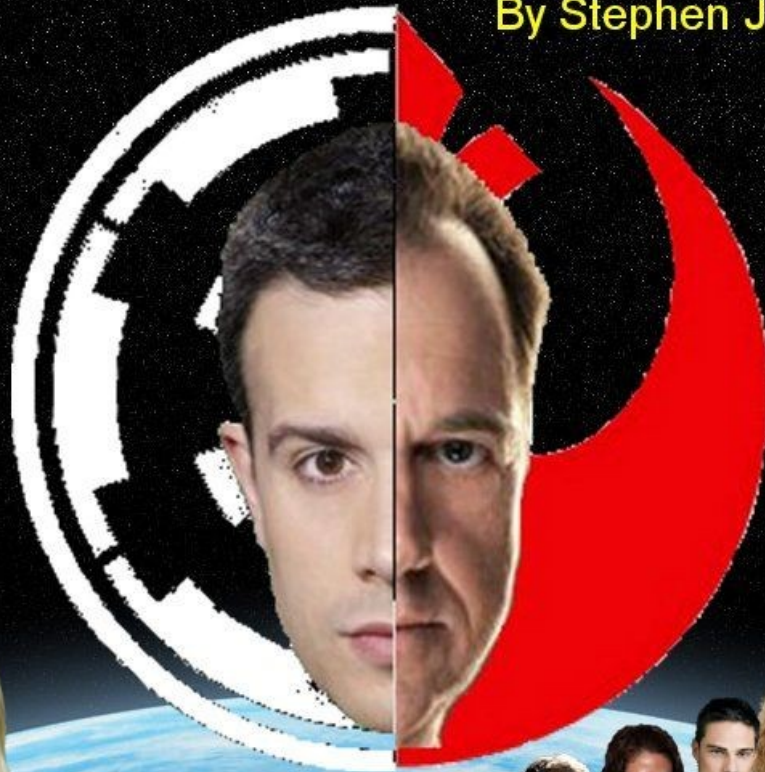


STAR WARS

7-11: A Droid in the Hand

By Stephen J Dutton



7-11
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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 GUERILLA
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...

A DROID IN THE HAND

ACCIDENTS HAPPEN, ESPECIALLY WHEN JAYSICA HORPID IS CLOSE BY AND WHEN
ANOTHER OF HER 'ACCIDENTS' LANDS HER AND HER CREW MATES IN TROUBLE HELP
IS NEEDED FROM THE MOST UNLIKELY OF SOURCES...

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

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1.

Maintaining an interstellar blockade required a massive dedication of resources and even a full squadron of Imperial starships was not sufficient to do it on their own, especially when the region to be blockaded ran the entire length of the Spire Worlds, the collection of star systems that was considered to run vertically 'upwards' from the sector between two protruding arms of the nearby nebula. Somewhere within the nebula the Empire believed that there was a faction of Separatists who had been able to hold out since the end of the Clone wars with significant forces at their disposal and so even with the panic that was starting to spread following the destruction of the second Death Star and the deaths of Emperor Palpatine and Darth Vader the local sector government was still willing to dedicate ships to this task.

The blockade was commanded by Admiral Lorn Sayer from his flagship the allegiance-class battlecruiser *Pride of the Empire* and his entire battle squadron made regular patrols up and down the Spire Worlds to watch the most likely exit points from the nebula. But in addition to this the Empire had launched thousands of probe droids into the nebula and laid millions of mines to block the path of ships trying to sneak past the patrols.

The Defender Ion Mine was one such type of mine that had been deployed in vast quantities by the Imperial navy. This weapon was designed as a reusable method of disabling starships and functioned in the same way as an ion cannon aboard a capital ship. If the mine detected a vessel approaching it, it would turn its weapon towards the ship and fire a power charged particle blast that could penetrate any shield and would overwhelm the electronics of the target, leaving it adrift and vulnerable. But the same properties that made the mines so useful to the Empire also made them of interest to other parties.

The YT-1300 class transport ship *Silver Hawk* had once been a legitimate cargo hauler. But when its owner Mace Grayle fell on hard times he had drifted into black market work and from there to working with the Alliance to Restore the Republic and now his ship was used to transport a rebel field team led by Major Vorn Larcus III. Now that the Alliance was putting greater pressure on the Empire and looked set to declare a New Republic at any time, the local Alliance forces were keen to boost their firepower should their guerilla campaign suddenly change to one of open warfare and for this reason Vorn had been ordered to take his team to the blockade and obtain as many of the ion mines as could be fit inside the *Silver Hawk's* hold. Vorn himself was asleep when the commotion first began and he opened his eyes at the sound of the first scream.

"Major is that what I think it is?" a voice asked from the bunk above Vorn's and the face of Tharun Verser, the former mercenary who was not only part of Vorn's team but also his son in law appeared peering down at him.

"Yes sergeant." Vorn replied, "I've got a bad feeling that it is." and he crawled out of his bunk and put on a robe.

Opening the door to the cabin he and Tharun shared, Vorn found a young woman still in her teenage years who was dressed for bed standing in the short passageway that connected all three of the *Silver Hawk's* cabins and its bathroom to the main lounge area. This was Cass Grayle, the adopted daughter of Mace.

"They're at it again major." she said.

"Thanks Cass." Vorn said just as Mace himself appeared from the cabin he shared with his engineer Tobis Dorfus. In turn the engineer also peered out into the passageway, "Sorry everyone." Vorn said, "I'll deal with this."

"That would be appreciated major." Mace said, "They are yours."

"One more so than the other." Vorn muttered, "But I get your point." and he then opened the door to the cabin that Cass was stood beside.

Inside the cabin Vorn immediately saw the other two members of his team. The first was the team medic Kara Larcus who also happened to be Vorn's wife despite being more than thirty years his junior while the other was the team's demolition and security expert Jaysica Horbid. Like Cass both women were dressed for bed but neither of them was making any effort to relax. Instead despite the confines of the cabin they shared with Cass the pair were wrestling on the floor with Jaysica holding tight onto a blanket while Kara was attempting to take it from her by force.

"Give it to me you klutz!" Kara yelled.

"No, it's mine!" Jaysica responded, "You have your own."

"Mine's ruined thanks to you!" Kara shouted.

"Shut up!" Vorn bellowed and both women stopped struggling and looked up at him.

"Now look what you did." Kara said to Jaysica, "You woke the boss."

"She woke me?" Vorn said, "Kara you're making as much noise as she is."

"But boss look at what she did." Kara said and she pointed to her bunk where the blanket was now stained

with some sort of brown liquid.

"It wasn't my fault." Jaysica said, "The floor was slippery."

"The floor was slippery because you spilt even more of that stuff on it." Kara said and Vorn looked down to see a second brown stain there.

"I just wanted a drink of hot chocolate to help me sleep." Jaysica said and Vorn frowned.

"Kara did you-" he began.

"No boss." she interrupted, "I did not leave laxative hot chocolate where the klutz would find it and drink it. It may be funny but it's way too messy." then she frowned, "Of course the regular stuff is no good when she hurls it around the place and nearly scalds me to death in my sleep."

Vorn then turned to the door that led to the lounge and opened it.

"Jeeves! Harvey!" he called out and a golden coloured protocol droid and an R5 astromech droid soon appeared.

"Yes Major Larcus sir." his protocol droid, known as Jeeves said, "How may we assist you?"

"How far from the minefield are we?" Vorn asked and the astromech droid whistled.

"Harvey indicates that at our current reduced speed we will reach the first of the target mines in two point five hours sir." Jeeves translated.

"Excellent." Vorn said and he turned back to the two women on the floor of their cabin, "Okay I want a gear check by the time we arrive." he told them, "Kara you need to make sure that your suit is ready as well as Mace's and the one we've been lent for Jaysica."

"Mine? But I'm not a demolitions expert boss." Kara said, "Why do I have to go?"

