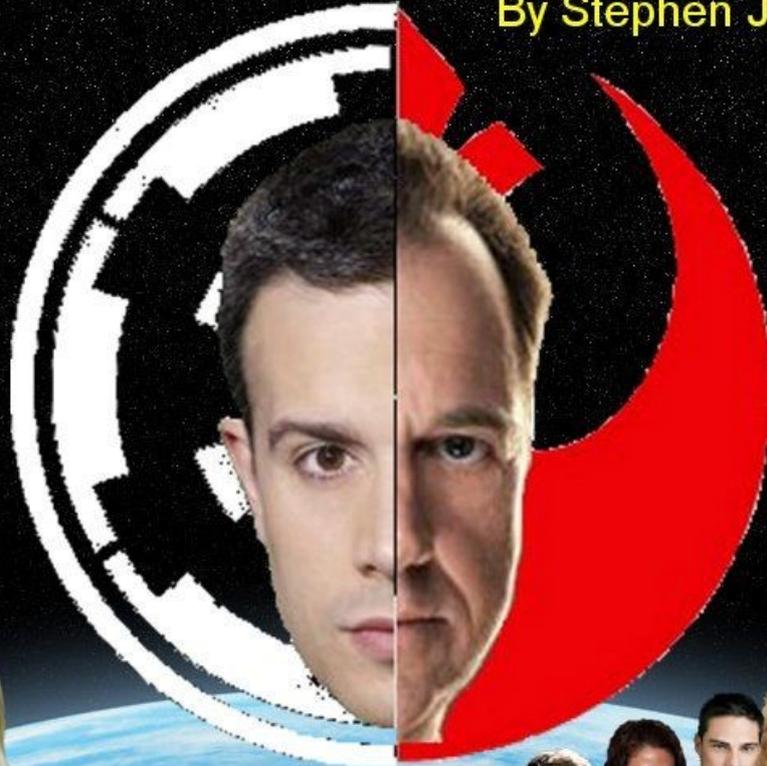


STAR WARS

3-04: Family Affair

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...

FAMILY AFFAIR

WHEN WORD REACHES THE ALLIANCE THAT THE EMPIRE IS DEVELOPING A NEW VERSION OF ITS TIE FIGHTER IN THE SECTOR MACE GRAYLE VOLUNTEERS FOR THE MISSION TO OBTAIN SPECIFICATIONS ON THIS NEW WEAPON. BUT TO GET CLOSE TO THE LEAD ENGINEER HE NEEDS HELP FROM INDIVIDUALS HE WOULD NOT NORMALLY APPROACH...

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

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1.

"Good morning captain."

Mace Grayle, captain of the transport ship *Silver Hawk* smiled as he saw a familiar face. Lieutenant Geran Pay was an agent with Alliance Intelligence and the pair had worked together on several occasions.

"So how are things going?" Geran asked, "You don't normally skulk about like this."

Mace pointed down the station corridor towards a cluster of people.

"It's Inra." He said, his upper lip curling at the mention of the hapan captain of the *Beauty Queen*, "She's been winding me up for a week now about the major doing a disappearing act on us so I'm trying to avoid her."

"Well you're not the only one with problems." Geran said, "I just wish I could hide from some of mine."

"Still not found the spy?"

It was widely known that the Empire had been able to insert an agent into the Alliance's local forces and Geran had been assigned specifically to find out who it was. However, since the spy's line of communication to the Empire had been cut they had laid low and their identity remained unknown.

"Actually we've been getting reports that Santhe Sienar's been subcontracting out work on the latest model of TIE fighter to a company in this sector. The general's keen to get as much information about it was possible."

"So what's the problem?" Mace asked.

"Well the work's being done in the Hayatan system."

"The mining belt?"

The mining belt was a region of space adjacent to the primary hyperspace route through the sector notable for its mineral rich if inhospitable worlds.

"Yeah, Kurrad Industries has an outpost on one of the larger asteroids there and we've had word that the facility has been contracted to do work on the guidance system. Unfortunately we don't have anyone inside their operation."

"So can't you just find some way of getting close to one of the corporate guys and see if you can use them to get what you want?"

"Yeah, we thought of that. We even figured out who we'd go after. There's a new guy just been transferred there with his wife and daughter. Problem is that the only one who seems to leave the security zone is the kid and one of our agents trying to get close to her would set alarm bells ringing."

"A kid? How old?" Mace asked.

"Oh, about fifteen I think."

Mace smiled.

"You know lieutenant, I may just have a solution for you."

"Really what?"

"Yes do tell Mace." A woman's voice called out from nearby and both man turned to see Inra approaching them, "So Mace, are you asking Intel to see if they can find your AWOL commander?"

"No he isn't." Geran replied, "Captain Grayle was just explaining his plan for getting close to a teenage girl."

Then his face fell and he looked at Mace, "That didn't sound good did it?"

Staring at him, both Grayle and Inra shook their heads slowly.

The correllian corvette *Renegade* was undergoing an overhaul, so when Mace walked onto the bridge most of the control consoles had been lifted to expose the electronics beneath.

"Is she in?" Mace asked a young woman in a fleet lieutenant's uniform.

"Oh hello Captain Grayle. Yes, Captain Mayan's in her office now."

Mace nodded and approached a nearby door, knocking when he reached it.

"Come." A woman's voice called out from the other side and Mace opened the door and went in, "Mace."

Captain Mallia Mayan said as soon as she saw him and she got up from her chair and the pair embraced, "This is a surprise." She said.

"Yeah, well I'm full of them." Mace replied, "I have orders for you from Alliance Intelligence. You're to go the Hayatan system."

"The *Renegade's* in no shape to go anywhere right now." Mallia replied.

"No, not the *Renegade*. Just you. Oh and me too."

A puzzled look appeared on Mallia's face.

"I don't get it."

"Well I've been assigned the task of getting data on the Empire's latest fighters and the plan calls for me to appear to be a happily married family man." Then he smiled and took a ring from his pocket, "They even gave me this." He said as he passed it to Mallia.

"How romantic." Mallia said as she took the ring. Then she added, "Mace this is plastic."

"Yeah well it seems that Intelligence's budget doesn't run to giving out gold jewellery." Then he smiled, "But you do get free run of the clothing in stores."

Mallia smiled back.

"You really know how to charm a lady don't you?"

"Where's the ship?" Mallia asked. She had arrived in the station's main hangar bay expecting to find Mace waiting for her with his ship, but instead she just found Mace sat next to an empty landing slot.

"Oh Tobis has taken the *Silver Hawk* to Estran." Mace replied, "There was something there he needed to pick up for this mission. He'll be here any minute though, traffic control have him on final approach."

Right on queue the familiar shape of the YT-1300 class *Silver Hawk* flew into the hangar bay. As it decelerated it's landing gear lowered and then it settled down on the deck in front of Mace and Mallia.

"See." Mace said, "Exactly like I said."

There was a hiss and the entry ramp to the *Silver Hawk* lowered. Almost immediately a girl in her mid teens rushed down the ramp and briefly hugged Mace.

"Wow!" she exclaimed, "So this is your headquarters? I can't believe I'm here."

"Mace darling," Mallia said, "what's going on here?"

"Mallia Mayan, meet Cass Jungan."

"Hi." Cass said and she gave Mallia a wave.

"Cass here is key to our mission." Mace explained.

"How come?" Mallia asked.

"Like I told you earlier, we're pretending to be a family. I'm the husband, you're the wife and Cass here – well do I really have to spell it out."

"Yes. I want to hear it." Mallia said.

"Congratulations." Cass said, "It's a girl. Mom." And she threw her arms around Mallia.

Mallia took advantage of the time in hyperspace on the way to Hayatan to talk to Cass.

"So how do you and Mace know one another?" she asked.

"Well I've been stealing datapads from Imperial agents who come into the cantina where I work and copying the data. Mace and Vorn helped get some gangsters off my back and they've kept checking up on me since then. I just can't believe they're finally asking me to join them on a mission. This is so exciting."

"Glad you're happy." Mace said as he entered the lounge from the direction of the cockpit. Then he looked at Mallia, "We'll be landing soon, then Tobis will pilot the ship to the outskirts of the system and wait to hear from us."

"All alone?" Cass asked.

"Oh he'll be fine." Mace replied, "Now does everyone have everything they need?"

"I don't have a blaster." Cass said.

"If you needed a blaster for this we wouldn't be bringing you along." Mace said.

"Missus Tedrin?" the real estate agent said when Mallia stepped from the taxi.

"Who?" Mallia asked, then she remembered the surname that they were using for the mission, "Oh yes, that's me."

"Well I'm Lyn and here's your new home." The other woman said and she waved towards the building behind her. It was a mid-sized building that looked to have been built according to a template used for all of the residences in the street.

"This is freaky." Cass said as she followed Mallia from the vehicle and she looked up, "There's no sky." Above the buildings, where on most settled worlds would be either an open sky or transparent dome here there was instead the rocky interior surface of the hollowed out planetoid from which numerous massive artificial lighting panels hung.

