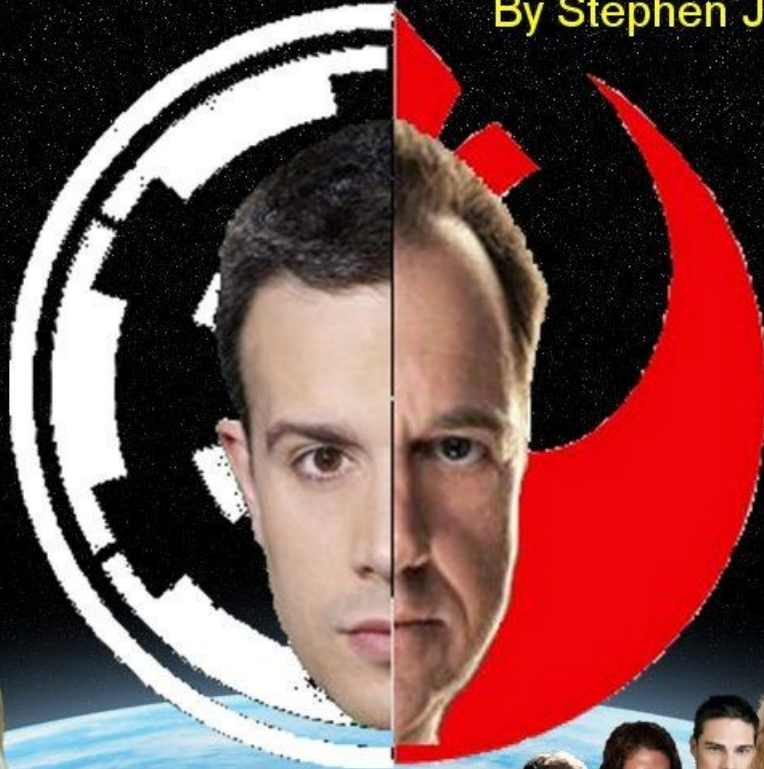


# STAR WARS

## 2-08: Path to Power

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...

## **PATH TO POWER**

WHEN AN ASSASSIN TRIES TO KILL ONE OF THE MOST SENIOR REPRESENTATIVES OF THE EMPIRE IN THE SECTOR GARM LARCUS MUST HUNT HIM DOWN BEFORE HE CAN FINISH THE JOB. BUT JUST WHO IS THE ASSASSIN WORKING FOR?

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

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# 1.

Rodge Larrs walked confidently down the steps of the Imperial capital building flanked by several assistants and a pair of bodyguards. As the sector's head of the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order, or COMPNOR for short he was a very important man. Only the sector moff carried more influence with the Empire's central authorities.

"Mister Larrs may I have a few words?" a woman called out from the base of the steps, "Moff Horatian still won't acknowledge my communications with his office. Why is he so reluctant to discuss the situation regarding rebel terrorism in the sector?"

"I'm sorry Miss Gorord," Rodge replied, "but I don't have time to speak with you now. Perhaps if you attend my press conference next week you can ask me again then.

As Rodge reached the bottom of the steps a man got out of a luxury speeder parked there and opened the rear door for him. Rodge was about to get into the speeder when the reporter approached him. His guards stepped in front of her.

"Why am I being given the run around Mister Larrs?" she demanded, "What are the authorities afraid of? Why have the Allastran Defence Forces been disbanded?"

His hand resting on the top of the speeder door, Rodge Larrs paused and looked at the reporter. The delay was just long enough. No longer aiming at a moving target the sniper took the shot.

"He's down! He's down!" one of the guards yelled as they both drew their blasters in response to the attack that sent Rodge Larrs to the ground. All around them people panicked and ran for cover. The shot had not been from a blaster but a projectile weapon and the bodyguards did their best to determine the source of the attack.

Meanwhile one of Rodge's assistants dragged him into the speeder and pulled the door shut behind him. He looked at the startled driver and yelled at him.

"Go! Get to the hospital now!"

"She's here." Jennay Larcus said to her husband Garm, putting the emphasis on 'she'.

"Who?" Garm replied as he continued to chop the vegetables they would be having for dinner.

"Who do you think? That young woman you work with."

"Oh, Vay."

"Yes, Vay. Why did you invite her?"

"I didn't." Garm replied, "You did."

"I did, didn't I?" Jennay said, a puzzled look on her face, "Why on Coruscant did I do that?"

"How should I know?" Garm said. In fact he had a very good idea how Vay Udra had convinced Jennay to invite her to the dinner party, he just did not know why she would bother to use her skills that way.

"I suppose I should go and say hello." Garm said and he put down the knife.

"Here," Jennay said and she handed him a tray of snacks, "Pass these round. Family first, her last."

Garm took the tray and headed for the lounge where he could hear the sound of their guests talking. This was supposed to have been a family dinner, Jennay's parents, her brother and sister in law and one other. That other was a man that Garm had known for his entire life and who he typically referred to using the word 'uncle' even though they were not related.

"Ah Garm my boy, those look delicious." Lord Couran Desh said turning round as Garm entered the room, reaching out to take one of the snacks. Garm held the tray out towards Jennay's family and smiled.

"Fresh from the – Stang!"

Jennay's father reached out and grabbed the tray as it slipped from Garm's grasp.

"Almost." The man said.

"Thanks," Garm said, "I don't know what happened."

What had happened was the individual who had just stepped out from behind Lord Desh. The slender built woman smiled at him. This was Vay Udra, supposedly an intern from COMPNOR though many suspected her of being Moff Gregor Horatian's mistress. What Garm knew was that neither was true. As his unofficial partner in the investigations branch of the Imperial Security Bureau he had come to realise that she possessed abilities that were best not spoken of, abilities that could get her an invite to a dinner party from Garm's wife. Invariably at work Vay wore a figure hugging black bodyglove. Garm had never seen her in anything else and he knew of gossip amongst Imperial personnel regarding what she wore beneath it. Today however, the bodyglove was gone. Instead she wore a figure hugging sleeveless dress and high-heeled shoes. The only similarity with her usual bodyglove was the black colour she had chosen.

"Hello Garm." Vay said, "Why are you staring?"

"Its just I'm not used to seeing you dressed like that?"

"My dress? It's new. Would you rather I wasn't wearing it?"

Lord Desh coughed and he raised his hand to his mouth to stop food flying out. Garm spotted Jennay's brother open his mouth, then he shut it again without speaking when his wife elbowed him in the ribs.

"It's fine." Garm replied, "Excuse me, Jennay needs me in the kitchen."

Upon returning to the kitchen he found Jennay still there.

"You could have warned me." He said, "Your father almost ended up wearing that food."

"Well perhaps if you were more loyal as a husband he wouldn't have." Jennay replied with a smile. Garm was about to reply when they were interrupted by the arrival of their daughter.

"Daddy," she said, "I can hear your comlink going."

"I'll be five minutes." He said to Jennay and he headed up to their bedroom where his comlink was indeed chiming to indicate an incoming signal.

"Agent Larcus." He said upon activating the device.

"At last." A voice said. This was Corvin Helios, director of the ISB for the sector, "I need you to meet me at the Central Plaza Medical Centre as soon as possible."

Garm sighed. This was not going to go down well with Jennay.

"Okay," he replied, "Vay's here now, we can-"

"No. Not her. Just you. This is a serious COMPNOR matter. Nothing to do with an intern or whatever the moff wants to call her when his wife's around."

"What's happened?"

"Haven't you seen the news? Rodge Larrs has just been shot."