"Because you'll be dealing with a live ion cannon." Vorn pointed out, "Jaysica knows remote triggers and Tobis will be able to evaluate the power systems. But you're the one with more knowledge of starship weaponry than any of the rest of us. This is a dangerous job and I need the best people on it." and at this point Kara smiled and looked down at Jaysica.

"You hear that? I'm the best." she said.

"Just get on with it and let the rest of us get some sleep." Vorn said before turning back towards his cabin.

"Oh, err, perhaps I ought to-" Tobis began.

"No Tobis." Mace said before he could finish, "Just because I'll be the one in my vacc suit for this doesn't mean you need to do the checks."

"He only wants to do it because Jaysica's got to." Cass commented before she returned to her bunk.

"I know." Mace responded, "Now nobody better disturb me for at least the next two hours."

The ion mine was pointed towards the nebula as the *Silver Hawk* drifted towards it but as Mace and Vorn watched it from the cockpit they knew that this could change at any moment and so they kept the ship's systems to a minimum as they approached. The mine was fitted with numerous anti-detection countermeasures itself and it had taken considerable effort for the rebels to determine the exact location of the mines in this particular field. Unfortunately they had been able to do nothing remotely to disable them without damaging them.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this major." Mace said, "The Empire isn't going to leave hardware like this drifting around in space if they thought that it was going to be easy for someone to do what we're planning."

"Maybe not but so far but it obviously hasn't spotted us. If it had it would have fired already." Vorn replied.

"Nevertheless I think that this is close enough." Mace said and Vorn nodded.

"I agree." he said and Mace fired several short bursts from the *Silver Hawk's* thrusters to bring it to a halt.

Meanwhile Vorn reached for the intercom.

"Target dead ahead. Is everyone ready?" he asked.

"Could you not use the word 'dead' in this situation boss?" Kara responded, "But yes, we're all-"

"Wait." Jaysica interrupted, "I still need Penny."

"What for?" Kara asked her.

"Because she knows how to fix things." Jaysica said and in the storage room that doubled as an air lock she looked around and called out, "Penny!"

In response to the summons a tiny box shaped mouse droid zoomed across the floor of the lounge into the storage room where Jaysica scooped it up and placed it in a shoulder bag.

"Now are you ready?" Kara asked and Jaysica nodded, "What about you Tobis?" Kara then asked, looking at the engineer who was adjusting some of the fittings of the vacuum suit he had borrowed from Mace.

"What? Oh, err, yes." he replied.

"All set boss." Kara said into the intercom.

"Then you better get started." Vorn told all three of the rebels in the storage room, "We've got a lot of work to do today."

"What does he mean 'we'?" Kara muttered after deactivating the intercom and then she and the other two vacc suited rebels put on their helmets and sealed their suits.

When this was done they closed the door to the lounge and Tobis began the de-pressurisation procedure,

flushing the air out of the storage room until it was a vacuum. When this was complete he began to climb the ladder up to the hatch mounted in the upper hull of the *Silver Hawk* and opened it. One by one the three rebels all climbed out onto the hull, holding onto one of the many irregular features as they looked towards the drifting mine that was their target.

"That's it?" Jaysica asked, "How are we all supposed to get across there?"

"Jump." Kara replied.

"Oh, err, we better link ourselves together." Tobis said and from his belt he began to unreel a length of syntherope. This was then passed through securing clips on the vacuum suits of all three rebels while leaving a significant length spare so that it could be tied to the mine when they reached it to prevent them from drifting off into space as they worked.

"Okay everyone get ready to jump on my command." Kara said when this was done.

"Why yours?" Jaysica asked.

"Because I'm a lieutenant, Tobis is a sergeant and you're just a corporal." Kara said and Jaysica frowned, "Now get ready. Get set. Jump!"

All three rebels leapt from the *Silver Hawk* towards the floating mine and propelled by nothing more than their own momentum they drifted towards it. Both Kara and Tobis reached out for the mine as they passed it, grabbing hold of some of the numerous protruding panels and antennas while Jaysica continued to drift until the syntherope line was pulled tight and she came to a halt.

"Okay Tobis," Kara said, "you reel in your girlfriend and I'll tie us to the dangerous space mine." then she sighed and added, "Those are words no-one should ever have to say."

With the rebels secured to the mine they then began to get to work, starting with Tobis who located an access panel and removed the cover, storing the panel in a bag attached to his suit and the fasteners in a pocket. Then Jaysica peered inside, using a glow rod to illuminate the interior of the mine and she frowned.

"What's wrong?" Kara asked.

"There aren't any explosives." Jaysica replied, "I'm good with explosives."

"Oh, err, it's an ion mine." Tobis said, "It has a reactor. There, look." and he pointed to the ion mine's power supply.

"But I'm not-"

"Look just find the auto-trigger and disable it okay?" Kara said, "Ideally without setting this kriffing thing off."

"That's not fair." Jaysica said as she slid her hand into the mine, "I wouldn't set it-" and then there was a sudden flash from within the mine and Jaysica quickly withdrew her hand.

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this." Kara said before the mine abruptly fired its thrusters and turned around, hurling the rebels on its outer casing away, only the syntherope line preventing them from tumbling helplessly into space, "Oh no." Kara added as she realised where the mine was now pointing, "The *Silver Hawk*."

Inside the cockpit of the *Silver Hawk* there was a sudden bleeping that made both Mace and Vorn stare wide-eyed at the console in front of them.

"Sensor lock." Vorn said.

"But the only place a sensor lock could come from is-" Mace said before trailing off as he and Vorn looked towards the ion mine just in time to see the bright flash of light as it discharged.

The energy blast shot across space directly towards the *Silver Hawk* and struck the ship on its upper hull, causing lightning to dance all across it. This spread into the ship as one system after another was overloaded and shut down.

"What's happening?" Cass exclaimed as she saw the lightning inside the lounge while she and Tharun sat playing cards.

"Jaysica." Tharun hissed and then all of a sudden he felt himself becoming weightless as the *Silver Hawk's* artificial gravity generators gave out.

"Oh my!" Jeeves called out and the protocol droid reached out to grab hold of something as it too began to float off the deck. But this meant that the cascading highly charged energy pulse was able pass into the droid as well and it shuddered violently before its eyes went dark as it shut down. The same was true of Harvey as well. The astromech droid was in the *Silver Hawk's* workshop when the ion blast hit and when the gravity began to fail the droid magnetically clamped itself to the deck moments before the pulse reached it and shut it down also.

The strength of the ion blast was so intense that every system aboard the *Silver Hawk* was affected and the ship suddenly became silent as every piece of technology aboard shut down, leaving it adrift.

Still attached to the mine by the syntherope line Jaysica, Kara and Tobis stared at the darkened *Silver Hawk*.

"Now what do we do?" Jaysica asked.

"What? You mean after you just shot our ride home?" Kara responded, scowling at Jaysica, "Well I suggest we start by making sure that this thing can't go off again and then hope the boss and the others can fix the

Silver Hawk before the Empire notices anything's wrong nerf herder.”

2.

"Lieutenant we may have something." the comscan operator aboard the gladiator-class cruiser said and his officer walked over to see what he had found.

"Show me." he said.

"Ion mine trill herf xesh one one three eight has reported a discharge sir. Perhaps the captain should be informed." the crewman replied.

"Well of course the captain needs to be informed." the officer replied, "That's standard procedure and you know what the captain thinks of diverging from procedure."

"Dad!" Cass screamed, "Dad, what do we do?"

"Just hang on there kid." Tharun replied and he reached out and grabbed hold of her as they both drifted towards the ceiling, "Now I'm going to push us back off and when we reach the couch you need to strap yourself down. Okay?" and Cass nodded, "Good. Here goes." Tharun said and he pushed off the ceiling to propel them both back down towards the couch where they could strap themselves down.

They did not have long to wait before both Mace and Vorn came floating down the corridor that led from the lounge to the cockpit and halted themselves by grabbing onto the table.

"What's happened dad?" Cass asked.

"The mine discharged." Mace answered.

"Jaysica. I told you so." Tharun commented.