"Oh that gets to a lot of people at first." Lyn said, "Don't worry you'll get used to it. The lights even mimic a Coruscant standard day/night cycle. Now about I show you around."

"That sounds like a great idea." Mallia said, "Do lead the way." And she and Cass both followed Lyn up to the house.

"Don't worry," Mace called out after them as he unloaded suitcase from the back of the taxi, "I can handle all of this alone."

Mace handed a credit stick to the driver and waited while the fare for the trip from the docking bays was deducted. Then he picked up as many of the cases as he could carry at once and took them inside.

"Mace darling," Mallia said to him s he dumped the cases on the floor just inside the front door, "Lyn was just showing me all the services available through our vid system."

"It's the full package." Lyn added, "All included with your lease."

"Well that's nice to know." Mace said, shaking his arms to get the feeling back in them. Then he spotted a large basket full of fruit, "What's this?" he asked.

"Oh just a little welcome gift." Lyn said, "We know that not everyone has time to get to the store on their first day so we provide a welcome pack based on the form you provided."

"That we provided?" Mallia asked, "I never saw a form."

"Oh yours was filled in by your husband's secretary I believe." Lyn replied, looking down at her datapad, "Ah yes, here it is. A Miss Kara Bilstran, she made us fully aware of your particular dietary needs and we stocked your fridge accordingly."

"Kara?" Mace said, "Oh great."

Lyn was about to ask if something was wrong when they were loudly interrupted.

"Mom! Dad!" Cass suddenly yelled as she came rushing down the stairs.

"No running inside!" Mallia shouted back.

"Sorry, but you've got to see this. The vid screen in one of the bedrooms fills an entire wall! Its mine right?"

"No." Mace said and he looked at Mallia, "I don't care what Kara's had put in the fridge, but I'm not giving up the big screen." Then he turned to Lyn, "Thank you for showing us our new home, but right now we'd just like to unpack and get some rest." He said and he led Lyn to the front door.

"Well here's your key," Lyn said, "and my comm. address is programmed into your communicator if you need it."

As Lyn walked away Mace turned and looked at Cass and Mallia.

"Well I'm going up to take a look at that vid screen." He said, "You two can bring the rest of the cases in. Its mainly your stuff anyway."

"You were the one who told me to take everything I wanted." Mallia replied and Cass nodded in agreement.

"That's right." She said.

"Yes, but you were supposed to leave the stuff you didn't actually need on the ship. Didn't Kara and Jaysica fill you in on how the system works? If anything goes wrong you may not be able to take any of that stuff back with you."

"We were too busy picking out clothes." Mallia said, "Now you go lie down if you have to and we'll bring in the rest of the cases."

2.

Contrary to what he said he was going to do Mace instead headed for the fridge and was pleasantly surprised to discover that Kara had not, as he had feared ordered it stocked with jars of assorted jellied invertebrates or cheeses so heavily spiced that they would tax the digestive system of a wookie. He grabbed a beer and searched through the drawer until he found a bottle opener and then returned to the lounge and activated the vid player, switching cycling through the channels until he found something worth watching. He opened the beer, put his feet up and then finally let himself relax while Cass and Mallia unpacked.

"Hey dad, what're you watching?" Cass asked when she next came down the stairs.

"Are you going to keep doing that?" Mace asked.

"What?"

"Calling me 'dad'."

"I thought I was supposed to."

"Well yeah, when we're around strangers. But you don't have to when it's just us."

Cass shrugged and went to sit down on the couch.

"Wait a moment." Mace said.

"What now?"

Mace tipped up the beer bottle and drank the last of it.

"Go get your dear old dad another of these. No wait, get me two."

Cass went to the fridge and returned with two bottles of beer that she handed to Mace. He took them, opened both and passed one back to Cass.

"You know I'm only sixteen right?" she said.

"Yes."

"So what's with giving me beer?"

"Well no matter what us adults say, I know kids are still going to drink if they can. So I figured it may help you impress the other kids at school if you can handle your alcohol. Now sit down and drink up."

Cass sat on the couch, tucking her legs beneath her and looked at the vid screen.

"So what are we watching?" she asked.

"I'm not sure." Mace said, sipping his beer, "Its either shock boxing or the barabel equivalent of a beauty pageant."

"Oh." Cass replied and then she took a sip of her own beer, "Oh good god." She said, wincing, "Do people really like this?"

"Yep. Of course, if you don't want yours-" Mace said and he held out his hand.

"No. I'll drink it." And Cass took another sip, wincing once more. Then she added, "You're the coolest dad ever. You know that?"

It was then that Mallia came downstairs.

"So what's going on?" she asked.

"Apparently I'm cool." Mace said, "Our daughter just told me so."

Mallia frowned.

"He gave me beer." Cass said, smiling and holding up the bottle in her hand.

"Beer?" Mallia said, looking straight at Mace.

"He says it will make me popular." Cass added.

"Oh really." Mallia said and still looking at Mace she asked, "Did you like the girls who got drunk a lot then?"

"I'm in trouble aren't I?" Mace asked and Mallia folded her arms and nodded.

"If she gets sick I'm not cleaning it up." She said and she went back upstairs.

"Do you two have to do that so loud?" Cass asked.

She had come downstairs the next morning after both Mace and Mallia had been up and about for well over an hour. She sat down at the kitchen table and leant forwards, supporting her head in her hands.

"So how much did you have to drink last night?" Mallia asked.

"Too much." Cass replied.

"Well you just need to get food in you." Mace said and he placed a bowl in front of Cass and then tipped in some cereal followed by blue milk.

"Make it stop." Cass said, clamping her hands over her ears as the cereal crackled in the bowl.

"Ahh, our baby's first hangover." Mace said with mock pride.

"So how come you don't have a hangover too?" Cass asked, glaring at Mace.

"That's easy." Mace replied, "I only had two beers and I'm used to it. You on the other hand had four and probably weigh about half what I do."

"You have to eat something before your first day of school." Mallia said from near the stove, "If you don't want cereal how about some eggs?" and she held out a pan of eggs. Cass glanced into the pan and saw the eggs floating in oil within. Clamping a hand over her mouth Cass got up and rushed from the kitchen. Mace wrapped an arm around Mallia.

"Do you remember your first hangover?" he asked.

"My parents found me passed out on the stairs." Mallia said.

"Well I woke up in the back of a police speeder."

"You got arrested?"

"When the police caught up with me yes."

They waited for Cass to return; now dressed in a school uniform but still looking somewhat the worse from her previous night's experimentation with alcohol.

"Come on." Mace said to her, "I've done you some toast. You can eat it on the way."

Cass just groaned as Mace led her to the garage where their hired speeder was and opened the door for her. Mace let the speeder's automated systems do most of the driving. He was unfamiliar with the route to the school, but it had been pre-programmed into the speeder navigation computer.

"So let's go through this one last time." Mace said.

"Do we have to?" Cass asked as she nibbled at her toast.

"Yes and stop getting crumbs on the seat."

"I'm Cass Tedrin and I'm fourteen. You're my dad and you're a sales rep for a life support systems engineering firm. We've come here from our old home on Estran because the company sent you."

"Why?"

Cass thought, but could not remember.

"You've forgotten right?" Mace asked and she nodded, "Doesn't matter." Mace told her, "If anyone asks just tell them that you don't know. You don't need too many details. Now what about your mission?"

"Get close to some kid called Sheri Vastan. Her father's just been transferred in from Kellos by Kurrad Industries. I need an invite to her house so I can try and get at any sensitive corporate data they've got there." Mace said and both he and Cass looked at the school building looming ahead of them, clearly a product of the same modular construction techniques as most of the other buildings inside the planetoid. Swarming around the front were hundreds of children of about Cass's age wearing uniforms identical to hers as well as numerous speeders approaching and stopping just long enough for the drivers to let their offspring disembark. This presented Mace with his first challenge, as the speeders seemed to be moving in some sort of pattern that he could not fathom out.

"No, I think you go that way." Cass said as Mace took over the controls of the speeder and tried to steer it as close to the school as he could.

A horn blared out and Cass and Mace looked to see the irate driver of another speeder waving his fist at them.

"Wrong way nerf herder!" the woman bellowed.

Mace snarled and reached down to his side.

"Mom'll kill you if you shoot someone on my first day dad." Cass said.

"Who? Oh yeah, Mallia."

"Just staying in character."

"I suppose I should too then." Mace said and he leant out of the window and shouted back, "Like I give a-
"Child present." Cass interrupted, "Hung over child. No swearing and no shouting please."

"Oh yeah. Sorry. Don't swear, its bad. Look we're there now anyway." And Mace brought the speeder to a halt outside the school gates. As Cass got out he leant towards her and asked, "You know what to do if anyone picks on you right?"

"Find out their name and address and you'll go round and kneecap them probably."

Mace smiled.

"You're catching on." And then he drove away, triggering more drivers to sound their horns.

