

STAR WARS

1-07: The Metal Killers

By Stephen J Dutton



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 MAGE GRAYLE, CAPTAIN OF THE FREIGHTER THE
SILVER HAWK TAKE THE FIGHT TO THE EMPIRE.

FACING THEM ARE A MULTITUDE OF ENEMIES, BOTH SEEN AND UNSEEN AS THE
EMPIRE PLOTS TO BRING DOWN THE REBEL ALLIANCE AND FOREVER EXTINGUISH
HOPE AND FREEDOM IN THE GALAXY...

THE METAL KILLERS

HARD PRESSED TO INCREASE THE SIZE OF THEIR FLEET, THE REBEL ALLIANCE
EAGERLY ACCEPTS DEFECTORS FROM THE IMPERIAL NAVY. HOWEVER THE EMPIRE IS
JUST AS EAGER TO PREVENT SUCH DEFECTIONS. AS MAJOR VORN LARCUS III AND
THE OTHER OCCUPANTS OF THE SILVER HAWK FIND OUT TO THEIR COST...

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

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1.

Mace Grayle captain of the light freighter the *Silver Hawk* had positioned his ship just within the rings of the gas giant. Outside of the cockpit he could see the chunks of ice that orbited the planet below and he kept a careful eye out for any that looked like they were straying too close to his ship. The last thing he wanted was for one of them to crash into it.

A flash in the distance, further out in space caught his eye. It was a flash that he knew well, it was the tell tale sign of a ship exiting hyperspace. To witness a ship exiting hyperspace by chance was unlikely in the extreme, space was far too big for that even within the confines of a star system. It was no accident that Mace had just seen this, he had been waiting for it.

"Major," he said into the ship's internal communication system, "I think they're here," and he sat back and waited.

In less than a minute Mace was joined in the cockpit by a man older than himself. This was Vorn Larcus III, the leader of the rebel cell that Mace carried on his ship. Vorn sat in the co-pilot's seat and looked at the sensor display.

"Do you know how long they've been here?" Vorn asked.

"They just jumped in. Why?"

"Oh its probably nothing," Vorn said, "Its just that they're not moving."

"Perhaps they're waiting for us to show ourselves," Mace suggested.

"Possibly," Vorn replied, "So what do you say we go introduce ourselves?"

Mace said nothing in reply. Instead he placed his hands on the ship's control column and piloted it towards the newcomer.

Leaving Mace at the controls of his ship Vorn left the cockpit and walked back to the communal area of the ship. On his way he met a young man in overalls. This was Tobis, Mace's engineer.

"I heard the engines." Tobis said, "Are they here?"

"It looks like it," Vorn replied, "I'm going to go and let the others know," and he walked on past Tobis while the engineer continued on his way to the cockpit. Entering the ship's communal area Vorn found his rebels waiting for him.

Two of them, the former mercenary Tharun and the fighter pilot turned medic Kara were sat at the table eating. Meanwhile his demolitions expert Jaysica was on her hands and knees picking food up off the floor.

"You could give me a hand," Jaysica said to the two at the table.

"Why?" Tharun asked with his mouth full.

"Yeah its not our food you managed to drop," Kara added.

"It better not be mine either." Vorn said when he looked down at the mess.

Jaysica jumped to her feet.

"Sorry sir, I didn't see you there," she said.

"Clearly," he replied, "but you better get that cleaned up quickly because the frigate's here."

Leaving Jaysica behind the other two rebels followed Vorn back to the cockpit to see the starship they had been waiting for. By this time it filled much of the cockpit view port. The vessel was much larger than the *Silver Hawk*, over ten times its length in fact and it had a distinctive shape. The ship consisted of two primary modules with a narrower section joining them together, while an irregularly shaped tapered tower extended downwards from the forward module. This was unmistakably a Nebulon-B class frigate, the type of warship favoured by the Empire for escorting commercial convoys. But this ship was not here to protect any helpless freighters, nor hopefully was it here to engage rebels. It was here to defect.

Word had reached the Rebel Alliance that the crew of this frigate were becoming increasingly dissatisfied with the state of the Empire and following several clandestine meetings between rebel agents and members of the ship's crew had convinced them to hand themselves and their ship over to the Alliance.

That was what had brought the *Silver Hawk* to this remote location. The frigate could not travel directly to a rebel dockyard with the Alliance running the risk of handing over the location of one of their bases to the Empire so instead the frigate had been told to come here where Vorn's unit would go on board to ensure that the ship's defection was genuine before providing the jump co-ordinates for the frigate to complete its journey.

"Have they made contact yet?" Vorn asked as he sat down.

"No, not yet," Tobis said, "I've been transmitting to them and they don't appear to be damaged but so far they haven't replied."

"I'll take us in closer." Mace said and he flew the *Silver Hawk* along the length of the frigate.

"The docking bay is open." Vorn noted as they approached the engineering module at the frigate's stern.

"And the shield is at low intensity." Tobis added after glancing at the sensor readings in front of him. Like most starships that featured internal hangar bays as part of their design, the Nebulon-B frigate used a shield similar to those used to protect against missiles to hold the atmosphere inside the hangar. At low power it would just block the passage of the air through it but still allow shuttles to enter or exit the hangar, while at higher settings it would be as effective as any physical door at blocking the entrance to the hangar.

"Do you think the ship's full of zombies?" Tharun asked.

"Zombies?" Mace asked in reply, "When has that ever happened? Apart from that one time."

"Technically they weren't zombies," Kara pointed out, "They were just people under the control of a mad jedi."

"One of them still tried to eat my face," Tharun said.

"What's going on?" Jaysica said as she entered the cockpit, wiping her hands on a cloth.

"The frigate we were waiting for is just sitting there doing nothing," Tobis answered her.

"You don't think its full of zombies do you?" Jaysica asked.

"There are no zombies on that ship!" Vorn suddenly yelled, raising his hands up to his head.

For a moment no spoke, then Mace broke the silence.

"So what do you want us to do then?" he asked.

"Take us into the hangar," Vorn said, "If we're going to find out what's going on then we need to get aboard that ship."

Mace manoeuvred his ship carefully through the shielded entrance and into the hangar where he set the *Silver Hawk* down.

"That's strange," Tobis said, still looking at the sensor displays, "these readings indicate a class three atmosphere."

"But that's toxic isn't it?" Tharun said.

"Yes," Kara added, "a breath mask is needed for humans to survive in that sort of atmosphere."

"But weren't the crew human?" Jaysica asked, "All the Imperial Navy are."

"Can you tell if the entire ship's been affected?" Vorn asked, "Or is it just in the hangar?"

"You're thinking a chemical spill?" Mace said.

"I hope so," Vorn replied.

"The sensors indicate that the air has too much carbon dioxide in it," Tobis said, "That sounds like a life support problem to me."

"So it's the entire ship then." Vorn said.

"Most likely," Tobis said, "Though its possible that there are pockets of clean air in places where the crew were able to rig up emergency shelters. Escape pods for example."

"That would explain why they didn't communicate with us," Mace said, "Their communications wouldn't be functional while the pods are still attached to the ship."

"Then there could be survivors," Vorn said, "That means we have to check."

"And if there aren't any?" Tharun asked.

"Then we take the ship to the Alliance anyway." Vorn told him.

Only four of the rebels aboard the *Silver Hawk* had breath masks of their own, so Vorn and Jaysica had to remain aboard the ship while the others went to investigate the frigate. It was also decided that they would take Tobis's R5 unit Harvey and Jaysica's mouse droid Penny with them.

Vorn and Jaysica sat in the *Silver Hawk's* cockpit and watched as the other rebels walked across the hangar bay towards the turbolift door ahead of them. Jaysica wriggled in the co-pilots seat.

"I can't see properly," she complained and she felt for the adjustment lever.

"Leave it," Vorn told her.

