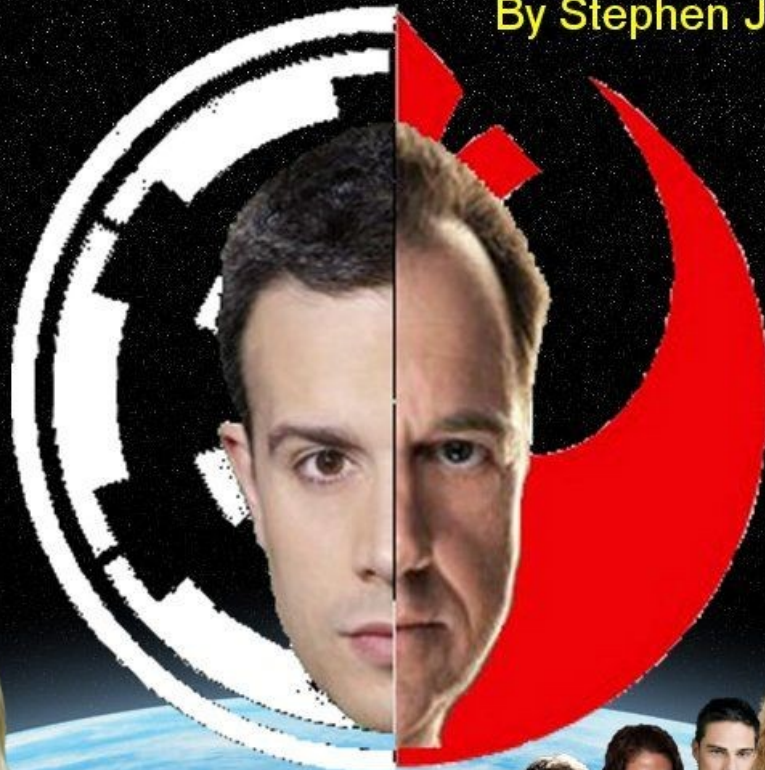


STAR WARS

5-08: Save the Ocean Queen

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...

SAVE THE OCEAN QUEEN

DISABLED BY AN IMPERIAL ATTACK, THE REBEL CRUISER *OCEAN QUEEN* NEEDS BOTH TECHNICAL HELP AND PROTECTION. BUT COULD THE HELP SENT BY THE ALLIANCE BE PUTTING THE SHIP IN EVEN MORE DANGER?...

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

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1.

"Captain I have enemy ships in sector fourteen!"

Captain Ghillas turned his chair to face the crewman who had just issued the warning. Like the captain and the rest of the bridge crew, the crewman was a member of the aquatic mon calamari species. The *Ocean Queen* was a mon calamari MC80 cruiser and the way in which its instruments were designed meant that it was best suited to being operated by crews of the same species.

"Identify them." The captain ordered.

"Three ships captain. Looks like an attack line of strike cruisers."

"Raise shields. What is our status?" Captain Ghillas asked, turning his chair once more to face others of his crew.

"Docking bay reports that all of the escape pods are aboard captain and our medical and security personnel are sorting through the occupants."

"Then there's no reason to stay here. Prepare to—" the captain began but he was interrupted as the ship shook violently under the impact of a barrage of fire from the Imperial ships' turbolasers, "Damage report!"

"Shields holding captain. But the Imperial cruisers are closing and I'm monitoring fighter launches from all three."

"Helm get us out of here. Anywhere." Captain Ghillas ordered.

"Yes captain. Standing by for jump." The cruiser's helmsman responded. The sound of the *Ocean Queen's* hyperdrive powering up filled the air, but just as the sound reached a peak there were a series of blue-white flashes from the Imperial cruisers as they opened fire again.

The ship lurched as it jumped to hyperspace, but at the same time klaxons sounded and the shuddering that typically lasted only as long as it took for a ship to traverse the portal created between two dimensions instead continued.

"Hyperdrive failing captain!" one of the bridge crew called out, "Enemy ion cannons have overloaded the system."

"What about our reserve?" Captain Ghillas asked, clinging onto the console built into his seat.

"I'm trying to get it online captain, but I doubt we'll be able to maintain an active field for long."

"Then just drop us back to realspace." The captain ordered and there was another sudden lurch as the *Ocean Queen* dropped out of hyperspace and the stars reappeared through the bridge viewport. The klaxons continued however and instead of appearing stationary the stars outside were moving rapidly as the *Ocean Queen* tumbled uncontrollably through space.

In the hangar of the space station used as the headquarters of the Alliance in the sector Mace Grayle, the owner of the light freighter *Silver Hawk* stood back and watched the two figures currently located beneath it. One was a man in his late twenties who was busy trying not only to service the ship's landing gear control lines but also explain the process to the teenage girl beside him.

"You do know that there are child labour regulations in the Alliance don't you captain?" a woman's voice said from behind Mace and he turned to see a heavily pregnant woman approaching him and he grinned, "Hang on, I need to take the weight off my feet." The woman then said and she promptly sat down on a nearby power converter, "Now, about your use of your adopted daughter as slave labour."

"Kara, Cass is quite happy learning about maintenance from Tobis." Mace said as he then sat down beside her.

"Plotting to replace your engineer with a younger model then?" Kara then asked.

"No. But it never hurts to have someone else around who knows what they're doing when confronted with damaged systems." Mace replied.

"Which is highly likely if the klutz is aboard." Kara commented and Mace nodded.

So how come you're not with your husband?" he then asked.

"Oh the boss is in some meeting with Shyla Nerin and Admiral Aphanar." Kara told him, referring to the heads of Alliance Support Services and the fleet battlegroup assigned to the sector respectively, "Shyla came rushing in while the four of us were trying to get some extra gear out of the boss' little princess. But it seems that him being her father and Tharun being her husband still wasn't enough for her to give us what we asked for. Oh Captain Mayan was with Shyla as well."

"Malia?" Mace responded to the mention of the woman he was involved with romantically, "Did she say anything about what was going on?"

"No." Kara replied, "But I bet if you head along to the admiral's office they'll all be there now."

Mace looked towards his ship and the two rebels standing beneath it.

"Keep an eye on them would you? You can consider it practice for when yours is born." He said.

"Sure. Off you go." Kara said and she watched as Mace rushed across the hangar. Smiling when he vanished she turned back towards the *Silver Hawk*, put two fingers in her mouth and whistled loudly, "Okay you two get a move on! I'm in charge now and I want you done before I need to order you to change the first diaper."

Admiral Aphanar's adjutant looked up from his desk as Mace appeared.

"Ah Captain Grayle. Go on in if you want." He said, nodding towards the nearby door and without speaking Mace just nodded back and headed for the door. As soon as it slid open he saw that the admiral's office was fairly crowded. In addition to the admiral sitting behind her desk there were a pair of humans standing just behind her. One of these was the woman that Kara had mentioned, Shyla Nerin while the other was a man that Mace had worked with several times before. A lieutenant by the name of Geran Pay, he had been sent to the sector by Alliance high command to help deal with an spy that the Empire was known to have planted within the local Alliance forces. Meanwhile on the side of the desk facing Mace were the other three members of the rebel unit assigned to his ship, Vorn Larcus, Tharun Verser and Jaysica Horbid. Hanging onto Tharun's arm was the woman who in addition to being Vorn's daughter had also married Tharun just over a year earlier. In addition there were three other rebels present, all of whom Mace knew at least in passing. Jarad Tarl was a fighter pilot and Kara's former squadron leader. The pair had a fractious history that included multiple charges of assault laid by Jarad against Kara. Then there were two women, Asha Lerner was not a combat officer but instead headed up the droid maintenance department here at Alliance headquarters while the final person present was Malia Mayan, commanding officer of the corvette *Renegade* and when Mace entered the room she smiled.

"Hi sweetie." She said before kissing him gently.

"Ah Mace, you ought to hear this." Vorn then said, "The admiral has an assignment for us."

"So I heard." Mace replied and then he looked to the mon calamari officer sat behind her desk, "Sorry about the interruption."

"No problem captain. As I was just telling the others this assignment is of the greatest urgency. You are aware of the recent activities of the cruiser *Ocean Queen*?"

"I believe you sent her to locate as many survivors from the *Primarch* as possible." Mace replied. The *Primarch* had been an Imperial star destroyer on which the crew had been persuaded to mutiny. Unfortunately the Empire had predicted this and sent a force of ships to prevent her from reaching the Alliance. The ship had been lost but not before many thousands of her crew had been able to abandon ship and were set adrift. Hoping to recruit these survivors to the Alliance cause anyway, the *Ocean Queen* had been amongst the ships despatched to find them.

"Correct captain." The admiral replied, "But it seems that the Empire was able to ambush the *Ocean Queen* just as they did the *Primarch*."

"A rival rescue mission?" Mace suggested.

"No." Geran said, "One of our operatives in the Imperial Navy confirmed that the Empire decided against a rescue mission, seeing any loyal survivors as acceptable losses when compared to the risk of rescuing mutineers and putting them aboard other ships to spread dissent."

"Then how-" Mace began before Geran interrupted him.