Garm rushed downstairs with his uniform over his arm.

"I have to go," he announced to his family and guests, "something urgent's just come up."

"I'll be right with you." Vay said and she set down her glass.

"No." Garm said, "Director Helios just asked for me. You stay here and have fun."

Upon his arrival at the Central Plaza Hospital Garm immediately noticed the increased level of security. Rather than the handful of guards to protect the facility positioned discretely, there were troopers from COMPForce, the military wing of COMPNOR everywhere. Garm ducked into a vacant room to change into his uniform before he identified himself to the staff.

"Agent Larcus, ISB. Where is Mister Larrs' room?" he asked at reception.

"Mister Larrs is in surgery right now." The reception droid answered, "However, the procedure has been completed and medical staff are preparing to move him to room five zero four. There are several other agents up there now. Would you like me to contact them for you?"

"No thank you, I'll just go right up."

Garm took a turbolift to the fifth floor. The number of guards here was even higher than on the first floor, with at least two on every corridor Garm walked along. Just as the droid had informed him, there were already several people waiting in the room assigned to Rodge Larrs. The most familiar of these was Director Helios, who was Garm's direct superior. Besides him were Rodge's wife, his deputy Greyan Dassall and a pair of officers from COMPForce, one a major and the other a captain.

"He should be here soon." Director Helios said to Garm when he entered the room.

"So what happened?" Garm asked.

"Somebody shot him." The COMPForce major said without a hint of sarcasm.

"It was a projectile weapon." Director Helios said, "Neither his close protection nor the building guards could determine the source of the shot."

"What about counter battery radar?" Garm asked.

"Too much clutter at that level." Director Helios said, "The system works fine for mortar rounds fired over buildings, but the system isn't set up for monitoring below the level of the nearby rooftops. I've got a request in for technical branch to take a look anyway to see if they can pull anything from it."

At that point the medical staff interrupted them as they brought Rodge Larrs in on a repulsor bed. He looked drowsy, having not yet fully recovered from the effects of the anaesthetic given to him, but he was conscious. "Rodge thank god." His wife said and she rushed to his side as the medics moved him to the bed in the room.

By the door, a surgeon stood still dressed for performing surgery. His gown was marked with blood and Garm guessed that it was Rodge's.

"He was hit by a single projectile." the surgeon began, "It's been turned over to your people for reconstruction and analysis."

"Will he recover fully?" Rodge's wife asked, clearly worried about her husband.

"Yes." The surgeon answered, "There was no nerve damage. His body armour stopped the projectile. We just had to repair the damage caused by the force of the impact against his ribcage."

"Is it acceptable for us to talk with him?" Garm asked.

"It is. Though he may be a little confused at first."

"Thank you doctor." Director Helios said, "We may need to speak with you further, please do not leave the building without informing us."

The surgeon nodded and then left the room. The people remaining gathered closer in around Rodge.

"What happened?" Rodge asked, his voice weak.

"Someone tried to kill you." Director Helios replied.

"Who?" Rodge then asked after a brief pause.

"We don't know that sir." Garm told him.

"The initial assumption is that it was a member of the Rebel Alliance who just waited for the first high ranking official to come by. You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time I'm afraid. Agent Larcus will be leading the investigation." Director Helios added. Garm was not surprised by this announcement, after all why else would he have been summoned here? But it would have been nice to have been told officially before hearing it announced this way.

"And that woman?" Rodge, "The so-called intern?"

"She's being kept out of this." Greyan chimed in, "I asked for this to be kept entirely within COMPNOR. That's why Major Kramm and Captain Layne are here. Their company will provide Agent Larcus with all of the support he needs."

"Vay is a COMPNOR intern." Garm said, referring to Vay's cover story, "She could be of use to us in this matter."

"I think that we all know that's not true Agent Larcus." Greyan replied, "Just because Moff Horatian expects us to believe that his mistress is one of us, don't expect me to—"

"Am I interrupting?"

The voice came from the doorway and when everyone turned around they saw Moff Gregor Horatian standing there, flanked by a pair of stormtrooper bodyguards. Immediately Major Kramm and Captain Layne snapped to attention.

"At ease." Moff Horatian said as he strode into the room, his guards remaining by the door. Greyan looked about nervously, well aware that the moff could not have failed to have heard what he had just said, "Rodge, Lyna." He said addressing Rodge and his wife, "I just had to come here to see how you were both coping."

"I just got shot." Rodge said, "It's Lyna that had to do all the coping while I was unconscious." And he took hold of his wife's hand and smiled at her.

Moff Horatian looked at the various other members of COMPNOR.

"Am I keeping you from something gentlemen?" he said.

## 2.

"Just so we're clear," Major Kramm said to Garm as he and the two COMPForce officers headed for one of the interrogation suites located in the capital building, "your rank is equivalent to mine so I'm not taking any orders from you."

"Just so we're clear," Garm replied using the same tone of voice, "Director Helios put me in charge of this investigation and Mister Dassall said you were to provide me with support. I have tactical authority that overrides your rank. You'll do as your told."

"Very well." Major Kramm said, frustrated, "We'll do as we're told won't we captain?"

"Of course major." Captain Layne said, sounding as irritated about it as his superior.

"Here we are." Garm said as they reached the entrance to the interrogation suite, "Now just let me do all the talking, understand?"

The two officers just glared back at him. Garm opened the door and entered the room.

"Ah, Agent Larcus. What the hell is going on?" Neema Gorord demanded, "Why am I being held here? I haven't even been allowed to contact counsel."

"Why would you need counsel Miss Gorord?" Garm asked as he sat down, "You aren't accused of anything."

"Then what's with the goons? Why else are they here if not to beat a confession out of me?"

"We make the lady nervous." Captain Layne said.

"Of course we do." Major Kramm added, "She's smart."

Garm ignored the two men and sat down in front of Neema.

"May I call you Neema?" he asked.

"No."

"As you wish. Miss Gorord you are a witness to a serious crime. The sorts of people who would attempt to murder the head of COMPNOR would most likely not think twice about killing a witness. Major Kramm commands a COMPForce company. His men will provide you with security until this is all over. Won't they major?"

"Oh of course Agent Larcus." Major Kramm replied.

"Nothing would give us more pleasure." Captain Layne added.

"See," Garm said to Neema, "you have nothing to worry about. Now what did you see?"

"Nothing. Rodge Larrs was giving me the same bantha poodo the administration's been giving me for months. They don't want to discuss anything to do with rebels like your father."

Garm's face fell. His father Vorn Larcus III had defected to the rebellion and since then Garm had been attempting to live it down. If not for the personal intervention of Moff Horatian and the mysterious Vay Udra then Garm would be languishing in a dead end assignment with no hope of advancement.

"You were speaking with him though?" Garm asked.

"Yes, we were talking. Or least I was talking, he was waffling."

"But you were close to him?"

"Yes, right in front of him."

"Good." Garm said, "I'd like you to accompany us out to the scene of the shooting."

"Yes well we don't always get what we want do we Agent Larcus?" Neema said, "Now if Moff Horatian were to-" then she stopped speaking suddenly as Garm got up and began to leave the room.

"Bring her." He said. Major Kramm and Captain Layne strode up to Neema and pulled her from her chair.

"Okay, okay." She said, "I'm coming."

Not long after Garm and Neema stood at the base of the steps to the capital building. Both Major Kramm and Captain Layne stood nearby, both men keeping their hands on the grips of their blasters.

"I was here." Neema said, standing at the kerb, "I was looking this way and Rodge Larrs was standing right in front of me, looking in my direction."

