

STAR WARS

DARKNESS RISING

1-03: WEAPONS & AMMUNITION

BY STEPHEN J DUTTON



STAR WARS

DARKNESS RISING

1-03: WEAPONS & AMMUNITION

When pirates hijack a shipment of weapons meant for the Trade Defence Force the race is on to prevent them from obtaining the key components needed to activate a devastating arsenal...

Darkness Rising is available from:
<http://thehazugfiles.uk/Index.htm>

Copyright notice:
Star Wars is the intellectual property of Lucasfilm Ltd. This story is completely unofficial and Lucasfilm has not endorsed or approved of any part of it.

1.

Captain Lunix Ghatt of the Trade Federation freighter *Malluk's Pride* turned around to face the rear of the bridge as the prisoner was escorted in. The stowaway had been discovered in one of the massive vessel's cargo holds by an engineering team investigating an irregularity in the power distribution system and then cornered by security staff about two hours later. Now the stowaway, a male arkanian, had his wrists bound as he stood between two armed security guards. Captain Ghatt had been surprised to learn that the stowaway was an arkanian, the near-human species was known for its arrogance and sneaking aboard a freighter and hiding among cargo did not match up with what was known about them.

"Who are you and what are you doing aboard my ship?" he demanded but the arkanian remained silent.

"Answer the captain!" one of the guards snapped and he delivered a kick to the back of the arkanian's knee that caused him to collapse. Only the fact that the two guards caught him prevented him from ending up sprawled across the floor of the bridge.

"My name is none of your business." the arkanian hissed, now glaring at the captain, "But I will tell you that I'm here to steal your ship." and he grinned.

"Preposterous!" Captain Ghatt exclaimed, "It will take more than one interstellar vagabond to steal this ship and we know that you're here alone. Security has already swept the rest of the ship."

"Maybe they swept the wrong bits then." the arkanian said, "Because your ship is going to be mine by the end of the day." and as if something had been waiting for him to utter those words the entire *Lucrehulk*-class freighter suddenly lurched and the blurred view of hyperspace outside the viewports coalesced into the stars of realspace.

"Captain the hyperdrive just cut out!" the helmsman, a member of the neimoidian species that was becoming ever more influential in the Trade Federation exclaimed.

"I can see that mister!" the captain snapped back, "Now tell me why."

"There seems to be a problem with the main reactor. It spiked and blew out the hyperdrive motivator."

"Can anyone tell me where we are?" Captain Ghatt asked.

"Interstellar space captain. At least two parsecs from the nearest star system." the vessel's navigator replied.

"Captain multiple sensor contacts. Ships just dropped out of hyperspace less than a million kilometres from our location." the comscan operator added and Captain Ghatt turned on the spot to glare at the arkanian stowaway.

"You did this!" he hissed, "Those pirates are your friends."

"I'd surrender now if I were you captain." the arkanian replied, "It will be easier on your crew if you do."

"Never." Captain Ghatt responded, "Raise shields. Comscan alert sector control to our situation. We need help out here as fast as it can get to us."

"Shields not responding captain. No power to them."

"Subspace communications jammed captain, I can't get a signal out."

Just then there was a bright red flash outside the bridge's main viewport as one of the approaching vessels opened fire on the *Malluk's Pride*.

"Those fools!" the captain exclaimed, "Don't they know what we're carrying? One stray shot and we'll take them with us when we blow."

"Oh they know exactly what you're carrying captain." the arkanian said, "Now if you don't surrender then my associates are likely come aboard firing and as you pointed out yourself the consequences of that could be rather unpleasant for all concerned."

"Enemy vessels now at five hundred thousand kilometres captain. Detecting multiple launch signatures, they look like shuttles to me."

"Helm can you get us out of here?" Captain Ghatt asked.

"No captain. We're too slow at sublight to outrun them and our hyperdrive is offline."

"Captain, I suggest you prepare to have guests." the arkanian said as a smile spread across his face.

