.

"-made all the arrangements." Garm and Vay caught him saying as they entered in the midst of the conversation, "Are you ready?"

"Of course I am." The other person involved replied and Garm and Vay looked at one another and smiled.

"That voice sounds familiar." Garm said.

"Doctor Vissal." Vay replied, "So much for them not speaking in months."

"I've got half a dozen cylinders ready to ship." The doctor continued.

"Good." Devid said, "Because the ISB were round here asking about you. I tried calling you right away, but there was no answer."

"No. Those COMPForce troops have made their presence more obvious and I wanted to find out what had happened. I couldn't get down into the lab to take the call."

"That's weird." Garm commented, "When we were at the doctor's house I didn't notice it being large enough for a laboratory."

Vay looked at the display screen of the computer terminal they were using to monitor the call and then checked her datapad.

"That comm. address doesn't match the doctor's home or any mobile device we've got him listed as owning." She said as the conversation between Devid and Doctor Vissal continued.

"How long until you can arrange pick up?" Doctor Vissal asked Devid.

"Sometime this evening. Do those troops have any sensors in place?" Devid replied.

"Only whatever's fitted to their armour and those two APCs."

"Two APCs?"

"Yes. Another one turned up about the time they started making their deployment more obvious. But neither has any enhanced sensor arrays fitted. So long as your people remain below the water line they should be invisible."

"Did he just say 'below' the water?" Garm commented.

"Sounded like it." Vay replied as she continued to focus on her datapad. Then she looked up, "What sort of laser brain goes for a swim around here?" she asked.

"Let's see if they explain." Garm said and both stared intently at the computer.

"I'll make sure everything's packed." Doctor Vissal said, "I don't expect any more visits from the Empire today, but your people better be aware that they'll be sneaking right past them."

"Understood. Then we can't have any more contact for a couple of weeks. I don't want to give the ISB chance to figure out we're working together." And then as the line went dead Garm and Vay looked at one another and smiled again.

"Oh now that wasn't nice." Garm said, "He should be happy that his conversations are actually worth listening into. Never mind the technical skill it takes to set this sort of thing up. Now do you have anything on that comm. ID?"

"It's a portable unit." Vay said, "Registered to a local office of an Estranian company."

"Now that's interesting." Garm replied, "A company from the planet the bio weapons are being shipped to provides a communicator to our scientist."

"And he's discussing shipping some cylinders somewhere." Vay added, "You think that it could be the bio weapon?"

"I do. But the question is from where?" Garm said, "That conversation made it sound like it would be

collected from the doctor's home. But we saw no evidence of any laboratory or weapons when we were there."

The water Vay. Remember the water.

"The water?" Vay commented.

"What about it?" Garm asked and Vay smiled.

"When we were at the house it was low tide right?" she said.

"Yes."

"But the house was barely above the water level. So if the level rises the house has to as well or it'll be flooded."

"And be filled with brain eating parasites yes. That's why it's on repulsorlifts."

"But why repulsorlifts? Why not just build it on stilts?" Vay asked.

"Because Vissal wants to keep it a specific distance above the water." Garm replied, smiling, "Close enough that it's not possible to see an extra level concealed below the water line."

"And the doctor warned Devid to make sure that whoever he's sending to make the collection should stay below the water. Which probably means some sort of submersible." Vay added.

"Then that's where we're heading." Garm said, "We're going back to the doctor's house to look for a hidden level beneath it."

The first line of COMPForce troops just waved Garm and Vay's speeder past when Garm slowed down enough for them to see his uniform, but they found their way blocked when they came to the crossing to the house.

"No admittance to the house sir." One of the unit of guards told Garm.

"Trooper do you see my uniform?" Garm asked him.

"Sorry sir, but I take my orders from Major Kramm and Captain Layne and they've given instructions that only themselves and Mister Kellesen are to be admitted."

Garm looked at Vay.

"Over to you I think." He said and Vay smiled.

"Why I thought you'd never ask." She said and then she leant towards the guard.

"Check your datapad." She said to him, reaching out through the Force for his mind. The recruitment and training of COMPForce troopers did not stress analytical thinking and so when Vay found it she found a mind that was wide open to manipulation. Then as the guard looked at his datapad she added, "We are authorised."

"You are authorised." The guard said.

"You don't need to call this in." Vay told him.

"We don't need to call this in." the guard then told the rest of his men.

"Move along." Vay added as she sat back in her seat.