Garm stood close in front of Neema and turned to face the same direction. Somewhere in his field of view was the location used by the would-be assassin.

"See anything?" Captain Layne asked.

"Actually yes." Garm said.

"Really?" Neema said.

"Of course not." Garm replied, "There are dozens of potential firing spots." Then he looked at the COMPForce men, "Major, would you mind taking a look?"

"Me?" Major Kramm asked.

"Yes major, you. Where would you set up to shoot a man stood here?"

Major Kramm walked over and as Garm stood aside he stood where the ISB agent had just been.

"I'd want a view of the entire set of steps," Major Kramm said.

"What about that low hill over there?" Neema asked, pointing to a spot beside a building where a small area of grassland was visible.

"Too low." Major Kramm replied, "I'd want to be able to shoot over the heads of any passers by and traffic. From there I could only hit someone standing further up the steps."

"The shot will have come from one of the windows." Captain Layne said as he approached the major and stood beside him, "What is that place?"

"Some sort of storage building." Neema said.

Garm looked around.

"There's a surveillance camera over there." He said pointing, "It points towards the building. If we pull the footage we should be able to narrow down where the shot came from."

"How?" Neema asked.

"No windows were broken." Major Kramm pointed out, "So wherever the shot came from, it was fired through an open window."

"So the assassin will be on video?" Neema asked.

"I doubt it. He'll have stayed back from the window to prevent that." Garm told her, "But we may pick up the muzzle flash." Then he looked at Major Kramm, "Major, while we review the records could you detail some of your men to escort Miss Gorord home? Have them keep an eye on her building."

"That's it." Garm said. He was sat in his office with the two COMPForce officers and all three were watching the camera footage. Several of the windows on the building they were interested in were open, but as Garm had informed Neema there was no sign of the assassin leaning out of any of them. But tracking backwards from the frame in which Rodge Larrs was shown being hit by the bullet there was a brief flash from one of them.

"What is that room?" Captain Layne asked.

Garm replaced the video footage on his computer display with a floor plan of the building.

"The building is rented business space." Garm said, "That entire floor is listed as being rented by a publishers." Then he paused while he accessed more records to do with the building, "According to insurance information it is used for storing flammable materials."

"Books?" Major Kramm said.

"I suppose so." Garm said.

"So we'll be searching the building then?" Captain Layne asked.

"Not us." Garm replied, "I'll instruct a forensics team to go over it as soon as possible. In the mean time I want it sealing off. There are four entrances according to these plans, so we'll need at least a full squad of your men to guard it."

"So what about us?" Major Kramm asked.

"Until we get more evidence there's not much more to do. Now it's getting late and I left my wife at home with a house full of dinner guests. If anything crops up overnight I'm sure the search team will let us know."

There were only a handful of vehicles left in the parking lot when Garm went down to his speeder. Calmly, he strolled towards the vehicle and opened the door.

"Miss me?" Vay said and Garm jumped.

"Don't do that!" he snapped as he took his hand away from his blaster.

"Sorry. I just thought that I'd come and see if you needed any help with your secret mission. Which I'm guessing is investigating the shooting of Rodge Larrs."

"Good guess. How much do you know?"

"Just what Gregor told me. Someone shot Rodge and now you're investigating it with a pair of his attack dogs following you around instead of me."

"It was felt that it would be better if I was supported by COMPNOR personnel only. Your cover is as an intern but we both know that's not true don't we?"

"Well," Vay said to him, "you know where I am if you need me." And Garm watched as she turned around and walked away leaving him alone.

Next morning Garm chose to head for the warehouse rather than his office. The COMPForce guard stepped aside without asking for identification. He took the turbolift up to the correct floor and stood in the doorway of the publisher's storage unit. From there he could see a trio of ISB agents using a portable computer to monitor the dozen or so droids that were going over everything. Each droid used a miniature repulsorlift motor to allow it to float above the floor, meaning that it could conduct its search without disturbing any evidence.

"Agent Larcus." Garm said to introduce himself to the search team.

"Good morning sir, I'm agent Bettan Drayson," the only woman among the three said to him, "and this is Corla Mashan and Allas Howett." As their names were mentioned the other two agents nodded at Garm.

"Found anything yet?" Garm asked.

"Actually we haven't been searching all that long." Agent Drayson replied.

"Why? I called you fourteen hours ago."

"Yes sir." Drayson said, "But the door was locked. It took until four this morning to track down someone with a key. One of the building staff."

Garm was puzzled.

"The lock was intact?"

"Yes sir." Howett said, "I studied it myself. There was no sign of any tampering at all. I was concerned that by forcing it ourselves we could destroy evidence, so we had to wait for a key. We haven't located where the shooter gained access yet."

"What about inside?"

"Just books so far." Drayson said, "We found some explosive residue near the window that we believe comes from the weapon, but apart from that nothing."

Garm looked around the room from the doorway.

"No bullet casing?"

"Not so far. It seems that the shooter took it with him. Assuming it wasn't a caseless weapon."

The conversation was interrupted by Garm's comlink chiming.

"Larcus." He said.

"It's me." Major Kramm said, "Where are you? What's your status?"

"Where the shot was fired from," Garm said, "and I'm just fine. How are you?"

"Waiting for you in your office. Mister Dassall wants an update on the case."

"Then give him one." Garm replied.

"He wants to speak to you. In person."

Garm glanced at the three ISB agents in front of him and frowned. Then he lifted the comlink back to his mouth.

"Tell him to wait, I'll be over in a couple of minutes."

"He's not here." Major Kramm said, "He's at church. He wants us to meet him outside at the end of the service."

"Meet me downstairs." Garm said and he shut off his comlink before Major Kramm could reply. Then he looked at the agents in front of him again, "Ridiculous." He said, "Now I have to waste my time telling Dassall we don't have anything concrete yet. Give me your com address so I can get back to you later."

Greyan Dassall was not amongst the worshippers that emerged from the temple building that Garm, Major Kramm and Captain Layne had just spent almost half an hour waiting outside. When the stream of people ended Garm headed up the steps towards the door.

"Where the hell are you going?" Major Kramm asked, catching hold of Garm's arm, "We don't go inside."

"You've been here before?" Garm asked.

"Yes," Major Kramm said, "and unless you're invited you don't go in."

"Well then," Garm said, "it's a good job Mister Dassall himself invited us here isn't it?" and he pulled his arm free of Major Kramm's grasp and continued up the steps.

When he got the doors a man in the black robes of the temple was just closing them.

"I'm sorry, but you can't come in." he said, "If you interested in joining us we hold a—"

"This is a place of worship." Garm said loudly, adopting an angry sounding tone that came close to reflecting his current mood, "Under Estranian secularism laws that makes it a public place that I don't need permission to enter. Alternatively I could quote you what Imperial Law has to say about denying me entry." And he placed his hand on his blaster and stormed past the bewildered looking man.

Inside the building was what Garm expected it to be. Benches aligned facing a raised pulpit and altar with a massive religious symbol, in this case a large rotating infinity symbol projected as a hologram in the air over the benches. The pulpit was a large affair, with room for several people in it. At that moment he could see three figures there. One of them was Greyan, while the other two were dressed in robes similar to the man at the door. One of these had his hood up and Garm could not make out any facial features beneath it.

"Agent Larcus this is most irregular!" Greyan called out when he saw Garm approaching and he ran down the steps from the pulpit, followed by the man with his hood down.

"I'm sorry sirs!" the man from the door said, "I tried to stop him."

"The agent had no right—" Greyan began before Garm cut him off.

