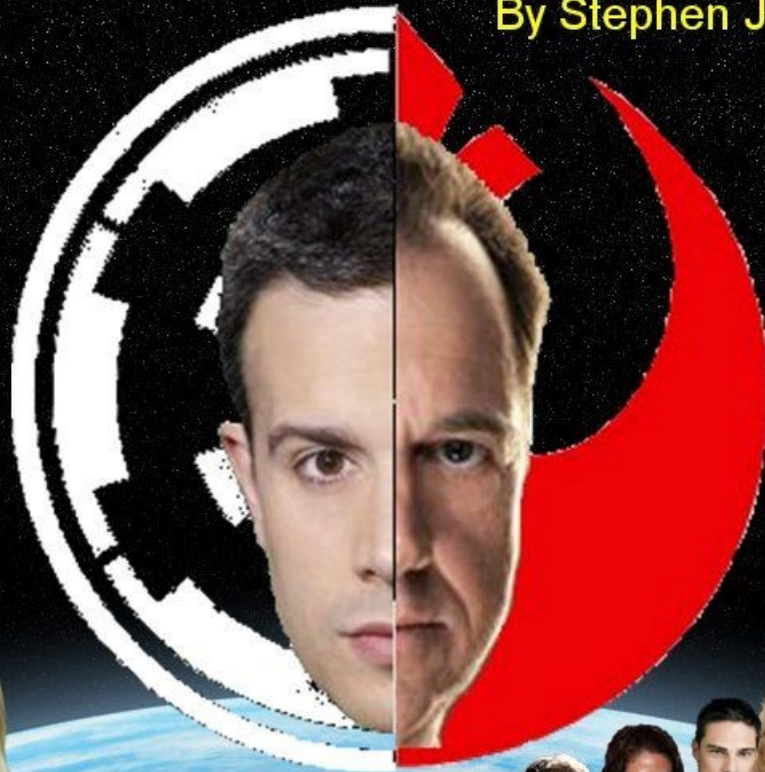


STAR WARS

4-03: The Phantom Visit

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...

THE PHANTOM VISIT

HOPING TO FLUSH OUT THE IMPERIAL AGENT IN THEIR MIDST, THE COMMANDERS OF THE REBEL SECTOR FORCES STAGE AN EVENT THAT THEY KNOW THE SPY WILL NOT BE ABLE TO MISS OUT ON...

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

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1.

The table and chairs set up on the hangar deck were simple foldaway types and Major Vorn Larcus III and Sergeant Tharun Verser were just sat back in them.

"Hard at work there?" a voice said from behind them and Vorn glanced over his shoulder to see a man in his mid sixties, slightly older than Vorn looking at them.

"Ah hello Dayle." Vorn replied, "Take a seat."

"Yes commander." Tharun adding, straightening his posture, "We were just going through these reports." And he reached out for a datapad.

"Yeah I bet." Dayle said as he took a seat, "Now what are you two really up to?"

"Mace has got himself an enhanced shield generator for the *Silver Hawk*." Vorn said, "Should be good for dissipating a few trillion watts."

"And he's installing it now." Tharun added.

A puzzled look appeared on Dayle's face.

"What's so entertaining about that?" he asked.

"Well being his engineer, Tobis is actually doing most of the work." Tharun said.

"And more significantly, being Tobis' girlfriend Jaysica is also lending a hand."

"Ah, now I see." Dayle said, the look of puzzlement turning to one of amusement and he looked at the battered YT-1300 freighter in front of them, searching for any sign of the infamously accident prone Jaysica Horbid.

"She's at the front. Underneath." Tharun pointed out and Dayle nodded.

"She's not alone." He said.

"Exactly." Tharun replied, "Kara's there too. Captain Grayle seemed to think that she owed him a favour or two for the way she's behaved recently."

"Kara?" Dayle repeated, "Oh this is too good to miss." and then he briefly turned towards his own ship where he saw one of his field team speaking with one of the deck management droids, "Hey Brak! Forget about that and come tell me what you think of this report." He yelled then he turned back towards the *Silver Hawk* and added, "This needs to be shared."

"Commander?" Brak said as he arrived, "You wanted to me to see something."

"Yes lieutenant, take a seat and watch."

"Watch what?" he asked and Dayle pointed to where Jaysica and Kara were working, "Oh." He added and he sat down, "Those pipes," he said, referring to a cluster of flexible pipes dangling from an open panel on the underside of the hull of the *Silver Hawk*, "are they-"

"High pressure lines from the refresher system?" Tharun interrupted, "Yes they are."

"Jaysica was supposed to have drained the system." Vorn said.

"Supposed to?" Brak commented.

"Yes but she drained the hydraulics for the turret instead." Vorn explained, "So right now Tobis is inside refilling that and no-one seems to have noticed that the refresher still hasn't been drained."

"Except for us." Tharun said.

"Shouldn't you have told them?" Brak asked.

"Where would be the fun in that?" Tharun replied.

"Actually Jeeves did try to warn them." Vorn said, "Kara's reply was that the day hadn't arrived yet when she took advice on starship engineering from a hunk of metrosexual tin."

"Then she switched him off." Tharun said.

"Which was about the time we decided to sit back and watch." Vorn added.

"It's stuck!" Jaysica suddenly called out from beneath the *Silver Hawk* and the four men sat watching all leant forwards in their seats.

"Oh don't be so ridiculous." Kara snapped back, "Look, you just twist here and-"

The screams were audible across most of the hangar deck as both Jaysica and Kara fell backwards, a jet of liquefied waste spraying out of the line that Kara had just disconnected and coating them both in foul smelling ooze. Jaysica tried to scrabble clear, but the waste also formed a slippery puddle on the deck beneath the two young women and she instead fell face down into it.

"We should be recording this." Tharun said.

The commotion attracted the attention of both Tobis and Mace inside the *Silver Hawk* and they appeared moments later on the access ramp.

"What the hell is going on out here?" Mace demanded as he saw Jaysica and Kara still struggling to get clear of the slippery mess.

"Looks like a plumbing problem captain." Tharun shouted and then Kara glared in the direction of their audience.

"Uh-oh." Vorn said, "I've got a bad feeling about this."

"You!" Kara shouted as she finally got to her feet and began to advance towards where Vorn and the others were watching from, "You knew that was going to happen. Look at me."

"What about me?" Jaysica said and then she coughed and wiped her face with her hand in an attempt to clear the mess but succeeding only in spreading it about. Meanwhile Tobis scurried towards her to help.

"Oh you had it coming." Kara responded, "I didn't."

"Daddy, Tharun what is going on?" the voice came from behind Vorn and he recognised it immediately as that belonging to his daughter, who was also Tharun's wife, Lyssa.

"Ah, hello dear." Vorn said, "We were just supervising the improvements to the *Silver Hawk*."

"What brings you to the hangar?" Tharun asked as he got up to embrace his wife briefly.

"Well that Doctor Na wants everyone with medical training to report to the infirmary. There are damaged ships on their way and they have a lot of casualties. He's so desperate he even wants her." And she looked towards Kara.

"Which ships?" Dayle asked.

"Oh I don't know. The *Ocean Queen* I think and the *Renegade*."

"The *Renegade*?" Mace suddenly exclaimed and he walked towards Lyssa, staring at her, "What happened?"

"How should I know?" she responded.

"Well where's the ship coming in?" Mace demanded.

"Doctor Na said docking port five. But why-"

Mace spun around and ran across the hangar deck, heading towards the nearest turbolift cluster.

"What did I say?" Lyssa said, looking at Tharun.

"The *Renegade* is Captain Mayan's ship." He told her.

The Corellian corvette *Renegade* had just docked at port five when Mace arrived and already there were medical technicians ready to transport casualties to the station's medical facilities.

"Krissa!" Mace called out when he recognised one of the officers who disembarked the *Renegade* and she looked toward him as he pushed his way towards her, "Where's Malia? Is she okay?"

"Captain Grayle." The younger woman replied, "Captain Mayan's injured. Don't worry though, she'll be fine."