When the YT-700 class light freighter *Swift Exit* dropped out of hyperspace it found a squadron of munifex-class light cruisers already in orbit around the small moon that served as a transfer station for the Trade Federation in this region of space. Here hundreds of freighters varying from vessels the size of the *Swift Exit* up to the three kilometre *Lucrehulk*-class freighters would arrive here to drop off or collect cargo that would then be moved to other sectors or distributed to customers in nearby systems and in addition to the force of warships there were several dozen commercial vessels visible from the *Swift Exit*'s cockpit.

"You know it's the big combines like the Trade Federation that are pushing smaller operators into the illegal market. Smuggling and black market stuff." Tylo Kurrast, the *Swift Exit*'s owner said to the teenage girl sat in the seat next to his as he looked at the ships.

"Are you complaining because you think it's unfair that people aren't able to compete with the Trade Federation or that it means you have more competition for your criminal activity?" the girl, Jedi Padawan Brae Udra asked in response and she smiled at Tylo. Tylo had come to be transporting a pair of Jedi aboard his ship as part of a deal to get him pardoned for his involvement in the handling of Sith artefacts. The plan to capture his accomplices had failed and now he was providing the Jedi with transport while they were acting as his protectors from the gang that had demonstrated an interest in seeing him killed for his collaboration. Just then Jayk Udra, Brae's instructor as well as her uncle entered the cockpit and looked at the assembled ships.

"Have they signalled us yet?" he asked and Brae shook her head.

"No. They've been quiet since we arrived." she said.

"They may not have noticed us." Tylo pointed out, "There's not much to distinguish us from any of the other light freighters out there."

"Try signalling them then." Jayk said, "We're looking for a ship called the *Shield of Muunilist*."

Tylo activated the communication system and leant back in his chair as he spoke.

"*Shield of Muunilist* respond please. This is the *Swift Exit* bearing representatives of the Jedi Order."

"Greetings *Swift Exit*, this is *Shield of Muunilist*. You're later than we expected. Please follow our beacon and we'll open our hangar."

"Late my ass." Tylo muttered as he turned the *Swift Exit* towards one of the cruisers.

"It's just their way of trying to establish superiority." Jayk said, "These Federation types are opportunists. They think that by making us think that we have delayed them we'll start by apologising and thus adopt a submissive role in our mission."

"Which is what exactly?" Tylo asked.

"One of their ships has disappeared and they need our help finding it." Brae replied.

"I think there's more to it than that my young apprentice." Jayk said, "A search and rescue operation does not require the involvement of the Jedi Order. We were ordered to divert here because of something that is of grave concern to the Republic."

"Ever wonder why your precious Jedi Order hasn't told you what the reason is?" Tylo asked, "Or what other secrets they may be hiding from you?"

"There was only limited time for them to apprise us of our orders." Jayk replied, "And the order keeps secrets that it feels need keeping. It does not keep them simply for their own sake."

"Well I hope that we're not flying into some poodoo storm of trouble because I always get a bad feeling whenever people start making a point of not telling me things I think I ought to know."

The hangar bay of the *Shield of Muunilist* was not designed to hold a large number of craft and given that the cruiser already had its full complement of shuttles and fighters aboard it was looking rather crowded as Tylo set down the *Swift Exit*.

When he and the two Jedi walked down the ship's access ramp they found themselves met by a small group of officers in Trade Defence Force uniforms and backed up by a squad of marines stood at ease rather than at attention.

"Captain." Jayk said to the individual wearing the uniform with the highest rank markings on it.

"Commander actually. Commander Jant." the man replied, "Captain Ferro is on the bridge. She asked me to take care of this for her."

"Is it normal to fob a job like this off onto a subordinate?" Tylo said softly to Brae.

"How should I know?" she whispered back.

"No, this is not normal." Jayk said out loud when he heard the exchange, "Commander can you explain why your captain appears so uninterested in a situation that the Republic has decided requires the intervention of the Jedi Order?"

"The captain feels able to carry out the assignment without you." Commander Jant replied, "She has no objection to your presence but she sees it as a waste of time. If you'd like to accompany me I'll take you to her now."

"Very well commander. Please lead the way." Jayk said.

Commander Jant escorted the two Jedi and Tylo to the cruiser's bridge where the only female officer present was stood beside the comscan station. As they entered the bridge she looked around and smiled.

