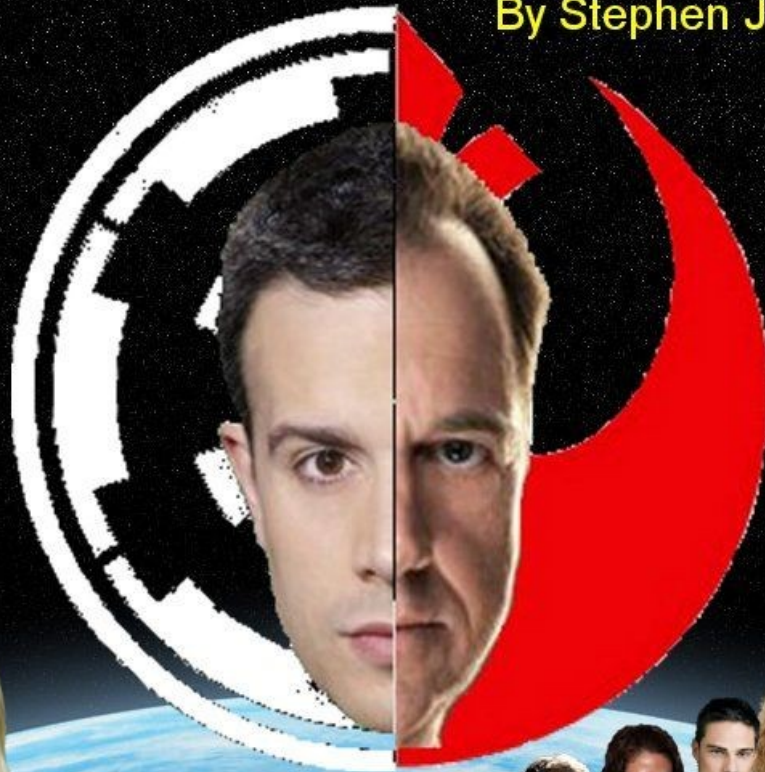


STAR WARS

8-02: Counter Revolution

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...

COUNTER REVOLUTION

ALERTED TO EVENTS ON ESTRAN, THE IMPERIAL FLEET FINDS ITSELF UNABLE TO DO ANYTHING TO REMOVE KELLESEN FROM POWER. ONLY BY TAKING OUT THE INQUISITOR HIMSELF CAN HIS COUP BE DEFEATED. BUT THE ONLY WAY PAST ESTRAN'S DEFENCES FOR GARM AND VAY IS AS PRISONERS...

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

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1.

As the Imperial-class star destroyer *Iron Warrior* dropped out of hyperspace in the Spire Worlds, the column of star systems neighbouring the nebula where the vessel had recently seen action, four of its occupants gathered around a holographic projector in a private briefing chamber. Fleet Admiral Vretan was the most senior naval officer in the sector while General Dern was his counterpart in the army. The other two present were agents of the Imperial Security Bureau, Garm Larcus and the Force sensitive agent Vay Udra.

"Can you get us a direct link to Estran yet?" Admiral Vretan asked, using the intercom to communicate with his staff on the star destroyer's bridge.

"Not yet admiral. The signal we received was a tight beam communication to avoid detection and we're having trouble locking onto the source."

"Estran's orbit could have taken the transmitter out of line of sight." Garm pointed out before the voice of the comscan operator on the bridge spoke again.

"We've got them admiral. I'm putting them through to you now." and at that moment two life sized holographic figures appeared around the console as if they were standing in the room with the four officers. One of them was a woman dressed in an Imperial uniform that even given the limited colour range available in the hologram it was clear that the uniform was of the Space Rescue Corps rather than a genuine military one. On the other hand the large man stood beside her was fully armoured except for his head, having removed his helmet for the purpose of the communication.

"Lieutenant Cordall, Major Kramm." General Dern said, "What is your current situation?"

"Secure for now general." Major Kramm replied, "My company is deployed to watch for any signs of hostile forces approaching."

"Mirri, how long do you think you can keep this channel open?" Garm asked and the woman took a deep breath before answering.

"I can't say for certain." she said, "This was an Imperial Intelligence facility and our communications ought to be secure. But the simple fact is that we don't know what sort of procedures intelligence had in place to guard against someone commandeering their facility. There could be a relief force on its way here as we speak."

"Then we'd better hurry things along." Fleet Admiral Vretan said, "What exactly had happened there on Estran while we've been in the nebula?"

"Inquisitor Kellesen staged a coup." Major Kramm answered, "Moff Horatian, Director Helios and Mister Larrs have all been arrested."

"As have numerous members of the military who are known to be loyal to you admiral." Mirri added, "I can't say whether Admiral Trent was in on the inquisitor's plan before he carried it out but he's certainly making the most of things to get rid of people he doesn't like."

"The news indicates that the same thing is happening all across the sector." Major Kramm said, "I think COMPNOR's pretty much defunct now. All the higher echelons have been detained and lower ranks placed under house arrest."

COMPNOR was the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order, a hybrid of citizens organisation and government department that included groups such as the Imperial Security Bureau and the paramilitary COMPForce.

"What forces do you have at your disposal?" General Dern asked.

"Just my company plus a handful of army personnel." Major Kramm told him, "Oh and the lieutenant here. She volunteered to help as well."

"If you call the choice gave me volunteering." Mirri muttered.

"Sorry I didn't quite catch that lieutenant." Fleet Admiral Vretan said.

"Just doing my duty sir." she replied.

"Surely Kellesen can't think he can hold onto power." Garm said.

"He's an inquisitor. They don't do anything they don't think they can succeed at." Vay said, "All he needs to do is contact any allies he may have on Coruscant and they can issue an order formalising his seizure of power. He just needs to hold out long enough to stop us from removing him before that can happen."

"Which he can do simply by raising the planetary shield." Admiral Vretan added, "He knows that even if we could launch a bombardment powerful enough to penetrate the shield we'd never risk it, not against the sector capital."

"There is one flaw in his plan though admiral." Garm said, "Estran's shield won't protect him from a threat already on the planet."

"Hey now hang on a minute," Major Kramm said, "I've got an infantry company, not an armoured division. No way can we storm the capital building and take down that witch. The defences are too strong."

"But you can infiltrate a smaller group." Garm said.
"Yes, but not enough to deal with Kellesen. He'll slice us up." Kramm said.
"Actually I wasn't thinking of having you go anywhere near him." Garm said and Vay winced.
"I've got a very bad feeling about what you're about to say." she said.
"What are you planning Agent Larcus?" General Dern asked.
"Vay can take on Inquisitor Kellesen sir." Garm replied, "She's done it before."
"And barely escaped with my life." Vay added, frowning.
"I believe in you." Garm replied, "You're our only hope."
"Agent Larcus," Fleet Admiral Vretan said, leaning on the side of the console between them, "regardless of how capable you think Agent Udra may be she, like the rest of us is still here, not on Estran to challenge the inquisitor."
"I'm aware of that admiral. But I have an idea of how to get us to Estran and through the shield." Garm explained.
"How?" General Dern asked.
"As prisoners." Garm answered and Vay sighed, "If we are captured on one of the other worlds in the sector, Allastra for example, then Kellesen will want us brought before him. If the major can get a small team into the capital building then they can free us."
"Us?" Vay commented.
"Well you don't think I'm going to let you do this alone do you?" Garm said and Mirri's hologram smiled.
"Congratulations Vay." she said, "I think you just volunteered as well."