"We can't be one hundred percent certain about that." Vorn replied, "But what does look certain is that every system on the ship has shut down. Including life support."

"But what are we going to do for air?" Cass asked.

"We'll see if we can get an escape pod on line." Mace replied, "They were both shut down when the blast hit so hopefully they won't have been badly damaged. That'll give us somewhere to shelter if we need to. Then we'll work on getting the rest of the ship running again. For now though, survival is key."

"Got it!" Jaysica exclaimed as she pulled a circuit board from inside the mine, "This ought to be the trigger circuit. Without it the mine shouldn't be able to fire."

"Ought to be? Shouldn't be able to?" Kara said, "Look you have to be sure about this. If we go back to the ship and all that happens is that it gets shot again then-" but before Kara could finish there was another massive burst of light. But this did not come from either the mine or the *Silver Hawk*. Instead it came from close by in space as a gladiator-class heavy cruiser dropped out of hyperspace and began to turn towards the mine.

"They're heading towards us." Jaysica said, "We need to get back to the ship."

"Oh, err, no we can't." Tobis replied.

"Why not?" Jaysica asked.

"Yeah, why not?" Kara added.

"Well, err, because with the *Silver Hawk* powered down that cruiser may not have detected her." Tobis explained, "But, err, but if we try to jump back towards her-"

"Then they'll be able to track us back there from our thermal signature." Kara said and she groaned, "Okay, everyone get ready to hope they're in the mood to arrest people."

The cruiser continued to circle around, coming to a halt less than a hundred metres over the rebels' heads with its stern pointed towards the *Silver Hawk*, suggesting that Tobis had been correct when he said that the ship may still be undetected. Then several figures in white armoured space suits stepped out of the main hangar door at the front of the vessel and propelled by jet packs on their backs they descended towards the rebels.

"Surrender!" one of the marines ordered as the squad aimed their weapons towards the rebels.

"Looks like we're in luck." Kara said, "They are taking prisoners today." and she raised her hands, as did Jaysica and Tobis. The stormtroopers then completed their descent, landing on the mine and taking hold of the rebels. Two of them held each rebel by the arms while another stormtrooper disconnected the syntherope line and allowed it to drift away into space. Then the entire squad triggered its jet packs again, propelling them and their prisoners back towards the cruiser that they entered through the hangar door.

"Prisoners retrieved sir." the squad leader told the officer who had been waiting for them just inside the force field that kept the atmosphere within the cruiser's hangar.

"Good." he replied and he pointed to Tobis just as the marines were removing the helmets from the three rebels' vacuum suits, "Take him below and prepare him." then he looked at Jaysica and Kara, "And process them. The captain will see them as soon as they're ready."

"Wait no!" Jaysica called out as Tobis was led away by two of the stormtrooper marines, "Where are you taking him?"

"You'll find out soon enough. The captain has ways of dealing with you rebel scum." the officer replied and then Jaysica and Kara were dragged off in a different direction.

Both women were taken to a compartment adjoining the hangar that was devoid of furniture. Here the stormtrooper stripped them and subjected them to scans to ensure that they were not concealing any devices within their bodies. At this point they were both bound. But rather than using the standard issue binders that Imperial forces used both women were placed in polymer garments that covered their torsos and lacking any arm holes also kept their arms trapped inside.

"What's happening?" Jaysica asked, "Why are they doing this?"

"I've got a bad feeling we're about find out." Kara replied as the stormtroopers then dragged them both from the room and marched them to a turbolift.

Upon exiting the turbolift the two rebel women were escorted to a room that was guarded by a pair of black uniformed fleet troopers who as soon as they saw the prisoners and their escort approaching snapped to attention while one also took out a comlink.

"The prisoners are here captain." he said and without any reply from the comlink the door between the two guards slid open.

"Get in there. The captain will see you now." one of the stormtroopers said and Jaysica and Kara were forced through the door where they saw the cruiser's captain sat behind a desk.

The Imperial captain was one of the minority to hold that position who were female. But that was not the most startling thing about her. She was badly scarred down one side of her face and the hand on the same side was covered by a glove, suggesting that it too bore the marks of severe injury. But most unusual of all was that wrapped around the back and sides of her shaven head was a cyborg construct unit. Cyborg constructs were known to massively increase brain power but this improvement came at a high price and those fitted with them became less than human as their emotions were frequently stripped away. Because of this they were most often seen fitted to those on the bottom rungs of society who could be compelled to undergo the risky surgery needed to implant them, not senior officers in the Imperial military.

"I am Captain Tull." the woman said gazing at the two rebels without any hint of emotion, "And you have both been arrested under suspicion of treason. Do you have anything to say for yourselves?"

"Kriff off?" Kara suggested.

"Ah, defiance." Captain Tull replied as she stood up and picked up a narrow baton from her desk before walking around it to stand directly in front of Jaysica and Kara, "I take it you have noticed how you have been bound." she added, "Can you guess why I permit this variation from standard procedure on my ship?"

"I guess you are just a pervert and get a kick out of the polymer." Kara said.

Then without betraying any hint of emotion at all Captain Tull held out the baton and jabbed the end of it into Kara's thigh, sending a powerful electric shock into her that made her cry out in pain. At the same time her leg went limp and with her arms bound she was unable to prevent herself from collapsing to the floor in a heap.

"I'll kriffing kill you for that." she hissed, glaring at the captain.

"Will you really?" Captain Tull asked and she promptly put her baton back on the desk and drew her sidearm instead. Then she released the safety catch and held it out to Kara, holding it right in front of her face, "Then here. Take it. Strike me down."

Kara snarled, flexing her arms in an effort to break free. But the binding garment had been made to resist such struggles and she remained trapped.

"You can't keep me in this forever." she said, "Then as soon as I'm out you're dead."

"I think not." Captain Tull said as she returned her blaster to its holster and picked up the baton again, "You see this ship still has another fourteen months to go before it returns to port for resupply. So for all that time you will remain here as prisoners. You will remain bound and you will answer the questions that are put to you."

"Kriff you. I'm not saying anything." Kara replied and she lashed out with her leg. But Captain Tull saw the early stages of the clumsy attack and her enhanced brain quickly calculated the best place to be to avoid it. Then she looked at the stormtroopers and nodded.

"Tape her." she said and before Kara could protest two of the stormtroopers lifted her back to her feet while a third tore a strip of tape from a reel and stuck it over her mouth. Then he wrapped more of the tape around her legs, wrapping them from just below her knees as far down as her ankles. Then when the two stormtroopers holding Kara released their grip Captain Tull jabbed her baton into Kara's thigh again and she produced a muffled scream as she fell back to the floor. But Captain Tull did not stop there, pressing the end of the baton against Kara's exposed neck and watching dispassionately as she convulsed.

"Stop it!" Jaysica yelled, "You're hurting her."

Captain Tull then withdrew the baton and looked at Jaysica.

"The Imperial military does not promote many females." she said, "This is because of the simple fact that

they see us as weaker than males and as you have just shown this is not entirely without reason. Fortunately my enhancements have purged me of the weakness that Imperial command sees in our gender. Now I will show you exactly why you will be answering all of my questions.”

Captain Tull then began to walk towards her office door and Jaysica was shoved along after her while two stormtroopers bent down to pick up Kara and carry her between them. The captain then led the rebel prisoners through the corridors of her ship. All the way it was obvious that Kara was doing her best to protest, hurling obscenities at the captain and the stormtroopers carrying her but the tape made most of it unintelligible.

This continued until they reached an unguarded door somewhere close to the ship's engines and Captain Tull paused to open it. The room on the other side of the door was almost devoid of features and there was no furniture at all. But it was not entirely empty.

“Tobis!” Jaysica exclaimed and she looked at Captain Tull, “What are you doing to him?”