"Ah there you are." she said, "I'm afraid that this is all a waste of your time. We're about to wrap all this up."

"Captain Ferro," Jayk said, "I am Jedi Jayk Udra. This is my Padawan Brae and Captain Kurrast. The Jedi Order has commanded me to assist you with this operation. What can you tell me?"

Captain Ferro folded her arms.

"Oh it's nothing special." she replied, "The trade vessel *Malluk's Pride* failed to arrive here on schedule and didn't check in. Fortunately our long range hyper-wave signal interceptors picked up a brief pulse of Cronau radiation from along her flight path. We've only got one point of reference so we can't pinpoint an exact spot at which the ship appears to have been forced out of hyperspace but by comparing the time at which the

pulse was detected to the known speed capability of the *Malluk's Pride* gives us a location we can search." Jayk glanced at Tylo and Brae before looking back at Ferro.

"Captain the Republic is not in the habit of sending Jedi knights to conduct mundane search and rescue operations. What is so special about this missing ship that brought it to the attention of the Jedi Order?"

"The ship? Nothing. It's a standard *lucrehulk-class* vessel. Less than two years old." Captain Ferro replied and a smile spread across Tylo's face.

"Here it comes." he said, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"But the vessel was transporting a cargo of concussion missiles for our Trade Defence Force ships. The sensitive nature of the cargo meant that we were obliged to report the delay." Captain Ferro added and Jayk scowled.

"How many missiles?" he asked sternly.

"About fifty thousand." Captain Ferro said and Brae's eyes widened.

"Surely there was an escort assigned." she said and the captain shook her head.

"It was felt that an armed escort would attract too much attention." Captain Ferro answered, "By sending it out alone it could remain anonymous. Besides, all of the systems on its route are well defended."

"And which system has it come out of hyperspace in?" Jayk asked.

"Ah, well it's in interstellar space at the moment."

"So about as far from help as it can get." Tylo pointed out, "Look captain, all this double bluff stuff with trying to make valuable cargoes look mundane just doesn't work. There's always some way for anyone really interested in stealing it to figure out how it's being moved. Trust me, I know what I'm talking about."

Irritation.

"And you are who exactly, captain?" Captain Ferro asked, "Are you a part of the Judicial Department?"

Tylo looked at Jayk.

"Captain Kurrast is a special agent contracted to the Jedi Order." Jayk told Captain Ferro, "His particular area of expertise is in black market operations and you would do well to listen to his opinions."

"Well right now I don't need opinions from anyone." Ferro said and she turned away from the Jedi and strode towards the command station where she stood in front of a console that provided her with the operating status of every system aboard the *Shield of Muunilist*, "Navigation, lock in the co-ordinates of the *Malluk's Pride* and stand by to jump. Comscan I want a full sweep as soon as we come out of hyperspace. Helm, you may commence jump when ready." then she looked around at the Jedi, "You may stay if you wish." she said, "But keep out of the way."

"Perhaps we should leave them to it." Tylo suggested but Jayk shook his head.

"Go back to the *Swift Exit* if you want but Brae and I will remain here." he said.

"Fair enough." Tylo replied, "I want to take another look at fixing that lock on the access ramp anyway."

2.

Jayk and Brae did as Captain Ferro had asked and did not seek to interfere with the crew's work as the *Shield of Muunilist* made its way through hyperspace to the location they had plotted for the *Malluk's Pride*. When the time came for the ship to return to realspace the two jedi looked forwards through the main viewport at the blurred lights of hyperspace.

"Reverting to realspace in three, two, one." the helmsman counted down and hyperspace suddenly became an ordinary star field. However, barely a second after the *Shield of Muunilist* dropped back into realspace an object that had been floating through space collided with the bridge viewport.

Surprise.

Fear.

Any collision in space was cause for concern and Jayk sensed the reaction of the crew. However, the impact was marked by a dull 'thunk' rather than a louder crashing thanks to the nature of the object. Any debris from a vessel would have been rigid and striking the viewport before the vessel's particle shields had been raised would most likely have smashed right through and wiped out everyone on the bridge but the object was not debris from a ship.