"Move along. Move along." The guard repeated, waving Garm towards the house.

Garm took the speeder right up to the door before bringing it to a halt and then he and Vay got out.

"Agent Larcus." Doctor Vissal said as the front door suddenly opened, "What brings you back here?"

"Could we have a word inside please doctor?" Garm said, glancing back to the shore where he noticed that the guards who had let them across the bridge were now in conversation with one of the vehicle commanders, "Quickly please." He added.

"Of course do come-" the doctor began before Garm and Vay suddenly barged past him, "What is the meaning of this?" he exclaimed as Vay sealed the door behind them.

"Where is your laboratory doctor?" Garm asked.

"I had to give it up when my research hit a dead end." Doctor Vissal replied.

"I mean the one you have here at your house." Garm said, walking further into the house and peering into every room he passed.

"Agent Larcus this is ridiculous." The doctor said, "I do not have laboratory here."

Deceit.

Panic.

"He's lying." Vay said simply, "And worried."

"Of course he is." Garm responded.

"What? How did you-" Doctor Vissal began.

"Miss Udra has an uncommon ability to notice such things doctor." Garm said as he entered the lounge and walked towards the couch.

Fear.

"There." Vay said suddenly, "Stop right there Garm. He's most afraid when you're standing where you are now."

"Oh really?" Garm replied and he looked down at his feet and noticed the rug beneath them, "How quaint." He said as he stepped off the rug and then pulled it aside to reveal a hatch set into the floor, it's edges flush with the floor but visible thanks to the obvious coloured border around the outside, "Would you care to open this up doctor?" Garm asked, but Vissal just glared at him so Garm instead turned to Vay, "Vay, have you got that master key of yours handy?"

"Of course I have." Vay replied and as she walked over to the hatch she produced her lightsaber from a pouch and there was a 'snap-hiss' as it ignited.

"You're a jedi!" Doctor Vissal exclaimed and he turned and ran from the room.

"I've got him!" Garm snapped, leaping over furniture as he gave chase and tackled the doctor in the hallway before he could reach the front door, "Doctor Torr Vissal, in the name of the Galactic Empire I am placing you under arrest on suspicion of treason and any other charges that may be applied later." Garm told him as he dragged him back into the lounge. Then he nodded at Vay and with a single swing of her lightsaber she sliced the hatch in half. Deactivating her lightsaber while she gave the two parts a chance to cool off Vay then kicked them both and they clattered down the shaft beneath them.

"Oh look. A ladder." She said.

"Keep an eye on the good doctor for me." Garm said as he pulled Vissal towards the shaft, "Send him down after me and then follow."

"Sure." Vay replied as she took hold of the doctor.

"I take there aren't any traps waiting for me?" Garm asked him and he shook his head. Garm then looked at Vay.

"He's telling the truth." She said.

"I hope so." Garm replied and then he began to climb down the shaft.

As he climbed the only illumination was what came from above him, but as soon as he foot touched the floor at the bottom of the ladder a sensor activated the lights and he saw the room around him. There was a heavy door set into one wall that had two small viewports set into it and when Garm looked through he saw the dark water of the lake, suggesting that this was some sort of docking port for a submersible vehicle. In the opposite direction was a more conventional doorway that for now was sealed with what looked to be an electronic combination lock but from behind it Garm could hear the sound of some sort of machinery and finally along one of the other walls there were six large cylinders, each one fitted with an enlarged version of the vaporiser that Garm had seen fitted to the bio weapon on Estran.

"Okay Vay, send him down then come down yourself." Garm called out, drawing his blaster and waiting for Doctor Vissal and Vay to descend the ladder, "So doctor," he said when they were both standing right in front of him, "care to explain all of this?"

"This was for my research." He replied.

"But you said you had to get rid your laboratory and that you didn't have one here at home." Garm pointed out and then he shoved him towards the sealed door, "Open it." He ordered.

Doctor Vissal frowned and punched a four digit code into the keypad. But as the door opened he dived out of the way.

"Seize them!" he yelled and the droids that had been hard at work assembling more of the delivery units for the bio weapon got up from their work and advanced on the two Imperial agents.

"Stang!" Garm exclaimed, levelling his blaster and firing a shot right into the chest of the closest droid. All of the droids were basic labour units, with no combat programming, offensive weapons or armour plating. Therefore the powerful energy bolt blew the droid apart, even though it did nothing to halt the advance of the rest.