Located centrally in the sector, Allastra was a well developed world that was used as the location for a major communications hub by the Imperial government. But the powerful subspace communication system was not the target of Garm and Vay's supposed infiltration of the world. Instead they entered the system in an ordinary lamda-class shuttle on a vector that made it appear as if they had come from the sector capital world of Estran and headed directly for the planetary capital. Despite the world's importance to the Empire in the sector, the Allastran authorities had a well deserved reputation for incompetence and corruption which had led to the planet's own armed forces being disbanded and the Imperial military taking over all of their duties as well as many of those associated with enforcement of major laws.

This made Allastra the ideal world on which to begin an operation that required Garm and Vay to be caught in the act. The poor performance of the local authorities made it a natural enough target, but the presence of Imperial agents at all levels of the planet's security apparatus meant that there would still someone competent enough to notice the supposed 'accidental' errors made by the pair that would lead to their arrest. Sat at the controls of the shuttle, Vay veered away from the capital at the last minute and rather than head for any of the Imperial landing pads within the city she set the vessel down in a long disused quarry just outside it.

"Okay, let's make sure that there's something to make the authorities really suspicious." Garm said as the pair hurried down the shuttle's access ramp and made their way to the edge of the quarry before Garm drew his sidearm from under the long coat he wore over his ISB uniform and pointed it towards the base of the ramp where a pool of fluid was collecting as it ran down from inside the shuttle, "Fire in the hole." he added as he fired a single shot from the blaster that struck the pool. In an instant the combustible substance ignited and flame spread back up the ramp into the shuttle. This was followed by a dull 'crump' as more of the stored flammable material inside caught fire and the flames began to spread.

"What's better than an abandoned shuttle?" Vay commented, "A deliberately burnt out abandoned shuttle."
"This will have them looking for someone." Garm added as he holstered his blaster again, "They won't know for certain who we are, but they'll know we're here. Now let's go and make sure we get caught somewhere believable."

It was only a short walk from the quarry to a transit station where Garm and Vay were able to board a monorail heading into the capital. Both took as much care as they could to avoid presenting their faces to any of the security cameras they saw but they made no use of any serious disguises other than the coats covering their uniforms. Their aim was to appear natural enough that they would not arouse immediate suspicion from passers by but when the authorities started looking for them they had to be identifiable and traceable.

By the time they reached the capital night had fallen and there were few people on the streets as Garm and Vay made their way through them. Their target was the now defunct Allastran Ministry of Planetary Security that had once been responsible for the planet's own armed forces as well as its intelligence service. The building was more than thirty storeys tall and included a private roof top landing zone. When these had been disbanded much of their equipment had been seized by the Empire, but there were certain items that had simply been mothballed where they were. Among these were several hyperspace capable shuttles operated by the ministry that were properly registered with the Bureau of Ships and Services as having diplomatic clearance and were kept on the roof of the ministry's old building.

“Okay, the shuttles are on the rooftop pads.” Garm said as Vay produced an electronic lock pick from under her coat that she then proceeded to use to override the lock to a side door.

“Do you want me to trip this alarm?” she asked but Garm shook his head.

“No it's too soon.” he said, “We'll make sure that when we reactivate the turbolifts the power surge is detected.”

“Okay.” Vay replied and there was a 'bleep' as the door lock released before it slid open.

Garm then took out his datapad and called up a floor plan of the building.

“The utility controls are in the basement.” he said, “Let's go. We'll leave the door open for the sector rangers to find when they respond.” and he and Vay disappeared into the building, leaving the door open behind them.

2.

Not all of Allastra's own law enforcement had been taken over by the Empire, however. Petty criminal activity was still dealt with at a local level, the sector's Imperial authorities considered acts such as vandalism, petty theft and assault as not worth their time investigating unless there was some connection to more serious acts and so it fell to Allastra's remaining police forces to carry out such duties. As part of these the police maintained frequent speeder patrols of the capital's streets at all hours and, unknown to Garm and Vay, one such patrol happened to drive by the old ministry building just after they had entered it.

The two police officers in the speeder knew the building to be abandoned and that its security features had been based around it being occupied round the clock. Therefore, if someone simply avoided breaking any security seals they would trigger no alarms and this presented the officers with an opportunity. What they hoped for was that squatters would break in and in such a case they would either arrest them or allow them to remain if they were able to pay the officers to look the other way. But in order to catch them the officers would first have to determine that someone had gained access to the building and so they pulled their speeder over and got out.

"We'll check the back." one said, "There are some windows at ground level leading to the basement that are big enough to fit most humanoids.

"We still charging double for aliens?" the other asked as they wandered around the side of the building, using glow rods to light their way.

"Of course. The Empire would sentence them more heavily so we ought to as well." the first officer said before the light of his glow rod suddenly revealed the open doorway, "Uh-oh." he said, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"Someone broke in." the other officer said, smiling, "Payday." and he started to head for the doorway.

"Wait!" his partner hissed as he grabbed hold of him to stop him, "Think for a moment. That's a security door. Squatters aren't going to be able to get through that. Not without triggering the alarms. This is a professional job." and then he took his comlink from his belt and raised it to his mouth, "Patrol trill herf xesh one one three eight to control we have a break in at the ministry of defence. Urgent backup required, Over."

The controls for the building's power were located inside a locked room in the basement and Garm smiled when he saw this.

"This ought to do." he said, "We'll trip the alarm once we've powered up the turbolifts to the roof. I reckon we ought to be able to get to one of the shuttles before we're surrounded by sector rangers."

"Seems simple enough." Vay replied as she opened the security door without triggering the alarm and Garm shone his glow rod into the darkened room beyond it.

In the beam he saw a control console that was helpfully labelled with the function of each power circuit and all he had to do was go through them until he found the one labelled 'Turbolifts'.

"Got it." he said as he flicked the switch, "Now we don't need to walk up all those stairs."

Danger.

Vay gasped as a tremor in the Force warned her of the imminent threat from behind her and dived through the doorway just before a blaster bolt struck the wall behind where she had been standing.

"Stang!" Garm hissed, "I thought you didn't trip any of the alarms."

"I didn't." Vay replied, "Whoever's out there must have found the open door."

"Sector rangers wouldn't be running street patrols." Garm pointed out and he winced, "That means they must be local cops."

"Does that matter?" Vay asked.

"Kind of. We can't be certain that they'll report having captured us promptly." Garm said and Vay smiled.

"I think I can handle that." she said as she removed her coat and drew her lightsaber. Then there was a 'snap-hiss' as she activated the weapon and stepped through the doorway.

"Jedi!" someone called out as soon as Vay stepped into view and there was a volley of blaster fire that Vay easily deflected, making sure that none of it was directed back at the police officers. She knew that if she harmed any of them then it would be all the more difficult to stop them from just dispensing summary justice when she and Garm surrendered to them. Then she ducked back into the utility control room.

"That should have their attention." she said.

"Now we just need to make sure they don't shoot us on the spot." Garm replied, "Think you can handle that?"

"Do you really need to ask?" Vay said and she shut down her lightsaber, "We surrender." she called out and then she let the Force flow through her to push the idea of her and Garm surrendering into the minds of the police officers in the hallway outside, "There's no need to shoot."

"Step out into the open now." a voice called out as the blaster fire stopped, "Keep your hands where we can

see them.”

Vay then tossed both her lightsaber and the compact hold out blaster she carried out into the hallway before stepping through the doorway with her hands in the air. Behind her Garm placed his blaster on the floor and kicked it into the hallway before he raised his hands and followed Vay out of the control room.

Keeping their blasters trained on the two uniformed ISB agents, a total of six police officers advanced out of the darkness before grabbing hold of both Garm and Vay roughly, forcing their arms behind their backs and locking binders around their wrists.