"I've nearly got it," she said but then there was 'crack' and the chair dropped suddenly, "Oops," Jaysica said and she held up the lever that she had just broken off, "It was an accident."

"When Mace gets back I'm telling him you broke his ship," Vorn said. He nodded towards the party of rebels outside the *Silver Hawk*, then he noticed the control booth to the side of the hangar.

"Hang on a moment," he said using the *Silver Hawk's* transmitter to signal the other rebels, "Check the control booth."

Tharun turned around to give them a thumbs up and rather than continuing to the turbolift they headed for the hangar control booth.

Kara screamed and jumped backwards when the control booth door was opened. She was stood right in front of it and the body of the crewman that rolled out nearly landed on top of him.

"What was that?" Vorn asked.

"False alarm major," Tharun signalled back, "We have a body here. Kara's checking to see if he's a zombie now."

"Everyone stop talking about zombies," Vorn said.

"He's not been dead long boss," Kara said, ignoring his exchange with Tharun, "a few hours at most."

"There's another one in here," Mace said as he stepped over the body in the doorway and into the control booth, "No signs of a struggle though."
"I think this one suffocated," Kara said, "and I'd bet the other one did too."
"So carbon dioxide poisoning then?" Vorn said.
"That's my conclusion," Kara replied.
"How long would that take?" Vorn asked.
"It depends, if carbon dioxide was deliberately released into the air then they could have died almost instantly when the oxygen was displaced. But it could have taken hours if it built up slowly."
"We need to check the life support system itself," Tobis said, "that will tell us if any changes were made to the settings."
"Split up," Vorn said, "Tharun and Tobis head for the life support control. Kara and Mace head for the bridge."
"Right you are. You two just take care of my ship," Mace said.
"Too late for that." Vorn replied.
"What's Jaysica broken now?" Mace asked.

Both the bridge and the life support control were located towards the front of the frigate in the inverted tower below the forward module so the four rebels initially set off together for their separate destinations. Along the way they found more bodies of crewmen, still clad in Navy uniforms but with insignia removed.
"Is it just me or are there not many bodies about?" Tharun asked out loud as Kara checked on another corpse discovered on their route.
"I hadn't been counting," Mace answered.
"This ship had a crew of what? Eight hundred?" Tharun said, "So why are there so few at duty stations?"
"It happened at night." Tobis said.
"What?" Tharun said.
"The ship's clock shows the early hours of the morning," Tobis replied, "So if it really happened in the last few hours then most of the crew will be in their bunks. They died in their sleep."
"The timing fits for this one too," Kara said, "I think they've all been dead about six hours. So from just after midnight."
"It still doesn't tell us how the carbon dioxide got into the air." Mace said, "Now let's get going."
The rebels stayed together as far as the bridge, where Kara and Mace got off the turbolift and left Tharun and Tobis with the droids to continue on down to the life support control. There were more bodies on the bridge, but only about a third of the positions were occupied, fitting in with Tobis's theory that the crew had died during the nighttime shift. One of the bodies was not at his station however, instead he lay on the floor beside an open equipment locker and he was wearing a breath mask.
"Carbon dioxide poisoning, same as the others," Kara said as she examined the body.
"But he's wearing a mask," Mace said, "How can that have happened?"
Kara removed the breath mask from the dead man and took a closer look at it.
"It's split," she said, "Look, here," and she held the mask towards Mace and pointed at the tube that ran from the facemask to the filter unit. Along its entire length Mace saw a series of splits in the tubing.
"How the hell did that happen?" he said as he took the mask from Kara and looked more closely at the splits. Each break in the tubing was a straight line that ran along the length of the tube instead of following the textured ribs around it. Each one also appeared to be the same length, "These were done deliberately," he said.
"The rest are the same," Kara replied as she took one breath mask after another from the locker and checked the tubing, "Every one is damaged in the same manner in the same place."
"Making sure that no-one can rig a complete mask from parts of them all," Mace added, "I guess this rules out an accident."
"For the masks I agree," Kara said, "but we still don't know why the air supply was contaminated in the first place."
"Hang on a minute." Mace said and he walked over to one of the control stations and studied it. Not finding what he wanted he moved on to the next one.
"What are you looking for?" Kara asked.
"Environmental monitoring." Mace said, "There should be a display somewhere here shouldn't there?"
"There should be yes," Kara replied and she too began to look over the control stations looking for the environmental monitor, "Found it," she said while looking at the third station she came to and Mace came over to join her.
"Well that doesn't look right," Mace said and he pulled out his comlink.
"What do you mean normal?" Vorn asked when Mace signalled the *Silver Hawk*.
"I mean that according to the instruments on the bridge the air is perfectly fine," Mace said.

Vorn checked the *Silver Hawk's* controls again.

"Well we're still reading a class three atmosphere," Vorn replied, "Check the other systems, I'll get on to Tobis."

Vorn heard Mace shut down his comlink and he then signalled Tobis.

"Tobis, are you in the life support section yet?" he asked.

"Not yet major," Tobis replied after a brief pause, "All the doors on this level are stuck. I'm trying to get one open now with Harvey."

"Well Mace says that the controls on the bridge are showing that the air is safe."

"No chance sir," Tobis said, "The *Silver Hawk's* sensors are working fine and Kara's confirmed that the crew have been dying of carbon dioxide poisoning," then Vorn heard a sudden hissing sound and Tobis added an excited cry of, "Got it!" as the door he was working on opened. This was followed by a less enthusiastic, "Oh."

"What's happening?" Vorn asked.

"We've got another body here sir," Tharun signalled back, "and he wasn't gassed."

"What happened to him?" Jaysica interrupted.

"His throat's been cut." Tharun replied.

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Tharun pulled the body from the chair it had been sat in and Tobis sat in its place and looked at the readouts in front of him.

"These all say that the quality is fine," he said.

"But we know its not," Tharun replied.

"I know," Tobis said, "and anyone sat here would know that as well."

"How come?"

"Because this readout here tells me that oxygen is not being fed back into the air and that every single carbon dioxide scrubber has been physically removed from the air recycling system. Without them the waste gas just built up until it reached a toxic level."

"Where are these scrubbers?" Tharun asked.

"This way." Tobis told him and he ran from the room back to the hallway where they had exited the turbolift. He stopped when he reached the door opposite to the one into the control room he had just left and he took out his datapad.

"Help me with this," he said to Harvey and the astromech droid extended its computer interface and plugged itself into a computer port beside the sealed door. After a minute or two of overriding commands placed into the frigate's computer network the door opened with a hiss.

"Stay behind me," Tharun told Tobis and the former mercenary went through the doorway with his blaster rifle at the ready, "Its clear," he called back, "but it's a right bloody mess in here."

Accompanied by the two droids Tobis followed Tharun through the doorway where he saw the empty holders for the carbon dioxide scrubbers. The scrubbers themselves lay scattered about on the floor where some of them looked to have been stepped on.

"What do we do now?" Tharun asked.

"Help me put these back in," Tobis said and he picked up one of the scrubbers and inserted it into one of the holders.

"But some of them are crushed at the ends," Tharun said as he slung his rifle over his shoulder and picked up one of the damaged scrubbers.

"It doesn't matter," Tobis told him, "Just put the damaged ones in the bottom row of holders so we know which ones won't be working at full efficiency."

On the bridge Kara and Mace had sat at the flight control stations and were reviewing the frigate's flight status as best as they could. Neither of them were qualified as pilots of capital ships, but their skills with transports and starfighters gave them enough knowledge to know if something was wrong.

"All this looks fine," said Mace, "I'd say that whoever sabotaged the life support just wanted to get rid of the crew while keeping the ship intact."

"I can't find anything wrong either," Kara said, "Apart from the environmental readings that is."

With the frigate's flight systems checked out and the carbon dioxide scrubbers back in place the rebels all returned to the *Silver Hawk* to discuss their options while the air cleared.