"I had every right." He said, "I can quote the laws if you need me to. I offered to do the same for this man here."

"You were not invited!" Greyan snapped.

"Actually I was." Garm said, "Major Kramm said you specifically requested my presence here after the service and the service is over."

Greyan looked ready to explode.



"Agent Larcus you are most welcome here." The man beside him said, "Allow me to introduce myself. I am Darall Harber," and he extended a hand in greeting, "I hold the services in this place. Mister Dassall was just briefing me on your situation."

"Was he indeed?" Garm replied as he shook Darall's hand, more out of politeness than respect.

"We prayed for his speedy recovery during the service." Greyan said, still frowning despite the priest's apparent lack of concern.

"A sacrifice was made." Darall added.

Garm remained silent and suddenly noticed that the third of the figures from the pulpit was no longer anywhere in sight. Then he looked at Greyan.

"You asked me for a report on the investigation." He said.

"I did." Greyan replied.

"Well we've nothing so far." Garm said, "Nothing at all."

### 3.

"So how did it go?" captain Layne asked when he saw Garm coming back down the steps of the temple.

"They're praying for us." Garm replied, "Doesn't that make you feel a whole lot better?"

"I can feel the divine influence already." Major Kramm said sarcastically, "What about you captain?"

"Indeed sir. I feel truly inspired by it."

"Well now we all know that the gods themselves are taking a personal interest in this I suggest we look busy. Let's get back to my office. I want to see what else has cropped up."

There was only one message relevant to the investigation waiting for Garm when he got back to his office and checked his computer. The bullet that had been removed from Rodge Larrs had been sent for immediate examination and the analysis droids had produced a virtual recreation of the projectile as it appeared before it had been fired.

"Semi jacketed with a soft tip." Garm said out loud as he watched the spinning image on his display.

"Nice." Major Kramm said as he leant in for a look himself, "The jacket allows for a higher muzzle velocity while the soft tip makes it expand when its hits bone."

"Which it did." Garm said, "The bullet flattened out when it hit the armoured vest Larrs was wearing under his suit. It slowed the bullet enough that although it cracked a rib or two it didn't penetrate the vest properly.

Good job too, if it had it would have punched a hole the size of my fist through his lung."

"Does it tell us where the bullet came from?" Captain Layne asked.

"The droids pulled rifling marks from the bullet." Garm said, "Every firearm sold in the sector has the marks it leaves on the ammunition it fires recorded. It looks like the weapon isn't registered here on Estran, but if it's come in from off world then it may still exist on another database. The analysis droids have already forwarded a request to every planet in the sector to check."

"But it might not be on any of them either?" Major Kramm asked.

"No." Garm admitted, "If its come from outside of the sector then we've little hope of finding any records. Alternatively the weapon could have been built or modified illicitly and it's rifling profile never recorded."

"So we're at a dead end?" Major Kramm asked.

"Not necessarily." Garm said, "We may not know much about the shooter's weapon, but we know where he fired it from and we know that the building is covered by external surveillance. Our man can't have been where he fired from for too long because he left next to nothing in the way of evidence. So the odds are that he's on camera in the hour or two before the attempted hit. I want you two to see what you can find. Compare who goes in with who goes out and run the faces of everyone inside that building through facial recognition. We may just get lucky."

"What will you be doing while we're doing your job?" Major Kramm asked.

"Lighting a fire under the forensics boys' asses." Garm said and he shut down his computer.

"So what do you have?" Garm asked.

"Where are your new friends?" Vay asked in reply as she stood aside to allow Garm into her apartment, "I thought you'd introduce me to them."

"And have them run off and tell that I'm speaking to you about the case? Not likely. I left them looking at pictures of who went in and out. I doubt they'll find anything but it's worth a try."

"Would you like a drink?"

"No thank you. Just whatever you've come up with."

"Actually I'd like to know what you've found out so far." Vay said as she sat down on the sofa and swung her legs up beside her.

"Very little." Garm said as he also took a seat, "Unregistered projectile weapon fired from just over a hundred metres."

"A professional?"

"To hit a human sized target in centre mass from that distance on the first shot? Yes. Plus whoever it was took the empty case with them."

"From the publishers' storage unit?"

"Yes. That Neema Gorord woman thought it could have been from a nearby hill, but Major Kramm rejected it as being too low to guarantee a good field of fire."

"Any signs of a break in?"

"Not through the front door. The search team is still looking for how he broke in. Plus there's a couple of agents canvassing other business in the building, but it's all storage units so there isn't often anyone there."

"What if he didn't?" Vay asked.

"Didn't what?"

"Break in. What if he had a key? Surely a professional would have been there before anyway to determine range and line of sight."

"We hadn't got that far." He said.

"That was my starting point." Vay said, "So I took a look at who rented that particular unit."

"We know that, it's a publishers."

"Yes, but who are they?"

"I don't know."

"Neither do I. Whoever they are they've covered their tracks rather well. You'd need a forensic accountant to get through all the layers of blind trusts and shell companies."

Garm stood up and walked to the door.

"I need to get on with this." He said and he opened the door. Then he threw a glance over his shoulder towards Vay and added, "Let me know if there's anything I can do to thank you for this. Seriously, anything." And then he left, shutting the door behind him.

"Promises, promises." Vay said to herself. Then she held up her hand as a piece of fruit flew through the air and into it from the bowl on the table and she took a bite.

Garm's next port of call was with the forensics team that he had told Major Kramm he was going to meet.

"What can you tell me about the lock?" he asked.

"Its nothing special." Howett replied, "Its triggered by an encoded data stick like most locks of this type."

"And you're sure that it wasn't tampered with in any way? No one tried to use a code generator to trick it into opening?"

"No sir, that would show up in the log as a large number of failed attempts at access. Locks like this don't limit the number of attempts you're allowed just in case someone deliberately sticks the wrong key in repeatedly to try and lock you out of your own property."

"How much information is in that access log?"

"Not much. If there's more than one key then they all have the same code, so we can't tell who's been in and out. But we know whether the door was locked and unlocked and also when it happened."

"I need a copy." Garm said and he held out his datapad, "Put it on here."

"You think the shooter had a key?" Howett asked as he plugged Garm's datapad into the computer the team was using and copied the lock's log file onto it.

"It's looking likely." Garm replied, "Unless you've found something to suggest a break in since we spoke this morning."

"No sir, I was saying as much to Captain Layne-"

"Captain Layne?" Garm interrupted, "When did you speak with him?"

"About half an hour ago. He was trying to get hold of you."

"Oh stang." Garm swore, "I take it you told him I wasn't here."

"Yes sir, I'm sorry, I-"

"That's okay." Garm said and he took back his datapad, "You weren't to know. Thanks for this, I'll probably be getting back to you soon." Then he turned around and walked away. As he travelled from the publisher's storage unit to the front door he timed how long the journey took and noted it.

Returning to the capital building Garm entered the turbolift alone. Initially he reached for the button that would take him to the floor where his office was located, but he paused at the last moment. His finger hovered briefly over the button then shifted to the one for the top floor and he pressed it.

The turbolift car rose rapidly, its built in repulsorlift generators not only propelling it upwards but also shielding Garm from the effects of the rapid acceleration and deceleration as it neared the top floor. The doors slid open and Garm stepped out of the turbolift.

Immediately he held his hands upwards as four stormtroopers aimed their weapons at him.

"Who are you?" one of them demanded while another stepped forwards and removed the blaster from Garm's holster.

"Senior Agent Larcus, ISB. I need to see him."

"Your presence here is not expected at this time." The stormtrooper replied.