Tobis had been stripped to his underwear and his wrists bound in front of him with more conventional binders rather than the garments used to hold Jaysica and Kara. This had allowed his captors to lift his arms up over his head and connect the binders to a metal bar that led up into the ceiling. The bar was too short to allow Tobis to stand on the floor though and instead he was left dangling in mid air. When the door opened Tobis immediately looked towards it, focusing on Jaysica as soon as he saw her but he was unable to respond to her thanks to the metal gag that held his mouth wide open.

“My crew are not doing anything with him.” Captain Tull said in answer to Jaysica's question, “Not yet at least.” Then she walked over to where Tobis hung from the ceiling and gently stroked his chest, “Torture is an imperfect method of gathering information at best.” she continued, “Eventually a person will say anything that they believe will end their suffering and it takes a highly skilled being to determine what is true and what is not. Interrogator droids do away with this but such machines are not generally available to the military, only to the Imperial Security Bureau. But in my experience there is an alternative method when dealing with groups of prisoners such as yourselves. My intention is to leave you all here together to consider your situation. Then I shall return and ask you to tell me how many other rebels are in this region and exactly where I can find them.”

“I'm not telling you anything.” Jaysica said, “Kara was right about that.”

“Then your friend Tobis here will suffer for it.” Captain Tull replied, “You see while people may lie to stop themselves being tortured I have found that they are far more likely to give answers more quickly if they are being forced to watch someone they care about being tortured instead. You see that is why you are bound as you are. When I send my men in here to inflict as much pain as they can on your friend you will be unable to intervene. You won't even be able to activate that control over there that would lower him from the ceiling.” she continued and she pointed to a single control button that was recessed into a small panel that was mounted on one wall and covered by a transparent hinged cover, “Nor can you open the door to escape.” and Captain Tull pointed to a second identical button beside the door, “Escape is so close for you all and yet so far.” then she turned towards the door and began to walk towards it, the stormtroopers falling in behind her. Lying on the floor where the stormtroopers had placed her Kara watched this and tried to yell more insults at her captors but this provoked no reaction and the door slid shut after the last of the stormtroopers left.

“Oh Tobis!” Jaysica exclaimed as she rushed up to Tobis and looked up at him, “Don't worry, I'm sure that the major will come and rescue us.”

Behind her Kara groaned.

In the compartment where Jaysica and Kara had been stripped and searched their belongings remained piled up on the floor waiting for someone to come and sort through them. A bleeping sound came from within the bag Jaysica had had with her when they were captured and the top of this opened as Penny rolled out and the droid paused to investigate its surroundings. The style of construction used in the room made it obvious that the droid was aboard an Imperial vessel of some kind. Unable to detect Jaysica within range of its sensors the little droid then set off in search of its mistress.

3.

Vorn watched as the Imperial cruiser jumped to hyperspace, departing as suddenly as it had arrived. Then he pulled himself out of the cockpit and headed for the *Silver Hawk's* workshop. One of the ship's two escape pods was accessed from this room and so it had been decided that this would be the pod that the rebels still aboard the *Silver Hawk* would try to bring on line, allowing them to use its life support to provide air in the workshop while they then attempted to repair the *Silver Hawk* itself.

"They're gone." Vorn told the rebels still aboard the ship as they worked to get the escape pod working.

"What about Tobis and the others?" Cass asked.

"Taken I guess." Vorn said, "That ship must have been monitoring the mine field."

"So what are we going to do?" Cass said.

"Right now there's nothing we can do kid." Tharun replied.

"But we have to try something." Cass said.

"Tharun's right Cass." Mace told her, "Unless we can fix the *Silver Hawk* we're going to have to hope someone comes along to rescue us. Never mind rescuing someone else. For now they're on their own."

Jaysica stood in front of the control that would lower Tobis from the ceiling, desperately trying to get to the button. She had been trying this for some time now, ever since Captain Tull had left the three rebels alone in the room but without success. The problem was that the cover over the panel needed to be gripped from both sides in order to be opened and without the use of her arms Jaysica had no way of manipulating it in this way. While she had been struggling to get at the switch Kara had spent some of her time in a futile effort to break free before giving up and just lying motionless on the floor.

"I can't do it!" Jaysica cried out as she finally ran out of patience, "Oh Tobis, I can't do it. I'm so sorry."

Then somewhat unexpectedly the door to the rebels' cell slid open and a mouse droid came rolling in before the door dropped shut again. Jaysica looked at the mouse droid, wondering why one of the ubiquitous droids would have entered the cell. But then it rolled straight towards her and chirped excitedly.

"Penny?" Jaysica asked and the droid whistled and rolled back and forth, "Oh Penny its is you. It is you."

Then she looked back at the button to lower Tobis from the ceiling and she smiled, "Quickly Penny, you need to press this button here." she told the droid and obediently the machine rolled up to the wall where the button was mounted.

Though they were not generally visible, mouse droids were equipped with two grasping arms. One for fine work and the other for heavier tasks. Studying the control panel closely Penny determined that to operate it would require both of them and so the two arms unfolded from inside its body. Extending the limbs upwards Penny used the heavy grasping arm to grip either side of the cover so that it could be opened before the lighter limb was slid under it and used to press the button.

As it turned out Captain Tull had been being truthful when she had said that all it required to lower Tobis from the ceiling was to press the button and the metal bar holding him in place began to lower, bringing him down to the floor. Then when he was low enough it was just a matter of unhooking himself from the bar and Tobis was free of it. However, he remained bound and gagged but with his arms bound in front of him he was able to simply reach up and pulled the gag from in his mouth. Then moving his jaw about as he tried to get rid of the discomfort of having his mouth wedged open wide for so long.

"Tobis you're free!" Jaysica exclaimed as she rushed towards him. Then she turned her back on him,

"Quickly. Take this off me."

"Oh, err, yes of course." Tobis replied and he brushed Jaysica's hair aside so that he could see the fastening at the back of her neck. But then his face fell, "Oh, err, I can't." he told her.

"Why not?" Jaysica asked.

"Well, err, there's some sort of lock. Like like on these." Tobis replied and he held up his hands so that Jaysica could see the binders around his wrists.

"So how do we get free?" Jaysica said and Tobis looked around.

"Oh, err, well I suppose we need to go and find something to undo the locks. We need to leave here anyway." he suggested and Jaysica frowned.

"But what about the guards outside?" she asked and there was a grunting as Kara tried to speak as well as a chirping from Penny.

"Well, ah, I doubt that a guard would have let Penny in." Tobis said, "So, err, I think that there isn't one. I – I don't think that the captain thought we'd be able to open the door." and there was another muffled outburst from Kara as she nodded in agreement.

"Tobis you're a genius." Jaysica exclaimed and she suddenly leant forwards to kiss him, prompting a groan from Kara.

Tobis then dashed across the cell to the switch by the door, flipped up the cover and pressed the switch. The door slid open instantly and Tobis leant through the doorway and peered both ways down the corridor. "There – There's no-one out here." he said, "Let's go."

"And hurry." Jaysica replied as she hurried to join him, "I feel stupid like this."

Kara frowned and tried to call out, prompting both Jaysica and Tobis to turn towards her. "Oh ha-ha." Jaysica said, glaring at her, "You were going to say I'm always stupid weren't you?" and Kara scowled at her.

"Err, I think I should take the tape from her mouth and legs." Tobis commented and Kara nodded.

"No wait." Jaysica said as he crouched down beside Kara, reaching out for the strip of tape that gagged her. "What? Why?" Tobis asked.

"If you take the tape off her mouth she'll just say mean things. I think you should leave it there." Jaysica answered and Kara tried to say something that sounded obscene, "See? I was right."

"Oh, err, I don't think we can leave her like this." Tobis said.

"Then make her promise to behave." Jaysica said and there was a muffled sigh from Kara, "Oh and that you're in charge not her."

"Err, she does outrank me. She's an officer." Tobis pointed out.

"But a mean one. Anyway you're not technically part of our field team. You work for Captain Grayle. Now make her promise." Jaysica said and Tobis looked at Kara.

"Sorry." he said, "But do-" and before he got any further Kara nodded slowly but the look on her face suggested that she was not happy.