"So why don't any of the ship's instruments show the build up of carbon dioxide?" Vorn asked Tobis.

"I don't know exactly," the engineer replied, "but my guess is that the sensors have been tampered with."

"Tampered with how?" Tharun asked.

"Well there are two ways of doing it," Tobis explained, "You could place an air tight container over the sensor so that it just read a tiny bubble around it instead of the whole room it is supposed to monitor."

"Sounds complicated," Mace said.

"Any risky," Vorn added, "the next person to come along could find it and immediately see that the sensor had been tampered with. You said that there was a second way, what is it?"

"Recalibrate the sensors," Tobis answered, "They're electronic devices that are normally maintained by the ship's compliment of droids, but anyone could open one up and tune it not pick up any change in the carbon dioxide level until it was already lethal."

"I didn't see any droids about," Tharun said, "Is that normal?"

"Actually no," Tobis said, "I should have noticed it myself. If we arrived during the night shift we should have seen all of the droids carrying out essential work while the crew were asleep."

"But the droids would have seen the crew," Vorn said, "My guess is that whoever sabotaged the life support and sensors also got to the droids to make sure that they didn't notice what was happening to the crew and do something about it."

"They would probably have to have done something to the droids," Tobis said, "There are a lot of sensors that they had to tamper with. It would make more sense to get the droids to do it instead."

"But who did all of this?" Jaysica asked, "Are they still aboard?"

"Unlikely," Mace answered, "Its probably one of the crew that wasn't part of the mutiny. You know, the ones that the crew put off the ship before coming here. He probably got to the systems before he was caught and they didn't find out."

"So that just leaves the ship adrift until the Empire gets here to take it back then," Kara said.

"No it doesn't," Vorn replied, "Because we're going to take it first."

"It takes over three hundred people to fly this thing with just a skeleton crew boss," Kara said, "and there are only six of us."

"We don't need a crew," Vorn said, "all of the flight systems are functional so all that we need to do is input the jump data into the navigation computer and let the ship fly itself to our fleet. The Alliance can put a proper crew aboard then."

At that point the rebels were interrupted by a high-pitched voice.

"Excuse me master Larcus," the voice said and the rebels saw a gold coloured protocol droid walk into the common area from the bridge.

"What is it Jeeves?" Vorn asked his droid.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you sir," the droid said, "but the sensors now indicate that the air outside is safe for humans to breathe without protective equipment."

"Right then," Vorn said, standing up, "let's go."

"Where to boss?" Kara asked.

"You come with me to the bridge," Vorn said, "I'll set the navigation computer and you can pilot the ship into hyperspace. Mace, Tharun and Tobis should head down to the engineering deck with Harvey to keep an eye on things so we can abort the jump if there's a problem. As for you..." he added, looking at Jaysica.

"What shall I do?" she asked eagerly.

"You know a thing or two about mouse droids," Vorn said, "So take Penny and go find where the ones on this ship are and get them to reset all of the atmosphere sensors."

"And try not to break another spaceship today." Mace added as he headed for the *Silver Hawk's* entry ramp.

"That was an accident," Jaysica protested as she followed behind Mace.

"Excuse me sir," Jeeves said as the rebels walked past him, "but what am I to do?"

"Stay here," Vorn told the droid, "and let us know if the ships instruments show anything odd."

Kara and Vorn had further to walk than the others, so they were the last ones to reach their destination.

"What do we do about them?" Kara asked, indicating the bodies of the crewmen.

"When we jump to hyperspace we'll send the ship's droids round to find them all and gather them up until they can be dealt with properly." Vorn replied as he took a seat at the navigation station and took out his datapad that held the navigational data for the jump through hyperspace.

While Vorn entered the jump co-ordinates Kara sat at the helm and grasped the controls.

"Here we go," she said, "I'll just nudge the ship around to get us further out from the planet." and she fired the main drives.

Jaysica had found the frigate's entire compliment of mouse droids, more than thirty of them, lined up in the droid maintenance section in the frigate's forward module. In addition to the mouse droids there were several other types of droid all awaiting instructions.

Mouse droids were highly flexible single purpose droids. An interchangeable skill module allowed them to be reconfigured for different tasks while keeping them far cheaper than droids that were capable of carrying out every task without modification, astromech droids for example. Jaysica set down her backpack when she entered the droid maintenance section, shut down Penny, removed the module currently attached to her own droid and immediately began to search for the skill modules she would require. She had just begun to search through a row of lockers when the ship lurched suddenly.

"What are you doing?" Vorn said while he hung on to the console in front of him.

"Sorry about that boss," Kara said, "I'm more used to an X-wing, I didn't expect her to be so responsive. I'll just give it another go."

Jaysica had just picked herself up off the floor from beneath everything that had fallen out of the locker when the ship lurched wildly again and she fell forwards into the locker itself. Her vision blurred slightly as she slammed into the back of the locker, but she was otherwise unharmed. However she was not the only thing to be thrown in that direction by the sudden movement of the ship. The locker door swung shut behind her and Jaysica's ears rang as it slammed shut and locked her in. The locker was quite shallow and she now found herself unable to turn around. She squirmed as she reached down to her jacket pocket for her comlink

to call for help when she remembered that the device was not in her pocket. It was in her backpack and she had left that by the door.

"Oh no," Jaysica said to herself and she leant her head forwards until it banged against the back of the locker.

Then Jaysica heard something in the room outside. It was footsteps. She was about to call out for help when she realised that there was something odd about them. They were the harsh sound of metal on metal rather than the softer sound of the soles of boots that a person would wear. It wasn't one of the other rebels moving about, it was one of the droids.

"I've got a very bad feeling about this," she whispered to herself.

"Yes what is it?" Vorn asked when his comlink chimed.

"It me major," Tharun said, "we were just wondering if Kara could warn us the next time she's about to fire the drives so we can grab hold of something. I think Mace is thinking about her neck."

"Yes we are having some, err, technical difficulties up here at the moment," Vorn replied, "but I think Kara's getting the hang of things now aren't you?"

"I think so boss," Kara said and she fired the engines for a third time. This time the ship barely shuddered as she applied just enough thrust to stabilise the frigate and then steered it away from the nearby gas giant, "How's our position?" she asked.

"Looks good," Vorn said, then he raised his comlink again, "How are the engines looking?" he asked.

There was the sound of distant voices from the comlink as the rebels in the engineering section discussed the matter. Then Tharun spoke again.

"Ion drives are running a bit hot major," he said, "Like someone who doesn't have a clue how to fly this ship has been firing them at random, but the hyperdrive's ready to go. We can make the jump any time."

"Okay then," Kara said, "On three. One. Two," and she activated the frigate's hyperdrive and the ship lurched again as it made the jump to faster than light travel.

"What happened to three?" Vorn asked.

"That'll teach people to criticise my piloting," she said, but Vorn just frowned before activating his comlink again.

"Well as some of you may have noticed," he began, "we've made the jump to hyperspace and we're still here. How are the engines looking?"

"Fine," Tobis replied, "they shouldn't give us any trouble at all."

"Excellent," Vorn said, "Jaysica how are we doing with the droids?"

There was no reply.

"Jaysica?" Vorn repeated, "Can you read me?" but still there was no reply, "Something's wrong," Vorn then said to Kara.

"Something's always wrong with her," Kara replied.

Vorn raised his comlink again.

"Tharun can you go and check on Jaysica? I can't raise her."

"On my way major." he signalled back.

When Tharun left the engineering control room Mace and Tobis remained behind. Tobis continued to study the condition of the engines while Mace just leant back in his chair and placed his hands behind his head.

"Interesting stuff eh Tobis?" Mace said as Tobis continued to sift through screen after screen of data.

"Puzzling." Tobis replied.

"How so?" Mace asked and he leant forwards again.

"Well the crew all died in the last few hours yes?" Tobis said.