"Injured? What happened?"

"There was a star destroyer waiting for us when we dropped out of hyperspace. Plus a pursuit line of blast boats. The captain had us position the ship between the *Ocean Queen* and the blast boats to disrupt their run while the *Ocean Queen* focused on the destroyer. We too several hits before we were able to get back into hyperspace and there was a fire. Captain Mayan went to help fight it and was burned."

At that moment a pair of the *Renegade*'s crew brought a stretcher through the airlock hatch on which there was a dark haired woman.

"Malia!" Mace exclaimed as he leant over her, "Are you okay?"

"Mace honey you really do ask the most stupid questions sometimes." She replied, her voice croaking.

"Sir you need to let us work." A medical technician interrupted, pushing between Mace and the stretcher that bore Malia.

"Thank you for joining me at such short notice." General Syres Kain announced to the handful of officers gathered together in the briefing chamber. Standing behind the general was Rear Admiral Aphanar; the mon calamari who commanded the fleet units assigned to the sector and beside her was a human in a lieutenant's uniform. This was Geran Pay and counter intelligence specialist assigned by the Alliance's central command.

The audience for this briefing was very small compared to the capacity of the room. Vorn and Mace were both present, as were two other human males. One was bald headed and wore a battered colonel's uniform while the other wore the flight suit of a fighter pilot.

"I don't want this to drag on too long in case anyone gets suspicious about why we're here," the general said, "so I'll let Lieutenant Pay explain things." And he stepped back, glancing at the lieutenant.

"Thank you general." The lieutenant replied as he stepped forwards and activated the holographic display that dominated the centre of the room, "This recording was taken from the logs of the *Ocean Queen*." He explained as the projected image of a mon calamari star cruiser appeared, a much smaller corvette alongside it. Almost immediately an Imperial star destroyer came into the shot and began firing while data tags indicating the positions of craft too small to be visible at this scale were used to represent a charging squadron of blast boats, "As you can see the Empire was expecting our ships to drop out of hyperspace and had forces waiting. Had the captains of the vessels not been able to escape back into hyperspace quickly it seems likely that we would have lost both ships."

"When do we get to the bit about the spy?" the man in the flight suit suddenly asked and he looked around at the others gathered, "I mean that is why we're here isn't it? We're the ones you've eliminated from your list of suspects."

It had been known for well over a year now that Imperial Intelligence had been able to infiltrate an agent into the local Alliance structure and for some time they had been able to pass information on Alliance fleet movements back to their superiors. This had been halted when the transmitter used to send the messages had been discovered, but the agent himself had escaped detection. Now though it appeared that he had been able to open up a new line of communication.

"I think Malia can be eliminated from the list as well Jarad." Mace commented, "The spy put her in the infirmary."

"So when she gets out of the infirmary we'll give her an invite to join our secret little club then." Jarad replied, "But I'm guessing we're all here to figure out a way of finding the spy as quickly as we can."

"Captain Tarl is correct." Lieutenant Pay said, "If the Empire is able to monitor our fleet movements again then finding the spy, or at least figuring out how they're getting information to their superiors and stopping it is a priority."

"So what's your plan?" Vorn asked, "You do have a plan don't you?"

"Ah, well." Lieutenant Pay stammered.

"He's not got a plan." The man in the colonel's uniform said.

"A trap." Vorn said suddenly and everyone looked at him.

"What's a trap major?" Admiral Aphanar asked.

"We set one." Vorn said, "We don't wait for the spy to happen to fall out from behind a curtain with a recording rod in his hand or accidentally reveal how he's communicating with the Empire, we dangle something right out in front of them. Something so important that they won't be able to help taking a closer look. And when they do-"

"We've got them." Mace interrupted, a grin appearing on his face.

"So what would be so important that the spy would have to take an interest?" General Kain asked, "we can't just leave a datapad full of classified information in a corridor while he hide around the corner ready to jump out can we?"

"Military data is out the question." Lieutenant Pay agreed, "Whatever we do needs to look real and no one would believe that classified data would be left lying around. We certainly wouldn't advertise its presence."

"I was thinking about Republic Day." Vorn said, "What if we let everyone know that something big is going happen as a celebration?"

"Well Republic Day isn't far off." General Kain agreed, "But what would make this one so special?"

"What if there was to be some big announcement?" the colonel suggested, "Something the spy would want to know about."

"Colonel Ergard, the content of big announcements tend to be common knowledge." Admiral Aphanar pointed out, "The spy must be made to reveal themselves."

"What if someone important was to give a speech?" Mace suggested, "An individual that the spy would want to get close to?"

"Like who?" Jarad asked, "The general and the admiral are right here on the station pretty much all the time. There's that actress woman who leads the team on the *Artist's Impression*, but she's just a captain and I don't see the spy wanting her autograph."

"Mon Mothma." Vorn said and the room went silent at the mention of the supreme commander of the Alliance to Restore the Republic.

"I doubt that we could get her to-" Jarad began.

"Oh just shut up and think for a minute would you?" Vorn snapped back at him, "We tell everyone that this year's Republic Day formal dinner is going to be extra special. We pull out all the plugs to make sure that the event is as fancy as it can be and we start a rumour that there'll be a special guest to make a speech. Officially we deny everything, but we give people the impression we're expecting Mon Mothma. The spy will never be able to resist getting close to her."

"Major, a state event like that requires special planning." Admiral Aphanar said, "Even if it is fake, we would have to make it look believable."

"It's just a fancy party." Vorn replied, "And it just so happens I know someone who is an expert at planning parties. Especially expensive ones."

"Oh no." Mace muttered, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

2.

"What is it daddy?" Lyssa asked when Vorn appeared in the storeroom she was searching through, "I'm very busy. Everybody expects me to keep track of all this rubbish." And she waved her hand at a nearby shelf filled with medical supplies.

"Mistress Lyssa," a nearby protocol droid said, "I would hardly think that—"

"Oh shut up Emsee." Lyssa said, "Now what do you want daddy?"

"Well I've got a job for you from the General." Vorn replied.

"More work? Why me?"

"Because you're the only one any of us trust to do this."

"Do what daddy?" Lyssa asked, folding her arms and staring at him.

"Well this year's Republic Day officer's dinner needs to be extra special. The general has a bit of a surprise planned and—"

Lyssa's eyes widened.

"A party?" she exclaimed, "I get to plan a party?"

"Yes you do." Vorn replied with a smile, "And there's something else too."

Lyssa stared across the room in disbelief. From the outside it was a non-descript storage chamber, but inside were rack after rack of high value clothing.

"Where did all this come from?" Lyssa asked, glancing briefly over her shoulder to where Vorn stood beside the quartermaster and her protocol droid Emsee.

"Oh all sorts of places." The quartermaster replied, shrugging, "Some of it's brought here by people when they join up. Some gets bought in job lots by procurement and some is captured in battle believe it or not. This fancy stuff isn't much use for day to day wear, but I can't throw it out just in case it's ever needed."

"Needed for what?" Lyssa asked, still having trouble believing that the Alliance had this secret hoard of designer clothes.

"Field work." Vorn said, "If we need to send agents places where this sort of clothing is worn we need them to blend in. Jaysica and Kara both have crates of the stuff on the *Silver Hawk*."

"And I can pick any dress I want?"

"You can take as much as you like." The quartermaster replied, "Look, as far as I'm concerned this is all junk that takes up more room than it's worth. So long as you can find somewhere to store it you can keep it. Just sign out whatever you're taking and assign it a mission reference."

"Mission reference? But I don't have one."

The quartermaster frowned and he looked at Vorn.

"Look major," he said, "I don't mind those two on your team looting this crap for missions, but I'm accountable for it all. I can't have you just turning her loose on it because you—"

"General's orders." Vorn interrupted and he held out a datapad, "It's for an event here on the station. I'm afraid I can't say any more because it's classified."

"Classified? How can anything to do with this stuff be classified?"

"Oh never mind that." Lyssa said and she looked at her droid, "Come along Emsee. We've work to do."