It was a body.

Prolonged exposure to the extreme low temperature of interstellar space had frozen the body solid and made it extremely brittle. Thus when it struck the *Shield of Muunilist* it shattered into thousands of pieces to produce a fine red film across the viewport.

"What the hell just happened?" Captain Ferro exclaimed.

"Looks to me like you ran someone over captain." Brae commented.

"I can see that!" the captain snapped, "Now perhaps you can use your vaunted jedi senses to tell me what he was doing out there in the first place."

"I would suggest that your freighter did not simply suffer a mechanical failure captain." Jayk said, "Instead I would venture to say that it has indeed been hijacked and rather tragically those responsible chose to eject at least some of the crew into space."

"Comscan what can you tell me?" Captain Ferro asked, hurrying back to the comscan station.

"I'm sorry captain but I'm not picking anything up." the comscan operator replied, "There's no sign of the *Malluk's Pride*."

"What about other bodies?" Jayk asked.

"Err." the comscan operator responded, staring at his console as he tried to determine how he should scan for drifting bodies that would not be radiating any heat and were unlikely to reflect enough energy to show up on radar at anything other than close range.

"Captain do you have a tractor beam?" Jayk asked.

"Yes, but not combat rated. It's just for cargo handling and bringing disabled craft into our hangar." Captain Ferro answered.

"That will be sufficient." Jayk said, "Direct the beam ahead and turn your ship around slowly. The gravity well will draw in any other bodies out there."

"Weapons!" Captain Ferro shouted across the bridge, "Stand by on tractor beam. Helm hold position and I want a slow spin to port."

"Perhaps we should head down to the hangar." Jayk said to Brae and she winced.

"We're about to start pulling dead bodies in from space aren't we?" she replied.

"Yes my young apprentice, we are."

Jayk and Brae had vacuum suits aboard the *Swift Exit* and given the proximity to hard vacuum that they would be working in, safety demanded that they put these on. But as they returned to the ship they heard two familiar voices from inside and they hurried up the ramp to see what was transpiring inside. There in the lounge they found Tylo with the parts of his blaster laid out on the table as he cleaned the weapon while a glowing blue figure looked on.

"Ah Jayk, Brae." the holographic guardian of Cal Udra's holocron said, "Tylo and I were just comparing our experiences of life on the run from the law."

"You were a jedi." Brae said, "You were the law."

"Well for most of my life yes. But there was a brief time when there was something of a misunderstanding regarding my little sister that led to us both being wanted fugitives."

"It seems that you jedi weren't always so stuffy." Tylo added with a smile, "Cal here was almost human." then he looked towards Cal and added, "Though I wouldn't mind it if you could find a holocron of his sister Lara. Especially if it features any of her experiences as a professional stripper."

"A stripper?" Brae said and she looked at Cal.

"To be fair it was just for one night." Cal explained, "And no it wasn't open pole night. She decided of her own accord to go undercover as a woman who takes off all her clothes for money. If you can call what she ended up wearing 'cover'. But she did make three hundred and two credits doing it."

"Brae, that skill will not be included in your training." Jayk said, "Now come and put on your vacc suit."

"Vacc suits?" Tylo said, "What's going on?"

"When we dropped out of hyperspace the ship hit someone." Brae told him and Tylo frowned.

"I didn't feel a collision." he said.

"Oh there wasn't another ship," Brae said, "We literally hit a guy. He popped open like fruit hit by a rail gun."

"You paint such a wonderful picture." Cal commented, "Which I'm guessing is better than how this person painted the front of the ship."

"Uncle Jayk thinks that there could be more floating around out there. Brae went on, "So we're sort of going fishing for them with the ship's tractor beam."

"Brae." Jayk said sternly.

"Okay, I'm coming." she said and the two jedi headed for where their vacc suits were stored.

Meanwhile Tylo looked at Cal.

"So can you show me a picture of this sister of yours?" he asked and Cal vanished, replaced almost right away by one of a young woman in jedi robes performing a hand stand.

"Cal put that recorder down." the image of Lara Udra said, "What are you recording me for anyway?"