"That's what Kara's said yes," Mace replied.

"Well according to this," Tobis said, pointing to the display he was reading data from, "this ship spent two days in hyperspace getting here."

"Let me see." Mace said, standing up and leaning over Tobis to look at the screen, "Now that is odd," he said, "You can't get off a ship in hyperspace and we'd have seen a launch between the ship getting to us and us getting on board it. We've been assuming that one of the crew that wasn't part of the mutiny sabotaged the ship before he was thrown off, but if the ship's been in hyperspace all this time then either the saboteur died along with the rest of them or he's still on board."

"And Jaysica's missing," Tobis said, standing up quickly and turning towards the door, "we have to go and find her."

"Steady on," Mace said, placing his hand on Tobis's chest, "Tharun's on his way to her right now. Your girlfriend will be fine."

"She's not my girlfriend," Tobis replied as Mace took out his comlink.

"Whatever," Mace said then he turned his comlink on, "Major we may not be alone here," he said.

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"Oh crap," Kara said as she listened to Mace explaining how there was no way that the crew had been killed by someone who had gotten off the ship after they sabotaged it.

"Follow me." Vorn said to her and he headed for the exit from the bridge.

"Where are we going?" Kara asked him.

"The security office," he replied, "If there is someone else on board that's the best place to start looking for them."

"But what about the bridge?" Kara asked.

"We're in hyperspace," Vorn replied, "What can they do now?"

The security office was very close to the bridge. It was nothing more than a row of computers along a wall with three seats in front of it. The final crewman to have been working here was slumped forwards where he had died. Vorn dragged him from the chair and laid him out at the other side of the room. Then he took the dead man's seat and began to look over the displays on the wall while Kara sat down next to him.

Tharun picked up his pace when Mace contacted him to warn him that there may be someone else on board. Now there was more than just the possibility that Jaysica had suffered another of her 'accidents' that only seemed to cause injury to her pride, she could be in real danger. Additionally just in case the saboteur really was still at large he unslung his blaster rifle and held it ready.

Approaching the droid maintenance section Tharun noticed that the door was open and he positioned himself so that he got the best possible view of the room before he reached the doorway. There was no sign of Jaysica at all until he stepped inside the room and he saw her backpack on the floor beside him. He looked around the room, letting his rifle follow his view and he saw a mouse droid on a workbench beside him that he recognised as Penny.

"Jaysica?" he called out, knowing that she would not have left her bag and droid here.

There was no reply to his question but Tharun thought that he heard something banging.

"Jaysica are you here?" he asked again, louder this time and he heard the banging again. It seemed to be coming from a row of lockers. The floor around was covered in equipment that looked to have been dropped there.

Tharun advanced carefully, keeping his weapon at his shoulder.

"Jaysica!" he shouted out and this time he spotted one of the locker doors shake near the bottom as something banged against it from the inside.

He reached out for the locker's latch and released it. Immediately the door flew open and Jaysica toppled out onto the floor at his feet.

"What were you doing in there?" Tharun asked as Jaysica picked herself up.

"It wasn't my fault," she protested.

"Let me guess," Tharun said, "You tripped."

"Well the whole ship felt like it was shaking," Jaysica explained, "First everything fell out on top of me and then I was thrown inside there. I thought I was going to be stuck there for hours."

"Yeah, well, at least this time you can blame Kara." Tharun said.

"What do you mean?" Jaysica asked him.

"Well who do you think it was that kept firing the engines?" Tharun replied.

"Ooh, and to think that she's always blaming me for things," Jaysica said.

"You're always doing things."

"Well I'm not going to let her get away with it this time," Jaysica said.

"Jaysica, are you going to steal all her clothes while she's in the shower again? Because that worked out well last time," Tharun suggested.

"No," Jaysica told him, "The major told me that was inappropriate. Even though he did stick around when I did it."

"Damn officers." Tharun said.

Then Jaysica noticed that Tharun was cradling his rifle.

"Why are you holding that?" she asked.

"Whoever killed the crew may still be on board the ship," he replied and Jaysica remembered the footsteps she had heard.

"I think you're right," she said, "but I don't think it's a person, I think it's a droid."

"A droid?" Vorn said when Tharun checked in to report that he had found Jaysica safe.

"That's what she says sir, she heard a droid walking about."

"But she didn't see it?" Vorn asked.

"No sir, she was stuck in a locker."

"I knew it," Kara exclaimed when she overheard this, "the klutz strikes again."

Vorn held up his hand for quiet.

"Where is this droid now then?" he asked.

"I don't know sir," Tharun replied, "I didn't see it."

"Tell Jaysica I want to know what sort of droid we're dealing with and you better stay there to keep an eye on her. Lock the door," Vorn said before shutting off his comlink. Then he looked at Kara, "Wait here while I check the bridge. See if you can locate that droid," and he got up to leave.

"What's on the bridge that's so important?" Kara asked.

"Just something I need to check on," Vorn said as he left the security station.

"Fine, don't tell me then. See if I care," Kara said as the door shut behind Vorn and she began to search through the images taken by the frigates onboard security cameras for any signs of a droid moving about. Vorn went directly back to the bridge and sat in the captain's chair, then he activated the frigate's internal communication system and put a call in to the engineering section.

"Hello?" a confused sounding Tobis said after noticing the incoming message.

"Put Mace on, Tobis." Vorn said.

"What is it?" Mace asked after a moments delay.

"I'm on the bridge," Vorn said, "go somewhere private and call me back," then he broke the link.

"Is it just me or was that weird?" Tobis asked when the line went dead.

"It's probably nothing." Mace said as he looked around. Then he asked, "That's the chief engineer's office right?" and he pointed a door.

"Yes that's right," Tobis answered.

"Good, wait here." Mace said and he went into the office, closing the door behind him.

Inside he sat at the chief engineer's desk and called the bridge.

"Mace here," he said, "What's up?"

"I think we have a problem bigger than just a dead crew here," Vorn replied.

"Such as?"

"The spy."

Mace paused when Vorn said this. After a recent attack on a rebel safe world the chief of Alliance operations in the sector, General Syres Kain, had determined that an Imperial spy had infiltrated the Alliance. This information had been kept to just a handful of officers that included Mace and Vorn.

"What makes you think that?" Mace asked.

"It looks like a droid killed the crew," Vorn said, "and since shipboard droids tend to be incapable of causing the death of sentient beings that means that the Empire had to have put an assassin droid aboard."

"And they wouldn't do that unless they already knew that the crew was planning to mutiny," Mace interrupted.

"Exactly and that information could only have come from inside the Alliance."

"So what are we going to do about it?" Mace asked.

"We can't send a signal while in hyperspace. We have to take out the droid before we reach our destination. The damage that this ship could cause otherwise doesn't bear thinking about. I've got Kara looking for it now. When we find it, we'll seal it in whatever section it's in and deal with it."

"Sounds straight forwards enough," Mace said, "Are you sure we can deal with an assassin droid?"

"Is there anyone else here to try instead of us?"

"I get the message. So what do I do while I wait for Kara to find the thing?"

"Just stay there, stick with Tobis."

"Safety in numbers?"

"Exactly. Tharun's with Jaysica and I'll head back to Kara."

"Sounds good. Well except for Tharun of course. He'd be safer with the droid."

The communication channel was then shut off and Mace went back to the main engineering room. As he left the office Tobis noticed that Mace was checking his blaster.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"There could be an assassin droid aboard," Mace said, "So from now on we stick together."

On hearing the words 'assassin droid' Tobis drew his own blaster and checked that the safety was off.

Vorn returned to the security station near the bridge to find Kara still switching from one camera feed to another.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Kara asked.

"From now on we stay together," Vorn said as he sat down again without answering the question.

"How romantic," Kara replied.

"I'm serious Kara. I think we're dealing with an assassin droid."