Cass made her way through the crowd of students. When she had still attended school on Estran there had been no uniforms, so it was strange to her to be surrounded by so many people in the same clothing. Subject to minor variations of course. It was even more strange when she went inside the building and found it packed wall to wall, the students creating a virtual barrier of dark blue everywhere she looked.

"Out of the way dork!" a voice snapped behind her and Cass was shoved out of the way as a group of students forced their way past her.

"I'll find out where you live." She muttered to herself. Then she headed towards the reception desk that was the only place where students did not seem to be congregating.

"How may I help you young lady?" the droid behind the desk asked.

"My name's Cass Tedrin." Cass said, "It's my first day."

"Please report to the councillor's office for induction and class assignment." The droid replied and then it turned on the spot and rolled to where an overweight woman had just walked up and leant on the desk.

"Oh great. Now I just need to figure out where the councillor's office is."

"You looking for the councillor's office?" a nearby boy about Cass's real age asked, "Its down there, right at the end of that corridor." And he pointed. Cass was about to thank him when she noticed that several of his friends were smirking behind his back and she deduced that he was lying.

"Why thanks." Cass said, a large smile on her face and she stepped closer to the boy, "Its so kind of you to help me." And without him or any of his friends noticing she was able to subtly remove the datapad from his bag and slip it beneath her jacket. She then watched as the boys walked away before walking off in the opposite direction to one they had pointed her in, casually dropping the datapad into the trash as she walked past a bin.

"Hope you backed up this semester's work loser." She said to herself as the device dropped from sight. Sure enough Cass found the councillor's office as far removed from the directions the boy had given her and there was already a girl sat outside.

"What are you here for?" the girl asked as Cass approached.

"It's my first day." Cass replied, "The droid on the desk told me to come here. Not that it told me where here was, I had to figure that bit out for myself."

"Same here. My name's Sheri."

"Cass." Cass replied, "It's a pleasure to meet you." And she sat down next to the other girl.

Almost immediately the office door opened and a man leant out into the corridor.

"Sheri Vastan and Cass Tedrin?" he asked and both girls nodded, "Good. Come on in m'kay."

The two girls went into the office and sat down. There was no desk in here, just a ring of individual chairs and walls bedecked with motivational posters.

"Right," the councillor began as he too sat down on the opposite side of the ring from them, "I'm here to help you both fit in as best as possible. To make things easier, I've assigned you both to the same classes. Is that okay?"

The two young girls looked at one another and nodded.

"Good." The councillor said, "Now here are your datapads." And he passed each of them a datapad identical to the one Cass had just thrown in the trash, "Now I'll need you each to sign for them. If you lose or break them you'll have to pay one hundred credits for a replacement, so be careful with them."

Cass and Sheri looked at the datapads. For now the displays simply showed a rotating image of the school's badge.

"Now I'll explain to you both how we do things here." The councillor said as he activated his own datapad.

"Three hours?" Sheri exclaimed as they left the councillor's office, "How can anyone take so long to say so little?"

Cass looked up at the wall-mounted chronometer to see that the councillor had indeed just spent half the day talking to them about such mundane thing as file formats for assignments and what did and did not constitute acceptable use of the school's facilities and equipment.

"Well I need a drink." Cass said and she walked over to a vending machine and inserted her credit stick.

Then she selected a bottle of water and waited for it to drop out of the machine.

"I hope you don't mind me saying this," Sheri said as she inserted her own credit stick into the machine and looked at the available options, "But you don't look well. Are you okay?"

"I'll be fine." Cass said, "I just drank too much last night."

Sheri stared at her.

"What? You mean real drink? As in-"

"My dad's beer." Cass replied, nodding slowly between sips of water.

"My dad would be furious if I took any of his." Sheri said.

"So will mine if he ever figures out I took it." Cass said, lying to keep up the pretence of her role, "But I'm sure I could sneak some more from his fridge if you want to share it."

Before Sheri could answer there was a chiming sound from the speakers set into the corridor ceiling.

"Come on!" Sheri exclaimed, "We better get to class."

At the end of the school day the school grounds were once again filled with students as they prepared to leave.

"So how about it?" Cass asked as she and Sheri walked down the steps in front of the building.

"How about what?"

"My dad's beer remember? I'll see if I can sneak any out and we'll share it."

Sheri smiled.

"Sure, if you think you can. Be round at six. Even when my dad gets home he keeps on working until real late and my mom'll never notice a thing anyway."

There was the sudden sound of raised voices and Cass winced as she recognised Mace's voice as one of those trading insults.

"Well I better go." She said, "I think my dad's here to pick me up."

The two girls split up and as Cass walked to where Mace waited she spotted the boy whose datapad she had taken being pulled towards a speeder by an angry looking woman.

"One hundred credits for a new datapad!" she yelled, "Do you think we're made of money?"

"But mom I told you-" the boy protested.

"Oh how is a girl half your size supposed to steal it?" the woman snapped and she slapped the boy over the back of his head, "Now get in the speeder."

Cass smiled.

"Good first day then?" Mace asked as she reached their speeder.

"Kind of weird being back in school. But I've done most of the work before so I don't need to worry about that."

"You won't be here long enough to worry about grades anyway." Mace replied as they both got into the speeder.

"Most of the people seemed friendly too." Cass went on, "Lots of people asking for my comm. address."

"Boys?" Mace asked, "Because I'll kill any that lay a hand on you. Its what any father would do."

"No. Most fathers just threaten to do that. Its just you that'd actually follow through with it."

"Hey, I'm just looking out for you."

"Well don't worry. I can look out for myself. Though it is nice to know that an elite team of rebel commandoes is on hand for if someone pulls my hair."

"Good, then we're agreed. A boy comes on to you and I get to kill him. Now what about your target?"

"Sheri seems nice. I'll need some beer though, I promised to split some with her."

"That's my girl." Mace said with a grin.

"I also need a photograph."

"What of?"

"Us silly. The school has a database of its pupils and it encourages us to add personal info to our entries."

"How much personal information are we talking about?" Mace asked.

"Oh none if we don't want to, but it'd look odd if I didn't."

"Actually I was wondering if we could get any more information about the Vastan family from it. Some people stick far too much on those sorts of publicly accessible profiles. Sometimes even secret stuff ends up on them by accident. You have to wade through gigabytes of inane chatter and images of people doing stupid things to get it though."

"There is one other thing as well." Cass said and she took the datapad from her bag, "I've got the proper approach route on this thing. Could you take a look at it please?"

"Fine, though I think the way I was driving you to school was perfectly acceptable."

"Yeah, right." Cass snorted.

Mallia greeting both Cass and Mace at the front door when they returned to the house.

"Well I've finished putting the transmitter together." She said when they were safely inside, "We've got our direct link to headquarters now."

"Have you spoken to them yet?" Mace asked.

"Oh no, I didn't think there was much for us to report."

"Well we should check in anyway. It'll make a good test of the equipment. The last thing we need is to find out its not working when we really need it. Now what about our imaging gear? Apparently Cass needs a family photo for school. Oh and some beer."

"Since when has drinking been on the curriculum?" Mallia asked.

"I don't need that for school." Cass answered, "I've got an invite to Sheri's and I need beer."

"Beer? And on a school night?" Mallia said, then she sudden added, "Oh god, I really sound like a parent don't I?"

"Kind of." Mace replied, "But you take to it so naturally." And he put his arm around her and kissed her.

"Uggh." Cass said, "Not in front of me please." Then she went back to the subject of Sheri, "It may also interest you to know that Sheri's dad bring s work home with him."

A large smile appeared on Mace.

"So if you can get a data copier to his computer we may be able to pull what we need directly from his home machine."

"Well it's a good job Mace restocked the beer then." Mallia added, "We also got you a communicator. Its there on the table."

Cass looked around to where three identical communications devices lay on the dining table. Unlike the comlinks that military units typically used these were point-to-point links. A much older technology that boosted range by relaying transmissions through networks of repeater towers. In the case of Hayatan the repeaters were set into the cavern ceilings and allowed wireless communications to take place between beings in different caverns, regardless of how much rock lay between them. The signals were simply carried from one repeater to the next in the network.

“Oh cool!” Cass exclaimed as she picked up one of the communicators, “I haven’t had one of these since I was at school for real. It was just something else the Empire seized when they took my folks.”

“The guy at the store said they’re state of the art.” Mace explained, “Though I can barely figure out how to switch mine on.”

Cass just shook her head.

“Parents.” She muttered to herself as she activated one of the PTP links and began to study its features.

3.

The address Sheri had given Cass was of a house significantly larger than the one that the rebels occupied and unlike that one this structure seemed to have been built without of the modular assembly techniques so prevalent here. The door was opened by a humanoid appearing SE-4 serving droid.

"Good evening miss." the droid said as it focused on Cass, "How may I assist you?"

"I'm Cass. I'm here to see Sheri."