In another part of the ancient space station that served as the Alliance's headquarters in the sector Captain Jarad Tarl looked in both directions to make certain that he was not being watched before he entered an unimposing office.

"Hello captain." The man sat behind the desk inside said as he looked up, "Here, this is yours share." And he tossed a small bundle of banknotes towards the captain, "Sergeant Kilter was very grateful for his transfer."

"Thanks Kyle." Jarad replied as he slipped the cash into his pocket without counting it, "But I've got big news. Profitable news. I think that there are going to be a lot of people wanting their duty assignments changed and we need to figure out the best way to take advantage of this without making any specific promises."

Kyle frowned.

"I don't follow you." He said.

"How much do you thin people would pay to meet someone famous?" Jarad asked, "Someone really famous?" and he grinned.

The crew of the *Silver Hawk* sat in the vessel's lounge area as Lyssa addressed them.

"Now I know that this sort of event is much nicer than anything you're used to," she said, "but I'm going to need your full attention. Daddy has promised me you'll be on your best behaviour." And she glared briefly at Kara, "All of you."

"Just get on with it." Kara said, staring back.

"Well as you know this event is for officers only, but I've found jobs for all of you in preparing for it."

"Oh how wonderful to be included." Kara commented.

"Here you go." Lyssa went on and she passed each member of the team a datapad, "I've included everything I want each of you to do on these."

"Mine says 'Don't touch anything'." Jaysica commented and she showed the datapad to Tobis.

"Because I don't want it breaking." Lyssa told her, "Now I have to go and meet with the general to talk about paint." Then she looked to where both hers and Vorn's protocol droids were stood watching, "Emsee, Jeeves, you're both to come with me."

"Oh course mistress." Emsee replied.

"Certain Miss Lyssa." Jeeves then added and as Lyssa strode out of the ship with the pair of droids shuffling after her. When she was gone Kara got up and headed to the kitchen section of the lounge where she began to pour herself a drink.

"She doesn't want anything breaking?" Jaysica said out loud, "How rude is that?" and she looked to Tobis for support.

"Ah, well-" he began before Mace turned towards Kara.

"You're taking your instructions well at least." He said.

"Don't hit anyone." Kara replied suddenly, "Don't hit anyone. Look, right there." And she held out her datapad so that the others could see.

"Oh yes, there it is." Mace said, "Right below where it says you have to wear-"

"I know what its says I'm to wear." Kara snapped, "And for your information I always do." Then she looked at Vorn, "Will she be inspecting them boss? Or will that duty fall to you?"

"I think I'll just check my dress uniform is pressed." Vorn said, sliding out from behind the table, "Its on my list of things to do after all."

"Stang Tharun," Kara went on, "how can you stay married to that nerf herder."

"That nerf herder's my daughter as well." Vorn reminded her.

"I know, but you didn't choose to-"

"She's lonely." Tharun interrupted. Throughout all of this he had been cleaning a blaster rifle, its component parts laid out on the table and he did not look up as he spoke. For a moment no one spoke and Tharun set down the barrel of his rifle and sat up straight, "What did you lot all forget that she never wanted to leave Estran? She didn't volunteer for the rebellion but the major literally had me carry her aboard this ship. She's no friends here and have either of you two ever actually just sat down and talked to her to find out what she's really like?" he went on and he looked at Jaysica and Kara. When neither of them replied he went back to cleaning his weapon, "Try it." He said, "I did."

"Yeah." Kara commented, "Right after you got so drunk you got hitched."

"You see what I mean general? This is all wrong." Lyssa said, waving her arm around the function room where the officer's dinner would be taking place.

"Err not quite." General Kain replied, already regretting agreeing to discuss the arrangements for the dinner with Lyssa. But then he caught sight of another officer, a woman in a lieutenant's uniform standing on the far side of the room with a pair of technicians, "Oh look, there's Lieutenant Lerner." He said, pointing her out, "Perhaps she can assign you some droids to help with whatever modifications you want to make."

"That's an excellent idea general." Lyssa said and without a further word to him she strode across the room.

"Didn't I tell you she'd be perfect?" Vorn said from behind the general.

"She certainly has thrown herself into the role." General Kain replied, "Though what everyone else will think of her by the end of this is another matter.

"All the officers will remember is the dinner itself general." Vorn said, "Which knowing my daughter will be executed perfectly. As for the enlisted personnel who have do most of the work, well I don't think Lyssa will be worried about them."

"How are the assignments going?" General Kain asked.

"Oh Captain Tarl's handling that." Vorn replied, "Though my people have told me that there's a lot of interest in being part of the celebration. Servers, honour guards, anything."

"Has anyone mentioned Mon Mothma yet?" the general asked.

"Mon Mothma?" a voice from behind them said suddenly and both Vorn and the general looked around to see Jaysica and Tobis standing there, Tobis clutching a box of decorations, "Is Mon Mothma visiting? She is, isn't she? That's why there's all this secrecy."

"Err, Jaysica." Tobis said, "Maybe we shouldn't be talking about it then."

"What? Oh yes of course. Come on, let's go deliver these decorations." And Jaysica pushed between the two officers, a bounce clearly evident in her step.

"Why exactly isn't she carrying anything corporal?" General Kain said to Tobis.

"What? Oh, err. This." And Tobis produced a datapad from his pocket, the one that Lyssa had given to him, "Number five sir."

"Don't let your idiot girlfriend touch anything." The general read, a puzzled frown on his face.

"My daughter decided that my people needed precise instructions." Vorn explained.

"Mon Mothma!" Kara suddenly yelled out and General Kain and Vorn both stared to where Jaysica was standing next to her, trying to quieten her down. Looking embarrassed Kara clamped a hand over her own mouth.

"Tobis go and give those two something to do." Vorn said and Tobis nodded before he head towards the two women, still loaded down with boxes, "Well we did want to get people thinking she'd be here." Vorn said.

"You there! Lieutenant." Lyssa said, "I need to speak with you."

"Who me?" Lieutenant Lerner replied, "Who are you?"

"I'm the one responsible for planning all this." Lyssa said, "And the general has put you at my disposal."

"Oh really?" Lieutenant Lerner said, folding her arms and glaring at Lyssa, "Well the general knows full well that my resources are limited. Now if you want to request-"

"Mon Mothma!"

Lyssa and Lieutenant Lerner both looked towards Kara as she cried out before they looked at one another again. However, Lieutenant Lerner's stern expression had now softened.

"You're planning a dinner for Mon Mothma?" she asked.

"What?" Lyssa responded and then she smiled, "Well of course that must be it. Why else would daddy and the general want me to do the planning? They know there's no one else better to do it around here."

"Vorn, I hear you've been holding out on me." The woman said. This was Shyla Nerin; the head of Alliance support services for the sector and Vorn had gone to see her with the massive list of demands given to him by Lyssa.

"Holding out how?" he responded.

"Well isn't Mon Mothma visiting to announce a new offensive in the sector? If there's going to be an influx of personnel and equipment then I should have been informed."

"I'm sorry Shyla. But the general hasn't said anything to me about Mon Mothma visiting."

"Of course not." Shyla replied with a smile, "All very hush hush I know. But for something as big as this-"

"Shyla I can't say anything. But I do need to give you this." And he handed her the datapad.

Still smiling Shyla took the device and looked at it. The expression on her face changed abruptly.

"You're kidding me." She said.

"No, Lyssa wants all of that made available."

"We don't have half of this."

"I did try to tell her. But we do have machine shops here on the station. Most of what's on the list can be made if we're willing to put in the effort."

"And manpower." Shyla added, "This is going to need a lot of extra duty shifts."

"From what I hear that won't be a problem."

"Actually you're right. I spoke with Kyle Varner and he told he's been inundated with requests ever since the rumours started about Mon Mothma visiting."

"I don't suppose I could get a list of those wanting to be assigned could I?" Vorn asked.

"I don't see why not. But what use would that be to you?"

"Oh curiosity mainly. I want to see who my daughter is going to end up annoying."