"The spy." He said, "The *Ocean Queen*'s crew found an anomalous section of program code in their communications array that had been sending low energy subspace pings at regular intervals. The Spire Worlds are crawling with navy patrols right now trying to head off any rakata forces that may try and sneak out of the nebula so it didn't take long for one of them to pick up the signal and intercept our ship."

"Now she's stranded." Shyla added, "Her hyperdrive systems were overloaded and need repair."

"That's where we come in." Vorn said, "We're to ferry the replacement parts."

"Why not just use a Support Services freighter?" Mace asked.

"Because your mission is not one of technical assistance." Admiral Aphanar announced, "The technical team and their equipment will be transported aboard the *Renegade*. You will be undertaking an investigation into the sabotage that allowed the *Ocean Queen* to be discovered."

"That's why I'm coming along as well." Geran said.

"And I'm with you too." Asha added, "The spy has been making use of my droids in the past and it's likely that he has done the same again."

"I thought it was a woman." Jaysica then commented.

"Oh how would you know?" Lyssa asked.

"Because Captain Grayle told us it was." Jaysica replied.

"I don't think that anyone needs to know this little lady." Tharun said softly.

"Tharun what are you talking about?" Lyssa then asked him.

"Yes sergeant, what are you talking about?" Malia asked and Mace winced.

"I don't really think it's important right now." Vorn said.

"Yes it is daddy." Lyssa responded, "How do we know that the spy is a woman?"

"Because when the captain fought with her he grabbed hold of her, well of her-" Jaysica began and then she placed a hand on her own chest.

"Oh really?" Malia said.

"So basically when you had the chance to catch the spy you just groped her instead?"

"If we can continue?" the admiral then said impatiently, "Major Larcus' unit along with Lieutenants Lerner and Pay will undertake the investigation to identify the enemy agent while the *Ocean Queen* is being repaired under the supervision of Lyssa Verser and Captains Mayan and Tarl will provide protection just in case the Empire is able to locate the ship again. Is that understood by everyone?" and then there were murmurings of agreement.

"Then I suggest you delay no further." The admiral said, getting to her feet, "Good luck and may the Force be with you."

As the rebels left the admiral's office they headed towards the hangar in a single group.

"Hey Lieutenant Pay!" Jarad called out with a grin, "I just had an idea how you can find this spy."

"Really?" Geran responded.

"Oh don't do this." Mace then said, rolling his eyes. But it was too late.

"How?" Geran asked.

"An identity parade." Jarad told him.

"An identity parade?" Geran repeated.

"Oh here we go." Mace muttered.

"Yeah." Jarad said, "We get all the women on the station to line up and Mace here goes along each one and grabs-"

"That's disgusting!" Lyssa snapped.

"Indeed it is." Malia added, "And I can assure you Lieutenant Pay, that Captain Grayle will not participate."

2.

Designed to transport up to eight people, including the two crew of the *Silver Hawk* was somewhat overcrowded when the addition of Asha, Geran and Lyssa brought the total to ten. In addition the protocol droids that Vorn and Lyssa owned served only to make it even more tightly packed.

"So Malia's not coming with us then?" Cass asked as she peered over Mace's shoulder in the cockpit.

"No, she has her own ship." Mace answered.

"One probably a lot less crowded than this one." Vorn added from the co-pilot's seat. Then he looked at Mace, "Perhaps Cass would be better off on the *Renegade* anyway?" he suggested, "If the Empire finds us—" "Major if the Empire finds us then Malia will fight." Mace interrupted, "The *Renegade* would be one of the most dangerous places for Cass to be."

"You don't need to protect me like that." Cass then said, "I'm not a little girl."

"You're seventeen." Vorn pointed out.

"Nearly eighteen." Cass replied.

"Are we having the why Cass shouldn't be going into battle conversation again?" Kara asked as she appeared in the cockpit doorway and then exhaled deeply as she sat down with a frown on her face.

"What's wrong?" Vorn asked her.

"Your little princess won't quit calling me Kara the Hutt when she thinks I'm not listening." She replied, "Like I'm some big fat slug. I'm telling you boss, this kid better turn out better than your other two. Otherwise I'm divorcing you and marrying Mace. At least he adopted a civilised kid."

"I think Malia might have something to say about that." Mace commented.

"Really?" Kara responded, "Have either of you put rings on one another yet? Because unless you have then you're still on the market."

"I'll try talking to Lyssa again." Vorn said to Kara, "Now strap yourselves in, we're ready to leave." And then there was the sound of the *Silver Hawk's* engines powering up as the ship took off from the deck of the hangar and turned to fly out into space. The *Silver Hawk* then accelerated away from the space station, travelling just far enough to get away from the gravity well that it created and then from inside the cockpit it seemed that the stars blurred together as the ship jumped into hyperspace.

"The damage doesn't look so bad from out here." Kara commented as the *Ocean Queen* hung in space in front of them, "Mind you, she looks a lot different to how she did the first time we saw her."

"When was that?" Cass asked.

"Not long before we first met you kid." Kara replied, "She was a star liner that charged spoiled rich people tens of thousands of credits for a trip to the edge of the nebula and back."

"Complete with a crew of slaves that we liberated when we took the ship." Vorn added.

"Not much left of the luxury now though." Mace then said, "All that armour instead of viewports."

"There are still a few of the first class suites left." Vorn commented.

"Your little princess had probably already figured out a way to make sure that she stays in one." Kara then said as the *Ocean Queen's* landing bay came into view.

"Okay, I'm done here." Mace said, getting up from his seat.

"But aren't we going to land in the hangar?" Kara asked, "It would make disembarking far easier."

"Not we. Her." Mace said, looking down at Cass, "Come on Cass, show off how much you've learnt." And a wide grin appeared on Cass' face as she swapped places with Mace, "Remember now, not a scratch." He then added.

"Major Larcus." Captain Ghillas called out as the occupants of the *Silver Hawk* began to disembark, "It is good to see you again."

"Indeed it is." Vorn replied as he shook hands with the captain. The he turned towards Lyssa, "This is my daughter Lyssa. She'll give your people the details of the supplies we've brought with us while the rest of us look into your other little problem."

"Yes, the spy." Captain Ghillas said, "My engineer has removed the modified code from our system, but he made a copy that has been placed on an isolated terminal for your use."

"That's great." Geran said, "I'll need to see that as soon as possible."

"And I suppose that I better take a look at your droids." Ahsa added, "How many do you have again?"

"More than three hundred." Captain Ghillas told her and she sighed.

"Jaysica has worked droid maintenance." Tharun then pointed out, "Perhaps she could give you a hand." And Asha frowned.

"That's a good idea." Vorn said, "Jaysica you go with Lieutenant Lerner."

"And Tobis can give you a hand." Mace then said to Geran.

"What about the rest of us boss?" Kara asked.

"You head to the medical section." Vorn answered, "See if they need any help there. Tharun can review the ship's security with Mace and—"

"Actually there's something I need to take care of first." Mace interrupted.

"Very well." Vorn replied, "You do what you have to while Tharun gets started and I'll liase with Captain Ghillas to try and ensure that none of us get in the way too much."

"Aren't you forgetting someone?" Cass then asked him as Mace headed back into the *Silver Hawk*.

"What? Oh yes, of course." Vorn said and he looked around. When he looked at Lyssa he stopped and smiled, "Would you mind taking Cass with you? Show her how you organise things."

Lyssa frowned briefly.

"Oh, very well. Come along with me." She said to Cass and then she looked back up the *Silver Hawk's* access ramp and called out, "Emsee! Emsee are you ready?"

"Oh yes mistress Lyssa," a protocol droid responded in a female tone of voice as it appeared at the top of the ramp with a bag under each arm.

"What's in the bags?" Cass asked, "Spare parts?"

"No silly. Spare clothes. You don't think I'll be wearing what I am now for dinner do you?"

"What am I supposed to learn from her again?" Cass then whispered to Kara who just shrugged.

"Come along, hurry up." Lyssa called out as she began to walk away. Then she paused close to one of the hangar crew, "You there! Where should I set up my things?" she demanded.

"Remind me Tharun," Kara said as she watched this, "how drunk were you when you married her?"

Inside the *Silver Hawk* Mace headed for the cockpit where he sat down and activated the communications system.

"*Renegade* this is *Silver Hawk*." He transmitted.

"Hi Mace." Malia replied as soon as her face appeared on the monitor in front of him, "What can I do for you?"

"I was wondering if you could spare the time to join me for dinner tonight. This is a luxury liner after all."

Vorn accompanied Captain Ghillas as the mon calamari officer made his way back to the command section of the *Ocean Queen*.

"This part of the ship has changed quite a bit since I was last here." Vorn commented as they went.

"Yes, it was your team that liberated us wasn't it?" the captain responded, "I'm sorry for not having thanked you as soon as we met."

"Well it wasn't entirely selfless captain. This ship is just too valuable for the Alliance to have ignored it for long."

"Nevertheless major, without you every one of my species aboard would still be a corporate slave."

The most noticeable thing about the command section that had been altered were the life support settings. Given that the mon calamari performed best in warm and humid conditions that was how the environmental control for entire command section was now set. When Vorn had come aboard the first time only the bridge itself had been like this but now he found the surrounding compartments somewhat uncomfortable as well. Fortunately the captain appeared to realise the effect that this could have on other species and when they reached his office there was a water dispenser set up in there.