"I know. This is an emergency. It concerns the attempt on Radge Larrs' life."

"Wait."

There was silence as Garm guessed that the stormtrooper was using his helmet's communication system to confer with some else.

"Come with me." The stormtrooper said eventually and he marched down the corridor. Garm followed the armoured soldier and noticed that a second stormtrooper followed on behind him, observing his movements. They came to a desk that had a woman in the uniform of an army lieutenant sat behind it. As soon as she saw them she got up and opened the large set of doors beside the desk. The stormtroopers then escorted Garm through the doors and into the office of Moff Gregor Horatian.

"Leave us." The moff said to the stormtroopers and they both marched back out of the office. Garm and the moff were not alone however. Three other men and a woman were present. One of them Garm recognised as Fleet Admiral Praus Vretan, commander of all Imperial Naval forces in the sector. He did not know the second man, but he too wore an admiral's uniform. Between the two naval officers was a portable holographic display unit that was currently being used to show a three dimensional image of a mon calamari star cruiser, the favoured capital ship of the Rebel Alliance. The third man was also a military officer, but army rather than navy. He was General Julius Dern, the moff's personal military advisor. The woman was also someone that Garm recognised, though he did not know her personally. This was Lady Lynn Sharva, member of the Parliament of Estran. She now occupied the position that Garm's father had before his defection to the Rebellion.

"Sorry about the enhanced security." The Moff said, "But General Dern was concerned that whoever is behind the attempt on Rodge's life may not be done yet.

"I was on those steps myself not an hour before the shooting." Admiral Vretan said, nodding in agreement with the moff, "That bullet could have hit me if the shooter had gotten there earlier."

"We must take every precaution while you investigate." General Dern added.

"Had you considered reviewing your internal security perhaps?" Lady Sharva suggested to Moff Horatian and Garm guessed the comment was really aimed at him. The woman was well known for her hatred of Garm's father and that hatred seemed to spill over to the rest of the Larcus family also. To further rub this in she then looked directly at Garm, the first time since he had entered the office and added, "We were just discussing some of your father's exploits. Did you know he stole a cruiser from its rightful owners?"

"With respect sir," Garm said, also addressing his comment to Moff Horatian, "I am here on a classified matter. Should we be discussing ISB operations in front of outsiders? Members of the military excepted of course."

The two admirals glanced at one another and smiled, knowing that Garm was playing Lady Sharva at her own game.

"Yes, of course." Moff Horatian replied and he turned in his chair to face Lady Sharva, "I'm sorry Lynn, but would you mind waiting outside? I'll have my adjutant get you something to eat if you want."

"I'll be fine." Lady Sharva answered abruptly as she stood up, "I sent my handmaiden down to the refectory when I arrived, I'll have her bring something." As she left the office she scowled at Garm.

"Take a seat Agent Larcus." Moff Horatian said when Lady Sharva was gone, pointing to the chair she had vacated and Garm sat down, "I don't believe you know Admiral Hall do you?" he added, now pointing at the man sat beside Fleet Admiral Vretan, "It was ships from his squadron that narrowly missed apprehending your father recently."

"Don't worry." Admiral Hall said to Garm, "I've heard all about you. I know you're not your father, even if some of the locals can't make that distinction."

"Heard all about me? Where?" Garm asked, wondering why his name would come up when someone was talking with an Admiral.

"Why at COMPNOR meetings of course. I've been a member for years. I know Rodge Larrs and your Director Helios very well. Let me just say I'm praying that Rodge makes a speedy recovery."

"Aren't we all?" Admiral Vretan muttered, "Better than the alternative."

"Alternative?" Garm asked.

"I believe the admiral is referring to Greyan Dassall." Moff Horatian answered.

"I agree." Admiral Hall said, "He's far too fond of grand public gestures that don't amount to anything. He had four ships from my squadron, including my own blast away at some worthless world last month just so he could brag to his friends in the media that he was instrumental in destroying a secret rebel base."

"I heard about that." Garm said, "So there was no rebel base then?"

"No." Admiral Vretan answered sternly, "Just a bunch of pirates that tried to murder a bunch of students and their teachers. But Mister Dassall suggested that it would be a good idea for us to make a show of force. Tied up four star destroyers for the best part of a week while they searched the rubble for evidence of a non-existent rebel base."

"Gentlemen." Moff Horatian said, raising his hand, "Somehow I doubt that Agent Larcus came here to discuss military operations. Did you?"

"No sir." Garm replied.

"So tell us how your investigation is going." Moff Horatian said, "Assuming that's why you're here of course."

"It is general. I have received information that may help lead us to the people who organised the shooting as well as the actual shooter. But I need more resources. A proper investigator, not Major Kramm and his men."

"So the major isn't being very helpful then?" Moff Horatian asked.

"As helpful as he can be. Assuming by helpful you mean dragging me off to see Greyan Dassall to give him updates on evidence I don't have yet."

"Ah," General Dern said, "so Rodge's deputy wants to make it look like he's in charge of the investigation so he gets the credit for solving the case."

"My, you are cynical today aren't you?" Admiral Vretan said to his army opposite number, "Why would you think that?"

"Because I've met Dassall too." General Dern replied.

"I take it you have someone in mind?" Moff Horatian said to Garm.

"Yes sir. I want Vay."

The moff leant forwards across his ornate desk and the trio of military men went quiet. As far as all of them were concerned Vay Udra was Gregor Horatian's much younger mistress.

"You put me in an awkward position Agent Larcus." The moff said, "This is supposed to be a strictly COMPNOR operation."

"It is my belief that Miss Udra is a COMPNOR intern sir." Garm replied, using Vay's cover story for his own benefit, "Or am I mistaken?"

Moff Horatian leant back in his chair again and the military officers all eagerly awaited his response. Garm was taking a risk and he knew it, the moff would never admit to Vay's real purpose in the sector but the man was well aware that Garm knew she was no mere intern. Garm felt sure that no matter what decision the moff came to he would pay for forcing him to it somehow.

"Of course she is," He said, "and she is of course at your disposal. Will there be anything else?"

"I may need a proper incident suite sir. I may have need of the enhanced communications systems."

"Pick any that's available. Now unless there's anything else could you ask Lady Sharva to come back in on your way out?"

## 4.

"Where the hell have you been?" Major Kramm demanded when he found Garm transferring the data supplied to him by Agent Howett to a computer in one of the incident suites, "And don't give me any crap about being with the forensics team, Kyle tried calling them and they said you hadn't been there since first thing this morning."

"I was with Vay." Garm replied without looking up, "Then the forensics team. Then Moff Horatian, Fleet Admiral Vretan and General Dern. Feel free to march upstairs and ask them about it if you want."

Major Kramm said nothing for a while. He knew far better than to disturb the sector's highest ranking military and political personnel. Instead he focused on the individual Garm had mentioned first.

"Vay? As in Vay Udra? The Moff's bit of fluff? You were told she was not to be involved in this investigation. Mister Dassall will-"

"Mister Dassall isn't running this investigation." Garm interrupted, "I am."

"But you work for Director Helios and he said-"

"Director Helios works for Moff Horatian and after my conversation with him Moff Horatian has assigned Vay to my team."

"Our team."

"My team." Garm repeated, stressing the word 'my', "I'm in charge here. Now go find Captain Layne and bring him here. By the time Vay gets here I want us to have a suspect to show her. If you want to complain to Greyan then I suggest you use the holo transmitters over there, I've secured this room for us so we'd have access to them."