Shyla plugged the datapad Vorn had handed her into her desktop terminal and began to search through her files, swapping the list of Lyssa's demands with a list of personnel transfer requests.

"Here you go." Shyla said as she disconnected the datapad and tossed it back to Vorn, "If you're planning on protecting Lyssa from all of them then you'll need a pretty big security team. Not one of ours though, most of our fleet troopers are on that list."

"It'll do." Vorn said, glancing at the list, "Now I'll leave you to figure out how to get hold of everything Lyssa needs." And he left Shyla's office.

In the corridor outside Vorn took one more glance at the datapad before he turned and headed for the station's command and control section. He made his way past the main command centre to a quieter area where an unmarked door was guarded by a pair of armed troopers. Vorn knew both men by sight as part of the security detail that had arrived with Lieutenant Pay.

"I take it he's in?" Vorn said to them.

"He is sir." One of the guards replied and he opened the door behind him for Vorn to enter.

"Ah hello major." Geran said when he saw Vorn, "How's the party planning?"

"Hectic." Vorn said, "But I'm hoping that this will be of use in your work." And he held out the datapad.

"A list of personnel transfer requests?"

"Yes. Those are all people wanting to be involved with the dinner. I thought that-"

"That the spy's name may be on it?" Geran said with a smile.

"Exactly." Vorn replied.

Geran immediately began to copy the list to his computer. Then he glanced upwards at Vorn.

"Yes?" he asked, "Anything else?"

"No. I'll let you get on."

The droids lined up in front of Lyssa and Lieutenant Lerner in the corridor bore a passing resemblance to 3PO protocol droids such as Emsee and Jeeves, but were clearly not of that type.

"This is every SE4 I've got." Lieutenant Lerner said.

"They're a bit grubby aren't they?" Lyssa commented and she sneered at the droids.

"Maybe, but they've got the full etiquette databases you need. They can lay out your tables and serve the diners."

"Then you'll have to clean them up. I'm not having grubby droids like this serving at my party. Wait a moment, I thought you were bringing eight of them."

"I did."

"Well there are only seven here. So where's the other one?"

3.

Jaysica sat on the work surface in the kitchen while Tobis lay beneath it, searching for a wiring fault that was preventing the newly installed hot shelves from working. In theory these should allow cooked food to be kept at a suitable regulated temperature until it was to be served. However, thanks to the fault anything placed on them was either burned to a crisp or went cold.

"Do you think we'll get to meet her in person? Mon Mothma I mean." Jaysica asked, swinging her legs back and forth.

"What? Oh, err well I doubt it." Tobis replied from beneath her.

"Why?"

"Well, err, we're not officers. I think she'll meet the senior officers and anyone getting a medal."

"That's not fair." Jaysica said sadly, "After all the work we've done here-"

"We?" Kara interrupted as she arrived bearing a compact tool kit, "I haven't seen you lift a finger since the boss let his little princess start bossing us about."

"Well Lyssa hasn't complained." Jaysica replied.

"That's because so far Tobis has been able to keep you away from everything breakable."

At that moment there was an almighty crash from the other side of the kitchen and both Jaysica and Kara looked around to see a rebel lying on the floor, surrounded by cutlery and with an SE4 droid standing over him.

"Mind where you're going!" the rebel yelled at the droid, but rather than apologise and help him up as its programming would typically require the droid bent down and picked up a large knife from amongst the dropped cutlery, "Hey what are you doing with that?" the rebel asked, but the droid did not respond, instead it turned around and began to head towards the hall where the dinner would take place.

"Tobis, I think we've got trouble." Kara said and Tobis slid out from beneath the worktop and looked towards the droid.

"Err, what's wrong with that?" he asked just before the rebel knocked down by the droid got back to his feet and placed a hand on its shoulder. The droid immediately reacted by slashing at the man's hand with the knife. He screamed in pain and pulled his hand back, clutching at it as blood sprayed across the floor, "Uh-oh." Tobis exclaimed and he darted after the droid.

"Well what are you waiting for?" Kara said to Jaysica and they too went after it.

The droid walked into the function room next door still holding the knife and approached the main table. A datapad was propped up on this, its screen showing an image of Mon Mothma's face and the droid immediately focused on it. The rebels at work in the function room ignored the droid, few of them even noticing the knife it held.

"Somebody stop that droid!" Kara yelled out as she emerged from the kitchen and a nearby trooper stopped unfolding chairs and stepped into the path of the droid. Immediately the droid raised the knife and plunged it into the stomach of the surprised trooper, "Stang!" Kara exclaimed and she ran to help him.

Meanwhile the droid itself continued to head towards the main table as other rebels looked on in surprise. No one in the room possessed a blaster and as such they did not dare approach the apparently out of control droid. Tobis however reacted by grabbing hold of one of the chairs yet to be unfolded and he ran after the droid. Approaching it from behind he swung the chair and broke it over the back of the droid. The droid fell, dropping the knife as it landed and Tobis pounced. He wrapped his arms around the droid and held it tightly as it attempted to recover its weapon.

"Jaysica help me!" he exclaimed as the droid continued to flail about.

Jaysica ran forwards and was about to strike the droid's deactivation switch when it lashed out an arm and knocked her backwards into a table that promptly collapsed, scattering the plates stacked on top of it across the floor. Without bothering to stand Jaysica crawled back towards Tobis and she brought her hand down hard on the back of the droid's head. Immediately it stopped thrashing about and went limp.

"Are you alright?" Jaysica asked Tobis.

"Err, yes, I'm fine." He replied, untangling himself from the droid, "Now help me get this thing up."

"What is going on here!" Lyssa's voice suddenly called out and both Jaysica and Tobis turned to see her storming towards them, Lieutenant Lerner close behind her.

"Oh, ahh, erm-" Tobis stammered.

"Look at this mess." Lyssa shouted, "What did you do?" and she stared at Jaysica.

"This droid went crazy." She replied, "It started attacking people with a knife."

"Oh what nonsense!" Lyssa said, "I am well aware that droids like this are incapable of attacking people."

"Well someone obviously forgot to tell that one that." Kara called out from where she was pressing against the injured trooper's wound, "Now how about someone gets me a medpac while Tobis gets rid of that machine?" and another rebel approached to give her an emergency aid kit.

"Take it to my workshop." Lieutenant Lerner said, "If its malfunctioned I need to find out why."

"Err, this wasn't a malfunction." Tobis said, "Somebody must have – well, I mean someone has to have altered it. Perhaps I should take it to Lieutenant Pay."

"Lieutenant Pay?" Lieutenant Lerner asked, "What does it have to do with him?"

"Well," Tobis began, "it's just that, well, err, the droid was heading for that." And he looked at the image of Mon Mothma still standing on the main table.

"You think the spy did it?" Jaysica asked, her eyes widening, "That means we just stopped an assassination attempt."

"Yeah, on a photograph." Kara muttered.

"But if it was programmed to attack Mon Mothma then we just saved her life." Jaysica replied and she looked back at Tobis, "We'll get to meet her now won't we?"

"Just get that droid out of here." Lyssa snapped, "Take it to that Lieutenant Pay if you must, but I want you to get straight back here and clean this mess up."

"Bring him over here." Doctor Na told Kara as she helped the injured trooper into the infirmary. The kaminoan towered over everyone else in the room, but lacking the muscular bulk of many of the galaxy's taller species his movements were smooth and graceful instead of slow and cumbersome.

Kara helped the trooper to the bed where the doctor began to peel back the dressing she had applied and studied the wound.

"How was this inflicted?" he asked.

"A kitchen knife." Kara replied.

"Thank you specialist, you may return to your duties." The doctor replied.

"Gee thanks." Kara replied, but then she noticed Mace sat by the side of Malia's bed, holding her hand as she slept and she wandered over to him, "How is she?" she asked.

"Sleeping naturally thankfully." Mace replied, "She inhaled a lot of smoke and fumes it seems." Then he glanced back to where Doctor Na was seeing to the trooper, "What happened to him?"

"Oh some droid went crazy and started attacking people with a knife."