“We are important prisoners.” Vay said as her face was pressed against the wall, “You must report our capture to Imperial authorities.”

“Look at these uniforms.” one of the police officers said, “These two look important. We should let the Empire know we have them.”

“You serve the Empire well.” Vay added, “You are sure to be rewarded.”

“We’ll get a reward for this, just you see.” the officer added as Garm and Vay were dragged away from the wall and pulled down the hallway towards the stairs.

“See?” Vay said, glancing at Garm, “No problem.” but rather than Garm speaking, the only reply Vay received came to her straight from the Force in the form of a voice only she could hear, that of her distant ancestor Lara Udra who had been a jedi knight almost four thousand years earlier.

Not yet. But there's still time.

Imperial Inquisitor Ibram Kellesen scrolled down the list of names on the display in front of him dispassionately. Each one was marked as having been either relieved of duty, arrested or in some cases executed to prevent them from taking action against Ibram’s new regime. The list was longer than Ibram would have liked and he suspected that some of those officers loyal to him were exploiting the situation to settle old scores. For now he would tolerate this, but should such vendettas threaten the efficient running of the sector then whoever was responsible would end up having their own name added to the list.

“My lord Miss Tharr is here to see you.” Ibram’s new secretary announced over the intercom. The woman had served Moff Horatian loyally for years but Ibram did not consider her a threat to him and so had allowed her to stay on in her position.

“Show her in.” Ibram replied and he looked up as the door to his office opened and a woman in an Imperial Intelligence uniform entered.

“Ah Gayal,” he said, “are you settling back in as chief of Imperial Intelligence once more?”

“Yes thank you.” she replied, “And as a way of saying thank you for my old job back I thought I’d bring you the good news myself.”

“Good news?” Ibram said and Gayal smiled.

“Guess who just got themselves arrested on Allastra?” Gayal asked rhetorically and before Ibram could answer she added, “Garm Larcus and Vay Udra.”

“They were arrested on Allastra? Why were they not with the fleet in the nebula still?” Ibram asked.

“I don’t know. Perhaps you can ask them yourself when they get here. I’ve sent orders to the sector rangers to have them brought here right away.” Gayal said and Ibram frowned, “What’s wrong?” she added when she saw this.

“Vay Udra is strong with the Force.” he answered, “She would not be so easily captured and Agent Larcus is no fool either. I sense a trap.”

“Do you want me to hold them where they are?” Gayal asked.

“No.” Ibram said, “Vay is too important. Have them brought here as you planned. But warn the sector rangers that they are to use the maximum possible caution. Even in custody Vay Udra is one of the most dangerous individuals in the galaxy.”

Garm and Vay were placed in separate vehicles to be taken back to the local police station and after being checked in they were each taken to a different cell to wait for the sector rangers to collect them. However, having been warned to use caution in handling the two prisoners the sector rangers were unwilling to simply take it on trust that the Allastran police had done their jobs properly.

Both Garm and Vay still had their arms bound behind their backs when the sector rangers burst into their cells in groups of eight and forced them face down onto the floor. Each of them was then gagged and a hood pulled over their heads before the sector rangers proceeded to strip search the prisoners, cutting away their clothing and examining the fragments for any signs that it had been modified to conceal something. The sector rangers left both Garm and Vay gagged and hooded but did not intend to move them all the way to Estran naked. Instead their binders were removed and replaced with bright orange overalls commonly used by the authorities on Allastra to restrain prisoners while they were being transported. These lacked sleeves or even holes for the wearers arms and once fastened kept the wearer trapped inside, still able to walk but without the use of their arms.

Dragged back to their feet, Garm and Vay were then guided through the police station to where the sector

rangers had two scout ships waiting on the roof and one of them was loaded aboard each one and locked in a small cell inside the craft. Even unable to see both of them heard the sound of the scouts ships' repulsorlifts as the scout ships took off and rose into the air and after a short period of time that seemed much longer to Garm as he sat in darkness the scout ships left Allastra's atmosphere and engaged their ion drives before making for open space and finally jumping into hyperspace as they headed for Estran.

3.

Major Kramm left most of his men to hold the Imperial Intelligence communication facility they had used to communicate with the fleet sent into the nebula while taking a single platoon along with him and Mirri to the capital building. Only Mirri still wore a uniform at this point, the armour worn by COMPForce troopers was too distinctive to allow them to approach the building without being noticed and that would lead to a full scale security alert. Fortunately, while Kellesen was in the process of purging all branches of COMPNOR from government the Space Rescue Corps was considered too insignificant for his allies to take an interest in. Major Kramm's second in command, Captain Layne, pulled the unmarked repulsortruck over to the side of the road beside the cantina opposite the capital building and Mirri opened the side door facing away from the building.

"You know what you're doing?" Major Kramm asked and Mirri nodded.

"I head for the parking lot and open the door for you." she said and the major smiled.

"That's right. Just remember that you'll have to use that blaster of yours. The guards-

"Yeah I know, the guards aren't going to let you in or give up their uniforms. It's not like I have to kill them anyway. A lethal shot will ruin those uniforms you need." Mirri interrupted and then she got out of the truck and stood back as Layne drove away.

Mirri then simply crossed the road and walked up the steps to the capital building. As usual the reception area beyond the main doors were guarded by stormtroopers overseen by an officer behind a desk.

"Identification." the officer said as soon as Mirri walked up to him.

"Do you really need to see my identification?" Mirri asked, noticing that the officer's rank was equivalent to her own.

"Yes I do. We're on a heightened security alert lieutenant," the officer replied. Then he glanced at the nearest of the stormtroopers, "and those guys take their duties very seriously."

"Okay I get it." Mirri said as she rummaged through her pockets for her identification card and handed it over.

"Who are you here to see lieutenant?" the security officer asked as he scanned the card.

"I don't know. I just got told to report to the naval offices by Admiral Trent." Mirri said. This was the riskiest part of Mirri's plan. The SRC had no true presence in the capital building and so its members would normally only be seen there if they were invited by someone from a more important government department and so Mirri had to provide a reason for her presence there. The problem was that if the security officer ran a check on this he would discover that she was lying. That was why Mirri picked Admiral Trent's name to use.

Checking with him would mean contacting the orbital fleet headquarters station and most likely rousing him from his bed. Given that Admiral Trent was currently using Kellesen's seizure of power to remove people who he had taken a dislike to Mirri was betting that no-one would be willing to risk angering him by checking something so mundane.

"Here you go then Lieutenant Cordall." the security officer said, returning her identity card and Mirri inwardly breathed a sigh of relief that her gamble had paid off, "Do you know the way?"

"Yes, I know exactly where I need to be." Mirri said, smiling as she took back her identity card and put it away. Then she headed for the nearby turbolift cluster and waited patiently for a car to arrive.

Stepping into the turbolift Mirri waited for the doors to close before she reached out to press the button for the underground parking lot rather than the naval offices that were located on one of the upper floors. She was not sure of whether or not the stormtroopers standing in the hallway outside would have noticed which button she reached for but at this stage of the plan Mirri was taking no chances.

The turbolift carried Mirri straight down to the parking lot without any stops in between and when she stepped out she found herself in a large and mainly empty space. The parking lot was well lit and Mirri headed for the vehicle exit where she knew there would be a security checkpoint manned by two guards. The checkpoint consisted of a small booth set beside the gates blocking access to the parking lot and as soon as it came into view Mirri saw that there were two men in army uniforms sat inside. Mirri considered herself lucky with this situation. Army troopers wore much lighter armour than the much more heavily indoctrinated stormtroopers and neither were wearing helmets. In addition army personnel were easier to manipulate than stormtroopers so despite being outnumbered she was confident that everything was going according to plan. "Hey!" she called out as she walked up to the checkpoint, "Could one of you guys give me a hand with a speeder?"