"Help yourself major." Captain Ghillas told Vorn.

"Thanks." Vorn replied as he got himself a cool drink. He took a single sip and then turned to the captain, "So how bad is the damage?" he asked, "All that we were told was that the hyperdrives were non-functional."

"That is all that was damaged during the battle." Captain Ghillas answered, "But there have been several other system failures recently. Just minor things on their own, but now that I've had the time to look at them all together I'm getting a bad feeling about them."

"How so?" Vorn asked.

"Major you have to remember that this ship is still not up to scratch as an Alliance warship. We are still upgrading and adding new systems as well as adapting facilities to a more efficient, if less luxurious configuration. The faults that have been discovered are all things that probably would have gone un-noticed until something failed if my crew had not been carrying out this work. As it was, we discovered several damaged systems that had not even been fully installed yet."

"Ah now I see." Vorn replied, "Someone unfamiliar with how you're working would think that they were hiding their damage, but the spy obviously doesn't know what's been completed yet."

"Exactly major. If we can't stop this enemy agent then I fear that it is only a matter of time before they sabotage something that we won't be able to find until its too late."

"I take it that you've taken extra precautions against further sabotage? Vorn asked.

"Yes. I had guards positioned near as many key systems as I could. But this ship is well over a thousand metres long major and I do not have enough troops to simultaneously cover every possible location for sabotage around the clock."

"I understand captain. Hopefully Lieutenant Pay will be able to provide us with a lead to the source of the sabotage." Vorn said, "Failing that perhaps one of your guards will get lucky."

The *Ocean Queen's* internal security was provided by the one thousand two hundred troops stationed aboard the ship and it was to the commander of these, a female human lieutenant colonel by the name of Drey that Tharun went.

"So you're here to find the spy then are you sergeant?" Drey asked when Tharun entered the room where he was timing several of his troops as they assembled blaster rifles. Though Tharun was stood beside him the colonel kept his eyes focused on his own men.

"Yes sir. We've been tracking this spy pretty much since we discovered she existed." Tharun replied.

"She?" the colonel commented.

"Yes sir. I'll leave Captain Grayle to explain how he found that out." Tharun told him.

"So what is it you want to know sergeant?" the colonel asked.

"We know that the spy makes use of droids to carry out acts of sabotage and espionage without exposing themselves. Have any of your troops noticed any droids behaving oddly since you left headquarters?"

"Droids behaving oddly? Don't they all do that?" the colonel said and Tharun grunted as he nodded in agreement. Then he noticed Mace rushing down the corridor towards them.

"Captain over here!" Tharun called out and Mace ran up to him and the colonel, "I was just explaining how you identified the spy as a woman." He then added.

"Oh for crying out loud!" Mace exclaimed and several of the troops in the room stopped what they were doing and stared at him, "It's not like I reached out and grabbed her chest on purpose."

"Your sergeant didn't mention that captain." Colonel Drey commented and Mace sighed.

"Of course not." He said, "That would be too easy." Then he took a deep breath and looked directly at the colonel, "So have you gone over your security deployment yet?"

"Not yet no." Drey answered, "Though at the moment everything's up in the air. Captain Ghillas has had most of my available people standing around next to every random bit of machinery that he can think of in the hope that we'll either prevent any more sabotage or happen to catch the culprit. That's in addition to our regular duties and guarding all those prisoners."

"What prisoners are these?" Mace asked.

"You don't think that we only picked up mutineers from the *Primarch* do you?" Drey asked in reply, "Some of the crew that didn't rebel made it to escape pods as well and since the Empire didn't bother sending anyone to pick them up it's been up to us instead. We've pulled in more than four hundred stormtroopers and other Imperial loyalists. Our holding cells aren't big enough for that many so I've got them locked up in a cargo hold."

Mace and Tharun looked at one another.

"That sounds like a tempting target for an infiltrator captain." Tharun said and Mace nodded.

"Yeah, release even a few of them and there'd be chaos until they were rounded up again." He said. Then he looked back at Drey, "Colonel I'd like to see this cargo hold if you don't mind."

"Well that's what did it." Geran said as he studied a large wall mounted display screen, filled with lines of computer code, "That application was inserted into the communication system to initiate a pulse at regular intervals that the Empire could track."

"I – I can't tell when it was added though." Tobis commented, looking up from his datapad, "I have the time of the first transmission but, from the looks of that code it was set up to begin at that time specifically."

"Yes covering their tracks rather effectively." Geran responded, "We can't isolate the droid used to upload the code because it could have accessed the system at any time."

"But, err, I think that we can find out where the modification was made." Tobis said.

"How?" Geran asked.

"Well, err the code was probably uploaded remotely. I mean from a port rather than directly into the core." Tobis replied.

"Of course!" Geran exclaimed as he rushed to the portable terminal that he had plugged into the *Ocean's Queen's* network, "All I need to do is look in the network usage log for a data packet the same size as the extra application and then not only identify the time of the upload but also track it back to its source."

Tobis moved to Geran's side as the man began to sift through the computer's records.

"There." Tobis said suddenly, pointing to a series of entries in the record that were all of identical size, "It, well, it looks like the application was uploaded into a different section of the computer and configured to move between different computers until it reached the communication system."

"Someone wasn't taking any chances." Geran said, "I'm going to have to go through these records in more detail."

"Err, perhaps I should go and see if Jaysica's having any luck. She ought to know about this." Tobis then said."

"What?" Geran asked, his mind more focused on the computer records than on Tobis, "Yes of course. Go check on where they're up to with the droids."

Jaysica was bored. For several months once she had been assigned to the droid maintenance section with Asha and she had hated every minute of it. Now she found herself once again surrounded by droids that she had to check out. Fortunately for her she had help this time around in the form of the three droids owned by the occupants of the *Silver Hawk*.

First amongst these was Jeeves, a gold coloured protocol droid that belonged to Vorn. Then there was Harvey, Tobis' R5 astromech droid and finally there was Penny, Jaysica's own mouse droid. With Asha out of sight Jaysica had opted to leave the task of inspecting those of the *Ocean Queen's* droids sent to her to Harvey and Penny, the two droids best equipped to carry it out. Meanwhile Jeeves oversaw the other two and translated their findings for Jaysica as the droid also recorded them on a datapad.

With nothing left for her to do herself Jaysica simply sat watching the droids work and yawned.

"Is this job keeping you awake corporal?" Asha's voice suddenly asked from behind her and Jaysica squealed and fell from her chair as she tried to turn around too quickly.

"Lieutenant I didn't notice you come in." she said as she got back to her feet, "I was just-"

"Yes I know what you were just doing." Asha replied, "And I don't really care."

"Really?" Jaysica asked.

"No. Frankly I trust those droids of yours to do the job more than I do you."

"Oh." Jaysica said, her face falling as she realised that she had just been insulted.

"Carry on corporal." Asha then said, "With whatever it was you were doing." And then as she turned to leave Tobis appeared in the doorway in front of her, "Come to see your friend sergeant?"

"Ahh, err-" Tobis began.

"Never mind, she's not busy it seems." Asha said, "Carry on." And then she squeezed past him and walked off down the corridor.

"Oh Tobis thank goodness you're here." Jaysica then said, embracing him as she did so, "This job is really dull." And at that point Harvey let out a sudden coarse noise.

"Master Dorfus sir," Jeeves said, "Harvey wishes you to know that it is in fact he and Penny that have been doing all the work."

"I just delegated it that's all." Jaysica responded and Harvey let out another sudden noise."

"Well really Harvey." Jeeves said, "There's no need for that sort of language."

"So did you come here for a reason?" Jaysica then asked Tobis before adding, "Oh never mind, I'm just glad you're here." And she squeezed him tighter.

"I, err - I came to see how you were getting on." Tobis said and Jaysica turned to look in the direction of the three droids doing all the actual work.

"How many have we checked Jeeves?" she asked but before the protocol droid could reply Harvey let out a series of chirps.

"Harvey indicates that he and Penny have inspected the program cores of sixty eight droids." Jeeves then translated and when Harvey produced another chirping sound Jeeves added, "He also states that he cannot say how many you have checked because he has yet to see you do even one." And Jaysica frowned.

"You know Harvey's really grumpy Tobis." She said, "Perhaps you should wipe his memory." And then Harvey let out a rude sounding noise.

"Yes Harvey." Jeeves said, "I totally agree."

3.

Emptied of all cargo, the centre of the hold had been converted into a holding facility by the installation of a large cage made of simple wire mesh and it was within this that the Imperial prisoners sat. Mace and Tharun could clearly make out a variety of uniforms from technicians and guards to a handful of officers and stormtroopers. These last prisoners lacked their traditional white armour and bodygloves and instead had been given simple overalls to wear. However, given that they were clones their identical features gave them away as the Empire's most loyal troops. Finally there was one other individual in the cage whose uniform made him stand out from the others. When most of the crew aboard the *Primarch* had mutinied the four COMPForce observers aboard had attempted to rally the rest to them. Three had been killed, but the fourth had not been so dedicated that he was willing to go down with the ship it seemed and Tharun grinned as he pictured the man pushing his way to the front of the queue for a place aboard an escape pod.