"A droid? But how?"

"Tobis reckons it was sabotaged and the klutz is convinced that she's personally saved the life of Mon Mothma. Did you know she was coming to visit?"

"Huh?" Mace replied.

"Oh its true. Jaysica got it from the boss and the general. But no-one's supposed to know."

"Is that why I heard three nurses talking about it?" Malia said suddenly.

"You're awake." Mace said, smiling, "I'll get someone."

"You'll do no such thing." Malia replied and she looked at Kara, "So tell me about Mon Mothma."

Kara pulled up a chair and sat down.

"Apparently she's going to be making some big speech on Republic Day at the officer's dinner and I get to be there."

Malia frowned.

"Did I get hit on the head when you got commission back?" she asked.

"No, but I'm on the serving staff. The boss's little princess is organising everything and so we're all on the staff list."

"You're working with Lyssa?" Malia asked and she looked back at Mace, "She's going to get arrested again isn't she?"

"Hey, I'll have you know I've been on my best behaviour captain." Kara replied, "Haven't I?" and she too looked at Mace.

"You just brought some guy in with a knife wound and I've only your word that it wasn't you." He said and Kara gently slapped his arm.

"Look Mace honey," Malia said, "as much as I appreciate you being here I'm fine really and you don't need to just sit there all the time."

"She means get lost so she can rest." Kara said.

"Fine, I get the message. I think I'll go take a look at that droid."

"Tobis and the klutz took it to Lieutenant Pay I think. Though that woman from droid maintenance seemed keen to start poking around with it herself."

Vorn was already with Geran when Mace arrived.

"Ah captain, how's Captain Mayan?" the lieutenant asked.

"Grouchy." Mace replied.

"Well that's good sign." Vorn said, "She may be able to attend the dinner after all."

"Yeah and be another one disappointed that Mon Mothma's not there. That tale is all over the station you realise? When people find out she's not coming they're going to be really mad."

"There's been no official announcement." Vorn said.

"And it's given us this. Your engineer brought it in with that young lady of his." Geran said and he pointed to the inactive SE4 droid laid on a nearby workbench, "I thought it wise to send them both to get the tools necessary for them to examine it. Droids aren't really my thing."

"What did she break?" Mace asked.

"Almost my neck. But she settled for sitting on a datapad." Geran answered, "Fortunately I'd copied its contents to my computer before she flattened it."

"Have you had chance to look through it?" Vorn asked.

"I have actually and I compared the names with our personnel files to see what sorts of people were asking for transfers that might get them close to the Chief of State. I'm working on sneaking a spike into the duty roster system to update the list but Mister Varner is still logged on and he'll spot it if I activate the spike."

"And who was?" Mace asked.

"Everyone it seems." Geran said.

"That's hardly surprising." Vorn said, "But I have to say that I never picked Kyle Varner as the sort to put in overtime to make other people happy."

"Well maybe he's just sorting out the mess he's made of it so far. What I saw made no sense."

"What do you mean?" Vorn asked.

"I saw some of the transfers he'd approved and they just didn't seem to relate to people's skills. Better candidates look to have been passed over and I can't see why."

"Well maybe he is trying to sort it out." Mace said, "If he screws up this he'll look like a real nerf herder." Then he noticed the frown on Vorn's face, "Problem Major?" he asked.

"Maybe." Vorn answered and he turned to Geran, "I want you to get that spike in place as soon as you can and then I want to see what it reveals. No need to give me a list, just give me access to his system."

"What's wrong?" Mace asked.

"Maybe nothing. But this may just answer a question I've been asking myself for a while."

The door then slid open and Jaysica and Tobis re-entered the room.

"We've brought the tools." Jaysica announced gleefully.

"And Harvey too." Tobis added as a red and white R5 astromech droid rolled in behind him.

"Good get him over here." Geran said and he pulled a chair out of the way so that the little droid could travel across the room to where the SE4 lay.

"Where do you want us to start?" Tobis asked as he and Jaysica stood beside the deactivated droid.

"We?" Geran asked.

"Well I know I only really know about mouse droids," Jaysica replied, "but they're all the same aren't they?"

"No, not really." Geran said, "I tell you what why don't you just take a seat and I'll give Engineer Dorfus a hand."

"Well okay then." Jaysica said and she found a nearby chair to sit down on.

There was a 'crunch'.

"Oh no," Jaysica said as she got back to her feet, "that wasn't important was it? It was an accident I promise."

"You know," Geran whispered to Mace as he walked past, "she may not be the spy but is it possible that the Empire sent her to us deliberately?"

4.

"Tharun honey are you in there?" Lyssa's voice called out from the access ramp to the *Silver Hawk*.

"Right here." Tharun replied and he emerged from the cabin he shared with Vorn, "What's the matter?"

"Where is everybody?" Lyssa replied and she embraced him, "Daddy promised me that I'd have your entire team at my disposal but you're the only one I can find."

"Err I think the major said something about catching up Lieutenant Pay when I last saw him. Perhaps he's got everyone else there."

"Well that Tobis and his idiot girlfriend were taking a faulty droid to him."

Then there was the sound of footsteps as someone else came walking up the access ramp.

"Maybe this is them now." Tharun said.

"Hey I just need to hide out here for a while." Kara called out, "The boss's little princes is a right – oh stang." And she came to a sudden halt when she saw Lyssa standing with Tharun in the lounge.

"Ah there you are." Lyssa said, letting go of Tharun, "Now come on the pair of you. We're going to go and find out where the rest of you are. Where's this Lieutenant Pay normally found then?"

"Err, that doesn't look right." Tobis said as he studied the brain of the SE4 droid.

"No it doesn't." Geran agreed, "It looks like someone removed part of the hardware and replaced it with something new."

"Something new?" Vorn asked, "Like what?"

"Err, ahh, it looks like something out of a datapad." Tobis said.

"Indeed it does." Geran said and he looked at Jaysica, "Corporal could you hand me one of those datapads you sat on? Any of them will do?"

"I told you it was an accident." Jaysica said as she held out the remains of a datapad.

"Yes. All three times." Geran said and he snatched the ruined device from her and ripped it open to expose the circuit board inside. Then he held a magnifier over both the suspect device in the droid's brain and a component located roughly centrally on the datapad circuit. Without the magnifier both appeared to be tiny black squares, but when enlarged markings were clearly visible that identified the manufacturer and serial number.

"Yes, see this device is the same." Geran said.

"What is it?" Mace asked.

"Oh that's just a basic processor isn't it?" Jaysica asked.

"Yes it is." Geran replied, "I think someone used it to replace the motor function control of this droid."

"Why?" Vorn asked.

"Oh, well, because that's where the life preservation programming cuts in." Tobis said, "Replace that and the droid could be programmed to kill. Maybe."

Just then Harvey emitted a sudden series of high-pitched chirps. A cable had been connected to the droid's head that ran to a port in the SE4's brain and it had been examining the droid electronically while Geran and Tobis carried out their physical inspection.

"What did he just say?" Mace asked and Tobis glanced at his own datapad that was connected to the astromech. On its display was a translation of what Harvey had just said.

"He says that significant parts of this droid's memory have been erased recently, though it looks to have been done somewhat crudely."

"So not using the equipment in droid maintenance?" Vorn said and Tobis shook his head.

"No sir. More likely by plugging a compatible device in and overwriting the memory segments with random data."

"Can you recover any of it?" Mace asked.

"Oh easily." Geran replied, "This sort of memory wipe is just to prevent anyone finding anything on a cursory inspection."

"Not much good for covering up a hit." Mace commented.

"No." Vorn agreed, "Though if the droid's been reprogrammed then the alteration could have included orders that would have led to its destruction after the attack but before any analysis could be carried out."

"Wait miss you can't go in there."

The shout came from outside the room and was from one of Geran's guards.

"Oh don't be ridiculous!" Lyssa's voice snapped back and the door suddenly slid open, "I thought so." She said as she stormed into the room, brushing the guard's hand from her shoulder. Behind her Kara and Tharun just watched through the open doorway.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Mace muttered.