"What's wrong with it?" one of the guards asked as he stepped out of the booth, "We can call maintenance if you want."

"It's kind of embarrassing." Mirri said, "It's not even my speeder and I've gone and dropped the keys down a grate. If I call someone to force the lock then my boss will know I screwed up and I'll have to pay to put it right. But if one of you could just help me lift up the grate then I can get the keys back."

The guards looked at one another and smiled before one turned back towards Mirri.

"I'll give you a hand," he said and he started to walk towards her.

Mirri turned around and walked away, letting the guard follow him. Then she led him far enough away from the security checkpoint that it was out of sight and found the first expensive looking speeder that she could that was near to a grate in the floor. As it happened it was parked in the section of the lot reserved for members of the ISB and Mirri guessed that the owner was currently somewhere in the detention section of the building.

"Here it is," she said, "My boss said I could use it so long as it doesn't get damaged. It's not like the owner needs it right now."

"Yeah, I get it," the guard said and then as he crouched down to take hold of the grate he added, "I've got to say it's about time someone did something about those nerf herders in the ISB always poking their noses into what we're all doing."

"Well we're certainly doing something now," Mirri said from behind the guard as she calmly drew her blaster and looked around to double check that there was no-one else nearby before she shot him in the back of his head with it set to stun.

There was a flash of blue and the guard slumped forwards over the grate. Holstering her blaster Mirri then dragged the unconscious guard behind the speeder so he was hidden from view before hurrying back in the direction of the security checkpoint. This time Mirri halted as soon as she saw the checkpoint and crouched behind a supporting pillar as she took aim with her blaster. Though the SRC was not a military or law enforcement organisation its personnel were still given some training in the use of blasters and Mirri had had cause to use hers on previous occasions. But the shot she need to make now was not the sort of close up attack she was used to. Instead she needed to hit a target more than twenty metres away and partially obscured by the booth. Twice Mirri lined up her blaster and was just about to take the shot when she decided otherwise and started again. But then on the third go she tightened her finger on the trigger a little too much and the blaster went off before she was ready.

The stun blast narrowly missed the guard, passing over his head and hitting the inside of the booth. The startled guard turned around and drew his blaster in one hand while the other reached for his comlink. Knowing that she had only seconds before the alarm was raised Mirri fired her blaster again, pulling the trigger of the weapon repeatedly in the hope that at least one of the shots would hit her target. As it happened the first shot struck the guard in his chest, just clipping the edge of his armoured vest near his shoulder. This was not enough to immediately incapacitate him but the energy pulse that splashed over into his arm did cause him to drop his comlink before he could call for help and before he could either recover the device or return fire at Mirri another shot caught him in the throat and he collapsed on the spot.

Mirri then emerged from cover and hurried towards the checkpoint, swapping her blaster for her comlink and activating the device.

"Kramm are you there?" she signalled.

"Right here," he responded, "What's your situation?"

"The gate is secured. You better get your men over here now," Mirri said as she reached the booth and stepped inside.

"Understood. We're on our way," Kramm said and then the channel went dead.

Mirri looked at the control console inside the booth and saw that it was very basic. There was one control for the gate currently in place across the entrance and another for a heavier blast door. The only other controls were for a standard intercom panel that thankfully had not been active when Mirri had shot the guard. Given that the gate could only be fully open or closed the controls to operate it were very simple and Mirri activated them with a single press of a button. Then as the gate was rolling out of the way Mirri dragged the unconscious guard inside the booth and left him slumped in the corner as the repulsortruck carrying Major Kramm's troops drove into the parking lot.

"There are two uniforms," Mirri said as Major Kramm and his men started to disembark, "One here and another hidden behind a speeder in the ISB section."

"Okay that will do for a start," Major Kramm replied, "But we need to get more. Do you know where the army barracks are here?"

"Err, not really no," Mirri replied.

"Never mind," Kramm said and he turned to his second in command, "Kyle put one of these uniforms on and go with her. We need uniforms and armour for the entire platoon."

"Of course major," Layne replied as he climbed out of the repulsortruck.

Inside the sector ranger scout ships both Garm and Vay felt the transition of the vessels back into realspace and then the vibration of the small vessels as they entered a planetary atmosphere. From that point it was only a short time before the scout ships touched down and Garm and Vay were suddenly dragged from their cells and led down the shuttles' access ramps.

As they were brought together again Vay sensed the familiar presence of Garm in the Force and she tell that

he seemed calm despite their situation. She would have liked to have spoken to him so that he too would know that she was alright but her gag prevented her from talking and she doubted that he would recognise any sound she was able to make over the sound of the scout ships' repulsorlift engines that were still running behind them.

Still hooded to keep them unaware of their surroundings as they were taken from the scout ships Garm and Vay were led straight into a building. Almost straight away Vay sensed a dark presence in the Force and she knew instantly that it was Kellesen, meaning that she and Garm had been brought to the capital building on Estran.

That part of their plan had worked at least, she thought to herself.

And was being stripped naked, bound, gagged and blindfolded part of the plan as well?

Under her hood Vay frowned at the intervention of Lara but did nothing in response.

The presence in the Force of Ibram Kellesen drew closer as Garm and Vay continued to be led through the capital building, being taken in a turbolift to another floor before being led down more corridors. Then right as Ibram's presence seemed right in front of her Vay felt the cold metal floors of the capital building give way to the soft carpet she recognised from Moff Horatian's office.

"Halt!" a stern voice snapped and the guards dragging Garm and Vay between stopped suddenly, "The prisoners for you sir." the guard added.

"Leave them." Kellesen said, "You are dismissed."

Fear.

Anger.

Hatred.

Vay felt Garm's reaction to the inquisitor's voice and sensed that if he was not bound as securely as she was then he would have launched himself at the other man. Then came the sound of the door closing behind Garm and Vay before there was silence. Ibram had been reviewing information about the status of his grip on power on his computer terminal when they had been brought in and he ignored them while he finished this, leaving them both to ponder what would happen next to them.

Only when he finished his existing task did Ibram get to his feet and walk around the desk to where Garm and Vay stood helpless before him and starting with Garm he removed their hoods. Both blinked as their eyes were suddenly exposed to light again after several hours in total darkness and Garm glared at Ibram. "I sense your anger Agent Larcus." he said as he returned to his chair, sat back down and looked across his desk at the two agents standing bound and gagged in front of him, "Now it seems to me," he continued, "that your being captured on Allastra was just a little too convenient. We all know how inefficient their law enforcement agencies are and yet they managed to capture two highly trained agents without a fight. I sense that your plan was to be brought here all along and it is likely that you intended to try and kill me." then he smiled, "So how is that working out for you?" and he paused. Then when neither Garm or Vay even attempted to respond he got up and again and approached Vay, "But where are my manners?" he said and he reached behind her head to undo her gag. But rather than remove it entirely he just loosened it enough that he could remove the ball from her mouth and let it hang around her neck, "There, maybe now we can have a civilised conversation."

"What about Garm?" Vay asked as Ibram returned to his seat again and she looked at Garm, focusing on the ball still wedged in his mouth.

"Oh I have nothing to say to him." Ibram replied as he picked up an antique style letter opener that Vay recognised as one she had given to Moff Horatian as a gift to reinforce the rumours spread when she first arrived in the sector that she was his mistress, "Though I do know someone who does." and he activated his intercom, "Our guests have arrived. Perhaps you should come and collect Agent Larcus now." he said before shutting the intercom off again without waiting for a reply.