"They look pretty secure captain. The refreshers are a good idea." And he pointed to several small portable refresher units that had been set up in the centre of the cage meaning that there was no need to let the prisoners out to relieve their bodily functions.

"And the guards have a good field of fire." Mace added as he looked up at the walkway surrounding the hold where several of Lieutenant Colonel Drey's troopers were stationed, each one carrying a blaster rifle.

"Yeah, I don't see anyone getting in here to release the prisoners without them being spotted." Tharun then said as he looked around, "I suppose someone could try tampering with the life support to disable the guards, but that'd affect the prisoners as well."

"Okay we're done here." Mace said, "I don't see anything that the colonel and her people could do any better."

"So back to the *Silver Hawk* then?" Tharun asked.

"Briefly yes. For me anyway." Mace said, "I just need to grab a few things. You can go check in with the major if you want but I've got other plans."

"Really? Got a date or something?"

"Actually sergeant, yes I do."

Cass looked at the datapad again, confused.

"I don't get it." She said, frowning, "How do you keep track of all this?"

"With a great deal of effort." Lyssa replied, "Not that anyone appreciates my work."

"But mistress Lyssa," Emsee then said, "You tell people so often how difficult this is, but you—"

"Be quiet Emsee." Lyssa said.

"Certainly mistress."

Then door to the store room then opened and Tharun entered.

"Hey there beautiful." He said with a smile and Lyssa smiled back, "I was thinking maybe we could grab a bite to eat. The ration packs aboard this ship may not be up to much, but the establishment itself is pretty good. I found out that the honeymoon suite is still intact and I was figuring that we never had a proper—" and then he noticed Cass, "Oh. Hey kid." He said, his smile becoming more of a nervous grin, "Perhaps you should forget what I was about to say."

"Well I know exactly what you mean," Lyssa responded, "and I think that it's a wonderful idea. Let's go."

"What about the kid?" Tharun asked.

"What here? Oh she'll be fine here with Emsee. Won't she Emsee?"

"Why certainly mistress. If you recall I have considerable experience in caring for children from your own youth."

"Hey I'm not a child." Cass protested.

"Then you should have no trouble in watching these supplies then." Lyssa said and she pointed to the stacks of containers behind Cass, "All you need to do is log each one as someone takes it. Oh and remember to make a note of who takes it as well."

"What if I need help?" Cass then asked.

"Then ask Emsee." Lyssa replied, "She's seen me do all of this before."

"I can just call dad as well if I get stuck. I'm sure he'll know what to do." Cass added.

"Oh I wouldn't do that." Tharun commented, "I think he's kind of occupied as well. With Captain Mayan."

"Oh great." Cass said, "I know what that means. Everyone's off having fun but me."

Vorn was relieved when he entered the *Ocean Queen's* sickbay in search of Kara. He had been having visions of the entire section being filled with badly injured crewmen as the overworked medical staff picked their way between them. However, the section seemed to be fairly orderly. The *Ocean Queen's* swift escape

from the Imperial navy attack line that had attacked it had limited the injuries to the crew and Vorn saw more Imperial uniforms amongst the patients than he did Alliance ones. The lack of security around these told him that they were some of the mutineers picked up from the *Primarch* rather than individuals still loyal to the Emperor. But one person that Vorn could not see was Kara.

"Excuse me," he said to a nearby medical droid, "I'm looking for my friend. She should have come in here about an hour ago."

"Please state the nature of her injuries." The droid replied.

"She wasn't injured. Or at least she wasn't the last time I saw her. Her name is Lieutenant Kara Larcus."

"The lieutenant is in examination room besh with Doctor Ik'Than." The droid then told him, pointing to a doorway at the far end of the room. Vorn nodded in response and headed for the door.

Upon reaching it Vorn saw that there was a display beside the door to indicate whether the room was occupied or not and at the moment it suggested that the room was vacant so he opened the door.

"Hi boss." Kara called out to him as she looked around from the chair she was sat in and she waved him closer.

"I take it that you weren't needed to help take care of the injured." Vorn said.

"Nah. The doc here had that covered already." And Kara looked back at the insectoid verpine sat on the other side of the desk. Vorn had met only a handful of the verpine species before now and all of them had been in technical professions. However, he was aware that the same aptitude they shared for understanding technology also extended as far as medicine as well, "But I did take the opportunity to talk to some of them though."

"Yes, we were just discussing the results of those conversations." Doctor Ik'Than then added.

"So what did you discuss?" Vorn asked as he sat down beside Kara.

"Well since a lot of the injured crew were from the engineering staff I thought I'd ask them about the sabotage." Kara replied, "Did you know that the communication system wasn't the only thing that the spy sent a droid to?"

"Yes, Captain Ghillas told me that other systems had been damaged." Vorn answered, "I don't suppose that any of the crew you spoke with were able to shed any light on any of it were they?" and Kara shook her head.

"No such luck boss. Most likely it was just some maintenance droid that waited until no one was looking. You know how it is with droids, they're just part of the scenery. Unless someone catches one in the act of sabotaging a system then people will just assume that the thing is exactly where it's supposed to be."

"Yes, that's the response we seem to keep getting. I got it from the captain and Tharun told me that the commander of the troop contingent said something along those lines as well." Vorn said.

"What about Tobis and the klutz? Have either of those two found anything yet?" Kara asked.

"I spoke to Geran." Vorn replied, "he's currently hoping to track down the droid responsible by monitoring network traffic."

"Network traffic?" Kara responded in amazement, "Seriously?"

"That's what he said. Its something to do with how the malicious code got into the system in the first place."

Vorn explained, "And I spoke to Asha as well. She said that she and Jaysica were still working through the droids and so far they'd found nothing."

"With the klutz hanging over her shoulder I'm surprised that all the droids haven't been trashed by now." Kara commented.

"No, Asha said that she and Jaysica were working separately with the droids divided up between them. It looks like Jaysica may have been leaving her share to our droids though." Vorn said, frowning as he told Kara about Jaysica's method of avoiding work.

"At least that way we can be sure that the droids she's asked to take a look at won't end up fit for the trash compactor." Kara said and then she lifted herself up from her chair, "Anyway enough of this poodoo. I'm hungry and I'm tired. Take me somewhere I can get something to eat and have a rest."

Vorn smiled.

"I think I know just the place." He told her.

Tobis studied the list of all the droids that had been assigned to Jaysica to examine and then the results of these examinations. A number of the droids showed signs that their core programming had been altered at some time in the past, but on its own this was nothing unusual in the Alliance. Often desperate for droids of any sort, commonly available types would be adapted to serve purposes other than those they had been designed for. However, as far as he could tell none of these modifications had anything to do with sabotaging the *Ocean Queen* in any way. For a moment Tobis considered the possibility that a droid could sabotage the ship and then be reprogrammed to remove this function, but that would still require another droid to be doing that reprogramming.

Just then the door slid open suddenly and an Alliance trooper burst in.

"You better come quickly." He exclaimed, "We just caught the droid!"

Looking at one another, Jaysica and Tobis paused then leapt to their feet and followed the soldier out of them.

"I suppose that we should just stay here then should we?" Jeeves called out after them, but they were already out of earshot. Turning back to Harvey and Penny he then added, "Well that was very rude if you ask me."

"Do you think they've really caught the droid that sabotaged the ship?" Jaysica asked Tobis as they hurried through the corridors of the Ocean Queen after the trooper.

"Err, well I suppose well find out when we examine it." He replied before the trooper ground to a halt outside a large door and opened it.

"In here." He said and then he darted through.

Jaysica and Tobis followed him through the door and found themselves in the cargo hold being used to hold the Imperial prisoners. Unlike when Mace and Tharun had seen the room though some of the guards had descended from the walkway and were clustered around a droid. Or rather what was left of one.

"You blew it up?" Jaysica asked as she and Tobis stared at the wrecked droid. From the looks of it, it had been an astromech droid of some type. The dome shaped head suggesting R2 or R3.

"Wh- what happened?" Tobis asked the guards and he knelt down to study the remains of the droid.

"It rolled in and began circling the cage." One replied, "No droid has any business being in here so we challenged it to halt. It didn't so we blasted the thing."

"Err, this hatch is open." Tobis said, tapping one of the hatches built into the astromech droid's cylindrical body.

"Yeah, that happened just before we blasted it. Why, what's behind it?" the guard answered.

"Err, fire extinguisher, computer access probe and – and –" and then Tobis stopped speaking and looked around to the cage filled with prisoners.

"Tobis what's wrong?" Jaysica asked.

"Oh, err, there's a cutting saw in there as well." He replied, "One that could cut right through that cage."

"But if the cage was cut open we'd never stop all of the prisoners from getting out." One of the guards said.

"I err, I think that was the point." Tobis said and then he looked up at Jaysica.

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." She said to him.

"I think we need to go and find the major." Tobis replied as he got back to his feet, "He needs to know about this."

"What about this droid?" one of the guards asked.

"Oh, err, you better keep it here where no one can get at it for now." Tobis told him, "We'll need to examine it further but, err, we can't risk anyone else getting at it first."