"Daddy you promised I would have these people at my disposal and now I find you all here playing with this junk."

"Lyssa darling I'm sorry," Vorn began, "but this droid is—"

"What this serving droid?" Lyssa asked, "It took more than a day for me to get hold of these and now you're pulling one apart?"

"Somebody replaced a bit of its brain." Jaysica told her.

Lyssa scowled.

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

"You mean it wasn't just malfunctioning?" Lyssa said, "But that means that someone is trying to ruin my party."

"Oh now you've done it." Kara said.

"Daddy what are you going to do about this now?" Lyssa demanded, staring at Vorn.

"Well as you can see we are—" Vorn began before Lyssa interrupted.

"Yes I can see what this little man is doing." She said, pointing to Geran, "But I don't see why everyone else has to be sat around when there's work to be done. Now I want all of you to get back to work and I will supervise here." And she pulled up a chair and wiped it clean before she sat down, crossing her legs and folding her arms.

"Well you heard her everyone." Vorn said out loud, "We've all got our lists of jobs."

"You mean you're all just going to leave her here?" Geran said as the others began to file out of the room.

"Pretty much." Mace said to him and then quietly he added, "Good luck. Oh and you may want to keep a blaster to hand."

"I'm not going to shoot her." Geran whispered back to him.

"Its not for her." Mace replied.

"Captain Grayle! Wait one moment!"

The voice called out just as Mace was getting into a turbolift and he placed his hand at the top of the doorframe to prevent it dropping shut.

"Don't worry lieutenant." Mace said as Lieutenant Lerner dashed into the turbolift car, "In field ops we try to avoid leaving people behind." And he let the door drop shut.

"Call me Asha please." She replied as the turbolift began to move, "But I wasn't worried about missing the turbolift, I wanted a word with you."

"Really? What about?"

"Do you know anything about that droid Lieutenant Pay's examining?"

"A little. Why?"

"Because it went crazy and officially I'm responsible for every droid on this station. But I'm not being allowed to see what happened to it."

"Don't worry lieut- sorry, Asha. No one is blaming you."

"But the equipment to carry out the sort of—"

"The alterations made to that droid were not made using any of the equipment from your department." Mace interrupted before Asha could finish her sentence, "From the looks of it someone reprogrammed a datapad's central processor and tried to use that to overcome the droid's life preservation programming. That's probably why the droid went crazy like it did, the processor wasn't up to the task." At that moment the turbolift came to a halt and the door opened, "Well this is my floor." Mace said and he glanced at his datapad, "If I don't collect sixteen cases of candles then — well quite frankly it won't make a damn difference but I'll never hear the end of it."

"You know some people would consider that rather rude." Geran said to Lyssa as she clicked her fingers at him to attract his attention and he approached the monitor she was staring at.

"Well some people just don't appreciate when they're being helped." Lyssa replied and she tapped the monitor, "Now is that what you're waiting for?" she asked.

Geran looked closely at the monitor.

"I don't think so." He said. The image was a blur of static and shadows with a single bright light roughly in the middle, "This memory sector doesn't show anything useful."

"Nonsense." Lyssa replied, "Look, there's a light on the ceiling and these parallel lines here are clearly pipes set against the wall. That's deck eleven-four."

Geran looked at the image again and squinted.

"How the hell can you tell that?" he asked.

"Because it uses those tiny cluster illuminators instead of light panels and those pipes are clearly part of the water pumping system."

For a third time Geran looked at the image, still unable to make out the details that were obvious to Lyssa.

"How do you know all this?" he asked.

"Because since being transferred to this grotty little station to be near my husband I'm expected to organise the replacement of those illuminators and the inspection of those pipes. Now I suggest you have your men out there escort you down to that level and you apprehend whoever it is that is trying to spoil my party."

"They're trying to do a bit more than that. They're-"

"Oh yes, yes, yes. They're trying to send information to the Empire. Well I'm not in this for your revolution. I have a party to plan and it's the only useful thing I've had to do since daddy brought me here. Now if you're not going I'll just take your men down there myself." And she stormed out of the room, "Come along, both of you are to come with me." She said to the guards outside and she grabbed hold of both.

"Wait!" Geran snapped and he followed her from his office, tucking his compact blaster into a pocket, "One of them needs to stay here. I'll go with you." Then after a brief pause he muttered, "Though why I'm doing this I have no idea."

5.

Deck one hundred and fourteen seemed deserted when Geran and Lyssa arrived along with one of Geran's guards. Almost all of the work carried out on this level was automated and inspections were normally carried out by droids.

"Okay, so we're here." Geran said to Lyssa, "Now where?"

"Well that image was from near where all the water purification units are." She answered and then she pointed, "That way."

"Let me go first sir. Miss." the guard said, drawing his blaster as he stepped from the turbolift.

Directed by Lyssa the trio made their way through the maze of machinery and pipes, some of it labelled with faded signs that had probably been applied when the station was first constructed around four thousand years earlier while the purpose of others was left unknown to anyone who was not familiar with the system.

"Here. Look." Lyssa said suddenly and she walked away from Geran and the guard to an alcove close to some of the larger water carrying pipes, "Is this what you wanted to find?" and she waved her hand at the alcove. Geran and the guard soon caught up with Lyssa and they saw that someone had set up a simple workbench here with assorted tools and electronic components laid out on a small shelf unit fixed to the wall behind it.

"Yes!" Geran exclaimed, "This is it. The spy must have set up down here because people hardly ever come down here." Then he looked up at the ceiling to where a single light provided illumination, "That's the light form the memory image." He said, "The SE4 must have been lain out on this bench while the spy worked on it." Next he looked at his guard, "Come on, we need to secure all of this."

"Yes sir." The guard replied and he took a single step forwards before the blaster bolt hit him in the back.

Lyssa let out a scream as the guard fell dead to the deck.

"Get down!" Geran snapped and he shoved Lyssa aside, pulling her down into the alcove as another blaster bolt flew overhead. Geran slid his own tiny weapon from his pocket and peered around the corner.

"Can you see him?" Lyssa asked.

"No." Geran replied then there was another shot and he ducked back, "Actually yes. But not his face. He's wearing a hood."

"Well aren't you going to shoot him?"

"I would if he was close enough." And Geran looked across to the body of the guard. In particular at the military grade side arm still holstered at his hip, "If only we could get to his blaster." He added. Then he remembered his comlink. Reaching into his pocket he pulled out the communication device and activated it, "Major Larcus can you read me?" he said into the device. For a few moments there was no response, but then Vorn's voice replied.

"Yes I'm here. What is it lieutenant?"

"Daddy help me!" Lyssa yelled into the comlink and Geran flinched from the loudness of the cry so close to his ear.

"If you could avoid deafening me." Geran said to her and then turned back to his comlink, "We're on level one-one-four. The spy has us pinned down."

"Are you armed?" Vorn asked.

"Just my hold out piece." Geran said, "One of my men is down and I can't get to his weapon without exposing myself to fire."

"Stay put." Vorn said, "We'll be right there."

Vorn could have simply sounded the alarm and had the entire station go on alert, but he knew that that would also alert the spy and he would likely flee. So instead Vorn just looked around the function room to locate his own team.

"We need to go." He said hurriedly as he gathered them together, "Lieutenant Pay and Lyssa have been cornered by the spy."

"Lyssa?" Tharun exclaimed, "What's she doing involved in this?"

"I didn't ask." Vorn replied, "But we need to get to them quickly. Now lets go grab our blasters and get moving."

The team rushed to the hangar bay and aboard the *Silver Hawk* to retrieve their weapons and in Tharun's case an armoured vest and helmet also. Only when they then reached the turbolift did they began to plan a strategy.

"Level one-one-four is all pipes and machines." Vorn said as he checked his rifle, "Its like a maze."

"Do we have a map?" Jaysica asked.

"There wasn't time." Vorn replied, "If we had Harvey I'm sure he could plug into the station network and find us one, but as far as I know he's still where we left him in Geran's office."