"Ah yes of course. Miss Sheri has indicated that you are to be shown right in." and the droid stepped aside, "May I take your bag?" the droid asked as Cass entered.

"No." Cass replied, aware that the bag contained several bottles of beer that the droid would be unlikely to allow her to keep if it discovered them.

"Of course. Walk this way please miss."

The droid was leading Cass up a wide set of stairs when Sheri appeared at the top of them.

"Cass you made it." She said cheerfully, "Did you manage to bring the stuff you promised?"

"Right in here." Cass replied, holding up her bag.

Sheri then beckoned Cass into her room and for a brief moment all Cass could do was look around in amazement. Even prior to her parents' arrest forcing her to move into the cheapest apartment she could find Cass had not had a room such as this or any of the items within it. Clearly Sheri's father was highly paid for his work. Sheri closed the door behind her and looked at Cass.

"So let me see." She said excitedly and one at a time Cass laid six bottles of beer out on the bed.

"Do you have an opener?" Cass asked.

"Didn't you bring one?"

"Of course not. Mom and dad would have noticed in a second they opened the drawer and it was missing. Surely you've got one in a house this big."

"In the kitchen." Sheri said and she led Cass back downstairs. As they went Cass made sure to try and take in every detail of the house, particularly ways by which someone could gain access if they wanted to.

The two girls were in the kitchen and about to begin going through the drawers when a man walked in.

"Oh hello." He said, looking at Cass, "So who are you?"

"This is Cass dad." Sheri said, "I told you about her remember? It was when you got home from work."

"Did you?" Sheri's father said, "I'm sorry I wasn't really paying attention." Then he walked to the caf maker and poured himself a drink, "So what are you looking for in there?" he asked, looking at the drawer Sheri was standing next to. Sheri stood there dumbfounded; she had no idea of what to tell her father.

"A knife." Cass said, spotting her discomfort, "We were going to get a slice of cake."

"Well not too much." The man said, looking at Sheri, "You know how the droid gets when you don't eat your dinner." Then he turned to Cass, "So tell me about yourself Cass." He said.

"Me? Oh well my parents just moved here. They're in life support systems engineering."

"Really?" Sheri said suddenly, "Like for starships?"

"That's right." Cass said, hoping no one would press her for too many details. Despite Mace's assurance that it was acceptable to have gaps in her story she was still worried that she would make a mistake that would be noticed.

"Dad works on starships as well. Don't you?" Sheri said, turning to her father.

The man smiled.

"Yes I do."

"He's working on one right now." Sheri went on.

"Really? May I see?" Cass said suddenly, sensing an opportunity.

Sheri's father frowned for a moment, but then his smile returned.

"Well I suppose it can't hurt." He said, "Come with me."

Cass and Sheri followed Sheri's father into his home office. Unlike the other rooms of the house that were decorated for maximum comfort the office was laid out in a purely functional manner. Dominating the room was an interactive workbench, its surface a combination of flat touch screen and holographic projector. Right now a three dimensional image of a starfighter floated above the top of the unit and rotated slowly while schematics of several of its internal systems were on the horizontal screen.

"Is that a TIE fighter?" Cass asked, looking at the rotating hologram. Cass had seen images of TIE fighters often, almost everyone in the Empire had. But this one looked different. It had the bent wing design of some of the more specialist variants, but rather than just two it had a third wing assembly mounted above the traditional ball-shaped cockpit. In addition the cockpit assembly itself was larger than Cass was used to, extending out behind the pilot's seat, "Why does it look so funny?"

"Because it's a new type." Sheri's father said, "Officially it has the designation TIE advanced x-seven, but it's

been given the nickname 'defender'. Though the current generation of TIE fighters would be more deserving of the name. This ship is an assault craft, pure and simple. Hyperdrive equipped and carrying a massive weapons load out."

"Wow." Cass said and she slid her hand into her pocket, taking hold of the data copier.

"Of course this is just a hologram." Sheri's father said, "We've got four of the prototypes in our hangar. All ready to fly."

Cass couldn't believe this. The Rebellion was under the impression that Kurrad Industries was merely developing systems that would be shipped off to be fitted to the new fighters, but her she was being told that there were four of these advanced craft right here. She moved her hand in her pocket from the data copier to her PTP link and pressed its touch screen, remembering exactly where to apply pressure to trigger a false message alert. She took the device from her pocket and looked at the display.

"Oh I can't believe this." She said and she put the PTP link away again, "My parents want me back home. I'm afraid I'll have to go." As she turned to leave she brushed against Sheri's father and discretely removed the Kurrad Industries identity card clipped to his waist.

Mace sat down.

"Physical prototypes?" he asked after Cass told him and Mallia what Sheri's father had said, "Four of them?" Cass nodded, smiling.

"And they're ready to fly. That's what Mister Vastan told me."

"We need to tell headquarters about this." Mallia said, "Right now." And she rushed to the computer set up at the side of the room. The machine was connected to the power socket using more than just the typical power cable. In addition to this was a coil of wire extending from a data port on the computer that allowed it to use the mains power wiring as a covert antenna. Mallia tapped at the keyboard, using several rapid keystrokes to activate the communications program.

"How long will this take?" Cass asked.

"We got an acknowledgement of our test message in about ten minutes." Mace told her as he joined Mallia by the computer.

"What? So there'll be a ten minute lag between what we tell them and their answer?" Cass asked.

"No." Mace said, "The delay was just for headquarters to become aware that we were trying to contact them. Once the connection is made we'll have near real time communication with them."

"Looks like they're paying more attention today." Mallia said suddenly, "We're on."

"Send your report." A voice spoke. Neither Mace nor Mallia knew whom they were speaking to; all they knew was that it was an agent with Alliance Intelligence based at the sector headquarters. The signal was as well shielded and encrypted as it could be made, so there was little chance of the Empire intercepting it, but it seemed that the agent at the other end of the link was taking no chances.

"Our agent has made contact with the target at his home." Mallia said.

"Copy that." The agent responded, "How long for data transfer?"

Mallia glanced back at Mace before she continued.

"Data transfer not attempted. Further instructions are requested." She said.

"Why?"

Mallia now glanced at Cass and smiled. Without turning back to the microphone set into the computer she said, "Our agent has obtained information suggesting the presence of physical units."

"Captain Mayan, did you just say physical units?" came the surprised reply. This time the voice was more familiar, to Mace at least. It was Geran Pay.

"She sure did." Mace said, "Four of them."

"Any word on their status?"

Mace and Mallia both looked at Cass and Mace pointed to the microphone and nodded. Nervously Cass leant forwards.

"I was told they are working."

"We'll be in touch. Stand by." Geran said and then the computer indicated that the communications link had been broken from the other end.

"So now what?" Cass asked.

"Well I think that our plans have just changed." Mace said.

"I'm kind of new to this field work too Mace," Mallia said, "so how about you be a gentleman and tell us ladies what's about to happen?"

"Well I'm guessing that in addition to obtaining design schematics on the fighters, we're going to be given orders to get inside the plant and get an up close look at them too."

"Well that makes sense." Mallia said, "After all a schematic only tells you so much. Photographs can be more informing."

"So what do we do until we hear back from them?" Cass asked.

"Easy." Mace said, "We wait."

As it happened the rebels did not have to wait long and after only a few minutes Geran's voice came from the computer again.

"Are you there?" he asked.

"Yes, we're here." Mallia replied, "Go ahead."

"I'm going to pass you over to someone else." Geran said, "I think you know her."

Mace and Mallia looked at one another and frowned. Mallia shrugged.

"Captain Grayle, Captain Mayan," a voice said. This was clearly alien and had the deep tones of a mon calamari, "this is Admiral Aphanar." Rear Admiral Aphanar was a female mon calamari and served the Alliance as the head of its naval forces in the sector. Any conversation involving her had to be about something important, "I have new orders for you."

"Go ahead admiral." Mallia replied.

"You are to ordered to gain access to the starfighter research facility." The admiral said.

"Here it comes." Mace whispered to Cass.

"Once inside you are to attempt to steal the prototypes on site. If this is not possible then gather all information possible and destroy them. Two additional personnel are en route. Aphanar out."

Once more the channel went dead and Mace and Mallia both stared at one another.

"We're supposed to steal them?" Mallia said.

"Looks that way." Mace replied.

"But neither of us are starfighter pilots."

"Maybe not, but we are both pilots of a sort. Plus the admiral did say that there were other rebels being sent to back us up. There'll probably be a fighter pilot amongst them."

"Do you think Kara will come?" Cass asked, a cheerful look on her face.

"Maybe." Mace said, "She did used to be a starfighter pilot after all."

"Before she hit Captain Tarl." Mallia added.

"Who's that?" Cass asked.

"The man who used to be her squadron commander. She gave him a black eye and got court-martialled. They haven't seen eye to eye since."

Mallia snorted.

"That's an understatement." She said, "She broke his damn nose when he didn't want her near his pilots."

"Okay, so let's assume it's going to be Kara." Cass said, "Tobis is on the Silver Hawk so do you think Vorn will be the other one they send?"