"What's going on?" Vay asked.

"I need to know about what Fleet Admiral Vretan is planning." Ibram replied, "I know that interrogating you is pointless but I think that my people will be able to get answers out of Agent Larcus here. They are very dedicated. Does that bother you? I know you are close, I witnessed the first time you had intercourse."

Surprise.

Vay sensed Garm's reaction to this, though it did not surprise her to hear that the inquisitor had been watching through a surveillance device planted in her apartment on the night she first took Garm to her bed. He had known about the encounter in time to inform Moff Horatian of it by the time the pair woke up the next morning.

"Tell me Vay, did you ever tell Agent Larcus how you were able to persuade a man still mourning for his dead wife how you so easily convinced him to have sexual intercourse with you that night?"

"Don't do this." Vay replied, remembering how she had used the Force to manipulate Garm into sleeping with her.

"So he doesn't? He doesn't know that you used your skills with the Force to affect his mind so he had no choice but to have intercourse with you? Interesting that for a woman who had until then only given her body

to men she was ordered to would use such coercion to seduce the one man she actually wanted to sleep with."

Anger.

"Garm don't listen to him." Vay exclaimed when she sensed his reaction to what the inquisitor was saying but at that point the intercom sounded to interrupt the conversation.

"Miss Tharr is here your excellency." a voice said.

"Good. Show her in." Ibram said and the door opened to admit not only Gayal Tharr but also a second uniformed Imperial Intelligence agent and a pair of IntSec guards, all of them female.

"Why Agent Larcus," Gayal said as she walked up to Garm and stroked the side of his face, "I don't think I've ever seen you looking so good before." and Garm scowled as the other agent strapped a collar around his neck that was attached to a leash.

"I need answers from him." Ibram said.

"You'll get them." Gayal replied, "Our methods may not be as barbaric as the ISB's are but Imperial Intelligence has always been more reliable. Once we get Agent Larcus into an interrogation cell we'll get you the information you want." and then she nodded at the other agent who now held Garm's leash. In response the other woman tugged at it and started to drag Garm back towards the door, followed by the two guards. Gayal watched them leave and before she turned to Ibram, "I'll give you a live feed of anything we get from him." she said, "Just let us know if you want us to focus on anything in particular." then she looked at Vay, "What about her?"

"I will deal with Miss Udra. She and I have unfinished business to conclude."

"Of course." Gayal said before she too left the office.

As soon as the doors closed behind her Ibram turned his attention back to Vay.

"Would you like me to remove that inconvenient garment?" he asked and Vay looked around.

"I don't see any other clothes around here." she replied.

"Do you really need them?" Ibram asked.

"Considering I'm naked inside this thing yes. But I'm guessing you already knew that." she answered.

"Of course I did. I saw the feed from Allastra."

"Well I'm happier being tied up than naked." Vay said.

"Then you have gone soft." Ibram responded, snarling, "If you had truly embraced your training you would have been willing to parade yourself naked around this entire building and endure any humiliation just for the chance to slit my throat. Obviously we have a long way to go. Now do sit down before you accidentally fall and we can begin." and he indicated a nearby chair.

"You know what," Vay began as she carefully sat down, "I think being gagged again is preferable to having to talk to you. Oh and that hood, it stops me having to look at your face." the problem was that she knew Ibram was right. From infancy she had been taught that the success of the mission was all and during her teenage years that had included performing many degrading acts just to position herself to strike when the time came. The pain and humiliation she suffered strengthened her ability to draw on the Dark Side.

The Dark Side may offer quick and easy solutions but they are temporary at best. Controlling your emotions to embrace the Light Side is the only long term solution.

Vay frowned momentarily at Lara's interruption. Ever since she had begun her unwanted communication with Vay the long dead jedi had made it clear that her intention was to quite literally get her to see the light and embrace the path of the jedi instead of the one she had been raised to believe in. The problem was that although Vay had come to reject some of what was expected of her by the Empire and to have grave doubts about some of her actions she saw nothing about the life of self sacrifice led by the jedi that appealed to her. Most significantly among the sacrifices she would be expected to make from her point was view was her relationship with Garm. She knew that the jedi code forbade such attachment and Lara had tried to put her off pursuing it as vigorously as she had done.

But then Vay remembered Garm's reaction when Ibram had brought up the manner in which she had used her ability with the Force to get him into her bed the first time and she realised that their relationship may now be over.

Anger.

Hatred.

"Good." Ibram said, "I can feel your anger and your hatred towards me. What do you know about the Rule of Two?"

"It's a limit on the number of Sith there can be." Vay replied.

"Almost. To be precise it is a limitation on the number of Sith Lords there can be. Many times over the last thousand years the Sith have inducted other force wielders into their ranks to be used as nothing more than weapons. But you and I can rebuild the Sith Order here on Estran. The Rule of Two allows for a master and an apprentice. One to wield the power and another to crave it. Become my apprentice Vay and when the Star Forge is under our control we can rebuild the Empire under our rule."

"The Star Forge is gone." Vay said, smiling as she glared at Ibram, "Garm and I destroyed it so that the

Empire would never be able to control its power.”

Rage.

Vay could feel how angry Ibram was to hear this even though he remained outwardly calm.

“No matter.” he said, “You will serve as my apprentice, you have no other choice other than a lifetime locked away alone in darkness wishing for a speedy execution.”

“I’ll never serve you.” Vay hissed and now it was Ibram’s turn to smile.

“What, not even for the opportunity to kill me? How else do you think the apprentice becomes the master?” he said, “Now doesn’t that sound tempting to you?”

4.

Gayal led the way while the second agent held the leash around Garm's neck and the two guards followed behind them. Garm did not know exactly what form his interrogation by Imperial Intelligence would take but he had a good idea. Whereas the ISB's interrogation branch had never wavered in the use of torture, Imperial Intelligence had generally considered itself above such things. This was a hold over from the days of the Republic when enhanced interrogation methods and torture droids had been forbidden to the then Republic Intelligence. On the other hand the ISB had only come into being during the time of the Empire and there had been no such limits placed on it.

The clue to the treatment that Garm could expect was in the agents who had accompanied Gayal to take custody of him. All of them were female and Garm knew that that was no co-incidence. He was well aware that it was a common tactic of Imperial Intelligence to try and put the subjects of their interrogations in situations where they would feel at a disadvantage to their interrogators and among humans as well as many other species a good way to accomplish this was to strip them. Psychologically many species were used to being clothed in the presence of others and they instinctively felt vulnerable when naked, particularly when those around them were of the opposite sex. Therefore, this was what Garm expected would be Gayal's first step of interrogation, removing what little clothing he had left and restraining him in a manner that left him exposed to the eyes of the all female interrogation team.

But first they had to get him to an interrogation cell. There were three different sets of cells in the capital building. The first of these was the general holding area meant for longer term detention of prisoners and it was here that Moff Horatian and the other senior personnel being held would most likely be being kept. The second was in the ISB's section of the building and Garm guessed that these would currently be empty. Third and finally were the cells belonging to Imperial Intelligence and it was obvious to Garm that this was where he was being led by his captors. The lateness of the hour meant that there were few people in there as Garm was pulled along by the leash around his neck but the handful of staff that they did encounter just moved out of the way and grinned, knowing that Garm was being taken away to be questioned about something.

Gayal and her agents led Garm to a turbolift that took them down to the level where the offices of Imperial Intelligence were located and when the doors opened again Garm saw that the hallway outside was more crowded than the administrative levels of the building. A squad of Imperial army troopers was positioned just outside the turbolift while stood by a vending machine along the hallway was a woman in a black officer's uniform and as Gayal's agents dragged Garm from the lift he recognised who she was and if not for his gag he would have smiled at the realisation.