"So we'll have to split up." Mace said.

"That's my thinking as well." Vorn said, "We'll move in pairs—"

"Ooh! I want to go with Tobis." Jaysica snapped and she took hold of his arm and pulled him towards her.

"Yes I thought you might." Vorn said, "Now those of you with datapads link them to your comlinks. We don't have a proper map so we'll improvise and use the datapads to monitor where each team is. Now Tobis has a datapad for him and Jaysica, Tharun can share with Mace and Kara can come with me."

The turbolift then came to a halt and the door slid open to reveal the poorly lit deck one hundred and fourteen. There was the faint sound of machinery in the distance, but apart from that nothing.

"Okay," Vorn said softly, "this is it. Now spread out and be careful. Lyssa and Geran are down here somewhere as well as the spy."

"Yeah, so be careful who you shoot at." Kara said, turning her head towards Jaysica.

"Lieutenant Pay," Vorn said into his comlink while it was still disconnected from his datapad, "can you read me?"

"I'm here." Geran's voice replied.

"Good. We're on your level now; we'll be with you as soon as we can. Larcus out." And Vorn shut off his comlink and plugged it into his datapad, "Okay then," he said looking at the rest of his team, "let's go."

Lyssa squealed as another blaster bolt struck the wall opposite. This struck one of the many pipes mounted there and blew a hole in it. There was a 'whoosh' as a jet of steam erupted that quickly gave way to a constant flow of dirty water.

"This is ruining my clothes!" Lyssa exclaimed and she tried to take shelter behind Geran.

"Whereas its doing wonders for mine." He muttered as he tried not to think about what sorts of contaminants may be in the water. Another blaster bolt narrowly missed them both and Geran had an idea.

"We need to move." He said to Lyssa.

"Move? But if we try to move he'll shoot us."

"I know we need cover and I can give it to us. Get ready to run as fast as you can when I say so. Away from the spy to the next junction."

"You better know what you're doing. My father will have your commission if I get hurt. I promise you that."

Geran frowned briefly and then aimed his blaster at the expanding pool of dirty water on the floor between them and the spy. The weapon was relatively low powered by blaster standards, but even the energy in a single bolt from this weapon was enough to vaporise a large part of the pool and when it struck it instantly there was a loud hissing sound as the water boiled and created a thick cloud of steam that blocked the entire corridor ahead of him and Lyssa, obscuring the spy's view of them.

"Now!" Geran hissed and Lyssa leapt up and ran down the corridor her hands raised over her head as she went. Rather than run straight after her Geran instead first lunged at the body of the dead guard and plucked the larger pistol from his holster. Then he too ran down the corridor after Lyssa.

As soon as they reached the junction both Geran and Lyssa ducked around the corner and pressed themselves up against the wall just as the cloud of steam cleared enough for the spy to attempt a shot at them, putting a smoking hole in the wall across the corridor from them.

"Shouldn't we just keep on running?" Lyssa asked.

"No." Geran replied.

"Why not?"

"Because the spy left a whole load of equipment back there that I want to be able to examine. So we need to stay and make sure he doesn't get to it."

"So what did coming here achieve then?" Lyssa snapped.

"Well if we are forced to withdraw we can just run down there without getting shot at." Geran replied, "And secondly it got us this." And he held up the guard's pistol as he returned his own smaller one to his pocket.

Then he leant around the corner and fired a pair of shots at random back down the corridor towards the spy, "See? Much better. Now I just need to let your father know that we're — uh-oh."

"What?"

"My comlink." Geran replied, "I left it in the alcove."

6.

Tharun held up his hand and Mace came to a halt behind him.

"That sounded like blaster fire captain." He said, "Pretty powerful. Military spec."

"Could have been one of the other pairs." Mace suggested, "My comlink's connected to my datapad, give me yours."

Tharun passed Mace the device and he activated it.

"Anyone shooting?" he asked.

"This is Jaysica, it wasn't me or Tobis."

"Kara here, not me or the boss either."

"Well we just heard shots from-" then Mace paused and looked at Tharun who just shrugged.

"You'll get echoes in a place like this." He commented.

"We're not certain where it came from." Mace said, "Did anyone else hear anything?"

"Err, I think I may have heard something." Tobis' voice replied, "But I couldn't tell it was a shot."

"Nothing here." Kara added and Mace looked at his datapad. Thanks to the signals transmitted by the comlinks linked to the datapad held by each pair he could see at a glance the routes they had taken and their relative locations, "Then I think it's somewhere east of our location." He said, "We're heading that way now." And he shut off Tharun's comlink, "Lead the way sergeant." He said and Tharun grinned as he brought his heavy rifle up to his shoulder, ready to fire.

Tharun kept ahead of Mace, checking each turning and potential hiding place as he made his way through the maze of machinery and pipes. Another blaster shot echoed past them and he suddenly veered off in another direction. Mace trusted Tharun's experience enough not to question him and merely followed, periodically checking the positions of the other two pairs on his datapad while he clutched his heavy pistol in his other hand.

Suddenly Tharun came to a turning and as soon as he checked it he stepped backwards and held up his hand.

"This could be it." He said softly I think there's someone down there at the corner.

Mace took a quick look around the corner for himself and he too saw the outline of something pressed up against the wall, but given the poor illumination he could not make it out clearly.

"I suppose we could just set our weapons to stun." He whispered.

"What if its Lyssa?" Tharun replied, "No way am I shooting my wife. I'll never hear the end of it."

"Well we can't call out a warning." Mace said, "If it is the spy that will just alert him."

There was a flash from around the corner, accompanied by the sound of a blaster shot.

"Yeah, we don't want to alert him if it is the spy." Tharun said, "We'll just have to try and get closer."

"How close?"

"Close enough to shove my blaster up his-"

"I get the idea. Go."

Cautiously Tharun stepped out from around the corner and keeping his rifle trained on the shape ahead.

Mace stepped out behind and followed, keeping his blaster raised so as to be sure that he would not accidentally shoot Tharun in the back.

When they were about half way along the passageway towards their target Tharun heard a sudden bleeping that he recognised at once.

"Motion sensor!" he snapped just as the hooded figure ahead spun around and fired.

The blaster shot struck the wall just ahead of Tharun and blew open a pipe, sending a blast of steam into his face. Tharun cried out in alarm as he staggered backwards, lifting his arm to shield himself from the scalding hot cloud.

Before the spy could fire again Mace dived forwards, knocking the blaster from the figure's grip and wrapping his arms around it.

"I've got him!" Mace yelled as the spy twisted around in his grip and then as he fought to keep hold of them plunged an elbow into his stomach. Immediately Mace released his grip and the spy slipped free, turning around to deliver a punch that sent Mace tumbling backwards into Tharun just as he was recovering his senses.

The spy picked up their dropped blaster and was just about to take aim at the two newly arrived rebels when Geran fired another shot from the far end of the corridor. Immediately the spy turned and ran, disappearing into the darkness before either Mace or Tharun could recover and give chase.

"What's happening?" Lyssa asked Geran, "I heard something."

"I think your father's team is here." He replied and he fired a shot down the corridor towards the hooded figure. His aim from this distance was off and the shot went wide, but it did cause the spy to flee and Geran stepped out from behind the corner.

"Who's there?" he called out, "Identify yourself."

"It's Sergeant Verser." Tharun replied, "And Captain Grayle too."

"Tharun?" Lyssa cried out and she pushed her way past Geran to run down the passageway towards him, "Oh it is you! It is you!" and she flung her arms around him.

"Don't worry about me." Mace groaned, "I'll be just fine."

"Where did the spy go?" Geran asked as he reached the others, blaster still in hand.

"I don't know." Tharun replied, "That way somewhere." And he pointed in the direction the spy had fled.

Mace took hold of Tharun's comlink and checked the display of his datapad again.

"We have Lyssa and Lieutenant Pay. They're both safe." He said into the comlink, "The spy is heading north from our position."

"That's back towards the turbolifts." Kara said looking at Vorn.

"Let's go." He said, "Maybe we can cut him off."