"Ah." Mace said, unsure of how to respond.

"What's wrong?" Cass then asked, seeing how Mace and Mallia were looking at one another.

"Err Cass," Mace replied slowly, "the major's gone."

"Gone? You mean he's dead?"

"No." Mace said, "He left to pursue something important to him. We can't be sure if he's coming back. So whoever the Alliance sends us, it won't be him."

4.

There was only one further communication from Alliance sector command, a brief signal to indicate when the other two rebel agents would be arriving. However, it still gave no indication of who they would be. The other rebels' arrival coincided with when the existing trio typically ate their evening meals so the decision was taken to lay out two extra places on the assumption that the reinforcements may also be hungry on their arrival.

"I think they're here!" Cass sudden exclaimed on the evening the reinforcements were scheduled to arrive, "A cab just pulled up."

"So who is it?" Mallia asked.

"I don't know." Cass replied, "A man and a woman from the looks of it. But I don't think I know either of them. The woman's a bit shorter than Kara and I think she's got blonde hair."

"Must be a couple of fighter pilots." Mallia said.

"Well let's not just stand around waiting," Mace said, "let's go welcome our guests to our happy family home." And he took both Cass and Mallia by the hands and led them to the front door. Letting go of them he put on a large smile and opened the front door to greet the new arrivals standing on the doorstep. Just as he was about to say 'hello' he recognised both of them, "Oh you've got to be kidding me." He exclaimed and his face fell.

"Who are they?" Cass asked Mallia.

"Cass Jungan," Mallia said, "meet Captain Jarad Tarl of Alliance Starfighter Command and Captain Inra Vayne of the *Beauty Queen*."

"Hi Mace." Inra said with a smile as she and Jarad set their bags down just inside the front door, "I heard you need our help."

Mace drew in breath to reply, but before he could say anything Mallia stepped forwards.

"Come on in." she said in a friendly manner, "Dinner's on the table."

There was an uncomfortable silence as the rebels sat and ate and it was broken only when Jarad noticed that Cass kept staring at him.

"What exactly are you looking at young lady?" he asked.

"Oh nothing really." Cass replied, "I was just trying to tell which of your eyes Kara punched. Your nose has healed really well."

Mallia spluttered as she pulled her glass from her mouth and Mace just smirked.

"So this is Vorn's replacement then?" Inra said, looking at Cass, "A schoolgirl?"

"This schoolgirl found out about the prototype ships." Cass replied, "Plus I got us an access card to the facility."

"Assuming it hasn't been cancelled by now." Inra said, "I would have thought you'd have been warned about that possibility. Then again, you've not exactly had the best of teachers."

"Don't." Mallia said suddenly as she saw Mace put down his eating utensils and get ready to reply.

Jarad smiled as Mace scowled at Inra.

"So tell me," Mace said eventually, "what's the plan for getting the fighters out of here?"

"Well I would have thought that was obvious." Jarad said, "We'll be flying them."

"Yes, but what about the pick up ship?" Mace asked.

"What pick up ship?" Inra replied, "We're flying them all the way back to headquarters."

"So what about Cass?" Mallia asked.

"What about me?" Cass added, looking at each of the rebels in turn.

"Those fighters are one man craft." Mallia reminded her, "So if the Alliance isn't sending another ship that can pick you up then how are you supposed to leave?"

"What about the *Silver Hawk*? Tobis could take me back."

"Oh that bucket of bolts has already been withdrawn." Inra said.

"Command didn't want a ship just floating about and raising suspicion." Jarad added.

"Plus it's a death trap anyway. No place for a child." Inra then said.

"But you can't just leave me behind." Cass protested.

"We'd never do that honey." Mallia said.

"No, we wouldn't." Mace said, "You'll just have to squeeze in with one of us."

"You know what that means don't you?" Mallia said, looking at Mace and he nodded.

"It means we have to take her on the raid." He said and for a moment there was silence once more.

"Really?" Cass said, "I finally get to go on a raid?"

"It looks that way." Jarad said, "Though just remember to follow my orders."

"Why your orders?" Mace asked.

“Well since I’m the only qualified starfighter pilot here, I’m clearly in command.”

“We’ve all flown a fighter at one point or another in our careers.” Mace said.

“I haven’t.” Cass commented, though no one paid her any attention.

“So,” Mace went on, “since I’m a field agent I’m in command.”

“Actually no.” Inra said, “I’m in field operations also remember? And the *Beauty Queen* has tactical superiority over the *Silver Hawk*. That means I’m in command.”

“Oh bantha podoo!” Mace exclaimed.

“If we’re talking about tactical superiority then the *Renegade* is a ship of the line.” Mallia pointed out, “So that would put me in command.”

“Well doesn’t have one of you have higher rank?” Cass asked.

“No.” Mace replied, “We’re all captains. Equal rank.”

“Well then,” Cass said with a smile, “since I’m the only one who isn’t a captain, doesn’t that put me in command?”

The rebel officers all just glared at her.

“Sorry.” She muttered, “Just trying to lighten the mood a bit.” and she took another mouthful of food.

“That’s it,” Mace announced loudly as he got to his feet, “there’s only one way to settle this isn’t there?” and he strode to the kitchen and returned with a shot glass.

“Oh no.” Mallia said, “Not that.”

Minutes later Cass sat back and watched as the four rebel officers sought to determine who should be in command.

“This is really stupid.” She said.

“Maybe so,” Mace said, “but its fair.” And he flicked another tiny ball made from a piece torn from a napkin and rolled up tightly towards the glass. The area around where the shot glass had been placed in the middle of the floor was now littered with such balls as the four captains all tried to be the first to land one in it. Suddenly a ball landed in the glass and Mace threw his arms in the air, “Yes!” he yelled out as both Inra and Jarad sighed and frowned at him.

“The best man won.” Mallia said, kissing him on the cheek.

Still frowning Inra folded her arms.

“Well I’m gong to turn in.” she said, “It’s been a long day. Where am I sleeping?”

“Cass show her to the spare room.” Mallia said.

“I take there’s a room for me too.” Jarad said.

“I’m not sharing with him if there’s not.” Inra said sternly, placing her hands on her hips.

“Don’t worry.” Mallia said, “There’s plenty of room for everyone.”

Jarad went to pick up the bags he had left by the door.

“My compliments to the newlyweds by the way.” He said.

Both Mace and Mallia smiled.

“Oh we’re not really married.” Mace said.

“Oh I didn’t mean you.” Jarad replied, “I just wanted you pass on my regards to Sergeant Verser and his charming bride.”

Puzzled looks appeared on both Mace and Mallia’s faces.

“Tharun?” Mace said, “Since when has he been married?”

“Since your last leave.” Jarad said, “He and Lyssa Larcus got married on the safe world you were on.”

“Larcus?” Cass said, “As in-“

“Vorn Larcus.” Mace said, interrupting as Mallia just looked on dumbfounded, “The major’s daughter.”

“So do you think Tharun really married this Lyssa then?” Cass asked as she stared out of the speeder window.

“No chance.” Mace replied.

“What’s she like? Is she pretty?”

“I suppose so.”

“What do you mean ‘I suppose so’?”

“Well I’m sure if I saw an image of her I’d think yes, but it’s just hard to get past the whole stuck up spoiled nerf thing she’s got going.”

“But she’s Vorn’s daughter. That must count for something.”

“Haven’t you forgotten what his son does?”

“Oh yeah, he’s in the ISB isn’t he?”

“Yeah and he’s proud to be in it as well. Even shot his own father.”

Cass suddenly noticed that the turning Mace had taken took them off the usual route to the school.

“Turn the auto-nav back on.” She said, “You’re going the wrong way.”

“No I’m not.” Mace said, “We’ve got somewhere more important to be. Don’t worry, I’ll write you a note to excuse your lateness.”

"Where are we going?" Cass asked, looking around to try and pick out their destination. But Mace said nothing.

The building that Mace parked the speeder outside was plain and windowless, giving no clues as to its function.

"I found this place online." Mace said he and Cass got out of the speeder, "They should have everything we need."

"But what though? Why won't you tell me what this place is?"

"Because that would ruin the surprise." Mace said and as the main door to the build slid open automatically upon his approach he stepped aside to let Cass go in first.

"Wow." She said as she looked at the walls lined with blasters.

"How can I help you sir?" the man behind the counter asked. He was older than Mace, with thinning hair and he wore what had at one time been a shirt from a military uniform.

"I've decided it's about time to teach my daughter to shoot." Mace replied as he approached the counter,

"What can you recommend?"

"Are you looking for a pistol or a rifle?" the man behind the counter asked.

"A pistol." Mace said, "I want her to learn to defend herself. We're not interested in hunting or target shooting just yet."

"Not much to hunt around here anyway." The man said as he took a tray of assorted blaster pistols from under the glass counter, "The really compact holdout pieces are illegal here." He said, "But these sporting blasters should be light enough for your daughter."