"Miss Tharr." Mirri said as she turned to face Gayal when she and her agents approached her.

"Yes?" Gayal said, "What do you want?"

"Him." Mirri said, looking at Garm, "Hand him over."

"Are you insane? Inquisitor Kellesen himself has authorised his interrogation by Imperial Intelligence. Get out of my way before you end up joining him."

"Don't say I didn't give you a chance." Mirri said and all of a sudden the army troopers from just outside the turbolift spun around and raised their rifles and opened fire. The two IntSec guards were hit first, with the powerful energy bolts punching right through the backs of their armoured vests before they could even turn around and then the agent holding Garm was hit just as she was drawing her blaster and as she fell she almost dragged Garm down with her.

Positioned on the far side of Garm from the troopers, Gayal was sufficiently obscured that none of them attempted to take a shot at her and she was able to draw her compact blaster from its concealed holster under her tunic and point it over Garm's shoulder at the troopers. However, before she could fire she felt the muzzle of a blaster pistol press against the back of her head.

"You know I've used this a lot today." Mirri said, "On stun mainly but I'm not entirely certain that its still set that way. So I guess you need to ask yourself one question. Do you think the Force is with you nerf herder?" Gayal sighed and raised her hands and letting Mirri take her blaster from her.

"You won't get away with this." she said, "When I don't arrive this place will be locked down and you'll never get out."

"Oh we aren't planning on going anywhere Miss Tharr." Major Kramm said as he lifted the visor on the stolen helmet he was wearing, "But Agent Larcus isn't the only thing we need from you."

"I'll tell you nothing." Gayal said and Major Kramm grinned.

"Oh we don't need your information. The lieutenant there needs your uniform." he said, "So strip."

"No." Gayal said flatly and Kramm looked around.

"Captain Layne, strip her." he said.

"Of course sir." Layne replied and he beckoned for one of the other COMPForce assault troopers to assist

him.

"Okay." Gayal said as they stepped forwards and she started to unfasten her tunic.

Meanwhile Major Kramm turned to look at Garm who was still standing bound and gagged in the corridor.

"Well? Aren't you going to say thank you for saving you Agent Larcus?" he said, grinning and Garm scowled at him before Kramm reached around the back of his head and released his gag.

"I take it that you have one of those uniforms for me?" he asked and Major Kramm nodded.

"Yeah, we mad sure to grab you a spare. Now what about your lady friend? Where is the little witch?" he said.

"With Kellesen." Garm replied, "Now how about we find somewhere private so you can get me out of this thing?" and he flexed his arms.

"Lieutenant Cordall needs a changing room as well so she may as well find somewhere for the pair of you while we deal with these bodies and her of course." Major Kramm said and he looked at Gayal who was now stood in her underwear and holding her uniform in her arms in front of her.

"Take her to the ISB offices." Garm said, "I'm guessing that they'll be empty now. Mirri and I will meet you up there okay?"

"Understood Agent Larcus. Just don't take too long. That bantha cow was probably right about what's going to happen when she doesn't turn up with you."

"We've located their position sir." the army officer in the hologram in front of the desk Kellesen was currently using as his own said, "It's an Imperial Intelligence communications station in the Verren Hills. But the facility is well protected and they are dug in. I need more men and armoured support if I'm going to flush them out."

"You will have all the men and arms you need colonel." Kellesen replied, "I want these traitors dealt with before they can threaten me. No prisoners. Do you understand?"

"Yes sir. I'll make sure my men are made aware of the order."

"Very good. Carry on colonel." Kellesen said and he shut off the holographic communicator. Then he picked up the letter opener again and began to stroke its blade as he glared at Vay who still sat bound in the chair,

"Your allies will not last long." he said, "Their position will be overrun shortly and then what will you have?"

Agent Larcus is being interrogating as we speak and you are here with me, helpless."

"Maybe we have more help." Vay commented.

"No, you do not. The COMPForce company under Major Kramm is the only formation on Estran that had not been accounted for and anyone else who went with you to Allastra is still there. I issued orders after your capture that no other flights were to leave the planet and that order has been followed to the letter." Ibram explained, "So that means there is no-one left here on Estran to save you. The only choices open to you now are how comfortable your time here will. Oh and Agent Larcus's as well of course."

"Garm?" Vay exclaimed as she glared at Ibram, "You leave him alone."

"Ah, so you do care about him them. Even though he now knows the truth about you. Good, then perhaps keeping him healthy will inspire you to remain loyal to me. Agree to that and I'll agree to set him free. You won't be able to continue your relationship with him of course, though I doubt that he would want that now he knows what you did to him in any case, but you'll have the satisfaction of knowing you saved his life from the firing squad that is his only future right now."

The door slid open to reveal a small storage room filled with shelves of cleaning equipment and a single droid stood motionless and inactive at the far end.

"This ought to do." Mirri said as she entered the room and pulled Garm in after her. Then she squeezed past him to close the door behind them.

"You didn't have to use the leash you know." Garm said, commenting about the way she had led him to the storage room.

"Hey, I just took hold of what Kramm handed me." she said as she squeezed pat him again before dumping both of the uniforms she carried onto the floor at her feet and took off her belt before reaching for the clasps on her tunic. Then she paused and looked at Garm, "Turn around." she told him.

"What?" he said.

"I said turn around. I'm about to get undressed here. I don't want you watching." Mirri said and Garm sighed as he turned around.

"That good enough?" he asked.

"Just about. Now no peeking." Mirri said as she started to change out of her SRC uniform and into the Imperial Intelligence one taken from Gayal. She still retained the belt and rank panel from her own uniform however, she knew that people would believe she was a lieutenant but not the highest ranking intelligence officer in the sector and she also suspected that she would need the blaster holstered on her belt again later on.

"Finished yet?" Garm said.

"Just about yes. Now let's get you out of that thing." Mirri replied and she reached for the zip running down

Garm's back.

"Just undo it." he told her, "Then hand me that uniform and turn around."

Mirri paused and frowned for a moment, looking down at Garm's bare feet.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

"You're naked under there aren't you?" Mirri asked.

"Yes. So?"

"Nothing. Just considering the possibilities, that's all." Mirri replied, smiling. Then she quickly undid the zip and placed the Imperial Army uniform she had been given for him on the shelf beside him before she turned her back on him while he got dressed.

Emerging from the storage room Garm lowered the visor on his blast helmet to prevent anyone from recognising him before he and Mirri headed for the turbolift to take them to the ISB offices where Major Kramm and his men would be waiting for them. Entering the turbolift Garm lifted his visor as he selected the floor they wanted and then both of them stood silently as the turbolift car began to move.

"So do you work out a lot then?" Mirri said suddenly, breaking the silence and Garm frowned as he looked at her.

"Why would you ask that?" he asked her and she smiled.

"I was just curious." Mirri replied.

"You peeked didn't you?"

"Okay I admit it, I peeked and to be honest I'm not sorry I did." Mirri said.

"As it happens I do work out but my job is pretty active as well." Garm said, facing forwards again. Then after a moment's pause he added, "You know I'd have thought you've have chosen something a lot more practical than red leather." and Mirri gasped, her eyes widening and her jaw dropping, "Yes I peeked too and I'm not sorry I did either." Garm said as the turbolift door opened to reveal Captain Layne and two of the COMPForce troopers guarding the turbolift.

"What's wrong with her?" he said when he saw the shocked expression on Mirri's face.

"Probably chaffing." Garm replied, "Where's Major Kramm?"