"We'll that would make sense," Kara said, "because wherever that tin can is it's keeping out of sight of all of the cameras."

"Wait, go back," Vorn said as Kara changed the camera image displayed again.

"What?" Kara said as she changed back to the previous view.

"There," Vorn said pointing at where the image showed a clock displaying the ship's time, "Zoom in on that."

"What? The clock? Okay but I don't see what's so special about...Oh," Kara said and she looked around at the clock in the security station. The time it was showing was not the same as the one in the camera image.

"Where is that?" Vorn asked. All that the image showed of the room was row after row of storage lockers.

"Deck eighteen, one floor down from here," Kara said. Then she added, "Oh crap. It's the armoury."

"Seal it," Vorn said and Kara frantically accessed the system to remotely close and lock the heavily armoured door to the armoury.

"It's sealed," she said with a sigh of relief, "But I can't be too sure that the droid is still in there."

"Do you have your blaster with you?" Vorn asked as he took his own compact blaster pistol from its holster under his shoulder.

"Of course I do," Kara replied and she pulled her own full sized blaster pistol from her belt, "You don't think that I'd be on a ship full of dead people without it do you. They could be zombies or something."

"Stop talking about zombies."

"Yeah, because assassin droids are so much better aren't they boss?"

Vorn ignored the comment.

"Let's go see if we've caught our droid then shall we?" he said and headed for the door again, "We'll have Tharun and Jaysica meet us there to give us back up."

The armoury door was still sealed when Vorn and Kara reached it so they waited for Tharun and Jaysica to catch up with them. When the other two rebels arrived in the staging area outside the armoury Jaysica walked straight up to Kara and punched her arm.

"That was for getting me shut in a locker," Jaysica said.

"Ow!" Kara said, grabbing her arm, "Boss she hit me. Can I hit her back?"

"Enough!" Vorn shouted and he turned to Jaysica, "Now you're the expert at breaking and entering..."

"Breaking stuff anyway," Kara muttered.

"...So I want you to get this door open," Vorn said, ignoring Kara's comment and he pointed at the armoury door, "Everyone else be ready when this door opens," he added.

All that sealing the armoury door did was lock out anyone with the correct access from being able to open the door, so even if the rebels had used a security station to unseal the door their lack of a suitable key would have prevented them from opening the door. Instead everyone stood back from the door while Jaysica set to work on the release mechanism, trying to bypass it and trick the door into opening.

"I think I've got it," she said as she brought two wires together. But instead of the door opening as the wires touched there was a flash of light and Jaysica cried out as the room was plunged into darkness. After a moment the lights came back on and Jaysica sat up.

"Did it open?" she asked, looking at the still sealed armoury door. She looked around and saw that the others were looking at her. Vorn was suppressing a smile while Tharun and Kara were just grinning at her.

"What?" Jaysica asked.

"It's nothing," Kara said, "We're just all really glad you're okay. I like your hair by the way."

"Thank you, I... Hang on," and Jaysica lifted her hands up to feel her hair, "Oh no," she said when she felt it. The electrical jolt that had passed through her had momentarily charged up her hair and instead of it falling neatly down past her shoulders it was a mass of strands that were repelling one another. Frantically she tried flattening it out with her hands.

"Jaysica, the door," Vorn reminded her, "You can fix your hair after we've dealt with the droid."

Jaysica returned to the open panel and resumed her attempt to bypass the door's control system. The next time the wires sparked the armoured door slid open with a hiss.

Almost immediately a burst of blaster fire erupted from inside the armoury.

"Down!" Tharun yelled and the rebels all took cover behind the benches in the staging area.

"Wait for a target," Vorn said, "Remember that the contents of that room are somewhat volatile."

There was another burst of blaster fire and Jaysica rapidly crawled away from the door to where the other three rebels were hiding.

"This is not a good position major," Tharun said, "All it takes is one grenade."

"Do you have a better idea?" Kara asked.

"Yes actually," Tharun replied and he pulled a smoke grenade from his webbing. He removed the pin and released the grenade so that the lever flew away. Then he counted to three and hurled it through the open armoury door.

There was a clatter as the grenade bounced across the floor of the armoury followed by a 'whoosh' as the pyrotechnic core was triggered and the armoury began to fill with smoke. Almost immediately an alarm began to sound as the room's sensors interpreted the smoke as signifying a fire.

"What will that do?" Jaysica shouted over the sound of the alarm, "A droid won't choke on the smoke."

"No," Tharun replied, "But it's optical and infra red tracking will be screwed up by it. Now it will have to come out here," and he got up and leaned over the bench, using it to steady his aim with his rifle.

Seeing a large shape appear in the doorway Tharun fired a burst from his blaster and an electronic squeal suggested that he had hit the droid. But more blaster fire coming from the armoury that forced him to duck behind the bench again indicated that he had not disabled the droid. Then there was the sound of heavy metal on metal footfalls and the assassin droid came into view through the cloud of smoke that was now spilled out of the armoury. The droid held a blaster rifle in each of its two hands, which it began to aim towards the rebels behind the bench.

"Now!" Vorn shouted and all four of the rebels directed their weapons towards the droid and fired as fast as they could.

The droid staggered backwards under the hail of blaster bolts until it stood with one foot inside the armoury and one in the staging area. At this point the smaller pistols carried by Vorn and Jaysica ran out of ammunition and the weight of fire was no longer enough to force the droid back. Vorn ejected his spent power pack and reached for another. Meanwhile Jaysica leapt up and dived towards the trail of wires dangling from open panel where she had forced open the door.

The assassin droid saw her move and its brain assessed the threat that she posed. There were two targets firing at it from behind the bench with military grade weapons while she appeared to have discarded her weapon entirely. The droid judged her no threat and instead fired at the other rebels.

Jaysica grabbed hold of the cluster of wires and touched two together. Immediately the armoury door came down on top of the assassin droid with a crash. The armoured frame of the droid was not as tough as the armoured door and the falling door smashed the droid's body.

"Well done Jaysica." Vorn said as the other rebels emerged from behind the bench and Jaysica opened the door again.

Tharun advanced on the remains of the droid, keeping his weapon trained on it just in case it was still active. He kicked the two blaster rifles away when he reached it.

"It dead major." he said.

"Good," Vorn said, "Now how long will it take to shut off that alarm?"

4.

Vorn and Kara returned to the bridge where Kara had already located the damage control station.

"Here we go," she said, "The system has already highlighted the alarm in the armoury and is asking me to confirm what action should be taken."

"Just tell it pump the air out of the room," Vorn told her, "That should clear the smoke," then he took his comlink in his hand and turned it on, "Tharun we're going to turn the pumps on to clear the smoke," he said into it, "let us know when its all gone."

Kara activated the system that would pump all of the air out of the armoury and with it the smoke generated by Tharun's grenade.

"That's it. Its all clear now," Tharun signalled after a short delay and Kara shut down the pumping system. Then he added, "Err major, I think that we still have a problem here."

"What is it?" Vorn asked.

"Well the droid had two rifles yes? One in each hand."

"That's right," Vorn replied.

"Well I can see the locker that they were stored in from where I am and there are six missing."

"Oh no," Vorn said.

"What's up?" Kara asked.

"There are two more assassin droids on board somewhere," Vorn told her.

"Two more?" Mace said in astonishment when Vorn contacted him with the news.

"It gets worse," Vorn said, "I think that they have a link into the security camera system that allows them to recall older images instead of producing a live feed. So they can move about without fear of detection."

"So what are we going to do about them?" Mace asked.

"I'm still thinking about that," Vorn replied, "For now we hold our positions. Tharun and Jaysica have taken some more blasters from the armoury, they've dropped a couple of rifles off with us and are on their way up to you with some more."

"Good idea," Mace said, "The more firepower we have the safer I'll feel with assassin droids running around the place," then he shut off his comlink and put it away, "Did you catch all that?" he asked Tobis.