"Okay go ahead." Jaysica said and Tobis peeled back the tape from Kara's mouth.

"Ow!" she cried out as soon as she was able, "Ow! Ow! Ow! Don't you know you should always tear tape off quickly so it doesn't hurt for as long?" she said.

"Err, sorry." Tobis said, "But I can't do much like this." and he held up his bound hands.

"Oh never mind, just get the tape off my legs so we can get out of here before a guard does turn up to check on us."

The tape wrapped around Kara's legs took longer to remove than the gag and she winced repeatedly as it pulled at her skin. But before too long there was a pile of discarded tape on the floor beside her.

"Thanks Tobis. Now help me up." Kara said.

"Please." Jaysica said, "You're not giving him and order so say 'please'."

"Please." Kara said, scowling at Jaysica.

"Pretty-" Jaysica began.

"Don't push it." Kara interrupted as Tobis did his best to help her to her feet. In the end he had to help Kara to sit up before wrapping his arms around her to lift her up but then all three rebels were ready to try leaving their cell.

Another check of the corridor revealed that none of the cruiser's crew were close by and with Penny darting between them the rebels crept out into the corridor.

"Stang this floor's cold." Kara commented as she put her bare feet on the corridor floor. Then she looked back and forth again, "So where are we anyway?"

"Oh, err, I think we're between engineering and the hangar." Tobis replied, "This area is meant for long term storage."

"Yeah, of us." Kara commented, "So let's think about this. We need a key or tools to get us untied. We need clothes and we need a way off this ship."

"Err, ah, then we need to get to the hangar." Tobis said.

"Steal a shuttle? I like it." Kara said, "But we'd need to make our getaway quickly so they can't just shoot us down. I think I can do it though."

"You can't fly a shuttle." Jaysica said.

"I was a pilot. What do you think they taught us at flight school?" Kara responded.

"Well not flying a shuttle with your arms trapped in one of these." Jaysica answered, flexing her arms as much as she could.

"Well, err, Jaysica a shuttle will have a tool kit." Tobis pointed out.

"Exactly." Kara agreed, smiling, "Plus some vacc suits hopefully so we don't have to fly out of here naked. I'm a married woman. The boss wouldn't like me being ogled by Tobis all the way back."

"What? Oh, err, I wouldn't-" Tobis exclaimed.

"Just a joke." Kara said, "Now are you going to lead the way?"

"Perhaps Penny should." Jaysica suggested, "She can check for crewmen ahead of us. I'd hate to run into stormtroopers like this."

"That's actually a good point." Kara replied, "And since she must have come here from there she obviously knows the way."

"Okay Penny, off you go." Jaysica said, looking down at her droid and it chirped as it rolled away with the

three rebels following behind.

Penny halted at each junction and studied the corridors in every direction as the droid continued towards the hangar bay located at the front of the ship. Occasionally the rebels encountered other mouse droids that were part of the cruiser's own compliment along with a few low level labour droids fitted with restraining bolts that paid them no attention but there were no signs of any of the more than two thousand crew that it carried or even any droids smart enough to notice three bound individuals making their way towards the hangar. Eventually Penny led them to an open hatchway at the rear of the hangar from where the rebels could see the two squadrons of TIE fighters that the cruiser carried mounted in twin racks that ran the length of the hangar while various other auxiliary craft were lined up on the deck across the hangar from them.

"Oh great." Kara commented, "The shuttles are right the way over there."

"Can we hurry?" Jaysica asked, looking around nervously, "I've got a bad feeling about staying here too long. What if they find us? We can't defend ourselves like this."

"Any ideas?" Kara added, looking at Tobis, "Your girlfriend put you in charge after all." but Tobis shook his head, "Great. Me either." Kara said.

"What about Penny?" Jaysica suggested.

"What about her?" Kara asked.

"Well why don't we send her to find what we need? If she gets us some tools and uniforms we can-" Jaysica started to suggest before Tobis interrupted her.

"Oh, err, no. I don't think that would work." he said.

"Why not?" Jaysica asked.

"Because everyone ignores mouse droids because they are so mundane," Kara said, "But a mouse droid carrying three pairs of pants and a set of power tools isn't. Even the most bucket headed stormtrooper would put two and two together and get us dancing on a little stage while they stick credit sticks in these rubber things. Oh and the waist band to Tobis's oh so tasteful cartoon bantha patterned underwear."

"They, they were a present." Tobis muttered.

"Let me guess, from her." Kara said and both Jaysica and Tobis averted their gaze, "Thought so." Kara added, "So does anyone have any ideas that aren't stupid?"

"You promised." Jaysica said. Meanwhile Tobis stepped out of the way of a column of interconnected mouse droids as they rolled past him, whistling.

"Mouse droids." he said.

"We've just been over that." Kara said, "Right, that's it. I lied when I promised to be nice and let him be in charge okay? I lie all the time. So from now on we'll do exactly what I say. Okay?"

"Oh, err, good luck." Tobis said and Kara frowned.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"I, err, I mean, well-"

"Come one, spit it out." Kara said.

"I mean good luck trying to escape on your own." Tobis said and Jaysica gasped, "You'll never be able to untie yourself without me and Jaysica's right. You can be mean."

"Ha!" Jaysica exclaimed and she quickly moved to stand right beside Tobis, the pair of them looking at Kara, "See? Tobis is still in charge here."

"What with his brilliant idea that even he already said wouldn't work? I tell you what then, I'll do you a deal Jaysica. We'll let Tobis carry out his laser brained plan. But when it fails as I know it will, you'll agree to follow my orders as the ranking officer here."

"Fine." Jaysica said.

"Oh and you stay tied up in that thing for a week. It'll stop you triggering any more space mines." Kara added and Jaysica paused. Then she smiled.

"And when Tobis's plan works you stay tied up like that for a week." she said, "Oh and you need to be nice to me and Tobis all the time."

"Oh, err, I really don't think-" Tobis began.

"Stay out of this sergeant. That's an order." Kara said. Then she looked at Jaysica, "Deal." she hissed.

"Good." Jaysica said, "Penny please record this." and the mouse droid chirped, activating its internal holo camera, "Kara please repeat the terms of the bet."

"I say Tobis's plan will fail, while the klutz who got us into this mess says it will work. When we finally get out of this only the one who's right gets untied. The other has to stay like this for a week." Kara said

"Good. That's all I need." Jaysica said.

"And I just need to hear Tobis explain how his idea to use Penny is any more likely to work than your lame one was." Kara responded and both women then looked at Tobis.

"Err, ah, I think I ought to-" Tobis began.

"Spill it." Kara said sternly, "Now."

"Oh, ah, well this ship has dozens of mouse droids aboard. Err, hundreds maybe. Well, ah, we reprogram them." Tobis said.

"How?" Kara asked.

"Err, Penny. She can swap the programming chips in some and get them to do more until all of them will do what we want." Tobis said.

"A hundred mouse droids with pants is going to be even more obvious than just one nerf herder." Kara replied.

"Oh no, we, err, we won't need them to steal us clothes. We're going to steal the cruiser." Tobis said. Kara looked down at Penny.

"Start recording again." she said and then looking directly into where she knew the hidden camera to be she added, "I've heard Tobis's idea and I'd just like to amend the terms of the bet. If he pulls it off I'll not only stay like this for a week, no wait, a month but the team can all spank my perfectly formed rear whenever I'm within reach. Okay stop recording there." and then she straightened up, "Go on." she said, "I could do with a laugh to lighten my mood."

"Well, err, once we control the mouse droids we have one of them access the ship's droid control system and use it to trigger every restraining bolt at once, shutting down all the droids aboard except for the mouse droids." Tobis continued, "Then the other mouse droids start accessing all of the emergency monitors around the ship to make it look like everything's failing. Without droids to inspect them the crew won't have time to check on any of them before it would be too late for them to abandon ship if the failures were real. So they'll all leave and we'll be control of the ship." and then Tobis just smiled.

"Oh Tobis that's wonderful." Jaysica said, jumping with excitement before kissing him on the cheek.