When Major Kramm returned with Captain Layne they found Garm staring at a list of numbers floating in the middle of the room.

"What's all this?" Captain Layne asked.

"It's the door log from the publisher's" Garm replied, "It shows every time the door opened and closed in the last three years."

"I thought there was no sign of the door being forced." Major Kramm said.

"There isn't." Garm agreed, "I'm working on the basis that our suspect had a key."

"You're welcome." A voice came from the doorway as Vay arrived.

"Ah Vay, glad you could make it." Garm said as he scrolled through the data, "Meet Major Kramm and Captain Layne, COMPForce."

Vay smiled at the two men. Captain Layne stared back blankly while Major Kramm just scowled at her.

"So what have you found?" Vay asked, standing besides Garm.

Garm held out his hand and waved it upwards within the hologram. As he did so the display reacted to his movement and zoomed to end of the list of data.

"These last entries are from our team." Garm said, "But the one here," and he pointed, "and here are the last ones before our people got there. One is three hours before the shooting, the next is about two minutes after it."

"So the shooter waited up there for three hours until he found a target?" Major Kramm said.

"Then ran for it before he could be caught." Captain Layne added.

"It looks that way." Vay said.

"Admiral Vretan." Garm said suddenly.

"Admiral Vretan?" Vay repeated, "What's he got to do with this?"

"He said he was out front of the building an hour before Larrs was shot."

"So why didn't the assassin target him?" Captain Layne said.

"Exactly." Garm said, "We've been assuming that the shooter was a rebel that targeted the first senior official to turn up. But taking out the chief of naval operations for the sector would be a far bigger result for the Rebellion than hitting a public relations guy."

"The hit was targeted." Major Kramm said.

"Yes." Vay said, "So now the question is who wants Rodge Larrs out of the way?"

Garm turned away from the display and looked at Major Kramm.

"Did you two look through the camera footage like I asked?"

"Yeah and we ran everyone through facial recognition software and came up blank."

"I'm not surprised at that." Garm said.

"Then why ask us to do it?" Captain Layne asked.

"Because I thought it would keep you both busy while I did some real investigating." Garm replied flatly, "Now I timed the trip from the publisher's to the front door of that building at just over two minutes. So, given that

we have the times that the door was opened and shut we know when our suspect was at the door. Give or take a minute.”

Major Kramm headed for the nearest computer and loaded the library of images that he and Captain Layne had compiled.

“Here we go.” He said, “The same guy, three hours and four minutes before the shooting and eight minutes after it. He’s looking down all the time, trying to shield his face, but it’s definitely the same guy.”

“But who is he?” Captain Layne asked.

“We don’t need to know that for now.” Garm said, “We just need his face.”

Two rows of figures stood in front of Garm. All wore uniforms of various law enforcement organisations, local police, Imperial customs, sector rangers and ISB field agents. Each and every one of them was a translucent blue holographic image originating from around the sector.

“This is our suspect.” Garm announced and the holograms all looked at the image now floating in their midst. Garm knew that at that moment the real law officers would be seeing an identical hologram floating in front of them in the same relative location, “We have him tagged just after the shooting but nothing since then. Alert all of your forces to be on the look out for him. Detain him if you can, but do not risk approaching him in public. This man is dangerous people, if he’s willing to kill the head of COMPNOR he won’t think twice about a few cops and he’s good enough that we don’t have a full profile on him yet.”

Garm then deactivated the holographic system and the figures in front of him faded to nothing.

“So what are we going to do?” Captain Layne asked.

“My troops are ready to move.” Major Kramm added.

“For now have them wait.” Garm said, “I want to head over and help the forensics team in their search.”

“Their search for what?” Captain Layne asked.

“Take a look at the images.” Vay said.

“Yeah, so what?”

“So do you see our man carrying anything big enough to hold a rifle?”

Leaving Major Kramm and Captain Layne to keep track of information coming back into the incident suite Garm and Vay headed back to the publisher’s storage unit. Together they stood at the door.

“So how long did you say it took you to get out of the building from here?” Vay asked.

“Two minutes.”

“Yet it took our suspect eight. Even if he had to wait an extra minute or two for the turbolift that still leaves four unaccounted for.”

“Not long to hide a rifle.” Garm pointed out.

“Then he must have hidden it on the way.” Vay said and then she linked her arm with Garm’s, “Let’s go for a walk.” She said.

The pair walked down the corridor towards the turbolift cluster.

“I take it these are the only ones.” Vay said when they reached the two turbolifts.

“Yes.” Garm replied, “There’s a stair as well of course.”

“Let’s stick with these for now.” Vay said and she summoned one of the turbolifts. When one arrived they stepped in side and travelled down to the first floor.

“What was that?” Vay asked when the turbolift halted.

“What was what?” Garm asked.

“That sound.” Vay said, “A clump when we stopped.”

“I didn’t hear anything.”

“Well I did. I think it came from above us.”

Garm and Vay both looked up and saw the hatch set into the roof of the turbolift car.

“Lift me up.” Vay said and Garm knelt down so that Vay could climb onto his shoulders. When he stood up again Vay was able to reach up and push the hatch open then stick her head through it.

“Got a light?” she asked.

“No. Wait, hang on, there’s a small one on my speeder keys.” Garm replied and he fumbled in his pocket before producing the access key to his speeder that had a tiny light emitting diode set into it and he passed it up to Vay, “See anything?” he asked.

“Oh just the usual I suppose. Dust and cobwebs. Oh and a discarded rifle. Looks like a slug thrower with a bolt action.”

Garm reached for his comlink.

“Agent Drayson.” He said.

“Yes sir?”

“We’ve found the weapon. It’s located on the roof of turbolift car two. Get one of your droids down here to grab it.”

"Is Agent Larcus there?" the holographic figure asked.  
"No he isn't." Major Kramm said, "Tell me what you want."  
"We've located the suspect sir."  
"Where?"  
"In a motel, south of the centre of Estran City. Its located beneath the monorail port."  
"I know that one." Major Kramm answered, "What's his status?"  
"Unknown. My men saw him go inside about five minutes ago. I can have an entry team there in ten minutes, shall I-"  
"No." Major Kramm cut him off, "Just watch him." And he shut off the communication system.  
"So what now?" Captain Layne asked, "Are you going to report this to Larcus?"  
"The son of a traitor? No. I'm going to get in touch with Mister Dassall." Major Kramm replied and he turned to the communications system again. Moments later a life size image of Greyan Dassall materialised in front of him.  
"What is it major?" he asked.  
"Local police have found our man." Major Kramm replied, "Hiding out in some dive of a motel."  
"What is Agent Larcus planning?"  
"He doesn't know. He's back at the storehouse with that Udra girl."  
"Vay? What is she doing there?" Greyan snapped, clearly angry.  
"Larcus claimed that the moff assigned her to him. They had a meeting earlier today."  
"And you did not see fit to tell me?"  
"I'm sorry. I-"  
"Never mind major. Now go and deal with this man."  
"Of course sir, we'll bring him in-"  
"No!" Greyan interrupted suddenly, "Whoever sent this man needs realise that the Empire will not tolerate the attempted murder of its officials. Go to where this criminal is hiding and kill him." Then the image of Greyan Dassall vanished.  
"So what are your orders major?" Captain Layne asked.  
"Gather up first platoon. We're moving out."  
"What about Larcus?"  
"Kriff him."



## 5.

Mal had just taken a bite of his burger when his communicator buzzed to indicate an incoming message. He swallowed the mouthful of meat and reached over for the device. He took one look at the communicator's screen and dropped his meal.

GET OUT NOW.