"Because I want your new niece or nephew to see what their aunt looks like as a zeltron." Cal's voice responded from out of shot, "You've been upside down so long your face has gone redder than that thing we found behind the fridge in our first apartment the night you decided to take up stripping for a living."

"I am not a stripper, Cal!" Lara yelled as she collapsed in a heap.

Wearing their vacc suits, Jayk and Brae stood just inside the magnetic field that maintained the hangar's atmospheric pressure as a squad of marines who were also equipped for operations in a vacuum used pole mounted hooks to snare the bodies that were being drawn towards the hangar by the powerful gravitational pull of the *Shield of Muunilist's* tractor beam. These needed to be handled carefully in their current brittle state though fortunately the magnetic field had a heating effect on them that thawed them enough that they would not simply shatter when handled inside the hangar to be set down on the deck.

While the jedi assisted with bringing the bodies inside Tylo and the *Shield of Muunilist's* medical officer inspected the bodies for any indication of how they had died. Exposure to space produced very specific injuries, with burns from radiation covering all unprotected areas while blood vessels in parts of the body not resistant to low external pressure would burst. Had the *Malluk's Pride* suffered an accident that had resulted in the ship's total or partial decompression then the bodies blown into space ought to have displayed such injuries along with blast damage from the ship. However, there were two problems with the theory that the bodies being recovered had been killed by exposure to vacuum. Firstly there was no sign of the ship itself, not even the smallest piece of wreckage had shown up on the *Shield of Muunilist's* sensors and secondly all of the bodies looked to have been dead before they were ejected into space.

"Okay we've got stab wounds, blaster burns and multiple blunt force injuries." Tylo said, using his comlink to speak with the two vacc suited jedi, "Looks like someone executed the crew before dumping the bodies into space."

"I don't get it." Brae said, "If the bodies were going to be ejected into space then why kill the crew beforehand?"

"Whoa, way to get dark youngling." Tylo replied.

"I'm not saying that I'd agree with spacing them, but why not?" Brae asked.

"The crew of a lucrehulk-class vessel is approximately five hundred." Jayk pointed out, "That would be a large task to undertake."

"Exactly." Tylo added, "Look, people aren't going to just walk into an air lock to get spaced. They'll fight back as soon as they know what's happening. That means you need to keep each one restrained until they're in the air lock. You're looking at needing about a thousand people to do it and if whoever did this had that many troops available it would still be quicker and easier to shoot, stab or beat them to death than round them up and push them out into space."

"Quite." Jayk said, "Spacing is an act of terror designed to intimidate others, not an efficient means of mass murder."

"So why eject the bodies into space at all?" Brae said.

"Because whoever did this intended to keep the ship as well as take its cargo. The last thing you want is five hundred rotting corpses stinking up your nice new prize." Tylo told her.

"Jedi Udra, that's the last of them." one of the marines in vacc suits said as another body was dragged into the hangar, "The number of bodies now matches the number given on the *Malluk's Pride's* crew manifest." and Jayk looked out into space where the almost constant flow of drifting bodies had now ceased.

“Very well.” he said, “Inform your captain that we will meet with her to discuss the situation as soon as we have changed. Also tell her that Captain Kurrast will be joining us to give us the benefit of his expertise.” and Tylo frowned.
“Oh wonderful.” he said, “I can hardly wait.”

3.

"They slaughtered the entire crew?" Captain Ferro said as she red down the manifest in the ship's briefing chamber. A copy of the manifest had been loaded into the main projection system and images of the crew taken from their personnel files were being shown in sequence on a large display screen at one end of the room.

"No witnesses." Tylo commented, "Important when you're trying to move fifty thousand missiles that every law enforcement agency in the galaxy is going to be hunting for by breakfast time tomorrow."

"So in your expert opinion the missiles will be sold on?" Captain Ferro asked.

"I would hope so." Jayk responded, "I would hate to think of why anyone would have a need for so many missiles themselves."

"The point is moot anyway." Captain Ferro said, "They're useless." and Tylo and the two Jedi exchanged glances.

"What do you mean 'useless'?" Brae said.