Meanwhile Kara frowned.

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

4.

All of the cruiser's droids were maintained at one central location positioned not far from the improvised cell where the rebels had been briefly imprisoned. As would be expected of an area of the ship dedicated to maintaining advanced technology it was equipped with a wide range of tools that would have no difficulty in deactivating the locks on the rebels' restraints but the repair workshop was also permanently staffed by at least two technicians who, despite being unarmed would have had no difficulty in overpowering the three rebels in their current state and raising the alarm.

Fortunately Tobis's plan did not rely on gaining access to the tools used to make repairs to the droids. All he needed to do was access the system that encoded orders onto program chips for the mouse droids. Each mouse droid was fitted with a replaceable program chip that provided them with specific instructions for an operating shift as well as providing them with the specialised skills needed to carry them out. When the droids had first been introduced to the Imperial military the task of fitting the chips had been carried out by the droid maintenance technicians, but it had soon become apparent that the simple task was more efficiently carried out by other mouse droids preprogrammed to fit them themselves. This meant that the portion of the droid maintenance section dedicated to programming and fitting the chips was generally left empty.

"Err, we'll have to go one at a time." Tobis whispered. The mouse droid programming area was just ahead, beyond a wide doorway leading to the staffed general repair area that stood open and meant the technicians could see out into the hallway if they turned in the right direction, "We'll need Penny to let us know when no-one's looking."

"Okay girl, you heard him." Jaysica said, looking down at her mouse droid and it whistled as it rolled forwards and halted in the doorway, pointing into the repair area.

"I still say this is crazy." Kara whispered, "I mean it, I've got a really bad feeling about this. The techs in there are sure to spot us. It's not too late to double back to the hangar." but before anyone replied to this Penny whistled and Tobis suddenly dashed past the open doorway and into the programming area.

"See?" Jaysica said softly, smiling, "He made it. Hope you're comfy like that because you'll be-" and then Penny chirped again and since the two young women had not agreed who was to go next both of them made a dash for the door to the programming area at the same time. Unlike the wider doorway of the general repair area that needed to be large enough to allow even the largest of the cruiser's droid complement to enter and leave, this one only needed to be large enough for a technician to pass through and so when both rebels reached it at the same time they suddenly became wedged in the door frame.

"Back up!" Kara hissed, "Let me through."

"I was here first. You back up." Jaysica replied as they both wriggled in their efforts to be the first to get through.

"Oh, err, perhaps you ought to-" Tobis said, stepping closer to the doorway just as all of a sudden both Jaysica and Kara burst out of the door frame and fell forwards unable to stop themselves. Jaysica let out a sudden surprised squeal as she fell right into Tobis and all three rebels ended up sprawled across the floor.

"What was that?" a voice said from the repair area, "Is someone there?"

"Oh nice work nerf herder." Kara hissed at Jaysica, "Now what do we do?" but once again Penny began to whistle, only this time much louder.

"Forget it, it's nothing." another voice said, "Just a damned droid."

"See what you almost did?" Kara then said, glaring at Jaysica.

"It wasn't my fault." Jaysica replied.

"It's always your fault." Kara said.

"Oh, err, I think you ought to hide while I work." Tobis said as he dragged himself out from under Jaysica and stood back up.

"Where?" Jaysica asked.

"Err, ah. Over here. I think this is a closet." Tobis said and he walked over to a nearby door and opened it to reveal a small storage space that from the dust inside looked as if it had not been used, or cleaned, in some time.

"We won't both fit in there." Kara said.

"Plus its dark." Jaysica added.

"Ah, oh, wait there's a light." Tobis said as he found a second button beside the door and pressed it, turning on the light inside the closet.

"Fine, now help us up." Kara said and Tobis returned to help her to her feet first before escorting her to the closet, "Wait." she said as she stepped inside and found that it was barely large enough for her to be able to fit inside after all, "I knew it. This is too small for us both."

"Oh, err, I'm not putting Jaysica in here." Tobis replied and before Kara could protest further he pressed the door control and it dropped shut, trapping her inside.

"Tobis!" Kara hissed, uncertain of whether he would be able to hear her through the door but unwilling to try shouting just in case it gave away their presence to the Imperial technicians in the next room, "Tobis open this kriffing door right now."

"Oh, err, no." Tobis replied, pressing his face to the door to reply, "I'll let you out later."

"Oh I am so going to make you both pay for this." Kara said, scowling. But then she became aware of a movement above her head and she realised that the closet had not been completely empty after all, "Oh no. I've got a bad feeling about this." she said to herself as one of the spiders from the web in the corner of the closet started descending on a thread towards her head.

Meanwhile Tobis returned to help Jaysica back to her feet as well.

"Tobis why did you do that?" she asked, looking at the closet.

"Err, well, ah, you keep arguing." he replied, "I, err, I had to separate you to keep you quiet and I'd rather be alone with you than her."

Jaysica smiled.

"Oh I love you so much Tobis." she said, "I wish I could give you a great big hug right now." and then she stepped closer and kissed him. Then she looked around the room, "So what do we do now?" she asked.

Tobis walked over to the single duty station in the centre of the room.

"Oh, over here." he said as he opened up the hinged consoles so that he could step into the duty station and he waited for Jaysica to follow before closing it. The duty station was really built only for one crewman to occupy and so it was something of a tight fit but there was just about enough room for them if they stood against one another, "Now I need to find the duty schedule." Tobis added and both rebels looked around at the various displays.

"I think it's over here." Jaysica said and Tobis looked over her shoulder.

"Err, yes, that's it. Good. We – we have seven hours until the next droid duty cycle." he told her.

"Why is that good?"

"Oh, err, because I don't want mouse droids coming back for orders before we're ready for them." Tobis said and he turned to another of the eight consoles that now surrounded them both, "Ah, this is the programming terminal." he said and he began to access the system that allowed orders to be encoded on the mouse droid skill chips, a task made slower by the binders around his wrists but one that was still a relatively simple task for the experienced engineer. When Tobis was finished with this he hit a key that immediately triggered the nearby auto-coding unit that transferred his modified instructions to the spare skill chips that were picked from the large storage racks, programmed and transferred to a tray where they could be picked up to be inserted into a mouse droid, "Err, the system says that there are one hundred and sixty four mouse droids aboard." Tobis said as he and Jaysica watched the chips coming out of the machine without any need for further interaction by them, "So – so now we need to bring them all here. Err, or rather Penny does." Tobis added and he opened up the duty station so that he and Jaysica could exit it and he went over to the growing row of programmed chips and picked one up, "I need her to take this." he said.

"Come on Penny." Jaysica said, "Take the chip from Tobis."

The mouse droid rolled up to Tobis and extended its lightweight grasping claw to take the chip that he offered to it.

"Oh, err, now go fit that to the first mouse droid you find." Tobis said to the droid, "Then, err, then come back here. The ship will bring the other droid back with you as well."

Penny let out a single whistle as the droid retracted the grasping claw back inside its body along with the programmed chip. Then it performed a tight turn and rapidly headed out of the room.

"Okay so now what?" Jaysica asked, looking at Tobis.

"Well, err. Now we can just wait." he replied, "The – the modified chips will bring the Imperial mouse droids here where they will, err, they'll collect another chip and go out and fit it to another droid. Then both will come back for another and so on until – until there are no more chips and we control all of the mouse droids aboard."

"And how long will that take?"

"Oh, err, about half an hour I think." Tobis replied, "An hour at most."

"Then there's just one more thing I need to do." Jaysica said and she hurried across the room to the closet door where she bent over slightly and used her shoulder to hit the switch that operated the light inside the closet. Then, with a smile on her face she dashed back to Tobis, "Now let's make the most of being alone at last." she said before kissing him.

"Dad, do you think that they're okay?" Cass asked.

Aside from Vorn, the rebels still aboard the *Silver Hawk* all floated in the workshop where Harvey had been secured to one of the workbenches with syntherope to prevent the inactive droid from just floating off it in the zero gravity conditions while the rebels attempted to fix it.