"You have a practice range here, yes?" Mace asked.

"Of course. We can demonstrate anything you see here."

Mace then looked at Cass.

"Pick one." He said to her.

5.

Cass gripped the blaster with both hands. It had a long, slender barrel and possessed much less bulk than the more military styled weapons available. But in Cass's small hands even this lightweight gun appeared large.

"I am holding this right?" she asked and she blinked. Both she and Mace wore large plastic glasses with a red tint that were intended to protect their eyes from exposure to the flash given off by blasters.

"Not quite." Mace replied. He stood immediately behind Cass and reached around her and slid her left from under the butt of the pistol so that it was instead positioned over her other hand and both were wrapped around the grip, "There, now I think we're ready. Keep your finger clear of the trigger."

The owner of the gun store handed Mace a power cell and he inserted it into the blaster until it clicked into place.

"There you go." He said as he stepped back, "You've got six shots."

Cass pulled back on the trigger quickly and squealed as the high-energy reaction inside the weapon made it kick upwards in her hand and the muzzle lifted enough to send the bright red bolt over the top of the target.

"Don't snatch the trigger. Squeeze it." Mace said and Cass fired again.

After the sixth shot only two had hit the target and Cass frowned.

"What's wrong?" Mace asked.

"I kept missing." She replied.

"Well it was your first try. Nobody gets straight bulls eyes first time round. How did the gun feel? Was it comfortable in your grip?"

Cass nodded.

"That's the important thing." Mace said and he looked at the storeowner, "We'll take it." He said as he took out a roll of banknotes. Is cash acceptable?"

"Of course." The storeowner replied, "Though I will need some ID for my records."

"Certainly." Mace said and he handed four hundred credits to the man along with the identity card provided to him by the Alliance, "The rest is for extra ammunition." He said, "I think we'll be practicing for a while."

"That's fine Mister Tedrin." The man said as he looked at the name on the card, "I'll just run this through and be right back."

Cass beamed as they left the store, a plain package under her arm containing the blaster, a holster and several power cells for it.

"Can I keep this?" she asked, "When we're done I mean?"

"No." Mace replied, "If you get caught with that on Estran then you won't have a chance of talking your way out of trouble."

"Then what's going to happen to it?"

"Oh its still yours as far as I'm concerned." Mace said, "We'll just keep it on the *Silver Hawk* for you. You can use it whenever we're in town. Deal?"

"Deal." Cass replied, "Thanks dad."

The table had been cleared to make the space the rebels needed to lay out their equipment and each person's personal gear was placed in separately arranged clusters. The presence and functionality of each individual item was checked once when it was taken from whatever it had been stored in and then placed down on the table. Cass just stood back and watched as the other rebels went through this. Each of them checking their own gear and then determining what additional items would be assigned to Cass to carry. Everything not being taken was to be destroyed. Nothing was to be left for the Empire to recover.

Unfortunately for Cass and Mallia that included the excess clothing they had taken from stores and Mace just grinned as he suppressed the urge to tell them that he had told them so.

The raid was timed to take place in the early hours of the next day, well before most of the workers would be arriving at the facility.

"So what sort of security should we expect?" Mallia asked.

Inra and Mace glanced at one another. Despite their mutual dislike they acknowledged that they had the most experience at this type of operation.

"Can't be certain." Inra said.

"Oh that's useful." Jarad commented.

"It could just be corporate security." Mace said, "Which could mean a bunch of guys whose ability to use any blasters they have is dependant on whether they can be bothered to practice in their spare time."

"Or there could be a naval security detachment present." Inra added, "Which could be either fleet troopers or even stormtroopers."

"What's most likely?" Mallia asked.

"If its private security they're probably better than the average." Mace replied, "This is too important a project for Kurrad Industries to risk their contract by assigning inferior personnel. If it's military personnel there's no telling though."

"But don't expect raw recruits." Inra said.

"Right then." Mace announced, "Everything looks set. I suggest everyone turns in because we've got an early start tomorrow."

Cass lay awake. Only now was it starting to sink in that tomorrow she could be going into battle. It was highly unlikely that they would be able to get to the fighters and launch them without being challenged. Inevitably that would lead to them having to fight their way through the facility. She had spent half the day shooting at static targets but now she worried about shooting at something not only living, but also them shooting back at her. She got out of bed and made her way to the room that Mace and Mallia shared and tapped on the door before going inside.

Mallia was sat up, looking towards her.

"What is it honey?" she said.

"I'm scared." Cass replied, "Can I stay in here tonight?"

Mallia smiled.

"Sure, just don't wake Mace. He gets grumpy when that happens."

"Hey look its not my fault!" Mace protested as he ran down the stairs after Mallia, "How was I supposed to know?"

Inra and Jarad who were both already downstairs looked around to see what was going on.

"Well you could have opened your eyes." Mallia suggested.

"What's he done now?" Inra asked while she continued to pick up her equipment.

"He's cheating on me with a younger woman." Mallia said and Mace's jaw just dropped.

"Oh that's ridiculous." He replied. Then he turned towards Inra and Jarad and with his palms outstretched said, "Look, I woke up and rolled over to give Mallia a kiss. How was I supposed to know Cass was between us? I mean you could have warned me."

Mallia smiled and placed her hands on Mace's face.

"Look, I'm just messing with you. Alright?" she said and Mace relaxed.

"So not funny." He said.

"I've had better anyway." Cass announced as she calmly descended the stairs. Like the rest of the rebels she was wearing close fitting black clothing. Then she looked at Mallia and added, "Does he kiss you like that?"

"All the time." Mallia replied then she smiled and to Mace she said, "Just messing with you again darling."

"Well it's almost four." Mace said, "We should get a move on and get out of here. I want to be a million kilometres away before the plant actually opens."

"We're there. Stay quiet." Jarad said from the driver's seat of the speeder. Beside him Mallia was in the passenger seat and Cass was in the back. Meanwhile Inra and Mace were concealed completely out of sight in the trunk of the speeder.

"Gate security's just a couple of droids." Mallia added.

"Good." came the muffled reply from Mace, "They should be easier to bluff. Just don't do anything to attract attention. You know, drive casual."

Jarad brought the speeder up to the perimeter gate. Behind the fence was a large parking area that at this time was mainly empty, while beyond that a massive Kurrad Industries logo could be seen on the part of the building that protruded from the cavern wall. Most of the facility was embedded in the solid rock behind it.

"Identity." The security droid that approached the speeder said flatly.

"Vastan." Jarad said and he held out the stolen identity card. He had been selected for this part of the operation because he bore most resemblance to Sheri's father, especially in the poor light of the Hayatan day/night illumination cycle.

The droid looked briefly at the identity card and verified that it was genuine, then it looked at the speeder.

"This vehicle and your passengers are not in my database." It said, "Explain."

"Oh right, the speeder." Jarad said, "Well my daughter crashed into mine while my wife was teaching her to drive. These are them by the way. So anyway, my speeder's in the shop and this is a rental."

"Wait one moment." The droid said, "I am accessing the vehicular registration database." And there was a pause, "Confirmed. Vehicle registered to Ozzat Rentals. Why are you carrying unauthorised passengers?"

"I'm just stopping off to deliver some notes." Jarad said, "We're going on vacation and have a shuttle to catch."

"Enter." The droid said to him and as the gate began to slide open it added, "Be aware that interior guards will fire on unauthorised personnel in the building."

Jarad waited for the gate to be fully open before driving through, he did not want to take the chance on striking it by misjudging the gap. As they drove past the security point Cass turned to keep it in her view. "We're through." She said.

"That was some nice talking there." Mallia said to Jarad, "Now find us somewhere to park."

"There looks good." Jarad said and he pointed to a row of large rectangular rubbish containers, most of which were full to overflowing.

"Looks like trash day must be tomorrow." Mallia said.

Jarad pulled up by the containers and got out of the speeder.

"So what now?" he asked as Cass and Mallia also got out.

"How about we ask the experts?" Mallia said and she walked to the rear of the vehicle and after taking a quick look around to make sure they were not being observed she opened the trunk.

"At last!" Inra said as she leapt out, "What have you been eating Mace?"

Mace ignored her and just looked around for a way into the building.

"The main door's not too far." Mallia said, but Mace shook his head.

"Security would never let us all in." he said, "We can get Jarad in that way, but no-one else."

"So what do you suggest then?" Mallia asked.

"Jarad'll just have to bluff again." Mace said.

"Huh?" Jarad said.

"Take Cass with you." Mace said, "I hate to have to use her on the front line, but I think we've no choice here. Go up to the guard on the front desk and try and bluff your way past him. Tell him she needs to use the refresher or something."

"Oh great." Cass said.

"Well if you've got a better plan up your sleeve young lady, do tell." Jarad said and when Cass did not reply he added, "Come on then."