"I mean that they weren't being shipped with their triggering circuitry installed. The Trade Federation is not stupid Padawan Udra. The circuits are following on another transport. Without them the warheads cannot be detonated."

"Like hell they can't." Tylo said.

"Captain Kurrast is correct Captain Ferro." Jayk added, "Though it may take them longer, whoever ends up with these missiles could be able to improvise a triggering device of their own. It may not be as efficient as the circuits intended to be used with them but it will still give them the capability to make use of them."

"Plus you can just rip out the warheads and use the material for all manner of smaller explosive devices."

Tylo said, "Even in their current state those missiles could be used to fight a small war."

"It does however, give us an opportunity to apprehend those responsible and recover the missiles." Jayk said.

"It does?" Captain Ferro replied.

"They'll be coming for the arming circuits." Brae told her with a smile, "They'll have found out that they weren't present as soon as they inspected what they'd stolen."

"True." Tylo added, "The missiles may still be valuable without them, but with the proper arming circuits they'll be worth much more on the black market."

"Impossible." Captain Ferro said, shaking her head, "The shipping details of the triggers is classified. Even I don't know what ship they're on."

"You mean like the presence of the missiles themselves on the *Malluk's Pride* was a secret?" Brae asked and Tylo smirked.

"Captain either someone is providing the thieves with information from the inside or your system has been sliced." Jayk told Captain Ferro, "You need to inform your superiors immediately and get them to provide us with the identity of the transport ship carrying the triggers."

"Of course." she replied, "I'll have my navigator lay in an intercept course and we'll rendezvous-"

"No." Jayk interrupted, "Captain you must make no moves to protect that ship. Doing so will only alert our quarry to the fact that we are on to them."

"Are you insane? They'll take the triggers!" Captain Ferro exclaimed, "Those missiles will be fully functional!"

"We will be waiting for those responsible captain." Jayk replied calmly, "And when the triggers are taken, we will be led directly to the missiles themselves."

"You're talking about letting the triggers fall into criminal hands?" Captain Ferro asked.

"We will disable them first." Jayk replied, "Which means we will need schematics and design files for them of course."

"As you wish." Captain Ferro replied, "But I've got a very bad feeling about this."

"What about the crew?" Brae asked, "If the pirates that took the missiles killed the crew of the first ship then how do we stop them from killing the crew of the second?"

"That is something I do not yet know." Jayk answered and Tylo groaned.

"I'm with her." he said, glancing at Captain Ferro, "I've got a very bad feeling about this."

When Captain Ferro reported in to her superiors that the transport carrying the missiles had been hijacked and that the second ship carrying the triggers was likely to be targeted next they quickly provided her with the identity of the second ship and its flight plan. Like the *Malluk's Pride* the *Glory of Vel* was undertaking a regular scheduled run between well settled and thus heavily patrolled systems that would eventually take it to the same Trade Federation transfer point where the triggers would be offloaded and issued to Trade Defence

Force vessels.

The triggers required far less room than the missiles themselves and this meant that a much smaller vessel could be used to transport them while still leaving enough room for an ordinary cargo to hide them among. However, the *Glory of Vel* was still more than a thousand metres in length and its cargo hold was big enough to allow the *Swift Exit* to land inside it and just as when they had boarded the *Shield of Muunilist*, the *Swift Exit*'s occupants found a welcoming committee of sorts waiting for them at the base of the access ramp. But unlike the military personnel in their neat uniforms the crew of the *Glory of Vel* wore functional but battered coveralls that lacked any indication of rank.

"Jedi Udra?" a human male asked.

"Yes." Jayk replied, "I need to speak with your captain immediately."

"That's me." the man said, "Captain Kean. Though you can call me Wedge if you want." and he held out his hand in greeting and smiled.

"Nice to see a friendly face for once." Brae commented and Wedge looked at her.

"I've never met a jedi before." he told her, "So when I was told to expect you I decided to pull rank and be here instead of on the bridge."

Fear.

Jayk looked around as he sensed the sudden tremor in the Force.

"Master what's wrong?" Brae asked.

"Didn't you sense that?" Jayk responded as he let go of Wedge's hand and reached for his lightsaber.

Fear.