"Down there in the investigators' offices." Layne replied, "He told em to take you straight to him." and he started to walk down the hallway towards the ISB Investigation offices. Garm followed and Mirri darted out of the turbolift behind him and caught up with him.

"Look," she said softly, "they were a joke gift from an old boyfriend and I had nothing else clean okay?"

"Trust me lieutenant, I've seen stranger. Much, much stranger."

Entering the investigation offices Garm and Mirri found Major Kramm waiting with the rest of his men, a full platoon's worth counting the two by the turbolift and the two left in the parking lot to make the security booth appear manned.

"What did you do with that rancor cow from intelligence?" Mirri asked as she realised that this represented the entire force of COMPForce troopers in the building.

"Oh she's having a time out." Major Kramm replied and then he slammed his elbow into a metal cupboard beside him and there was a muffled cry from inside.

"I thought you'd use one of the cells." Garm said.

"No access keys." Kramm said, "Oh and I hope your guys will forgive me for using up most of the tape on their desks to make sure she won't be going anywhere."

Garm smiled.

"Just let them see what you used it for and I think you'll be fine." he said.

"Okay, so we're all here." Layne said, "So now what?"

"Kellesen and Vay are in the moff's office." Garm said, "That's where we need to go."

"You think we can take him down without her?" Mirri asked and Garm shrugged.

"I hope so." he said, "But a full platoon ought to stand a fair chance against one man. Even Kellesen must have his limits."

"And you really think that just killing him is enough to end this?" Layne commented and Garm nodded.

"With Kellesen gone and Gayal Tharr doing her best impression of the thing from the mummy's tomb command will fall to the military and that means General Dern will have seniority. Hell, everyone knows he's been looking at taking over as regional governor if Moff Horatian retired and he knows all the locals that matter." he said, "So all we need to do is kill Kellesen and signal the *Iron Warrior* that it's safe to jump into the system and General Dern can take over. Then he can have Moff Horatian and the others released."

"Supposing the general decides to hang onto power for himself?" Layne said.

"He won't." Garm answered without hesitation, "Even if he tried he'd be taking over right after one usurper had been executed and I doubt he'd want to make it two in a row."

"So how do we go about carrying out this summary execution?" Mirri said.

"A direct assault." Garm replied, "No more subterfuge and sneaking around. We need to attack Kellesen directly. Then when he's been dealt with we can use the communications equipment in the moff's office to signal the *Iron Warrior*."

“What about his security staff?” Mirri asked.

“What about them?” Major Kramm responded.

“We can't just kill them.” Mirri protested.

“Actually that's just what we have to do.” Garm said, “Right now they are enemy soldiers and they'll be trying to kill us in defence of Kellesen. Anyone who doesn't just get out of our way is a threat.”

“If they aren't with us then they're against us.” Layne said.

“Sounds good to me.” Kramm added, “So what are we waiting for?”

5.

Getting up to the level of the moff's office meant taking the turbolift and this was the riskiest part of the plan as far as Garm and Major Kramm were concerned. It required splitting the platoon up into smaller groups for them to fit into the turbolifts and to minimise the disruption they summoned all the turbolift cars at the nearby cluster and waited for them to arrive. As the doors to each one slid open Major Kramm ordered a single squad into the turbolift and had them hold the doors until the entire platoon was standing inside a turbolift and only then did they release the doors and select the uppermost floor of the building.

The top floor of the building was guarded by a unit of four stormtroopers, two beside the turbolifts and two more opposite them. The two opposite them were the first to die, gunned down as soon as the first turbolift door slid open and the prepared COMPForce troopers inside opened fire with sustained bursts from their rifles. The two troopers either side of the turbolifts spun around and raise their weapons but before they could return fire another of the turbolifts opened and Major Kramm himself shot one of the stormtroopers. The final stormtrooper was able to get off a shot though and one of the COMPForce troopers in the first lift was hit. Garm then darted forwards and scooped up the dead stormtrooper's rifle and turned it towards the remaining guard. But before he could pull the trigger a third turbolift arrived bearing Captain Layne who put a single blast into the stormtrooper himself then followed this up with a short burst to make sure that he was dead as he fell to the floor.

However, although the platoon had successfully breached the first layer of security on the top floor there were many more layers to be penetrated and they were far from reaching the moff's office as alarms sounded in reaction to the blaster fire.

"The cameras!" Garm yelled, "Take out the cameras." and he fired his rifle at a nearby surveillance camera, causing it to explode in a shower of sparks.

Kellesen looked up when he heard the alarm sound and he activated his intercom.

"What's happening?" he demanded.

"Sir there's trouble on your level. An army unit has attacked the security detail by the turbolifts. We're sending three more squads up to track them down." a man's voice responded.

"Show me." Kellesen said and in front of him a flat holographic image appeared that showed the disguised COMPForce troopers as they emerged from the turbolifts, firing at the stormtrooper security detail. Then right before the feed from the security camera was cut off Kellesen saw the face of Garm as he looked directly into it without a helmet to disguise his features.

Rage.

"Something wrong?" Vay asked from the chair and Kellesen glared at her before he spoke to the security officer again.

"Those aren't army troopers." he hissed, "Garm Larcus is with them. They must be part of the missing COMPForce company. Warn your men to take additional care and remind them that I want Agent Larcus taken alive and able to answer questions. If he isn't in an interrogation chamber within an hour then someone else will take his place." and he shut off the intercom before the security officer could respond. Then he stared at Vay, "There will be no escape for your Agent Larcus this time." he said.

"Maybe you're the one that there'll be no escape for." Vay replied and Kellesen stood up and strode around the desk. Reaching down he took hold of Vay by her throat with one hand and lifted her up off the floor.

Startled, Vay found her feet dangling in mid air as Kellesen tightened his grip and she struggled to breathe.

"Your precious Garm Larcus will pay for this I promise you." Kellesen said, snarling as he spoke, "When I have the information I want I will take my time in making him suffer." and then he threw Vay across the room.

Unable to control her fall while she was bound Vay slammed into the wall and dropped to the floor still gasping for breath and as she looked up she saw Kellesen march out of the office, leaving her alone.

Desperately Vay tried flexing her arms, hoping that the overalls would give way and she would be able to free herself before the inquisitor returned.

Really? That's your big plan? Try and rip your way out of a restraint designed specifically to hold someone doing that? Think Vay. Ibram Kellesen doesn't consider you a threat like this. Make him pay for that.

Vay was about to just dismiss Lara's words when she suddenly spied something out of the corner of her eye and a smile started to spread across her face.

"I have you now." she said to herself.

"Behind us!" Captain Layne called out as a unit of stormtroopers emerged from a corridor that the COMPForce platoon had already passed by and he opened fire, spraying blaster bolts towards them.

"They must be calling in troops from all over the building." Garm said, "We need to split up."

"That means splitting our firepower." Kramm pointed out.

"I know." Garm replied, "But if we leave one squad behind then they can at least stop us being caught by surprise by any of them."

"Captain." Kramm said, looking at Layne, "I'm leaving you here with one squad. Give us a five minute head start before you follow. Don't let anyone get behind us."

"Yes major." Layne responded before shooting another stormtrooper who had appeared in front of him.

"The rest of you look alive!" Kramm shouted, "We've got a traitor to find." and then he started to advance along the corridor in the direction of the moff's office.

There were two more stormtroopers lying in wait for the COMPForce troops around the next corner, both concealed behind furniture so that they could wait until there were several of the attacking troops visible to them before they finally opened fire with their rifles set to automatic and the rapid barrage of energy blasts cut through three of the troopers.