"Yes I did," Tobis replied.

"So how much damage can those two droids do?" Mace asked.

"So long as we hold the bridge and engineering only a limited amount," Tobis replied, "Anything they do to the ship should show up on our monitors."

"They pulled all the scrubbers from the life support system and a nearly full crew didn't notice that," Mace pointed out.

"They didn't actually damage the ship," Tobis answered, "and since there are only six of us breathing the air if they tried that again it would take days for the level of carbon dioxide to build up to a level where it could be considered dangerous."

"So what else can they alter without damaging the ship and giving away their location?" Mace asked but before Tobis could answer both rebels spun around and aimed their blasters at the door as it hissed open. Both relaxed when they saw Tharun and Jaysica standing there. Unusually Jaysica was armed with a blaster rifle like Tharun's.

"Nice hair," Mace said to Jaysica.

"Shut up," Jaysica snapped back at him.

"Anybody want a bigger gun?" Tharun asked as he and Jaysica walked up to Mace and Tobis and each of them unslung a second blaster rifle from their shoulders and put them down on the engineering consoles. Tobis quickly grabbed hold of the one that Jaysica had put down and lifted it clear of the controls it looked about to activate.

"I still think that we should have got something bigger," Jaysica commented, "There was all sorts of stuff in that armoury."

"We're fighting in a confined space," Tharun told her, "repeating blasters and grenade launchers are for open ground. These E-elevens will do just fine in here."

"But do be careful not to shoot at anything important." Tobis said.

"How do I know if something's important?" Jaysica asked.

"If its not an assassin droid then its important," Mace answered, "So only shoot at them."

While Kara continued to use the security station on the bridge deck to aid in their search for the remaining assassin droids, Vorn kept watch on the readouts from the bridge control stations for any signs of tampering

with the ships systems. He was not over enthusiastic about the idea of both he and Kara being alone while the assassin droids were on the loose but they had left all of the doors between them open and had taken precautions against anyone accessing the bridge deck. The turbolift cars had both been called to this floor and then jammed by means of chairs placed in the doorways to prevent anyone summoning them to other floors, while the access hatches in the floor and ceiling had been wedged shut with metal rods formed from chair legs that had been unscrewed. Vorn was confident that no one was getting onto this deck without alerting he and Kara first.

A sudden 'clang' attracted Vorn's attention and he picked up the rifle that Tharun had left with him.

"Boss? Do you hear this?" Kara called out to him.

"I hear it." Vorn replied and he rushed off the bridge towards the security station. There he found Kara standing in the doorway with her rifle in her hands looking up at the hatchway in the ceiling. The wheel that held it shut turned as far as the now bent chair leg wedged through it would allow and there was another 'clang' as it jammed.

"I think we've found an assassin droid," Vorn said and he pulled out his comlink, "We've got one. Maybe even both." he said into the device."

"Where?" Tharun's voice responded.

"Deck sixteen, trying to get onto the bridge deck through the access hatch," Vorn said.

There was a brief pause before Tharun replied again.

"Mace and I are on our way major, hang on," he said.

"Good. Be advised that the turbolifts are not operational in the forward section," Vorn said before putting his comlink away.

"You realise that the fact that we've jammed the hatch will probably tell the droid that we're in here don't you?" Kara said to Vorn.

"That had crossed my mind," Vorn said as he watched the chair leg bend further, "and I don't think that Mace and Tharun will be here before that chair leg snaps and the droids get in."

"You think it's both of them?"

"I don't know. If it's just one them we might be able to deal with it ourselves, but I don't think that we can handle both of them."

"So what do we do?" Kara asked.

"We make it look like we've left and we hide," Vorn answered and he reached down to the hatchway on the floor, removed the chair leg holding it shut and opened it.

"Hide? Where?"

Vorn looked around. There were only a handful of rooms on the bridge deck and few places to hide in them.

"The escape pods," he said eventually, "Even if the droids think to look for us there they won't be able to break in before Mace and Tharun get here."

"When the going gets tough, the tough get into an escape pod," said Kara, "Good idea boss," and the two rebels ran towards the rear of the deck where they knew there to be a row of escape pods. They climbed into the nearest of the escape pods and Kara closed the hatch behind her. The interior of the pod was cramped, in theory it was designed for four people but only over short distances and occupant comfort was not high on its list of design priorities.

"Well this is cosy isn't it?" Kara said as she squeezed into a seat beside Vorn.

"Shush." Vorn said and held up his hand and listened.

At first there was only the sound of Kara and Vorn breathing in the confined space, but then there was also the sound of metallic footfalls coming from outside the escape pods.

"There's one outside," Vorn whispered.

Then there was the muffled sound of a blaster rifle being fired on automatic and there was a small explosion from by the escape pod hatchway. Then there was the sound of footfalls again as the droid went away.

Vorn went to the hatchway and looked through the tiny view port.

"It's gone." he said and he reached for the hatch control to open it.

Nothing happened.

"It's damaged the mechanism," Vorn said.

"Does it know we're in here?" Kara asked.

"I doubt it," Vorn replied, "Otherwise it would have tried to kill us. I think it is just disabling all of the escape pods to cut off any means of escape," then he pulled out his comlink, "Mace, Tharun, where are you?" he signalled.

"Boom section," Mace answered, "Be with you in a few minutes."

"We're trapped in an escape pod," Vorn said, "After you've dealt with the droids get Tobis down here to get us out."

"Understood." Mace replied.

Vorn then put his comlink away.

"So," Kara said, "What can we do to pass the time in here?"

"Oh this is brilliant," Jaysica said out loud and she spun her chair around, "Kara's stuck. She's always making fun of me when stuff like this happens and now the shoe is on the other foot."

"What was that?" Tobis said, looking up from the console that had held his attention.

"Oh, never mind." Jaysica said and she got up and began to wander around the engineering control room, pausing in front of an inactive monitor and using its reflective surface as a mirror while she tried to flatten her hair down.

Mace and Tharun picked up their pace after the signal from Vorn soon they entered the frigate's forward module where they saw the access hatchway they had to take and they slowed down.

"I'll go first." Tharun said and with his blaster rifle raised he advanced on the hatchway in the floor while Mace covered him.

Suddenly there was a hiss and the doorway that they had just come through from the boom corridor dropped shut.

"That wasn't me," Mace said and he quickly pulled out his comlink, "Tobis are you playing about with the doors in the forwards module?"

"Its not me." Tobis replied.

"What is Jaysica sat on?" Mace asked.

"Nothing," Tobis said, "She's trying to tidy up her hair."

"Been running your fingers through it?" Mace said.

"No, I, err." Tobis mumbled.

"Just tell me what happened with the door Tobis," Mace said.

"The assassin droids must be on the bridge," Tobis said, "they're sealing off sections of the ship."

"Why would they do that?" Tharun asked into Mace's comlink.

"I'm not sure," Tobis replied, "Hang on a moment. Where are you exactly?"

"Forward module, right by the access hatch to the adjacent decks," Mace told him.

"Quick," Tobis said, "Head towards the starboard side of the ship. The airlock's there."

"Airlock?" Mace said, "But we can't go outside in hyperspace."

"You're not going outside," Tobis said frantically, "but you'll need the spacesuits. I think that the droids are about to pump all of the air out of the ship."

Mace and Tharun stared at one another for a moment then they both ran towards the airlock. Almost immediately a door that did not open when they pressed the control blocked their way.

"It's sealed." Mace said and he fired his blaster at the control panel. There was a shower of sparks and Mace reached through the hole blown in the panel and pulled out and handful of wires. He then began to touch the ends of the wires together.

"Mace, hurry." urged Tharun.

"I'm going as fast as I can." Mace replied and the door suddenly slid upwards. Mace and Tharun dived through the open doorway moments before it dropped shut again. Once more they encountered a sealed doorway between themselves and the airlock.