"Okay then." The senior guard announced, "We'll move it to the side of the room but after that nobody will get close to this thing until one of you two get back and tells us its okay. Is that acceptable?"

"Err. It should be yes." Tobis answered. Then he looked at Jaysica again, "Come, let's go."

"Ah, here we are." Tharun said as he and Lyssa stood arm in arm at the entrance to the honeymoon suite and he opened the door. Immediately a wide smile spread across Lyssa's face.

"Oh Tharun this is wonderful." She said as she let go of him and stepped inside. Then she noticed a table that had been set for a meal with a single candlestick in the centre, "And you even prepared it for us to have a romantic meal together!" she exclaimed and she rushed back to his side and kissed him.

"Huh? What?" Tharun replied when he too saw the table and despite the fact that he had no idea about how it had come to be in that condition, "But we'll have to see what sort of food I we can rustle up." He added, "I didn't have time to-"

"Oh that doesn't matter." Lyssa interrupted, "Come on, let's see what we can-" and then she too suddenly stopped talking and scowled.

"What's wrong?" Tharun asked, worried that she had figured out that the table was nothing to do with him.

"Hello daddy. Hello mother." She then said and Tharun turned to see Kara and Vorn standing in the doorway behind him.

"Stop calling me that!" Kara snapped.

"But you did marry my father." Lyssa pointed out and now Kara scowled.

"I take it that we weren't the only ones to have had the idea of coming here while we had the chance." Vorn then said.

"No you weren't daddy." Lyssa replied, "But look, my darling Tharun prepared that table for us. So that means the room is ours. I'm sure there are other cabins available though. Even if none of them are first class I'm sure they'll be good enough for a farmer's daughter." And she glared at Kara.

"Why you stuck up scruffy looking nerf herder!" Kara yelled and as she stepped towards Lyssa Vorn reached out and grabbed hold of her.

"Who's scruffy looking?" Lyssa replied angrily and as she looked as if she was about to move to strike Kara, Tharun wrapped an arm around her to hold her back, "I'll have you know that I only pick out the best clothing

available.”

”Yeah I bet.” Kara said, “Leaving the scraps for the rest of us.”

”Would you two give it a break?” Vorn said, “Now Kara, maybe we ought to leave since Tharun’s gone to the effort of-“

”Oh he didn’t do that.” Kara interrupted.

”What?” Vorn asked.

”Of course he did.” Lyssa said.

”Oh really?” Kara then asked, “So ask him which fork is which since I can see from here that he’s laid out a full set.”

”Ah.” Tharun commented as both Lyssa and Vorn stared at him.

”Well if you didn’t do this then who did?” Lyssa asked, peering over her shoulder at Tharun who just grinned back at her nervously.

”Can someone explain why you’re all in here?” Mace’s voice suddenly called out and as the four people in the room turned they saw him standing in the corridor outside with one arm around Malia and a bag of ration packs in the other.

Tharun looked at Vorn.

”Want me to check under the bed major?” he asked, “Jaysica and Tobis could be hiding under there.”

4.

The door to the office opened and Tobis and Jaysica rushed in.

"Where's Lyssa?" Jaysica asked as she looked at Cass. The girl was sat behind the desk that Lyssa had been using looking at a datapad and as the other two rebels entered she quickly pulled her feet off it.

"Gone." She replied, "Why?"

"Because we need to find the major." Jaysica said, "We thought she might know where he was."

"Try his comlink." Cass suggested.

"Err, we did." Tobis told her, "He's turned it off."

"So has everyone else." Jaysica added, "And nobody seems to know where any of them are."

"Well Tharun came in here and took the major's daughter away with him. He mentioned that he'd found out the honeymoon suite was still intact."

"Oh Tobis, did you hear that?" Jaysica said excitedly, "Perhaps we should see if we can get to use it for a while. Don't you remember how nice it was?"

"Well she went off with him and left me here alone with her." Cass said and she pointed to the deactivated Emsee sat slumped forwards in another nearby chair, "She was annoying though, so I turned her off." Then she paused for thought and added, "I'm not sure Lyssa or Tharun would be too happy if we disturb them though. They could be taking more pictures like these." And she held out the datapad towards Jaysica who saw that the display showed an image of Lyssa lying on a bed with only the angle of the photograph preserving her modesty.

"You shouldn't be looking at things like that!" Jaysica snapped as she snatched the datapad away from Cass and tried to turn it off as quickly as she could.

"Well she shouldn't give me a datapad if she doesn't want me to look at everything that's on it." Cass replied.

"We, err, we need to find out where the major or Captain Grayle are. Urgently." Tobis said, "And Tharun is likely to know how to find the captain at least."

"Look there's a simple solution to this." Malia said, "That table's big enough for six so we can just set four more places and then all eat together. How does that sound?"

"Well it sounds fair enough to me." Vorn replied as Kara and Lyssa continued to just glare at one another.

"Quite fair." Tharun agreed.

"Major, Tharun. May I just have a quick word?" Mace then asked and he beckoned them to follow him down the corridor.

"Of course." Vorn said and he and Tharun began to follow. Then Vorn paused and reached out and grabbed Kara by the arm, "You too." He said.

"But boss-" Kara began to protest.

"I'm not taking the chance on you and Lyssa coming to blows." Vorn whispered into her ear and she frowned.

"She started it." Kara muttered as Vorn led her away with him.

"I know that and I also know how you tend to finish things." Vorn whispered back. Then as Mace came to a halt Vorn looked at him and asked, "So what is it Mace?"

"I need the room." He said, "As in just me and Malia."

"How come?" Kara asked.

"I can't explain." Mace said, "I just need to have this meal with just Malia okay?"

"I think we can find somewhere else to get something to eat." Vorn said, looking at Kara, "After all we hadn't even figured out what we were going to eat yet."

"Lyssa won't like it but I'm sure I can persuade her." Tharun added, "Especially if the lieutenant's leaving. It'd make her look petty in comparison."

"Stop calling me lieutenant." Kara said, "It freaks me out." And then as Tharun drew in breath to speak again she quickly added, "And don't call me mom either. That's even worse."

"Fine. So we're all agreed that Mace gets the room then." Vorn said.

"Oh wait a minute boss." Kara replied, "You outrank him. Shouldn't we get the nice room?"

"Well technically Captain Mayan is a fleet captain." Tharun then pointed out, "That means on the field ops scale she's equivalent to a lieutenant colonel."

"And she said we should all share." Kara said, "Case closed, let's eat."

"No Kara." Vorn said, keeping hold of her as she tried to return to the room, "We'll find somewhere else."

Then looking at Tharun he added, "Now you go get Lyssa and we'll all find somewhere together."

"Sure thing major." Tharun replied before heading back to his wife.

"Thanks." Mace then said to Vorn.

"No problem." Vorn replied and with a smile he added, "So do you have a ring ready?"

Mace's jaw dropped briefly.

"How did you know?" he asked as his hand slid into his pocket.

"Fancy room. Fancy meal, or at least as fancy as survival rations can be." Vorn said, "Remember I've done this myself before. Twice."

"Let me see it." Kara whispered, pulling on Mace's wrist until his hand appeared holding a small black box.

He held it so that Malia could not see it and opened it up. Immediately Kara gasped.

"Dad! Major!" Cass then called out from further down the corridor and all the rebels looked around to see her rushing towards them with Jaysica and Tobis alongside her.

"What's wrong?" Vorn asked.

"The spy just tried to set all of the Imperial prisoners free." Jaysica exclaimed. Then she noticed the ring that Mace was holding and her eyes widened, "You're proposing to Captain Mayan?" she said out loud and Kara, Mace and Vorn all winced as Malia suddenly stared at Mace.

"Oh nice going laser brain!" Kara snapped.

"What?" Jaysica asked.

"Well he obviously hasn't asked her yet has he?" Kara responded, "Now you've just gone and blown it."

"Well how was I supposed to know?" Jaysica asked.

"Err, because he's still holding the ring?" Cass suggested as she smiled nervously at Malia.

"Can we just focus on what's important right now?" Vorn asked.

"Sure." Kara replied, "I'm dying to know if Malia will say yes."

"Of course she will." Cass responded.

"I think he means the spy trying to release the Imperial prisoners." Mace said as he returned the ring to his pocket.

"Yes I do." Vorn replied and he looked at Jaysica and Tobis, "Now explain properly."

"Oh, err, well you see a droid went up close to the holding pen and may have been about to cut it open when the guards shot it." Tobis replied.

"They made a real mess of it major." Jaysica added, "The droid I mean."

"We better go take a look and we ought to let Lieutenant Pay know so he can meet us there." Vorn said and he looked at Mace and added, "Sorry."

"That's okay major. I think the moment's gone anyway." Mace replied and Kara looked at Jaysica and frowned at her.

"What?" Jaysica asked again.

"We better stop by the *Silver Hawk* as well." Vorn said, "If the spy is making a move then I want something more than just this hold out blaster I've got under my jacket."

"I better be getting back to the *Renegade* as well." Malia said as she approached, "Releasing prisoners could just be a diversion for an attack." Then just before the rebels could set off she looked at Mace, "Oh and Mace honey?"