"There again." Jayk said.

"Yes, I felt it too that time. Someone's afraid of us being here." Brae said as she too reached for her weapon and Tylo copied them, drawing his blaster."

"What's happening?" Wedge said, looking back and forth between the jedi and Tylo.

"I'd say that not everyone is as happy to see us as you are captain." Tylo replied.

"Captain clear your people from the hold." Jayk ordered, "But bring them past us. Whoever it is doesn't want us here and I intend to find out why." then while Wedge was telling his men to exit the cargo hold Jayk looked at Brae, "Brae, you and Tylo stay near the ship. See if you can pick up wherever this being that is so unnerved by our presence is hiding."

"You don't think it's one of the crew then?" she replied and Jayk shook his head.

"I only sensed fear when the captain specifically mentioned that we were jedi. The crew would have been aware of that fact before we arrived so there must be someone else aboard this vessel and I suspect that they are tied to the outlaws we are hunting." he explained and Brae nodded before they split up, Jayk heading for the main exit from the cargo hold that was where the crew were gathering while Brae started circling the *Swift Exit* and searching for any indications of anyone who was not supposed to be aboard the *Glory of Vel* at all.

When Jayk reached the exit the crew present in the cargo hold were able to file out one at a time and although Jayk sensed a degree of nervousness in all of them, there was no sign of the much stronger fear he could still sense elsewhere in the hold.

"Keep this door sealed until I give the all clear." he told Wedge and the freight captain just nodded from beyond the doorway before he reached out and closed it.

"Okay so now what?" Tylo asked as he looked around.

"Well Brae?" Jayk asked out loud.

"I'm trying uncle." she replied.

"Let the Force flow through you, don't fight it and don't try to compel it to bend to your will. Just let it show you the way." Jayk said.

"I know, I know." Brae said, "I-"

Fear.

Brae spun around suddenly, igniting her lightsaber with a 'snap-hiss' and bringing it up into a fighting stance. "Over here." she called out and she rushed forwards, disappearing between two stacks of large cargo containers.

"No Brae, wait!" Jayk called out after her as he ran towards where she had gone," Tylo-

"Don't worry, I'm after her." Tylo replied as he followed Brae through the cargo that was piled well above head height. The problem he immediately encountered was that Brae had turned a corner and was out of sight before Tylo could reach her and he found himself darting between stacks of cargo as he tried to track her by sound alone. All the while he kept his blaster level and ready to fire at a moment's notice just in case the first person he came across turned out not to be Brae but whoever it was that she was hunting. However, rather than Tylo finding either Brae or her quarry it was the latter of these that found him first.

A loose deck plate echoed as Tylo put his foot down on it and then as he stepped forwards and reached a corner and arm suddenly lashed out from the other side and knocked the blaster from his grip. Then a slender figure dressed in red leapt out from around the corner and slammed into Tylo, sending him crashing

into the stack of cargo containers opposite. Tylo struck back immediately, driving his fist into the masked figure's face and producing a loud high pitched yelp. Then he reached out and grabbed hold of the mask that concealed his opponent's features and ripped it away to reveal the face of a human woman behind it. The woman tried to kick at Tylo but he reacted quickly and grabbed her leg instead, pulling on it to cause her to fall. However, as she landed she ended up near where Tylo's blaster was and she reached out and grabbed hold of the weapon before pointing it upwards.

"Stang!" Tylo exclaimed and he dived out of the way as she fired his blaster. The bolt narrowly missed Tylo, instead punching a hole in the container behind him and he felt the heat of the energy blast stinging his scalp as he landed on the deck. At the same time the woman got back to her feet and pointed the weapon down at Tylo's head. But before she could fire again there was a voice from behind her.

"No!" Brae yelled and the woman spun around to find herself confronted by the young jedi padawan with her lightsaber held up in front of her. The woman adjusted her aim for Brae's head with both hands gripping Tylo's blaster and was just about to pull the trigger when Brae suddenly swung her lightsaber and sliced through both of the woman's arms just above the wrist.

Fear.

Pain.

Surprise.