The pair ran, retracing their path towards the turbolift cluster that had brought them to this level. Ahead of them they heard the sound of footsteps and both rebels raised their blasters just as there was a flash.

"Oh no!" Jaysica exclaimed, "I'm so sorry. I thought you were the spy, it was an accident."

"We figured the spy was heading back to the turbolifts." Tobis added and he held up his datapad.

"We thought the same." Vorn said.

"Yeah, but at least we didn't almost take your heads off. I felt the heat from that as it went past." Then she paused and sniffed, "Hang on, what's that smell?" and she raised a hand to her head, "My hair! You singed my hair you worthless nerf herder! Any closer and you'd have killed me!" and then she lunged towards Jaysica who reacted by squealing and leaping behind Tobis.

"I said I was sorry!" she cried out, "There's no harm done."

"Look at my hair!" Kara snapped as Vorn took hold of her and pulled her way from Jaysica.

"We don't have time for this." He said, "Now let's get after that spy before he escapes."

All four rebels now ran towards the turbolifts, hoping to get there before the spy could reach them and escape.

"There he is!" Vorn snapped as the turbolifts came into view and sure enough the hooded figure could be seen standing just in front of one of the sets of turbolift doors, waiting for the turbolift to arrive. But Vorn's warning alerted the spy the rebels' presence and before any of them could act the spy turned and fired at them.

"Stang!" Kara exclaimed as they took cover, "First Jaysica now him. Is there anyone not trying to kill me today?"

Vorn ignored this and quickly leant around the corner, his rifle held up in front of him and he fired a burst of shots towards the turbolifts. The shots struck the doors, pitting and scorching them in a row before Vorn ceased fire. Just at this moment there was a soft chiming sound and one of the sets of doors opened and the hooded figure dived inside the empty turbolift car. Immediately the spy closed the door again just and Vorn emerged in a last desperate attempt to stop them escaping.

"Oh kriff it!" Vorn yelled as he realised that the spy was gone and he let his rifle drop to his side, "He could get anywhere on the station now. We'll never catch him."

"Her." Mace called out from behind him and Vorn turned to see Geran, Lyssa Mace and Tharun approaching him.

"What?" Kara said.

"I said 'her'." Mace replied, "We're after a humanoid woman."

"How do you know?" Vorn asked, "Did you see her face?"

"No." Mace replied, "Not exactly."

"Then how?" Vorn asked.

"It would seem that the good captain made an attempt to physically apprehend the suspect." Geran replied, "Sadly he was unsuccessful at this, but during the struggle he did-"

"He copped a feel!" Kara suddenly exclaimed, "What a typical man. So how was it captain?"

Mace scowled and looked at both Jaysica and Kara.

"One word from either of you to Malia and I'll kill you both. I swear it."

"I can't believe Mon Mothma isn't here." Jaysica said sadly as she peered through the doorway from the kitchen into the function room where officers were sat in rows eating their Republic Day dinner.

"Yeah, but I see all those officers are still getting fed." Kara replied, "And the boss's little princess still seems happy enough." And she cast her gaze to where Lyssa was stood by the main doors directing both serving droids and living waiters.

"Tharun doesn't though." Jaysica said and she glanced to beside the main door where Tharun was stood at attention wearing his dress uniform, one of several members of the honour guard assembled for Mon Mothma despite her having failed to appear. Now they were simply waiting while the officers ate, "I like the band too." She then added; turning her attention to the formal orchestra playing while the officers ate. "Yeah, well the conductor's a perfectionist. I'll bet the major's princess just loved him."

"Who is he?"

"Oh Colonel Williams? From what I heard he defected from the Imperial Navy right after the initial declaration of rebellion. Mind you I also heard he has a twin brother that stayed with the Empire. The rumour is that they decided between them to pick different sides so that no matter which one won one of them could dominate the galaxy's orchestral music scene."

A whistling from behind them made both Jaysica and Kara look around and they saw Kyle Varner making his way across the kitchen.

"Why are you so happy?" Jaysica asked, "We're not even getting to see Mon Mothma after all the work we put in."

"He didn't do anything though did he?" Kara said.

"Actually I did." Kyle said as he grabbed hold of a nearby plate and a fork and began to eat, "Without me your team leader and his daughter wouldn't have been able to put this little event on. Why should I care whether or not the Chief of State turned up? Now if you'll excuse me I need to speak with one of the guests." And he set the plate down before heading into the function room.

From their position by the door Jaysica and Kara watched as Kyle made his way to one of the tables where fighter pilots were sat and he bent down beside Jarad Tarl to whisper into his ear. Jarad got up and the pair calmly made their way from the room.

"I wonder where they're going." Jaysica commented, "Dessert hasn't been served yet."

"Like I care." Kara replied, "Come on let's leave them to it. If the boss's little princess spots us here she'll go berserk and do things to us far worse than what I'm planning to do you for almost shooting me."

"But I said I was sorry." Jaysica protested as they turned away from watching the dinner, neither of them noticing when Vorn got his feet and followed Jarad and Kyle from the room.

"Here you go." Kyle said, handing Jarad a datapad, "A full list of what we got from this little picnic."

Jarad took the datapad and smiled as he skimmed through it.

"Nice." He said, "See, I told you it wouldn't matter that this was all fake."

"Not enjoying your meal Captain Tarl?" Vorn called out down the empty corridor and he strode towards them, "But my darling Lyssa went to so much trouble."

Jarad lowered the datapad and was about to slip it behind his back when Vorn suddenly reached out and grabbed hold of his wrist, pulling the datapad back up in front of Jarad.

"Or perhaps you're both reviewing how much money you made selling favourable duty assignments?" He snapped.

"I don't know what you're-" Kyle began.

"Shut up!" Vorn exclaimed and he produced a datapad of his own.

"I thought that the spy may try and get assigned to a duty shift that would bring her close to Mon Mothma, so I had Lieutenant Pay take a look at the transfer list. He found a few irregularities that tied in with a suspicion I've had for a while now. Ever since Jaysica managed to get promoted without my recommendation. How long has this been going on?"

Both Jarad and Kyle stared at Vorn without speaking.

"Let me guess then." Vorn said and he stared directly at Jarad, "Back to before Kara got court martialled for hitting you. You passed her over for a promotion and I'm thinking that if we took a close look at it we'd find out that money changed hands between you and the man you gave the promotion to. I'm right aren't I?"

"Oh kriff." Kyle said softly.

"Don't worry." Jarad said to him, "he can't prove anything. If he could then he'd have turned us in already."

"Oh but I can." Vorn replied, smiling, "Or at the very least I can give General Kain enough to trigger a formal investigation."

"Oh kriff." Kyle repeated, "Look, this was all his idea."

"Oh shut up you weak minded fool!" Jarad snapped, "He's not turning us in are you?" and he looked back at Vorn.

"No, not necessarily." Vorn replied and he held out a slip of paper, "Take it." He said.

"So the great and noble Vorn Larcus is as corrupt as we are." Jarad sneered as he took the paper and opened it up to read what was written on it.

"This ends now." Vorn said, "You give me what's on there and from now on no one profits from selling duty assignments. Do you understand me?"

Jarad frowned and held out the sheet of paper so that Kyle could read it. He laughed.

"You've got to be kidding me." He exclaimed, "Promotions to commissioned ranks like that can't just be fed into the system. There has to be a vacancy and there aren't any."

"Well you better hope one arises." Vorn said, "Because that's what I want."

"Well tough, because-" Kyle began, but Jarad held up his hand.

"Deal." He said, scowling, "We'll make it happen somehow."

"Good." Vorn replied, "Now gentlemen, I want to get back and eat my dessert. Good evening." And he turned and walked away.

"Are we really going to do what he says?" Kyle asked Jarad when he thought Vorn was out of earshot.

"What choice do we have?" Jarad replied, "But we're not going to wind up our little business we're just going to take a little break from it until we've given Vorn Larcus what he wants. After all, if he turns us in afterwards we won't be the only ones affected now will we?"