"Yes?" Mace replied.

"Exactly." Malia said and he frowned, "The answer's yes." Then Cass leapt forwards and embraced her.

"Wow! You're going to be my mom." She said.

"See lieutenant. Captain Mayan doesn't mind." Tharun then said to Kara who just frowned.

"Your men made a real mess of this droid." Vorn commented as he knelt by the remains of the astromech droid.

"It was the only way we could stop it." Colonel Drey replied. The woman had been summoned by the troops on guard and had remained to see what Vorn's team would make of the droid.

"Well Tobis, is there enough left to examine?" Mace then asked his engineer.

"Err, I don't know." Tobis answered, "But Lieutenant Lerner is more of an expert on droids than I am."

The door to the cargo hold then slid open again and Geran came rushing in.

"What have we got?" he asked out loud.

"A droid that wouldn't stop and some trigger happy guards." Kara replied. Then when she saw Mace and Vorn as well as the colonel looking at her she added, "What? They could have shot out its legs couldn't they?"

"Well we better get what's left of this droid's brain to my office." Geran said, "We need to take a look at what's left of its memory."

"We'll need Lieutenant Lerner." Mace pointed out and Geran nodded.

"Has she been contacted?" he asked.

"Not yet."

"I don't get it." Cass then said, "If we know that this is the droid responsible for the sabotage then can't we just take it back to headquarters to be examined? Surely the information on who last reprogrammed it will be there."

"The spy couldn't have known about this holding cell before the *Ocean Queen* was deployed." Vorn explained, "And in order to reprogram the droid to release the prisoners from it the spy must have known about it first. "Which means-"

"Which means that the spy is aboard the ship with us." Geran interrupted, "Either as part of the ship's crew or someone that we brought along with us in the work crew."

Geran and Tobis both picked up the pieces of the astromech droid's remains and the group then began to head for the door. All except Tharun.

"Is there a problem sergeant?" Vorn asked.

"I'm not sure sir." Tharun replied, "Something just doesn't look right. I can't put my finger on it but I've got a bad feeling about this. I'd like to stay and keep an eye on things here if that's all right."

"Certainly. Carry on sergeant." Vorn said and then he turned around again and left with the others as Tharun continued to gaze into the cage.

The droid components were laid out on a workbench in the room being used by Geran when Asha rushed in. "What have we got?" she asked.

"Several bits of charred droid." Geran replied.

"Courtesy of the ship's marine detachment." Kara added.

Asha picked up the first piece of the droid she came to and looked at it closely.

"Well lieutenant?" Vorn said to her.

"I think that the damage is just cosmetic." She said, "Charring from a nearby blaster bolt I'd say. Though the heat could have fried it and there'd be no way of knowing until we plug it into a computer."

"Then I suggest you get started." Vorn told her and she nodded.

Together with Geran and Tobis, Asha began to prepare the components to have their stored data copied and examined while Cass and Jaysica just watched. Meanwhile Vorn took Kara and mace aside.

"We need a plan of action." He told them.

"Well whoever reprogrammed that droid is going to know we've got it boss." Kara replied, "Or rather what's left of it."

"Which probably means that she's preparing another one as we speak." Mace said.

"I think we should tell Captain Ghillas to have all droids recalled to storage and shut down." Vorn said.

"That's a tall order major." Mace said, "Running a ship this size without any droids to make sure that all the trivial stuff gets done is not going to be easy."

"Yeah, unless you're not so fussed about little details like air or gravity." Kara added.

"That doesn't matter right now." Vorn said, "What is important is that we stop any more sabotage before it happens and those prisoners stay right where they are. Now I'll go and see the captain while you lot remain here and see what our experts can recover from that droid brain."

5.

Tharun headed up onto the walkway to get a view of the cage from a different angle. As far as he could tell it looked undamaged, just as it had done when he had circled it just before.

"So how many are in there?" he asked one of the guards.

"Four hundred twenty-six, the guard replied without taking his eyes off the cage.

"Four hundred and twenty six." Tharun repeated to himself. Given the way that the prisoners were moving about that was too many for him to be able to attempt a count by himself. This was especially true of the stormtroopers, all of whom appeared identical. Then he suddenly began to look around the cage for a particular individual he had seen earlier.

"What supplies have been given to the prisoners?" he asked quickly, without looking at the guard beside him.

"I'm sorry sergeant, I don't quite understand."

"Its an easy enough question. What supplies have been provided to the prisoners? Food? Water? Replacement clothing?"

"Just food and water since they got put in here." The guard answered.

"And what about the stormtroopers' armour?"

"Confiscated when their escape pods were recovered. They were brought here in those overalls."

"So where's that COMPForce creep then?" Tharun asked as he continued looking for the man he had seen when he first inspected the cage.

"Perhaps he's using the refresher." The guard suggested as he too began to search for the figure in a distinctive COMPForce uniform.

"Then he's taking his time about it." Tharun said, "Because I've been looking at that cage for more than twenty minutes now and I haven't seen him at all." Then he pulled his comlink from his pocket and activated it, "Major do you read me?"

"Vorn here. Go ahead Tharun." Vorn's voice replied.

"Major I think we've got a big problem. I think that some of the prisoners have escaped."

When the doors to the cargo hold next opened it was so that Mace, Vorn and Lieutenant Colonel Drey could enter, accompanied by a platoon of the colonel's troops.

"What's going on here sergeant?" the colonel demanded.

"I know we're short of one prisoner and I wouldn't be surprised if there were more missing." Tharun replied.

"How can you tell?" Mace asked, "Half of them have the same face."

"There was that COMPForce observer in there when we were first here captain. Now he's gone."

"Spread out around the holding pen." Colonel Drey ordered her troops and the marines began to form a cordon around the cage.

"So where do you think that the breach is?" Vorn asked.

"That's just it major; I don't think that there is one. The guards would have noticed anyone trying to cut through the mesh."

"So how do you think that they escaped sergeant? Are you suggested they just teleported out of there?"

Colonel Drey asked.

"No ma'am. But I think it may have something to do with that droid." Tharun replied, "I don't think that it was intended to cut through the cage side at all. We all know that even though the guards may have been overwhelmed by a mass breakout a good number of the prisoners would still have been killed first."

"So what do you think the droid was doing here?" Mace asked.

"I think it was just sent to survey the layout of the holding area and get the exact position of those refreshers." Tharun replied.

"The refreshers?" Vorn said, "But why?"

"For that we'll need to get in there." Tharun answered.

Colonel Drey then looked at her men surrounding the cage.

"Get those prisoners along one side." She called out, "Then get that door open."

The troops surrounding the cage immediately began to bellow at the Imperial prisoners, ordering them to gather as far from the locked cage door as possible and when some were slow in their reaction there were sudden flashes of blue as blasters set to stun were fired at the deck close by them. Then once the area around the cage door was clear one of the guards unlocked it, allowing Tharun, the officers and a pair of marines to enter. Tharun headed straight for the refresher units and one at a time he pulled open the door. The look on his face indicating that the amount of use they had seen was making them smell rather unpleasant. Then he suddenly stopped and stepped back.

"There." He said, pointing inside at the hole not only in the base of the refresher unit but also the deck plating on which it stood, "Someone cut through from the deck below."
"Oh stang!" Colonel Drey exclaimed, "How the hell did that happen?"
"My guess would be that the astromech droid was transmitting everything it saw to a remote location and that was used to determine exactly where to cut through the deck plating." Mace said.
"Never mind that right now." Vorn said as he unslung the rifle he had over his shoulder, "Down the hole sergeant."
"Yes sir." Tharun replied as he also unslung his heavier rifle and then lowered himself down through the hole. Mace went next while Vorn looked at the colonel.
"I suggest you get this sealed up and do a head count." He said to her, "And perhaps the prisoners should make do with buckets from now on." Then he too jumped down through the hole.
The deck below was lit only dimly and in the darkness the exact function of the room in which the rebels had landed could not be determined. What could be deduced however was that there was nobody else in there with them.
"Let's shed some light on this shall we?" Vorn said as he switched on a glow rod and shone its light over the machinery that lined the walls.
"I'd say that we're somewhere within the air reprocessing plant." Mace said, "These look like carbon dioxide scrubbers to me."
"Very good, but where are the missing prisoners?" Vorn asked and just then there was the sound of heavy footfalls as something large and metal came down the corridor outside the room towards the rebels. All three pressed themselves up against the wall and aimed their blasters towards the approaching droid, a bulky maintenance type that unsurprisingly was equipped with a cutting torch built into its chassis in place of an arm.
"You will accompany me." The droid announced, apparently oblivious to the fact that the three men before it were not Imperial soldiers.
"You heard him." Vorn said to the others as he lowered his blaster, "Let's go."