"Probably best not to think about it kid." Tharun responded, "Now keep that light where Captain Grayle can use it to see what he's doing."

"Okay, but I'm worried about them. Where did that Imperial ship take them?" Cass said.

"Got it." Vorn then said as he appeared in the doorway and pulled himself into the workshop, "One spare astromech power cell." and he held the part out to Mace.

"Thanks." Mace replied, "I think this will do it. There may be a few minutes of memory lost that Harvey hadn't shunted to long term storage but all of the non-volatile stuff should be recovered if we can just give him power. Well here goes nothing." and Mace inserted the fresh power cell into the droid.

The instant that the power cell made contact with its terminals there was a sudden electronic squeal from Harvey that made all four rebels flinch. Then Harvey began to emit a string of bleeps and whistles while moving its legs back and forth as it tried to right itself.

"Harvey calm down." Mace said as he began to release the syntherope from around the droid, "We got hit by an ion blast from the mine. We need you to help fix the ship so we can go and rescue Tobis, Jaysica and Kara from the Empire."

"And quickly if at all possible." Vorn added, "Because I've got a bad feeling about what may be happening to them on that ship."

5.

Just as Tobis had said the mouse droids began to return to the programming area to collect more modified chips before heading out to locate unmodified droids and install the chips in them. Given that each droid would continue to return to the room to collect further chips even after fitting one to another droid so that it could repeat the procedure the effect was exponential, with the number of droids carrying the modified chips doubling with each batch. Only Penny made only one trip, returning to the programming area to keep watch and alert the rebels if anything other than a mouse droid approached. The end result was that in just over half an hour, just as Tobis had estimated there were no further chips waiting to be installed.

"Oh, err, that's it." Tobis said as he got to his feet from where he and Jaysica had been sat beside the duty station so that it hid them from view should anyone happen to walk past the doorway.

"So now what happens?" Jaysica asked as he helped her up as well.

"Well, err, perhaps I should explain it to you and Kara together." he said.

"Oh go on then. Let her out." Jaysica said and Tobis went over to the closet and opened the door. As soon as the door slid upwards Kara burst out of the closet, hoping about and shaking her head violently as she tried to dislodge the numerous spiders and lengths of spider silk now mixed up in her hair.

"Get them off!" she exclaimed, trying to keep her voice low despite her desperation, "Get them off! Get them off! Get them off!"

"Oh, err, hold still." Tobis said as he tried to brush her hair with his hands.

"I can't." Kara responded, "Oh I think some got down my neck and are inside this thing."

"Err, I – I don't think that's possible." Tobis tried to reassure her, "The collar seals tight around your neck and your legs. There's no room for the spiders to get in."

"Ugh!" Kara said as she tried spitting out what felt like a clump of cobweb stuck on her lips, "And what was the idea turning out the light on me?" she added, glaring at Tobis.

"What? Oh, err-" he began.

"One of the technicians came in and did it." Jaysica lied, "We managed to hide behind that duty station but he thought that the light had been left on by accident."

Kara looked at Jaysica and cringed.

"Oh stang no." she said, "You didn't. You locked me in there in the dark just so that you two could do that? Gods that's disgusting."

"Oh, err-" Tobis responded.

"Kara, I don't know what you're talking about." Jaysica said.

"Oh really? Well these things we're tied up in have a zip so we can use the refresher and you two left yours wide open." Kara said, prompting a gasp from Jaysica as she leapt behind the duty station to cover herself, "I am so telling the boss about this. Figures that you'd get excited about being wrapped in something shiny and rubbery though Jaysica." Kara added. Then she look at Tobis, "So what else did you get up to while I was locked in the closet then? Has your plan failed yet?"

"What? Oh, err, no." Tobis said.

"Oh well. There's still time yet." Kara said, "So what's happening now?"

"Well, err, all of the mouse droids aboard are now under our control." Tobis told her, "So – so they'll all wait until Penny triggers all of the restraining bolts on the other droids before they start to create false alarms all over the ship."

"And what are we supposed to do now then?" Kara asked.

"Well, err, we go and find somewhere to hide near the bridge." Tobis replied.

"Near the bridge? Like this?" Kara said, "How are we supposed to do that?"

"Err, there's an emergency ladder shaft about twenty metres from it." Tobis said and Kara stared at him.

"A ladder? How are Jaysica and I supposed to climb a ladder?"

"Ah, I – I wasn't thinking that we'd climb it. I – I just thought we could use it to hide in." Tobis explained and Kara sighed, "We, err, we can use Penny to scout ahead of us again."

"Oh very well." she said, "I suppose the sooner you fail to get us there the sooner I win the bet." and she and Tobis headed towards the doorway.

"Tobis wait." Jaysica called out quietly, "I can't go out there like this, you have to fix my zip."

The command section of the cruiser was far more heavily manned than the maintenance and storage sections but that was not to say that every corridor and compartment was occupied at all times. Therefore, slowly but surely the three rebels were able to make their way through it, repeatedly hiding in smaller compartments or minor passageways that Penny had confirmed were empty until nearby crewmen had moved on and another hiding place could be reached until finally all three of them hurried into the emergency

ladder well and Tobis closed the door behind them.

"Oh I've got a very bad feeling about this Tobis." Jaysica said as she peered down the shaft that they were now stood around. There was no hatch to cover the shaft and the ladder looked as if it extended all the way to the lowest of the cruiser's decks.

"Bet you're glad Tobis did up that zip." Kara commented, "There's a bit of a breeze blowing up this shaft." and Jaysica frowned at her.

"I just hope Penny can trigger the restraining bolts quickly." Jaysica then said, "I don't want to fall."

"Oh, err, here." Tobis said and he lifted his arms over her and pulled her closer to him.

"I hope Penny's quick about whatever she does as well." Kara said, "I'm worried about what you two are planning to do in here while we wait for her."

While the three rebels waited in the ladder shaft, Penny was heading back to the droid maintenance area that they had just come from. The trip this time was much quicker however, as the droid was able to move about at top speed without worrying about any of the crew noticing it. As far as those who saw Penny were concerned it was just another anonymous mouse droid.

Upon reaching the droid maintenance section Penny headed for the repair workshop rather than the programming area. In here was a console that was being ignored by the technicians at work in here as they focused on the damaged droids that they were expected to get back into service as quickly as possible.

Because of this as well as the general attitude in the military that mouse droids were just part of the background and not to be bothered with they ignored Penny as the rebel droid rolled right through the workshop and up to the console.

Most of the controls on this console were standard enough, but there was also one switch that more resembled the two that had been used in the cell where the rebels had been held, with a flip up cover used to prevent it from being pressed accidentally that was clearly labelled 'FOR EMERGENCY USE ONLY – SEVERE PENALTY FOR IMPROPER USE.'

Just as the mouse droid had done in the cell to drop Tobis back to the floor, Penny used one grasping arm to lift the button's cover and the other to press it firmly until it triggered. The moment this happened Penny reversed, letting the cover fall back into place while the droid raced back out of the workshop.

6.

"Captain every droid fitted with a restraining bolt has just gone into shutdown mode." one of the bridge crew called out at the same time as the ship's computer reported to Captain Tull via her cyborg construct unit that every droid restraining bolt on the ship had just been triggered at the same time.

"What's happened?" she demanded, "Someone get in touch with maintenance. Find out why they triggered the emergency shut down." but then the computer began to feed her more data and her crew started to confirm that the droids were not the only thing starting to go wrong on the ship. Almost immediately after the droids shut down the navigation computer crashed. Following this all fire controls were locked into training mode and then the shield generators shut down. But the worst was still yet to come.

"Captain there seems to be a problem with the main reactor. Massive temperature spike." a crewman exclaimed before a klaxon sounded.

"Get me engineering now." Captain Tull ordered, "I need to know what's wrong with my ship."

"Captain, the chief engineer reports that he is unable carry out an internal inspection of the reactor right now because their maintenance droids are shut down. It'll take eight minutes for them to suit up and go inside themselves."