Jarad strode towards the main door with Cass following close behind him. The doors were made of something thick, yet transparent and set into a front wall of the same material. Just inside this there was a slot in the ceiling that suggested an armoured shutter could be dropped into place if needed. The doors slid apart automatically as the rebels approached and they went right in. The lobby was a massive open space with a circular desk set into the centre of the floor. The area inside this circle was at a higher level than the rest of the floor, so the single guard sat there was looking down at the rebels as they approached.

"Hi." Jarad said, "Look buddy, is it alright if my kid here uses the refresher. I know its not—"

"Who are you?" the guard demanded, scowling.

"Vastan." Jarad replied as he reached for the identity card again.

"The hell you are!" the guard snapped as he stood up, "I know Mister Vastan and you're—" but before he could continue Jarad leapt up, grabbed the guard's tunic and dragged him over the desk. Slamming the startled guard into the floor he punched the man's face several times before he could react.

"Boring conversation anyway." Jarad said as he stood up again and delivered a kick with his heel to the already unconscious guard. Then he reached into his pocket and took out a comlink, "Guard's down." He said, "Come on in."

"Look out!" Cass suddenly cried out a warning and as Jarad spun around he saw that another security guard had just appeared at the far side of the lobby and was already in the process of drawing his blaster. Jarad reached for his own, but instinctively he knew that he would not be the first to fire.

There was a flash and the explosion of a blaster shot and Jarad assumed that the guard's shot had gone wide. But then he saw the blaster drop from the guard's grip as the man crumpled and fell to the floor.

Turning again he saw Cass staring at the guard, her blaster in her hand.

"I – I –" she spluttered.

"You got him kid." Jarad said and at that moment the other rebels came rushing in through the doors.

"What's happening?" Inra exclaimed as she saw the two guards.

"I took care of this one." Jarad said, "And the kid got him."

"Cass are you okay?" Mallia asked, but Cass just stood there.

"Take a look at those uniforms kid." Jarad said, "Notice how the guy on the desk is in blue? That's because he's just some local security guy. The one you shot's in black because he's a naval trooper. We're dealing with fleet security here. They'll kill you without a second thought."

"True." Inra said as she went over to the body of the fleet trooper and picked up his blaster, "This is set to kill."

"Got it!" Mace suddenly said from within the desk, "Workshop and hangars. Level six, section four. Come on let's go."

The security guard yawned. It was near to the end of his shift and he was impatient to leave. In front of him the wall was dominated by a screen split into multiple parts, with each part showing the feed from a single security camera. Unfortunately the number of cameras meant that it could be difficult to pick out individual images unless the viewer was alert and the guard on watch was not very alert at all. "Oh where's Shar gone now?" another security guard asked as he entered the room and he pointed at one of the images. "What are you talking about?" the first guard said, then he spotted the feed from the lobby and noticed that there was no sign of the guard on the front desk, "Oh no."

6.

The turbolift car came to a sudden halt and in the distance a klaxon could be heard.

"I've got a bad feeling about this." Mallia said.

"Where are we?" Jarad asked.

"Stopped between levels four and five." Inra replied.

"Give me a hand with this door." Mace said and he and Jarad began to drag the turbolift doors open. But when a gap opened up between the doors all that it revealed was the blank face of the inside of the lift shaft.

"So much for getting out that way." Jarad said.

"Well we can't stay here." Mallia said, "they'll find us in no time."

"Then we climb." Inra said, "Its only a couple of levels. Now someone give me a leg up to the hatch."

The rebels climbed up onto the roof of the turbolift car and looked up the shaft.

"Doesn't look too bad." Mace said.

"Speak for yourself." Cass replied, "It looks like it goes on forever."

"Yes, but we only need to get to that door there." Mace replied and he pointed to a door not far above their current position.

"But still, how do we get up there?" Mallia asked.

"Yeah," Jarad added, "its not like there's a ladder."

"Like Inra said," Mace replied, "we climb. Or rather Inra and I will. We'll drop down a line for the rest of you."

Then he looked at Inra, "Ready? Or are you worried about breaking a nail or something?"

"Oh ha, ha. Get a move on." She replied and both she and Mace began to make their way up the shaft, making use of any imperfection in the walls that allowed them to get a grip.

The pair were soon at the door that was their target and as Inra began to fix a syntherope line to a reinforcing girder Mace pried open the door and leant through the gap.

"There's one now!" a voice called out from down the corridor as Mace stuck his head through the gap in the doors and he ducked back inside the shaft.

"Company." He exclaimed as he drew the heavy blaster pistol from his holster, "Fleet troopers." Then he dived out of the shaft.

Blaster bolts shot over his head as the two Imperial Navy troopers in the corridor opened fire, but Mace made it to an alcove opposite the turbolift shaft where a water cooler was located.

"Wish I had my deck sweeper with me." Mace muttered. The deck sweeping blaster was designed for use in situations exactly like this, where the user was faced with multiple opponents in a confined space.

Unfortunately he had not considered it as a useful item when he had planned out the mission. This raid was well outside the original profile. So with just his pistol in hand he leant around the corner and fired twice, both shots hitting one of the troopers and knocking him back.

"Intruder on level six!" he heard the trooper yell into his comlink, "Send backup, they may after the-" then a burst of blaster fire from Inra's carbine silenced him.

"If you had a decent gun Mace," she said, "or if you were a decent shot even, you'd have got them both before they got off that warning."

"Oh like they wouldn't find out we were here anyway." Mace replied, "But if it means so much to you I'll let you go first from now on. Now keep watch while I help the others."

Inra steadied her carbine against her shoulder and repeatedly looked down the corridor in both directions while Mace stood at the door to the turbolift shaft and assisted the other rebels to get out as they scaled the line from the turbolift car below. When they were all in the corridor he untied the line and reeled it in.

"Okay, we're clear." He said, "Inra, take point."

"Which way?" Inra asked and the rebels looked around for anything to indicate which way section four lay in.

"Oh I think we should head that way." Mace said, pointing in the direction the guards had come from, "Those guys must have been guarding something. Right?"

Inra set off down the corridor, ignoring the two bodies in the way and stopping only when she reached the point where the corridor turned through ninety degrees. She took a quick glance around the corner then set off once more.

Behind her the other rebels followed, the three officers all held their assorted pistols at the ready whereas Cass kept hers lowered.

Inra suddenly came to a halt and held up her hand. The others advanced to her position but stayed just behind her.

"What is it?" Mace asked softly.

"Security." She replied, "At least four of them behind a barrier."

Mace risked a quick look around the corner and saw that Inra was correct. A mixed unit of corporate security and fleet troopers had deployed a portable plasteel barrier and were using it for cover.

"No way we can rush them." Inra said.

"Damn I wish I'd brought that deck sweeper." Mace said.

"Yeah," Inra added, "or a grenade."

Then the two freighter captains both looked at one another and smiled.

"Got any tape?" Mace asked.

"Oh no." Mallia said, "Not that."

"Tape?" Cass asked, "I don't get it. What do you need tape for?"

"You tape a bunch of blaster power together and pull out the overload sturm dowels." Jarad explained, "The battery chemistry makes them heat up and explode. Its almost as good as a grenade."

"Yeah." Mallia added, "Providing you don't mind it blowing up in your face."

"Okay, let's see your spare ammo people." Mace said and all of the rebels began to pull the spare power cells from their pockets. "Right then." Mace said, "We've got eight."

"Will that make a big bomb?" Cass asked.

"Any more than five will just overload immediately." Mace said, "So I say two bombs of four each."

"Sounds good." Jarad agreed, "So I take its you and me throwing them."

"I think so." Mace said, "We can't afford anyone throwing like a girl." And the three female rebels all scowled at him.

Lacking any tape, the bundles of power packs were instead tied together using short lengths cut from the syntherope line they had used to scale the turbolift shaft.

"I smell something." Cass said.

"Yeah," Mallia said, "it's the power packs heating up. Now stand back and cover your ears."

"Ready?" Mace said to Jarad and the other man just nodded, "Right then. Now!" and the two men leapt out from behind the corner and before the guards could open fire they both hurled their improvised bombs over the barricade and dived back around the corner.

There was a flash and two sudden booms as the bombs detonated in rapid succession and then the sound of screaming along with a high pitched wailing as the explosions triggered the fire alarm and fire suppressant began to flow from the emitters positioned in the ceiling.

"Go!" Mace snapped and the rebels rushed around the corner.

The guards were nowhere to be seen now and it was only when the rebels reached the barrier that they found one of them still alive. The man tried to raise his blaster but Jarad was quicker and finished him off with a single shot.

"That was gunfire!"

The voice came from behind the rebels and there was the sound of footfalls as more guards began to respond.

"W- where do we go now?" Cass asked.

"Easy." Mace replied, "In there." And he pointed to the blast door behind the barrier that was marked with a large number four, "I'm guessing that's the section four hangar."

He ran to the door and found it locked.

"Check those guys for a key." He said, "Quickly." And the rebels began to rifle through the pockets of the dead men.

"Found anything?" Mace asked as he finished going over the body he had chosen.