"This looks fried." Asha said, shaking her head as she attempted to access the droid's optical sensor memory.
"So we can't tell who reprogrammed it then?" Jaysica asked.
"That's pretty much the case yes." Geran answered, "Though there may be clues in the rest of the wreckage."
Just then Tobis' comlink chirped.
"Err, hello?" he said as he activated the device.
"Tobis," Mace's voice hissed, "we're somewhere in the atmosphere reprocessing system following a droid. We think it's responsible for cutting a hole in the deck under the holding pen for the Imperial prisoners. Get down here and help us figure out what it's up to."
"Oh, err, yes captain. I'm on my way." Tobis replied and then he stuffed the comlink back in his pocket.
"Wait." Asha said to him suddenly, "You stay here and keep working on that droid. I'll go and help with the one your friends have found."
"You better not go alone." Kara said.
"In your condition you'll just slow me down." Asha replied and Kara frowned, "Major Larcus is going to need help quickly."
"I'm not an invalid." Kara said angrily.
"No, but you can't run as fast as you need to." Geran pointed out and then he looked at Jaysica, "You better go with her instead."
"Me?" Jaysica replied.
"Yes corporal. You." Geran said, "Now get out of here the pair of you."

The droid led the three rebels to another nearby compartment and halted outside.
"You should wait in here." It told them, "Further instructions will follow later on."
"Well you heard him." Vorn said as he pressed himself up against the wall beside the door and his hand hovered over the controls. Then he waited while Mace positioned himself on the other side of the door and Tharun stood opposite it, his rifle aimed directly at it.
"Ready major." Tharun said, nodding and Vorn slammed his hand down on the button to open the door. Tharun saw movement from beyond the door and opened fire, two bright red blaster bolts shooting into the room and impacting on the far wall not far from the head of a man in the black uniform of an Imperial Navy fleet trooper.
"Stang!" a man's voice called out from inside the room and just as Mace dived through the open doorway a blaster bolt flew over his head back out into the corridor.

As soon as he came to a halt Mace felt the impact of someone else tackling him and as he fell backwards he found himself looking into the familiar face of a stormtrooper clone. Unlike Tharun and Vorn, Mace was armed with only his heavy blaster pistol rather than a rifle and as the stormtrooper struck him the weapon ended up trapped between them. As he tried to fight off the stormtrooper with his one free hand Mace also tried to pull the weapon free, but the stormtrooper appeared to know what he was doing and reached down to grab hold of the weapon for himself. As the blaster emerged from between them it pointed it neither and both struggled to turn it towards their opponent, but before either could gain the upper hand Vorn charged through the doorway and swung the butt of his rifle at the stormtrooper, striking him at the base of his skull. Suddenly able to move as Vorn pulled the incapacitated stormtrooper off him, Mace swung his blaster towards where the fleet trooper had now taken cover and fired twice. Both shots missed, but the forced the trooper to cease fire and duck for long enough to allow Tharun to reach the doorway and fire a burst from his rifle towards the trooper's improvised barrier. The powerful weapon punched several smoking holes straight through it and there was the sound of something heavy hitting the floor behind it. Both Mace and Vorn rushed forwards, their blasters still trained at the barrier and they looked over it to see that the trooper was now dead. Then Vorn's comlink sounded.

"Go ahead." He said into the device.

"Larcus it's Drey. We've done a count and we're short of seventeen prisoners. They must be down there with you."

"Seventeen?" Vorn responded, "Well we've dealt with two, but there's no sign of the others. One of the ones we encountered had a blaster so I think that its safe to assume that at least some of the others will be armed as well. We've no choice but to sound a security alert and lock down this section of the ship."

"Understood." Colonel Drey replied, "But be careful."

"Oh don't worry about that." Vorn replied, "We're always careful." And then he shut off the comlink and put it away before noticing that both Mace and Tharun were staring at him, "What?" he asked.

Tobis paused in his inspection of the astromech droid's remains as he looked at part of the droid's casing.

"Found something interesting?" Kara asked as she noticed he had stopped.

"What? Oh, err, maybe." Tobis replied and then he got up and approached the intercom terminal on the wall nearby. Picking up the handset he dialled in the number for the room where Jaysica had been examining droids earlier.

"Hello?" Jeeves' voice answered, "I'm terribly sorry but it there's no one here right now. They've left us all alone down here."

"Oh, err, hi Jeeves." Tobis said.

"Why Master Dorfus it is so good to hear your voice." Jeeves replied, "Might I ask how much longer we should wait here?"

"Err, I'm not sure. Look Jeeves do you have that datapad with the list of droids on it? Tobis asked.

"Why of course Master Dorfus. I have it right here."

"Good. Err, I need you to check a serial number for me. It's, err, it's resh two grek four four eight."

"Certainly master Dorfus. That serial number is listed here as one of the droids that Lieutenant Lerner was to have examined. Though it has not been logged as having been checked yet. Might I ask what-" Jeeves told him before Tobis suddenly shut off the intercom.

"Jaysica's in trouble." He said, turning towards the other rebels.

"The klutz is always in trouble." Kara replied, "She is trouble."

"Leave her alone for once!" Tobis snapped and Kara and the others just stared at him.

"Calm down sergeant." Geran said, "Now explain properly."

"Well, err, the droid that was used to survey the holding pen was on the list that Lieutenant Lerner was going to examine, yes?"

"That's what Jeeves just said." Cass replied.

"So, well, err, if it's on her list but she hasn't checked it yet then why isn't it still being held in storage?" Tobis asked and both Geran's and Kara's eyes widened.

"Oh kriff." Kara said, "We've got to warn the boss."

"I need to warn Jaysica." Tobis added as they both took out their comlinks.

"What's going on?" Cass asked, looking at everyone in turn.

"We've just found our spy." Geran replied and he pointed to the remains of the droid they had been studying, "Asha Lerner reprogrammed this droid and set it loose."

"But why leave us here to find out?" Cass then asked.

"Probably because she's not planning on coming back." Kara told her, "She must have something else planned."

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

6.

Asha and Jaysica rushed into the turbolift and skidded to a halt. Asha spun around and pressed a button on the control panel to select the turbolift car's destination.

"Hey that's not the right floor." Jaysica said, "That's the hangar level."

"Oh yes it is." Asha replied and before Jaysica could react she lashed out with one hand and struck the smaller woman in her throat. Jaysica clutched at her neck gasping for air as she staggered back and then Asha delivered a strong punch to her face that knocked her back against the wall of the turbolift car before she collapsed in a heap on the floor.

Then Asha took out her datapad and comlink and connected the two devices together. Then she tapped at the datapad display and smiled.

In one of the rooms used to store droids aboard the *Ocean Queen* all of the inactive machines suddenly came to life and began to move towards the exit.

"What's happening?" Tharun said as alarms suddenly began to sound, "That's not the security lockdown."

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

"Me too." Vorn replied. Then he saw the same droid that had led them to the room containing the two escaped prisoners coming towards them.

"You should locate the nearest escape pod." The droid announced, "This ship must be abandoned."

"Abandoned?" Tharun said, "That doesn't sound good."

On the bridge of the *Ocean Queen* Captain Ghillas looked around.

"What's happening?" he demanded.

"We have system failures all over the ship captain." One of his officers replied, "It looks like it's the droids sir. They're attacking the ship."

"Get me Colonel Drey." The captain ordered.

"The colonel is in the lower decks sir, dealing with the prisoners."

"Then just get me anyone who can deal with these droids!" Captain Ghillas exclaimed.

Cass helped Kara along as Geran and Tobis hurried on ahead. Overhead the lights flickered and the rebels looked up at the failing illumination panels.

"Oh this isn't good." Kara said.

"Jaysica!" Tobis suddenly exclaimed and Cass and Kara looked ahead to see that he and Geran had reached the turbolift at the end of the corridor and that Tobis was knelt cradling Jaysica in his arms.

"Let me see her." Kara called out as she moved forwards as fast as she could manage and when she reached the turbolift she too knelt down beside the unconscious Jaysica, "No broken bones that I can see." She said, "But I think that she's suffered a blow to the head or two."

"Will she be okay? Cass asked.

"I need to check her out properly. But I'm not so sure I'd want to trust this ship's medical systems right now. Get us to the *Silver Hawk*. My stuff is there."

Approaching the *Ocean Queen's* hangar, Asha halted at the entrance and looked around. Ground crews were rushing from ship to ship in here and disconnecting from the *Ocean Queen's* automated refuelling and diagnostic systems before they could be damaged. The squadron of X-wings under Captain Tarl was maintaining a continuous patrol schedule by keeping most of its fighters in the hangar at any one time while just two patrolled outside and Asha headed towards the nearest of these.

Beside the fighter was an R2 astromech droid and Asha calmly walked up to this and plugged her datapad into the droid.

"What is the status of this craft?" she asked and as the droid chirped its reply she saw the translation appear in text on her datapad's display, "Good." She said and she began to tap at her datapad, accessing the droid's programming, "I have new orders for you." She added.

As they drew closer to the *Ocean Queen's* outer hull Mace, Tharun and Vorn heard the sound of footsteps ahead of them. Not the harder sound of metal on metal of droids but the sound of booted feet moving in a hurry.

"Identify yourselves!" Vorn called out and in reply a blaster bolt came hurtling towards them.

"Down!" Tharun snapped as he dropped to the deck and returned fire.

"Well it looks like we've found the other escapees." Mace said as he too fired a shot towards the enemy despite not having a clear line of sight, "Looks like you were right about them heading towards these escape pods."