He jumped up off of his bed and ran to the motel room window. He pulled the curtain aside just enough that he could see out and looked around the parking lot. On the far side he saw what he had feared - a clearly marked police speeder.

Mal headed directly for the door and rushed outside. He ran along the walkway outside towards the stairs, noticing that his were not the only set of footsteps he could hear. Reaching the stairs he took two steps before halting and turning around. Moments later a uniformed policeman appeared. Surprised, the officer reached for his blaster. Before he could draw his weapon Mal lashed out and struck him in the throat. Choking, the policeman staggered backwards and toppled over the safety rail. Mal turned around again and ran down the stairs.

Reaching the vehicle park, he saw that a pair of people had witnessed the policeman's fall and were now crouched besides his body. Mal rushed over to them.

"Did you see?" one of the people said, "He fell."

Ignoring the man, Mal crouched down by the policeman himself and plucked the blaster from his holster.

"Hey!" the other witness yelled as Mal began to run off and he grabbed hold of his sleeve. Without hesitation Mal turned around and head butted him before sprinting away between the parked speeders.

"Stay right there!" a voice called out and Mal saw the second policeman from the speeder talking aim at him. Mal dived behind a parked landspeeder and a blaster bolt flew over his head. Leaning around the vehicle he returned fire and the policeman fell as he was hit in the chest. Mal picked himself up and continued to run. As he approached the edge of the parking lot the sound of powerful repulsorlifts caught his attention and he looked over his shoulder to see a group of troop transports descending from the skies. As he watched the white armoured forms of COMPForce assault troopers began to disembark.

"Remain where you are!" an amplified voice blared out from one of the hovering transports. But Mal ignored the command and instead fired two shots at the soldiers already on foot before he continued to run.

That the incident suite had a pair of COMPForce troopers standing guard outside was not a surprise to Garm, however the fact that both Major Kramm and Captain Layne were missing from inside was.

"Where are they?" he asked one of the guards, standing face to face with him while still clutching the clear plastic bag that held the rifle recovered from the turbolift roof. The guard just stared back. Garm looked at Vay, "Am I imagining things, or did I just ask this enlisted trooper a question?"

"You did." Vay replied.

"And did the enlisted trooper answer me?"

"No."

Garm looked back at the trooper and placed a finger on the rank insignia on his chest.

"Tell me where they are trooper. Now."

"The officers are deployed." The guard announced.

Garm stepped aside.

"Vay, explain it to him."

Vay smiled and stood in front of the guard. She smiled and then punched him on the nose.

"You forgot to say sir." She said. The second guard looked as if he were about draw his weapon, but stopped when Garm placed his hand on his own sidearm.

"Now tell me where they've gone," Garm said, "and remember who you're speaking to."

"A call came in from local police." the second guard said while his companion clutched his bleeding nose,

"They located the suspect and the major and the captain took a platoon out to eliminate him."

"Eliminate?" Garm said.

"Yes sir, those were their orders."

"Orders? I'm in charge of this investigation and I gave no such orders to anyone. I wasn't even told about the message. Now since the chain of command here goes me, Director Helios, Moff Horatian and then the gods above, perhaps you can tell me where this order came from."

"It came from Mister Dassall sir."

"Dassall?" Garm shouted, "When the hell did he get the chance to give an order?"

"I believe the major contacted him after the call came in sir."

"Of course he did." Garm said and he passed the rifle to the guard, "Look after this." He said then he looked at Vay again, "We need to go. With any luck we can still stop Kramm flushing the entire case down the refresher."

"Okay," Vay said, "but I've got a really bad feeling about this."

Mal could still hear the sound of booted feet behind him as he ran towards the sewer entrance. He didn't know if he would be able to lose the soldiers in there or not, but he knew he would not be able to lose the airborne transports that were guiding them while he remained in the open.

The opening was just ahead when he saw one of the transports had descended in front of him and its side panels slid open to allow a squad of troops to disembark and cut him off.

"Drop the weapon!" Major Kramm yelled, bringing his rifle up to his shoulder.

Mal began to raise the stolen blaster when he saw more blasters being pointed at him, he halted and looked around. More troopers were closing from all directions and he no avenue of escape. Raising his hands into the air Mal crouched down slowly and set the blaster down on the ground before standing up again.

"I said put it down!" Major Kramm yelled again.

At first Mal was confused, but then he realised what was happening. The only eyewitnesses were soldiers, but there was an overhead walkway nearby with civilians crossing it. Mal closed his eyes before Major Kramm shot him.

Slowly, several COMPForce troopers approached Mal's body and kicked it to make sure he was dead. Then they waved at Major Kramm.

"Looks like I got him." Major Kramm said.

"Well he gave you no choice." Captain Layne replied before there was the sound of another transport descending from overhead.

Garm and Vay jumped down when the vehicle stopped about a metre above the ground and walked towards Major Kramm and Captain Layne.

"What the hell is going on?" he demanded.

"Oh look its Agent Wonderful." Captain Layne said to Major Kramm, "Do you want to tell him how we closed his case for him or shall I?"

"Take a look Larcus." Major Kramm called out, pointing at Mal's body, "There's your would be assassin. Not so deadly now is he?"

Garm continued to stride towards the two officers while Vay instead headed for the body of Mal.

"What the hell are you playing at?" Garm shouted, "We needed him alive. In case you haven't noticed our interrogation suites aren't equipped for holding séances."

"What's your problem?" Captain Layne said, "We were told to get rid of him and we got rid of him."

"And how do we find out who he was working for?" Garm demanded.

"Who he was working for?" Major Kramm snapped back, "He's just some lone nut. I thought conspiracy theories were your father's forte."

Captain Layne cracked a smile at this.

As the two men argued, Vay searched Mal's body. She checked in his pockets and beneath his shirt. What she found made her smile.

"You!" she said to the nearest of the COMPForce troopers, "Take images of this entire area, we may need them if there's an investigation. Then bag up the body and ship it to the morgue. Get them to store it until told otherwise." Then she stood up, subtly sliding two items removed from the body into a pocket of her bodyglove and she walked over to where Garm and Major Kramm were exchanging insults.

"We should go." She said to Garm softly.

"Listen to the little girl Larcus." Major Kramm said, "We don't need you here. My men have ended this without your help. Run back to your office and leave the real world to us."

"Don't think you've heard the last of this!" Garm said, jabbed his finger at the major, but Kramm and Captain Layne just smirked as Vay pulled him back towards the transport that had brought them here.

As Major Kramm watched Garm and Vay leave he suddenly noticed some of his men recording images of Mal's body.

"What are you playing at?" he demanded when he walked over to them and snatched the recording rod away from the man taking pictures.

"The young lady said to-"

"I don't care what she wanted!" Kramm snapped, "I don't want any of this recording." And he deleted the images that had already been taken, "Now get that trash out of here and make sure its burned." he added, pointing at the corpse.

Garm slumped down in a seat as the transport lifted off.

"It's like working with kowikian monkey lizards!" he exclaimed, "Drunken kowikian monkey lizards. Wearing blindfolds, thick mittens and roller skates." Then he suddenly looked up and stared blankly into space,

"Whoa," he said, "I suddenly had this image of my dad in my head." Then he shook his head and looked at Vay who had taken a seat opposite him, "Those two nerf herders just ruined everything. Without the shooter to pull a confession from we'll never find out who's behind all of this."

"Oh I don't know about that. Vay replied and she reached into the pocket where she had placed the items removed from the body and held them out for Garm to see. Looking into Vay's open palm Garm saw a civilian communications device and a pendant, "Take a look at the last message." Vay told him.