"We don't have time for this," Mace said.

"Do we have a choice?" Tharun asked.

"Yes actually, this way." Mace replied and he ran across the room they were in to a door labelled 'TIE HANGAR ACCESS' and he blasted its control panel.

"TIE fighters?" Tharun said.

"Yes, they're pressurised independently of the ship," Mace said as he touched wires together and the door slid open, "Get in one quick and shut the hatch."

Moving through the door as quickly as they could, Mace and Tharun found themselves in a massive room that was dominated by the racks designed to store Imperial TIE fighters while not in flight. Two dozen of the tiny vessels stood in rows and the two rebels ran towards the nearest of them. Hurriedly they climbed the ladders at the end of the racks and leaped into the fighters through their open rooftop hatches and pulled them shut behind them.

"This way!" Tobis said, pulling Jaysica out of the control room. The doors here still functioned, the assassin droids apparently beginning their process of sealing off individual sections of the ship at the front and working their way to the back.

"Where are we going?" Jaysica asked.

"Here," Tobis replied and he let go of Jaysica and pointed to a door, "Emergency supplies. There should be spacesuits in here," and he entered the room.

Jaysica followed him into the storeroom and found him pulling a spacesuit from a rack of them.

"These won't fit me," Jaysica protested. All of the suits were intended for people ten to twenty centimetres taller than Jaysica and of greater mass.

"They're the only ones here," Tobis said as he began to pull off his overalls, "They'll just have to do."

"Well turn around then," Jaysica said when she took the nearest suit from the rack, "I'm not undressing in front of you."

"Oh, err, of course," said Tobis and he turned around.

"This is ridiculous," Jaysica complained when she had pulled the suit on and was fastening it. Tobis was already had his helmet on and was strapping on the life support pack as he turned around to see what Jaysica was talking about. There he saw that the limbs of the suit were bunched up over Jaysica's limbs inside it and the body was sagging a great deal.

"Where did you take that suit from?" he asked.

"Right here." Jaysica said and she pointed to the empty slot at the end of the rack where her suit had been stored.

"The suits are stored in size order," Tobis said, "Didn't you notice that you were taking the biggest one?"

"Then pass me the smallest one," Jaysica said, "and don't look."

Just as Jaysica was reaching for the fastening on her suit to undo them when the storeroom door dropped shut.

"What's happening?" she called out, but before Tobis could answer there was the sound of a pump starting up.

"The droids are emptying out the air!" he shouted, "There's no time to change your suit." and he pulled down his helmet visor.

Frantically Jaysica connected her life support pack and put on her helmet.

"Let me help you," Tobis said as the diminutive Jaysica then struggled to get the life support pack on her back, "Turn your mixture up," he told her as he strapped the pack to her back.

"What?" she asked.

"The oxygen mix," he said, "you need to set it higher to begin with. These are soft suits that use a low-pressure life support system. If we don't decompress properly we'll suffer decompression sickness."

"What does that do?" Jaysica asked.

"It can kill." Tobis said and Jaysica fumbled with the dial controlling her oxygen supply, turning it up.

On the bridge of the *Silver Hawk* Jeeves noticed the external pressure dropping towards zero. Panicking he activated the ship's communication system.

"Master Larcus," he said, "Master Larcus the atmosphere in the frigate is being purged."

There was no reply so Jeeves tried again.

"Master Larcus please tell me you are alright," he said, "at this rate there won't be any air left in under a minute."

There was a brief pause then Vorn's voice came from the communication speaker.

"I know," he said, "I'm not in a position to do much about it right now."

In the escape pod Vorn and Kara had kept the lights out just in case the assassin droids came back and noticed that they were one through the view port in the hatch.

"Right then," Kara said as Vorn shut off his comlink, "Where were we?"

5.

"Okay now what?" Jaysica asked when her suit was properly fitted.

"We wait," Tobis said, "and I'll try and get hold of Mace."

"Tobis adjusted his suit's communication system. At present it was set for broadcasting over about twenty metres allowing him to hold a normal conversation with other people nearby in spacesuits. To communicate with Mace and Tharun at the other end of the ship he would have to adjust it for longer-range communication.

"Mace, can you hear me?" Tobis transmitted and he waited for a reply. Nothing was sent back so Tobis tried again, "Mace, Tharun, are you two okay?" he asked.

"What's happening?" Jaysica asked when she heard Tobis send the transmission again.

"I don't know," Tobis said, "If they got into suits then they should be able to receive my transmission."

"What if they didn't?"

"The ship's been depressurised," Tobis said, "If they're not in suits..."

"They're dead aren't they?" Jaysica said.

Tobis was about to say that he thought they were when a thought occurred to him.

"Hang on, I'm going to change my transmitter to our comlink frequency," he said and he reset his communication system again.

"Mace, can you hear me?" he sent.

"Yes I hear you." Mace replied after a brief delay.

"Thank the force." Tobis said, "What happened?"

"We couldn't make it to the airlock for spacesuits," Mace said.

"So we got inside TIE fighters instead," Tharun interrupted using his own comlink, "Unless you've got any bright ideas we're stuck here until someone puts the air back into the hangar."

"It's up to you now Tobis." said Mace, "You and Jaysica need to take out those assassin droids."

"Understood," Tobis said and he set his suits communication system back to its default setting.

"What did Mace say?" Jaysica asked, having heard none of the conversation.

"We're on our own," he said, "We have to take out the assassin droids ourselves."

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

Tobis and Jaysica sat in the storeroom for about half an hour while they decompressed properly. For the entire time Tobis tried to think of something to say to Jaysica, but whatever he thought of seemed stupid, so he said nothing rather than risk annoying her. When he decided that they had waited long enough Tobis took his comlink and datapad from his overalls on the floor and stashed them in a pocket on his spacesuit. Then he got up and headed for the door. He pressed the button to open it, but it remained shut.

"Help me get this open," he said to Jaysica and he began to remove the panel covering the control mechanism, "I think we'll have to override every door."

Jaysica got up and walked towards Tobis. Her ill-fitting suit made walking difficult and she tumbled over and into Tobis.

"I can't walk in this thing. Let alone pick a lock," she protested, "and it's really uncomfortable," and she tugged at the suit in an attempt to get it into a more comfortable position.

"Be careful," Tobis warned her, "You could tear it."

Jaysica let go of the suit just as Tobis was able to trick the door into opening.

"Quickly," he said, "let's get out of here," and he stepped through the doorway.

"I can't do anything quickly in this," Jaysica complained as she followed Tobis.

In the corridor outside Tobis headed for the next door on the way back to the engineering control room and set to work on getting it open. The door opened as easily as the first and Tobis went through followed by Jaysica. Then he noticed that the first door that he had opened had not yet closed.

"Look at that," he said and he pointed to the open doorway.

"What about it?" Jaysica asked, "It's just an open door."

"Exactly," Tobis said, "It means that the droids aren't monitoring the doors any more or they'd have closed it as quickly as they could. Come on we have to hurry," and he ran down the corridor towards the door to the engineering control room.

"Geek. You try hurrying anywhere in a suit this big," Jaysica said to herself before she followed him. She overlooked the fact that her suit's communication system picked up her words and transmitted them straight to Tobis.

As soon as the door opened Tobis went into the room beyond where Harvey waited for them.

"Harvey what's happening?" he asked the droid. In return it rolled towards one of the control stations. Tobis went to the station and looked at the information displayed there.

"It looks like the droids have emptied the entire ship of air alright," he said, "so they're probably satisfied that we're all dead."

"How can you be certain?" Jaysica asked as she lumbered through the door.

"Because otherwise they'd be watching the doors more closely."

"Just out of interest, why didn't we do that to look for them in the first place?" Jaysica asked.

"Because we didn't know the state of the doors to begin with," Tobis said, "Whereas the assassin droids specifically closed them all and then went along sealing them."