"We don't have eight minutes." Captain Tull said, studying the temperature data being fed to her directly by the computer, "That reactor will blow in five at this rate."

"Captain life support is failing. All air reprocessing systems have shut down." another crewman reported and the normally expressionless cyborg captain frowned.

"Abandon ship." she ordered, "All hands abandon ship."

"Do - do you hear that?" Tobis said as the sound of alarms was heard, "The order's been given to abandon ship."

"So let's get out of here." Jaysica said.

"Err, no. We have to wait." Tobis replied, "We need Penny to tell us that the way to the bridge is clear."

"Yeah, otherwise your little plan would fail at the last minute." Kara added with a grin. But Jaysica smiled back at her.

"It hasn't failed though has it? Looks like you're about to lose our bet." she said and Kara scowled at her.

"Dream on." she replied.

Penny rolled up to the entrance to the bridge and carried out a quick check to confirm that it was abandoned.

The little droid headed back to the emergency ladder shaft and opened the door, whistling excitedly.

"That's it!" Jaysica exclaimed, "The crew have abandoned ship." and the three rebels hurried from the shaft and towards the bridge. Once inside they began to inspect the various displays that showed systems all across the ship failing.

"Oh, err, I think it worked." Tobis said, "Escape pods are launching. The crew will all be gone in about a minute."

"Captain your shuttle is ready." the crewman who met Captain Tull in the hangar said to her but the captain ignored him and came to a sudden halt.

"Something's wrong," she said, "The reactor temperature has stabilised without input. Wait here, I'll be back soon." and she turned around and marched back the way she had come.

"Captain wait!" her first officer called out after her, turning and running to catch up with her, "There's very little time left."

"There should be even less commander." Captain Tull responded as they both stepped into a turbolift, "The reactor is not behaving as it should during an overload."

Exiting the turbolift near the bridge the two officers hurried towards it. But as they rounded the final corner and were able to see through the large open doorway to the bridge they both saw the three rebels, all still bound inspecting the ship's controls.

"The prisoners have escaped." the first officer exclaimed and at the same moment the computer informed Captain Tull directly that the reactor temperature had just experienced another spike, bringing it very close to critical. By her calculations there was barely enough time to return to her shuttle and escape.

"Tobis look!" Jaysica exclaimed when she noticed the two Imperial officers staring at them through the doorway.

"You want my ship you rebel scum?" Captain Tull called out, drawing her blaster before any of the rebels could react, "Take it and enjoy it while it lasts." and she fired her blaster.

But the shot was not aimed at any of the rebels. Instead it was aimed for the control panel beside the

doorway to the bridge and as it exploded in a shower of sparks the blast door it controlled suddenly slid shut, sealing the rebels inside the bridge and the Imperial officers outside it.

"This way commander." Captain Tull then said, "We must hurry if we are to abandon ship in time."

As Jaysica and Kara watched, Tobis inspected the controls to the blast door on the inside of the bridge.

"Oh, err, I've got a bad feeling about this." he said, "I – I think we're trapped in here."

"But the ship is ours right?" Jaysica asked, "The crew have all fled?"

"Err, oh, ah, yes. Yes we control the ship." Tobis said, "Oh and that reminds me." and then he hurried to one of the control stations where as quickly as he could while still wearing binders he pressed a sequence of keys that caused the various alarms that were sounding to cease. Then he rushed to one of the stations where the cruiser's defences were controlled from and pressed more buttons before finally turning back towards Jaysica and Kara.

"That – that's it." he said, "All systems are restored and – and our shields are up. So, err, the crew can't get back aboard."

"And how do we get back to the *Silver Hawk*?" Jaysica asked.

"Well, err we should be able to get the co-ordinates out of the navigation logs." Tobis answered, "Then, err, then we just reverse course and jump back into the system where the ship is."

"And what about the mines?" Kara asked.

"Oh, err, this ship controls them. We – we can just shut them all down by remote control." Tobis answered.

"After that I wonder if the major will let me be the first to give you a spanking Kara?" Jaysica asked.

Harvey whistled to indicate that the last of the *Silver Hawk*'s systems had now been restored to functionality. "Excellent work my little friend." Vorn said as he and Mace sat in the cockpit with the droid, "But now we need to be able to back away from that mine without it firing on us again."

"Perhaps if we fired first." Mace suggested, "It's in range of our laser cannon." but before Vorn could respond there was a flash of light as a gladiator-class cruiser that looked identical to the one that had taken Jaysica, Kara and Tobis away dropped out of hyperspace.

"They're back!" Vorn snapped, "They must have got our location from the others and come back for us."

"If we raise shields that mine will hit us again." Mace pointed out.

"then let's hope they only have an approximate position. Go get on the turret and I'll be ready to raise our shields after you take out the mine."

But then the *Silver Hawk*'s communication system came to life.

"Hey boss!" Kara's voice called out, "Do you like our sweet new ride?"

"Kara?" Vorn exclaimed, "Is that really you?"

"Who else would it be boss? Look, we've shut down all the mines in this system. Can you get over here and give us a hand? You'll need something to break through a blast door with and something for picking electronic locks. Oh and clothes for us all as well."

"You have got to be kidding me." Tharun said as the rebels who had remained on the *Silver Hawk* saw the three former captives standing on the bridge of the captured cruiser, "You captured this ship like that? Just the three of you."

"Four." Jaysica said, "We couldn't have done it without Penny. She helped us get out of our cell and take over all the mouse droids."

"Three." Kara responded, "Penny may have helped but you didn't. All you were good for was giving Tobis something to do while he waited for his plan to work. I was the one who told him what to do to fly this ship back here though." then she looked at Vorn, "Now can you get me out of this thing boss?" she asked, "It's getting really sweaty in here."

"Hey wait a minute." Jaysica exclaimed, "You lost."

"What do you mean 'she lost'?" Cass asked in response.

"Oh, err, there was a bet." Tobis answered and Jaysica looked down at Penny.

"Show them Penny." she said and the mouse droid used its internal comlink to transfer one of its recorded data files to the cruiser's bridge holographic emitters and a three dimensional image of Kara appeared, bound exactly as Kara was at that moment.

"I say Tobis's plan will fail, while the klutz who got us into this mess says it will work. When we finally get out of this only the one who's right gets untied. The other has to stay like this for a week." the hologram said before the image skipped to the next recording, "I've heard Tobis's idea and I'd just like to amend the terms of the bet. If he pulls it off I'll not only stay like this for a week, no wait, a month but the team can all spank my perfectly formed rear whenever I'm within reach. Okay stop recording there."

"Oh that's poodoo!" Kara snapped as the other rebels began to gather around her.

"I'm sorry Kara." Vorn said as he produced a key to release Tobis from his binders and unlocked them before Tharun then handed the engineer some overalls, "But that sounded quite clear to me. You made a bet and

now you have to live with the consequences.”

“Oh you've got to be – Ow!” Kara responded, flinching as Tharun slapped her, “I didn't – Ow! Hey stop that.” she added, glaring at Cass

“What?” Cass asked, “I'm only doing what you said.”

“Yes but -Ow! Hey boss what was that for?”

“Fun.” Vorn replied, “Now Tobis if you'd like to untie Jaysica she can get dressed and I'll meet you all back on the *Silver Hawk* in ten minutes. The Alliance can use this ship to gather up all the mines in the system safely so I want a full report on its status. Captain Grayle with me if you would.”

“Yes major.” Mace said and the two men turned and began to walk away.

“Hey boss you can't leave me here like this – Ow! Stop that, it's not -Ow!” Kara called out after Vorn.

“So how long are you actually going to leave her tied up like that major?” Mace whispered when they were far enough away that none of the other rebels could hear them.

“Oh that depends.” Vorn said, smiling as there was another cry of pain from behind them.

“Depends on what?”

“Two things actually. Firstly how entertaining it is and secondly how long I can get away with it until she threatens to divorce me.”