"They're the nearest." Vorn pointed out, "They don't know the layout so they'd have to have asked the droid and it would have pointed them here."

"So what's the plan major?" Tharun asked.

"Aim high and wide." Vorn replied.

"Huh?" Tharun said.

"Don't bother trying to drive them back." Vorn explained, "Make it look like we don't want them escaping, but let them get to the pods. Once they've ejected they can't go anywhere. We're in interstellar space with no planets for tens of billions of kilometres in any direction. Just as soon as we've dealt with what's going on here we can pick them up. But we don't want them deciding to go and cause trouble elsewhere on the ship." Tharun sighed.

"If you say so sir." He said.

While Cass continued to help Kara, Geran and Tobis carried Jaysica between them into the hangar and towards the *Silver Hawk*. Geran and Tobis were first up the access ramp, while Cass paused at the bottom and glanced around what was happening in the hangar.

"Come on kid." Kara said as she proceeded up the ramp on her own.

"Isn't that her?" Cass asked, staring towards the line of X-wing fighters on the other side of the hangar.

"Who?" Kara asked.

"Lieutenant Lerner. The spy." Cass replied and Kara walked back down the ramp to look for herself. She was just in time to see Asha climbing into the cockpit of a fighter and putting on a helmet.

"Oh stang! It is her!" she exclaimed. Then she looked at Cass, "Quick, get aboard we've got to go after her." The pair hurried back up the ramp and sealed it behind them. Then they headed into the lounge area of the ship where Geran and Tobis had laid Jaysica out on the floor.

"Can't see to her now." Kara said as she darted to the ladder that led to the *Silver Hawk's* turret and Cass headed for the cockpit, "That traitorous rancor is getting away. Tobis you need to make sure that the engines are ready for launch."

"Launch?" Geran said as Tobis ran to the ship's workshop, "But if you're going to the turret and he's going to get the engines going, who's going to fly it?"

"I am." Cass replied as she headed down the corridor to the cockpit and Geran's jaw dropped.

"Her? But she's just a kid." He said, looking back towards Kara as she climbed up into the turret.

"She's a kid who can fly." Kara replied as she squeezed herself into the gunnery chair, her swollen stomach only just fitting behind the controls.

"Oh I've got a bad feeling about this." Geran said and then he ran to the cockpit, "You sure you know what you're doing?" he asked as he sat down beside Cass.

"Sure I know." She replied, "Dad's been teaching me." And then the ship shifted as Cass powered up the repulsorlift engines.

"So how are we planning on catching a fighter?" Geran asked over the intercom.

"Well I'm figuring that Cass is a better pilot than Asha." Kara replied, "Besides which all Cass has to do is fly. Asha's got to try and get a jump plotted as well if she wants to escape."

"Well we better get a move on." Geran said, "Because Asha just took off."

Asha's stolen X-wing flew out of the hangar and accelerated directly away from the *Ocean Queen*. Looking at her sensors she saw that both the *Renegade* and the two patrolling X-wings were positioned on the far side of the star cruiser.

"Blue Six what are you doing?" Jarad transmitted from one of the patrolling fighters.

"Can you run the communications?" Asha asked the reprogrammed astromech droid now mounted behind her and watched the display on the control console that translated the reply, indicating that the droid could operate the communications, "Good. Then tell Captain Tarl that this fighter has been rigged to explode and you're trying to get it as far from the *Ocean Queen* as you can. Then plot me a jump to the Bytan system." And the droid chirped its compliance.

It was then that the *Silver Hawk* suddenly flew out of the hangar behind her.

"Okay she's right ahead of us." Geran told Cass.

"I know, I see her." Cass replied as she steered towards Asha's fighter. However, she applied too much pressure to the controls and Geran watched as the X-wing vanished off to the side.

"Keep us on her tail kid." Kara said from the turret.

"I'm trying." Cass replied, "But I've not flown in combat before."

"Tobis get to the cockpit and take over." Kara ordered.

"Err, right." He replied and he ran from the workshop to the cockpit where Cass slid from the pilot's seat and let him take her place.

"I take it you know how to fly this thing properly?" Geran asked.

"Err, yes." Tobis replied as he quickly determined Asha's position from the sensors and then steered the *Silver Hawk* towards her.

"Mace is that you?" Malia's voice then sounded over the communications system.

"No, Captain Grayle's still on the *Ocean Queen*." Geran replied, "We're going after that X-wing that just launched."

"The one that's about to explode? Why?" Malia asked.

"What do you mean its about to explode?" Geran asked her in return.

"The astromech droid aboard it told us. The ship's been sabotaged and the ground crew launched it to get it clear."

"No! Lieutenant Lerner's aboard. She's the spy and she's getting away." Geran said.

"You're kidding." Malia said, "Look, we're coming about. We'll be with you in two minutes."

"I don't think we've got that long." Geran replied.

From her position in the turret Kara aimed her single laser cannon towards Asha's fleeing fighter. She watched impatiently as the targeting system indicated that the fighter was out of range but as she had correctly guessed Asha's inexperience was limiting how fast she could escape and the gap between the two ships closed until all of a sudden there was a bleeping that indicated the fighter was now within firing range and Kara chanced a quick volley of fire. The blasts streaked out across the space between the two ships to just clip the wing of the fighter, blasting off two of its laser cannons.

"What the hell?" Asha exclaimed as the fighter shook and she looked along the wing as her astromech droid reported the damage, "Okay then if that's how you want to do this." Asha said to herself and then out loud she addressed the droid, "Lock S-foils in attack position. We're going in."

"Look!" Cass exclaimed and she pointed through the cockpit canopy at where Asha's fighter was banking round and heading back towards them.

"Oh, err, perhaps I ought to raise the shields." Tobis said.

"You think?" Geran responded.

Then there were streaks of red across the blackness of space as Asha and Kara exchanged fire. But although both women's aim was good the two ships had both had chance to raise their shields and all of the shots were deflected.

The two ships flew past one another and Asha ceased fire, banking to bring the *Silver Hawk* back into her line of fire. But Kara's cannon had an all round field of fire and she spun the turret to track the fighter, continuing to fire and Asha's inexperience at space combat was suddenly exposed.

When she had steered to engage the *Silver Hawk* she had concentrated her fighter's shields towards the front of the craft and now that the freighter was behind her she had left herself vulnerable. One of Kara's laser blasts struck the rear of Asha's X-wing and her astromech droid let out a brief squeal before it was consumed in fire.

"No!" Asha exclaimed as she realised that she was now effectively trapped here. She had no experience at plotting hyperspace jumps and without the droid to do it for her she was unlikely to be able to manage it for herself before the corvette and other two fighters now bearing down on her got into range.

However, she could still try and take revenge on the rebels who had done this to her and with a scowl on her face she activated her targeting computer as she lined up on the *Silver Hawk* once more.

"Oh, err, uh-oh." Tobis said as he banked the *Silver Hawk* to one side suddenly.

"Tobis what are you playing at?" Kara demanded from the turret, "How can I aim if you can't fly straight?"

"Oh, err, sorry. But Asha's trying to get a torpedo lock." He replied.

"Oh stang." Kara said, "Keep us out of the way then. I'll do whatever I can from here." And she opened fire at random; laying down a curtain of fire intended to prevent Asha from getting a lock on them rather than making a serious attempt to shoot down the spy.

Asha felt her fighter shake again as one of Kara's shots hit her forward shields. But the targeting computer was still getting closer to a lock and Asha smiled as she watched it calculating the ideal firing solution.

"I have you now." She said as she heard a continuous tone.

"Oh no." Kara said as she saw the flash of white light from the X-wing as a torpedo was launched and as she watched the weapon closing her hands went to her stomach and the unborn child within it. But the torpedo just shot right past the *Silver Hawk* without detonating as Kara turned to watch it carry on into the distance. Then she looked back at Asha's fighter to see what had happened to disrupt the lock.

"No, no, no!" Asha said as she frantically looked over the console in front of her to try and find out what she had done wrong. There was still a tone being emitted by the console and Asha could not understand why the torpedo had failed to destroy the *Silver Hawk*. Then she realised that the tone was not indicating that she had a lock on the *Silver Hawk*, but that someone had obtained a lock on her.

"I have you now." Jarad said to himself as he squeezed the trigger on his control column and then he smiled as he watched the torpedo fly towards the stolen X-wing.

Inside that fighter Asha attempted to fly an evasive pattern to disrupt the lock, but as a novice pilot she did not know how to best shake it off and as the alarms in her cockpit grew louder she instead let go of the control column and closed her eyes.

"They got her!" Cass yelled as she saw the torpedo strike Asha's X-wing.

"Yeah I see it." Geran said as another pair of fighters then flew past, their wings opened out into the attack position.

"Hello *Silver Hawk*." Mace's voice then called out from the communication system.

"Dad?" Cass asked, "Dad we got her. The spy. We got her."

"Oh, err, technically it was Captain Tarl's fighters that-" Tobis began.

"Never mind that." Mace interrupted, "Now the escaped prisoners are adrift and Colonel Drey's marines are running around dealing with the reprogrammed droids, but I still have one little question for you."

"Oh, err, right. What is it captain?" Tobis asked.

"What the hell are you lot doing with my starship?"