"Oh." Jaysica replied, though she was more interested in trying to get comfortable in her suit than listening to Tobis's explanation.

"I think that the assassin droids are probably still on the bridge," Tobis said, "So that's where we need to go."

"I can't get all the way to the bridge like this," Jaysica said and she flapped her arms to show that the sleeves of her space suit were far too large.

"Of course," Tobis said and he looked around the room. He spotted a toolbox left by one of the workstations by one of the crew and he opened it up and removed a roll of tape. Then he walked over to Jaysica and knelt down in front of her, "Spread your legs for me," he said.

"What?" she replied.

Tobis held up the reel of tape.

"I'll wrap this around the arms and legs of your suit to make it tighter," he said.

"Oh, alright then."

With the tape in place Tobis went back to the control stations where the blaster rifles that had been taken from the frigate's armoury for himself and Jaysica had been left and picked them up.

"Come on," he said, holding out one of the rifles for Jaysica to take, "We'll take Harvey as well," he said, "he'll make opening the doors a lot easier."

Harvey not only made opening the doors easier and faster, he also made Jaysica and Tobis feel safer. While the droid worked on the door mechanisms the two rebels were able to stay back and cover the doorway just in case an assassin droid lurked immediately beyond it. In a matter of minutes they had reached the forward module.

"You'll have to stay here," Tobis said to Harvey, "The major and Kara disabled the turbolifts and you're too big for us to carry down the access ladders."

"So we're heading down from here then?" Jaysica said to Tobis.

"I think we should head upwards first," he replied, "to the droid maintenance section."

"What for?" Jaysica asked him.

"Penny," he answered her, "We can carry her down to the bridge level and have her open the doors for us instead of Harvey."

The two rebels both slung their rifles over their shoulders and began to climb the ladder up to the droid maintenance section. When they got there Jaysica rushed inside first.

"Penny!" she called out when she saw her droid still on the workbench and she picked up the tiny droid and reactivated it.

"We'll need another one," Tobis said and he walked up to one of the other mouse droids that was a part of the frigate's own compliment.

"Where are the skill modules?" he asked Jaysica, "We need another security one for this mouse droid."

"I didn't find them," she replied.

Tobis looked around and saw the locker where Jaysica had been trapped earlier. He went over and began to search through the rest of the row until he found one that contained shelf after shelf of mouse droid skill modules. He took a security access module like the one that Jaysica typically kept fitted to Penny and inserted it into the mouse droid.

"Come on," Tobis said as he headed back to the access shaft, "we need to get this done."

"We're coming," Jaysica said and with Penny under her arm she followed Tobis back down the ladder.

When they reached the bridge deck Jaysica and Tobis set down the mouse droids and set them to communicate on spacesuit frequencies.

"Open that door," Tobis commanded, pointing towards the door in the direction of the bridge. While the mouse droids set to work he unslung his rifle and turned to Jaysica, "There are two doors onto the bridge," he said, "One in the room beyond that door and another one through the captain's ready room. My plan is to get Penny to open the door from the captain's ready room to distract the assassin droids. We'll use her spy camera to see where they are and then we'll have the other mouse droid open the other door and we'll go in through that."

The mouse droids opened the door just as Tobis finished explaining his plan.

"I'm not sure I like the sound of this," Jaysica said, "Those assassin droids are pretty tough."

"Do you have a better idea?" Tobis asked.

"No," Jaysica replied, "we'll go with yours."

When all of the doors between the access shaft and the entrances to the bridge were opened Tobis changed the instructions to the mouse droids.

"Unseal the doors," he said, "but don't open them until I give the command," then while each mouse droid set to work on a different door Tobis took out his comlink and datapad and connected them together. Then he used them to access the feed from Penny's built in spy camera. Shortly after both mouse droids chirped to indicate that they had unsealed the doors to the bridge.

"Here we go," Tobis said, holding his datapad in one hand and his rifle in the other. Jaysica looked at him nervously and just nodded, "Penny open the door," Tobis said.

On the datapad's display Tobis and Jaysica watched as an image of the bridge appeared when Penny opened her door. Moments later the first assassin droid appeared and advanced towards Penny with its blaster rifles held high.

"Where's the other one?" Jaysica said.

"No time to find out," Tobis said and he turned to the mouse droid at his feet, "Open the door now!" he commanded and he dropped his datapad to the floor.

As soon as the door opened Tobis rushed onto the bridge and pointed his rifle towards the assassin droid shown in the image sent by Penny. He squeezed the trigger of his blaster rifle and held it down, sending a stream of high-energy blaster bolts towards the killing machine.

The first few bolts were deflected by the assassin droids armoured chassis, but the repeated hits took their toll and its armour first cracked then gave way entirely. The droid exploded in a shower of sparks and collapsed.

"One down!" Tobis said.

"What about the other?" Jaysica asked as she followed him onto the bridge.

"I haven't seen it," Tobis said.

From where they were a massive screen obscured Jaysica and Tobis's view of most of the bridge.

Somewhere beyond that obstacle they believed lurked another assassin droid. Tobis turned back to the mouse droid that had opened the door they had just come through.

"Go to the front of the bridge," he ordered and the droid rolled onto the bridge and past the two rebels.

"Watch for blaster fire," Tobis said but the mouse droid made it all the way to the front of the bridge without being fired on, "Damn," Tobis said, "I was hoping the assassin droid would give its position away. I guess we'll just have to go and take a look ourselves."

Cautiously Tobis advanced around the screen. As soon as he stepped around it the assassin droid that had been waiting immediately behind it swung out its arms and sent the engineer flying backwards. Fortunately the blow struck him in the chest rather than the head where it would have smashed the faceplate of his spacesuit's helmet.

Jaysica screamed and fired her blaster rifle on automatic. The assassin droid was still obscured by the screen and the burst of fire just tore away the exposed arm. Against a living opponent that would have been enough to stop them, but to an assassin droid it was a mere inconvenience.

The assassin droid whirled around from behind the screen. From Jaysica's attack pattern it could calculate exactly where it expected her to be, but not being a trained soldier she had just dropped to the floor to check on Tobis and the burst of blaster fire missed her.

"Look out," Tobis said and he raised his blaster rifle and fired, but fired too soon and the droid leapt aside before Tobis could swing his weapon around enough for the attack to strike it.

The droid aimed at the rebels on the floor again and prepared to fire a burst that would kill both of them. But before it could fire its sensors detected the short-range transmission typical of droids communicating with organic beings in spacesuits that would be heard as a shrill squealing. At almost the same time its leg was struck by something and the assassin droid looked down to evaluate the potential threat. At its feet the droid saw nothing more than a mouse droid that it kicked aside, then it looked back towards the rebels only to see that they had gone. With its one remaining arm holding its weapon at the ready the droid advanced.

In the hallway outside the bridge Jaysica and Tobis waited, watching the image on Tobis's datapad that still showed the feed from Penny's camera. It clearly showed the assassin droid walking towards them.

"Get ready," Tobis said and Jaysica nodded, "Droid, return here," Tobis sent to the mouse droid at the front of the bridge."

As soon as the tiny droid emerged from behind the screen the assassin droid spotted the movement and aimed its blaster at it.

"Now!" Tobis shouted and both he and Jaysica leant around the doorframe and fired their weapons at the assassin droid.

The assassin droid tried to adjust its aim towards the doorway, but under such sustained and powerful attack it was torn apart before it could return fire.

As the assassin droid lay on the floor, with sparks flying from its remains Tobis rushed across the bridge to the life support station. He rapidly worked the controls and began the process of pumping air back into the interior of the frigate.

"It's done," said Tobis when the pressure had increased enough for him to remove his helmet, "We can go let the others out now."

"That will make a nice change," Jaysica said as she too removed her helmet, "I can't wait to see the look on Kara's face when I get to rescue her for once."