Garm took the communicator and accessed the message log. There, time stamped just before the arrival of Major Kramm's COMPForce troops was the warning for Mal to leave the motel.

"Who is this from?" Garm said, "The source isn't identified by name, just a number eight."

Vay let the pendant dangle on its chain beneath her hand. There, Garm saw what looked like a number eight on its side, an infinity symbol.

"Who do we know that goes to this church?" Vay asked, "The sort of person that owns sprawling estates where a man could practice with a seven millimetre bolt action rifle unnoticed until he became proficient in its use? The sort of man who would know about Rodge Larrs' comings and goings and stood to gain from his death?"

"And the man who's been delaying us from the start," Garm added, "and had his pet monkey lizards eliminate his own assassin before we could get to him."

Garm and Vay looked at one another and smiled.

## 6.

"Ah Garm, do come in." Moff Horatian said, "I take it you have news for us?"

"Yes sir. My investigation is now complete and I have a full report for you." Garm replied. He and the moff were not alone. This meeting had been prearranged and numerous interested parties were present. Besides the moff and Garm were Rodge Larrs, Fleet Admiral Vretan, General Dern, Director Helios and Gayal Tharr, the sector's head of Imperial Intelligence.

"Where is your assistant Agent Larcus?" Rodge Larrs asked, "The one you were so keen to have on this case."

"Oh she's otherwise engaged tonight sir." Garm replied.

*Vaulting over the wall, Vay landed with feline grace in the garden. She could just about make out the shape of the motion-triggered security light mounted on the house wall and with a flick of her wrist she reached out through the force and sent a loose rock flying into it, destroying the light emitting diodes completely. She took a quick look around for any signs of either living or automated security patrols and after assuring herself that she was alone sprinted towards the house.*

Garm plugged a mem-stik into a port on the moff's desk and a holographic image appeared. The projection detailed all of the evidence that Garm had collected during his investigation.

"As you can see the attack was specifically targeted. The door logs confirmed that the shooter had ample opportunity to attack Admiral Vretan and other senior figures but waited especially for Mister Larrs.

"The weapon was a commercially available seven millimetre bolt action rifle that had never been registered in the sector. The shooter's fingerprints were found on the weapon, clearly we were not supposed to recover it."

The front door was alarmed, Vay could tell that easily. Not wanting to waste time on subverting the alarm she instead rang the bell and waited. She did not sense the approach of a living being, so when the door began to open she knew that it was a droid.

"Good evening miss, how may I-" the droid began before there was a snap-hiss and a red glow from Vay's lightsaber and she sliced the droid in half. Then she darted inside.

"After the shooting the perpetrator fled to a motel near a monorail terminal from where he could have travelled to any destination on the continent. He was warned to flee from this location just before COMPForce arrived."

"Warned? By whom?" Moff Horatian asked.

*"Hold it right there!" a man called out as he along with a second man descended the massive staircase that dominated the hallway. Both men held blasters that were aimed towards Vay.*

*Reaching out through the force once more she sent a vase crashing into one of the men and he fell backwards. The second man wasted no time in opening fire and blaster bolts streaked towards Vay. She raised her lightsaber and deflected one bolt after another, sending them in alternating directions until she instead sent one straight back at the man and he was killed by his own blaster fire.*

Before the second man could come to his senses Vay was rushing up the stairs towards him. He aimed his blaster with one hand and Vay removed it with a single swing of her lightsaber. The man's scream of agony was brought to an abrupt halt as she delivered a second blow to his chest before continuing up the stairs.

"The man who hired him sir. The shooter was a paid agent in this crime. The true culprit is none other than Greyan Dassall."

There was a collective gasp as Garm adjusted the projection to show an image of the deputy COMPNOR chief, along with several items of personal information.

"There is no record of payment," Garm explained, "so we're assuming that it was done in cash."

"You can't be serious." Admiral Vretan said, "The man's a self-righteous oaf maybe, but a traitor?"

"Yes sir. As you can see the two men were members of the same church, we have public video footage of them together outside the temple on several occasions and the warning to leave the motel came from Mister

Dassall's personal communicator. He is also responsible for several orders given that could have derailed the investigation."

*Another guard was waiting at the top of the stairs and there were rapid footfalls as two more approached from behind him. Vay concentrated hard and with a powerful shove delivered through the force she sent the first guard flying backwards into the others, knocking all three to the floor in a heap.*

*One of them was quick to get back to his feet and ignoring his lost blaster he instead opted to try and tackle Vay. She sidestepped effortlessly and as the guard went past she delivered a kick that sent him tumbling over the banister rail and down to the floor below.*

Vay was upon the others before they could react and with two swift strokes of her lightsaber they were both dealt with.

*Ahead of her lay her target, the door to Greyan Dassall's bedchamber.*

"For example," Garm went on, "the first thing he did was to try and remove Vay Udra, a proven investigative asset from the case and replace her with inexperienced personnel over whom he had significant influence. He then manipulated them into feeding him information so that he could remain one step ahead of the investigation, culminating in his attempt to remove a key witness and destroy the evidence linking the pair."

*Vay could sense the fear on the other side of the bedroom door, Dassall was inside. The door was locked, so Vay drove her lightsaber into the structure around the lock itself and sliced a neat semicircle from the door before delivering a single strong kick that opened the way for her.*

*Inside the bedroom Dassall was alone, cowering beside his bed. He had a weapon that he aimed in her direction, but with a thought she ripped it from his grasp and it flew through the air into her own hand.*

*"I can pay you!" Dassall cried out, "Five million credits in cash! Please, I have the money here!"*

*Vay ignored him and tossed his gun aside. Then she advanced on him, the only sound the hum of her lightsaber.*

"But he's been my deputy for years." Rodge Larrs said, "What did he hope to gain?"

"Your position perhaps." Garm replied, "His unpopularity outside of COMPNOR would have made you unlikely to name him as your successor were you to retire of your own accord, but by accelerating the matter he was the one who would have assumed control by default."

"These are serious charges Agent Larcus." Moff Horatian said, "You are sure of the evidence?"

"I am sir."

"There's going to be a terrible scandal when this comes out." Gayal Tharr said and she turned to Rodge,

"You better come up with something good for the public."

"Don't worry." Garm said, "The situation is well in hand."

*"I'm not for sale." Vay said.*

*"I can help you! I can-" then Greyan Dassall's pleas were cut off along with his head.*

"What started with the attempted murder of Rodge Larrs, sector chief of the Committee for the Preservation of the New Order last night escalated with the vicious killing of his deputy Greyan Dassall and several of his staff." Neema Gorord reported, the camera pointed at her as she stood outside the front gate of the Dassall estate. Behind her marked police speeders were clearly visible and a piece of brightly coloured tape was strung up across the gateway, "Late last night a large force of rebel terrorists stormed the Dassall home in a raid apparently timed for when the rest of the Dassall family would be away. They swiftly overpowered the security detail before gruesomely killing Mister Dassall himself. Apparently Mister Dassall had just enough time to trigger an alarm that summoned a military response team that was successful in eliminating the rebels as they tried to leave the grounds. An early statement from COMPNOR paid tribute to Mister Dassall's years of service to the—"

Darrall Harber turned off the video screen.

"This is unfortunate." He said as he turned around to face the robed figure behind him.

"Indeed." an inhuman voice replied, "His influence was beneficial to us. He will be difficult to replace."

"Perhaps we should rethink our strategy."

"No. The Empire of your Palpatine is fleeting, ours will be infinite."