Then Garm heard the 'snap-hiss' of Vay's lightsaber as she activated it again and leapt past him. A droid raised its arms to try and grab Vay, but the attempt was so clumsy that Vay simply swung her lightsaber in a vertical arc and sliced off the limbs. Confused, the droid then began to stagger about as it tried to determine how to follow its instructions now that it had no hands until Garm pressed his blaster to its head and blew it off. Vay then continued to slice her way through the droids, leaving only damaged ones for Garm to pick off as she pressed onwards.

"Call them off doctor!" she yelled as she broke through the droids and reached out and grabbed Doctor Vissal by the collar. Pulling him closer she held out the blade of her lightsaber to his throat. Fear.

"Stop!" he yelled and in unison the remaining droids came to a halt and lowered their arms.

"Now that's better." Garm said as he stepped into the laboratory and looked around," Now this is interesting." He said, "What does all this look like to you Vay?"

"Like an automated production line that takes parasite-infested water from the lake and places them in tanks to be deliberately released." Vay replied without taking her eyes off Doctor Vissal.

"Just what I was thinking." Garm replied and then he was interrupted by the sound of raised voices from the house above.

"Doctor Vissal! Are you safe? Agent Larcus identify you location!" Ibram's voice called out and Garm headed back to the ladder.

"Down here!" he shouted back up it, "I think you ought to come down here and take a look at what our friend Doctor Vissal's been up to."

Vay, quickly. You have to destroy this room before he can see it.

Vay felt the warning from Lara, but paid it no attention as she heard the sound of Ibram descending the ladder.

Hurry! He's almost here. You have to stop him-

"What is this?" Ibram asked as he looked around.

"The source of the bio weapon I'd wager." Garm replied and Ibram frowned.

There was a hollow 'clang' as the submersible docked, followed by a hiss as the docking port hatch slid open. Devid stepped into darkness that vanished as he foot hit the floor and the lights came on. Looking around him he saw that the room was completely empty, despite Doctor Vissal having promised to have the weapons ready for shipment. Devid looked up the ladder shaft and saw only darkness, suggesting to him

that the hatch above was closed. Aware that there could be Imperial troops in the house above he did not call out. Instead he looked back into the submersible.

"This way men." He said, "The stuff must be in the lab." And four more men exited the submersible and headed for the closed door opposite. When they got there the door slid open automatically and Devid saw that there was someone sat inside with their back to him.

"Doc I wasn't expecting you to be-" Devid began and then the figure turned around.

"I'm afraid the good doctor won't be joining us today." Garm said as he pointed his blaster at the newcomers and from either side of the doorway Ibram and Vay stepped into view.

"Run!" Devid yelled and he turned away from the door to the laboratory and ran back towards the submersible. As he ran he heard the sound of someone sliding down a syntherope line and narrowly avoided Captain Layne as he suddenly appeared at the bottom of the ladder.

Though he missed Devid the captain was in time to block the retreat of the rest of his men and he sung the butt of his rifle into the face of the first.

"Get down!" he bellowed at the rest as Garm fired past him, aiming for Devid. The shot missed but it passed through the hatch into the submersible before it could close and struck the far wall.

Inside the submersible alarms were staring to sound as Devid disengaged from the underwater module and acrid smelling smoke began to fill the interior as the damage inflicted by the shot caused fire to spread. Devid triggered the emergency repulsorlifts to take the submersible to the surface and he rushed to the top escape hatch, throwing it open. But as he clambered onto the top of the vessel and looked to where the emergency raft was stored he heard the sound of powerful repulsorlifts from overhead and looking upwards he saw a gunship descending out of the sky. The downward thrust of the gunship's engines made the submersible rock and Devid screamed as he found himself falling over the side into the water.

"Help me!" he yelled as he tried to wave at the gunship and well aware that the water in which he was immersed and was being thrown up as spray by the gunship above was filled with the deadly aqua-notris that he had planned to sell as a weapon.

Armoured hands reached down as the gunship settled low over the water and Devid was dragged up into the troop-carrying compartment of it. When they let go of him he lay on the floor spluttering and coughing as he tried to clear himself of the water.

"Get me to a hospital!" he yelled and then one of the COMPForce troopers removed his sealed helmet to reveal his face.

"Oh now what's the hurry?" Major Kramm asked, "I'm sure that the ISB will be only too happy to get you all the medical care you need. After you've answered all their questions of course."