"No key," Jarad said, "but I got a wallet here." And he held up a wallet, "Ooh, two hundred credits. Thank you very much." And he tucked it in his own pocket.

"Here they come." Mallia said as the footfalls became louder.

"Inra, you and I'll hold them. The rest of you keep looking." Mace ordered and he and Inra took up positions behind the barrier and prepared to fire on the oncoming security team.

"Let's hope they don't have any grenades." Inra said.

"Yeah," Mace agreed, "or anything to tie power packs together with."

With their spare ammunition used to create the improvised grenades, Inra and Mace were careful to conserve what was left in their weapons and they fired sparingly when the first guard appeared. The guards on the other hand fired without cause to fear running out of ammunition and the air above the rebels' heads was filled with bright red bolts of energy as the barrier blocked the shots lower that would otherwise have hit them.

Cass screamed and suddenly lay flat on the floor.

"Cass! Are you hit?" Mallia asked, crawling towards her.

"No. No, I'm fine." She replied.

"Mace!" Mallia then yelled, "There's no key here."

"No." Jarad said, "But there's a vent." And he pointed to a grill set into the base of the wall beside the blast door.

"Don't be stupid." Mallia replied, "That's too small."

"Not for her." And Jarad looked at Cass.

"He's right." Mace said as he fired over the barrier again and then ducked down before the guards could shoot him, "It may be possible to open the door from the other side. Do it."

"What?" Cass exclaimed, "Me?"

"You always wanted to come on a raid." Mace reminded her.

"Yeah." Jarad said, "Welcome to the rebellion. Are you having fun yet?"

Jarad and Mace rushed towards where the ventilation grill was located and began to remove the screws holding it in place.

"Okay go!" Mallia said, "And don't forget your blaster. You'll need to shoot each corner of the grill on the other side to get it off."

The ventilation shaft was barely wide enough to allow even Cass's small frame to crawl along it. Clearly Kurrad Industries did not want people crawling about in the walls of their top security facility. A precaution missing from many other places.

The grill leading to the other side of the blast door was set about three metres along the horizontal shaft and when she reached it Cass looked through it to make sure that she was not about to emerge into a room full of guards. Satisfied that there was no-one nearby she pressed the muzzle of the blaster against the metal shaft wall at the corners of the grill and fired once, then repeated this for each of the other three corners. But the grill remained in place.

Cass pushed against the grill and felt it wobble slightly, but it was obvious that one of her shots had missed the retaining screw in one corner. She pressed her blaster to the shaft wall again and fired another shot but still the grill stayed in place. She tried a third shot, but when she pulled the trigger of her blaster nothing happened and she realised she had fired all six shots and had no spare ammunition.

"Oh no!" she exclaimed loudly.

"Cass? What's happening? Are you alright?" Mallia called out after her.

"The grill's stuck and I'm out of ammo."

"Then just kick the kriffing thing!" Jarad shouted.

Cass lay along the shaft and kicked at the grill, watching as the metal bent outwards slightly under each impact. Then, when the gap between grill and wall was wide enough she squeezed through.

From inside the room on the other side of the blast door the noise of battle was heavily muffled, but Cass knew she had to act quickly and without pausing to take in her surroundings she rushed back to the blast door and slammed her hand down on the controls beside it. Immediately there was a loud hiss and Cass stepped backwards as the door began to separate into two sections that retracted vertically into the wall and floor.

"Move!" Jarad shouted, rolling through the gap as soon as it was big enough and the other three rebels were soon rushing after him.

"Close it!" Mace yelled and Cass hit the control panel again and the door began to slide shut once more.

"Open the blast door! Open the blast door!" one of the guards outside yelled into his comlink.

"Step aside." Inra said and she pushed Cass out of the way before firing a burst of blaster fire into the control panel, "That should hold them for a while."

"Well hopefully it won't need to be long." Mace said, "Look." And he pointed.

The rebels were standing on a wide, solid walkway that ran long the entire wall of the room. The rest of the room was a massive volume filled with expensive looking computer equipment. But what was more significant was that in amongst all of this equipment was the reason for the rebels' presence here.

Four prototype TIE defenders.

"Okay," Mace said, "Lets take a closer look."

The rebels descended from the walkway and ran to the nearest of the fighters and looked inside.

"Flight controls look pretty standard." Jarad said, "Though there's a few more toys in there than when I flew TIEs for the navy."

"Will we need suits?" Inra asked. Though they were of course airtight, the basic TIE fighters lacked life support and pilots wore vacuum suits to protect them from the vacuum of space.

"I don't think so." Jarad replied, "Look, that panel there looks like the life support regulator on a lambda-class shuttle."

"Figures." Mace said, "A hyperspace-capable ship needs a proper life support system."

"One thing though." Jarad said, looking at each of the prototype vessels, "Only that one seems to have any guns."

"Then that's the one you take." Mace said, "You're the fighter pilot after all. Everyone else pick another ship."

"What about me?" Cass asked.

"Well I'm in command and I'm responsible for keeping you safe." Mace said, "You fly with me."

"You call this keeping me safe?" Cass replied.

"Kind of. Now wait while I get strapped in then you climb after me."

Mace strapped himself into the seat of the TIE defender they had been studying and then looked up as Cass climbed in through the top hatch.

"Easy does it." He said, "You'll just have to sit in my lap and hang on to me."

"Have you flown in one of these before? A TIE fighter I mean."

"Flown? No. But Tharun and I hid is some once to escape a bunch of assassin droids that were pumping the air out of a ship. But that was before we met."

"Good." Cass said. Then Mace reached up and sealed the hatch.

With only a few quick button presses the flight systems of the fighter came to life, all apart from the weapons reading operation.

"Is everyone ready?" Mace asked, activating the communications.

"This is Inra, I'm online."

"Mallia ready."

"Captain Tarl ready."

"Arrogant nerf herder." Mace muttered, momentarily deactivating the comms, "Okay then," he said when the communications were reactivated, "does anyone know how to open the hangar door?"

"Sure." Jarad replied, "Like this."

The sound of Jarad's fighter's laser cannons firing was audible even inside the other fighters and the powerful energy blasts tore through the large hangar door. There was a sudden rush of air as the hangar was opened to vacuum and loose equipment was swept out into space.

"Now everyone follow me." Jarad said and his fighter suddenly accelerated through the gaping hole in the door.

The new fighters had obviously been designed with speed in mind and they accelerated rapidly away from the planetoid.

"Attention unidentified pilots!" the voice was heard in all four fighters simultaneously as Hayatan's defence forces reacted to the unauthorised launch, "You are piloting stolen craft. Decelerate and surrender or you will be fired on."

"Fired on?" Cass said to Mace, "By what?"

"I'm guessing them." He replied and he pointed to a cluster of dots on the sensor display, "Jarad? What do you reckon?"

"TIE/Ins. A full squadron." Jarad replied.

"Can they catch us?" Mace asked.

"They way these thing are accelerating? Not a chance."

"Then everyone just floor it." Mace ordered, "You've got the jump co-ordinates. Use them." And he shut off the communications without waiting for a reply, "Hold on tight." He said to Cass.

The four TIE defenders raced ahead of the more basic TIE fighters desperately trying to catch them. But just as Jarad had said they had no chance of catching up to the rebels before they cleared the mass shadow of Hayatan and in rapid succession each of the ships was enveloped in a flash of light as they jumped into hyperspace.

It was only a few hours later that the TIE defenders dropped back into real space and the familiar shaped of the Alliance's sector headquarters hung in space ahead of them.

"Unidentified craft! Stand down and identify yourselves!"

"Did the Empire follow us?" Cass exclaimed as once again the sensor display showed a cluster of dots moving towards them, this time from in front.

"No, don't worry." Mace replied, "Those are ours." And he pointed as a pair of Alliance Y-wings sped past,

"This is Captain Grayle." Mace signalled, "Reporting as ordered."

"Confirmed Captain Grayle. Welcome home. Proceed for docking." The rebel fighter leader replied and the squadron of Y-wings began to pull away.

"Okay you heard the man." Mace signalled to the other TIE defenders, "Go on ahead. I'll be along in a bit."

"What's happening?" Cass asked as the other stolen ships all began to head towards the space station. Mace just smiled.

"Turn around. Sit looking forwards." He said and he took his hands off the control column.

"What are you doing?"

"Don't worry." Mace said, taking Cass's hands and placing them on the control column. Then he took his feet off the pedals below him, "Now put your feet there." He added.

"But what-" Cass began.

"Hey," Mace interrupted, "can't a proud father teach his daughter to fly?"

In her run down apartment on Estran Cass prepared for bed. Tomorrow she would be returning to her job at the cantina, serving drinks to servants of the Empire she hated so much. Before she turned out the lights she looked at the images pinned to the wall next to her bed. One of them was old now; it was the only picture she

had been able to rescue of her parents and younger brother. The other was new and it showed her standing in the back garden of the house on Hayatan, wearing a school uniform and smiling in the company of Mace and Mallia.