Garm returned fire, forcing one of the stormtroopers to take cover again while another trooper attempted to leap over the bodies of his fallen comrades and was promptly struck by a shot from the other stormtrooper.

"Kriif this." Major Kramm said and he held his rifle around the corner without looking and held down the trigger. Moving the muzzle of the rifle at random created a storm of blaster shots that filled the corridor until the rifle's power cell was depleted, at which point Kramm pulled the rifle back around the corner, ejected the spent cell and inserted another. But the sound of firing had stopped completely and peering around the corner he saw that both stormtroopers now lay dead on the floor.

"Come on!" he yelled and he charged around the corner. But as he did so Ibram suddenly appeared at the far end of the corridor and unleashed a blast of telekinetic Force energy that hurled him backwards into a wall.

Another COMPForce trooper leapt around the corner and took aim with his rifle.

"No! Don't do it!" Garm yelled but he was too late to stop the man from pulling his trigger and firing the blaster.

The trooper's aim was good and the blaster bolt shot straight at Ibram. But the inquisitor had ignited his lightsaber the moment the trooper appeared and he brought up the blade in the path of the energy bolt to parry it, angling the blade just right so that the bolt was reflected right back at the trooper who had fired it and he was struck in the chest.

Garm had seen Vay use her lightsaber in this fashion many times and he knew that the way to penetrate Ibram's defences were to overwhelm them from as many directions as possible.

"Full auto." he told the troopers behind him, "Everyone together on my word and stay low. Go."

A squad of troopers rounded the corner and took up positions crouched by the walls while Garm remained at the corner and all took aim at the inquisitor.

Danger.

The tremor in the Force was overpowering but even without its warning Ibram could tell what was about to happen.

"Fire!" Garm ordered and in unison the COMPForce troopers fired their weapons. But at the exact moment that they opened fire Ibram did something that Garm had not expected and shut off his lightsaber before leaping into the air and rolling sideways so that he landed out of sight, retreating back in the direction that he had come from.

"He's running." one of the troopers exclaimed excitedly.

"He's heading back to the moff's office." Garm said, "If he makes it there it'll be tough to dig him out. We need to catch him first."

6.

Vay looked around as Ibram burst back into the moff's office. She was still on the floor where she had landed but she had managed to get herself into a sitting position and she watched as Ibram hurried to the desk and activated the communication system built into it.

"Security," he said into the intercom, "Agent Larcus and his group of traitors are closing in on my office. Instruct your men to converge on this location. My previous orders regarding Agent Larcus are rescinded, do whatever it takes to stop him and his men." then he shut off the intercom and switched instead to the external communications, directing a call to the orbiting fleet headquarters, "Admiral Trent." Ibram said.

"The admiral isn't here right."

"Then get him. This is Inquisitor Kellesen, do I need to explain further?"

"No sir. I'll put you through to him."

Moments later an image of Admiral Trent appeared over the desk in front of Ibram.

"Yes inquisitor?" he asked.

"Admiral I need a shuttle sending down for me." Ibram said, "Plus a squad of marines to escort me aboard. Tell the pilot to set down on my private pad."

"But inquisitor, why-" Admiral Trent began before Ibram interrupted him.

"There is no time for questions. Just do your job man." he snapped.

"Of course my lord. The shuttle will be with you shortly." Admiral Trent said and then the image vanished.

"Things not going so well?" Vay asked.

"A temporary setback." Ibram replied, "My forces will have all the time they need to track down Agent Larcus and his allies after we have gone."

"We?"

"Of course. You are both too valuable and too dangerous to abandon here. Rest assured Vay I see the darkness inside you and I know eventually you will call me your master."

"I'd rather die." she said before there was the sound of blaster fire from the reception area outside before the sound of banging on the main doors to the office and Vay smiled, "Looks like Garm's going to be here before your shuttle Ibram."

All of a sudden the doors burst open and Garm, Mirri and several COMPForce troopers appeared in the doorway. Ibram unleashed a sudden blast of telekinetic energy towards the door that slammed the doors shut again. But Garm dived forwards before the wave struck to land flat on the floor and while Mirri and the troopers accompanying him were once again shut out of the office, Garm remained inside with Ibram and Vay.

"Well, well, Agent Larcus." Ibram said as a smile spread across his face while Garm was getting back to his feet, "it seems that Vay gets to watch while I kill you." and then he held his hands out in front of him and let loose with a storm of bright blue lightning.

Garm screamed in pain as the lightning enveloped him and he slumped back onto the floor as he convulsed and Ibram laughed.

"Did you really think that you could stop me Agent Larcus? I am more powerful than you can possibly imagine. Even Vay is no match for me, what chance do you have?" he said.

"Ibram stop! You're killing him!" Vay called out.

"Of course I am." Ibram said, pausing the lightning as he looked at Vay instead, "He is a traitor and he deserves to die." and then unleashed another wave of Force lightning.

"I'm so glad you said that." Vay hissed and then she looked towards the desk where the letter opener she had given to Moff Horatian still sat and she let the Force flow through her.

Ibram sensed the power flowing through her and he ceased the lightning attack on Garm again as he turned back towards Vay. But the attack came from the direction of the desk, now to the inquisitor's side and the letter opener flew through the air directly towards Ibram. It spun as it flew so that the tip pointed directly at the inquisitor before the blade buried itself in his throat.

Ibram's eyes widened and he reached up to clamp his hands over the wound as blood flowed freely from it, running down his robes to the floor. Then he collapsed, still desperately trying to stem the bleeding. Vay watched closely as he looked towards her and in his last moments he stared back at her and spoke.

"All of this could have been ours." he croaked before he let out one last gasp and Vay sensed his life force leave him.

"Garm." Vay said as she pushed herself across the floor towards him, "Garm can you hear me?"

with Ibram no longer able to hold the doors closed with the Force they burst open again and Mirri and the COMPForce troopers rushed into the room.

"The inquisitor's dead." Vay said, "Signal General Dern."

Mirri nodded and ran to the moff's desk to activate the communication system.

"Lieutenant Cordall calling *Iron Warrior*." she signalled, "Inquisitor Kellesen is dead. You can jump whenever you're ready."

Garm groaned.

"Garm are you okay?" Vay asked but Garm looked towards Mirri.

"Lieutenant, would you mind helping me up?" he said and Mirri walked over to him and helped him back to his feet while Vay looked on. Then he looked down at her.

"Garm I'm so sorry." she said, "I could sense how angry you were that I used my powers on you but-

"Vay," Garm said, "I wasn't angry because of what you did." and then he reached down to drag her back to her feet, "I was angry that Kellesen thought he could use it to drive a wedge between us. Now let's get out of here, I've had a long day and I really want to get home."

"Fine, get me out of this thing." Vay said, flexing her arms inside the overalls as she followed him.

"Later maybe." Garm replied, "As a good friend told me recently, it has possibilities." then he forced a smile,

"Oh yes, I bet you'll never guess who wears red leather underwear."

"Hey!" Mirri called out as she heard this and she rushed after Garm and Vay, "I explained that. It was a present."

The door to the cell occupied by Moff Horatian, Rodge Larrs and Director Helios opened to reveal Admiral Trent flanked by a pair of stormtroopers.

"Come to gloat admiral?" Director Helios asked.

"Get in there traitor." one of the stormtroopers said as he shoved Admiral Trent into the cell.

"What's going on?" Moff Horatian demanded as he got to his feet.

"Just setting a few things right governor." General Dern said as he then appeared in the doorway as well,

"Now if you'd like to accompany me I can turn your office back over to you."

"What about Inquisitor Kellesen?" Rodge asked and General Dern smiled.

"The inquisitor is no longer a problem." he said.