Screaming as she stared at the blackened stumps where her arms now ended, the woman was unprepared for Tylo's next strike and he kicked her in the back of one of her knees and her leg gave way. Unable to grab hold of anything to steady herself or break her fall, the woman collapsed face first onto the deck and Brae stepped forwards and raised her lightsaber, ready to deliver the killing blow.

"Brae no!" Jayk yelled as he appeared behind her and his intervention made Brae suddenly realise what she had been about to do and she stepped back, shutting off her lightsaber. Instead she reached down and picked up Tylo's blaster by its barrel, the woman's hands still wrapped around the grip.

"Yours I think." she said before tossing it at Tylo as he lay on the deck looking back up at her and he flinched as the hands came loose in mid flight and landed either side of him.

"That's not funny." he said, scowling as he retrieved his blaster and kicked the severed hands away.

"Of course it was." Brae replied.

"Just in case neither of you have noticed," Jayk said as he strode forwards and grabbed hold of the now sobbing woman and dragged her to her feet, "we have a prisoner to interrogate. Tylo with me. Brae stay here and conduct a full search of this hold."

Brae's face fell.

"why aren't I being included in the interrogation?" she asked.

"Because you almost lost control here Brae." Jayk told her, "I want you to take the chance to calm down while Tylo and I get some answers. Do you understand?"

"Yes master." Brae replied, sounding less than enthusiastic. But then Jayk looked at Tylo.

"But it was funny." he added and Tylo frowned.

4.

With no hands to prevent a set of binders simply dropping from her arms, the woman was restrained using a pair of cargo straps wrapped around her torso to tie her to a chair in an office that had been emptied of most of its furniture for the purpose of interrogating her. Now there was just her chair and a plain table in the room while Jayk, Tylo and Wedge all stood staring at her.

"Let's start with something simple." Jayk said, "Your name."

"Kriff you jedi!" the woman screamed back at him.

"I don't need to be a jedi to sense the anger in that voice." Tylo commented.

"Strange." Jayk replied, "Especially since we are the only hope she has of leading anything close to a normal life in prison. Without our recommendation I doubt that the Republic will authorise the payment for a passable set of prosthetic hands."

"Make all the threats you want. I'll not see the inside of a cell." the woman said.

Fear.

"Ah, now we're getting somewhere." Jayk said with a smile, "She's afraid."

"Afraid of what?" Wedge asked.

"Afraid that this really is the end of the line for her would be my guess." Jayk said.

"Still, she's obviously done what she came here to do." Tylo added, "Unless you think she was lying about not going to prison as well."

"No. I sensed no deception there." Jayk said, "She has at least some faith that her work was carried out sufficiently to enable her associates to be able to intercept this vessel."

"Do you think she can tell us where they are?" Wedge said, "I can get in contact with the Trade Defence Force and they'll have a squadron there in a few hours."

"Given the level of planning that was put into this operation I would guess that they thought of that." Jayk said, "Most likely that information was not made available to her." and then he looked at the woman, "Am I right?" he asked and she averted her gaze, "I think I am." he added.

"She must know something useful." Wedge said.

"Like how her friends plan on attacking the ship." Tylo responded.

"Yes, let's move on to that shall we?" Jayk said, leaning on the table as he stared at the woman, "You do want to tell me what your plan was." he added, using the Force to push the idea of co-operating with him into her mind. The problem was that she had a stronger mind than he was expecting and she refused to respond, "This may take a bit longer than expected." Jayk told Wedge, "But we'll get there in the end."

A small group of the *Glory of Vel's* crew was assigned to help Brae search the cargo hold and she was glad of the help. Naturally enough the cargo hold occupied the bulk of the freighter's internal volume and even with the extra crewmen to help her it was a daunting task. Brae started from the place where she and the woman had fought and tried to work backwards from there. She knew the direction that the woman had come from and also that she had been somewhere that she had been able to observe and overhear Captain Kean as he met the *Swift Exit*. Searching deeper into the stacks of cargo containers led Brae to an old looking container that had a tiny piece of fabric caught on its corner and Brae reached up to pluck it free.

"Come here a moment." she said to a nearby crewman and the man hurried over to her.

"Yes miss?" he said.

"Do any of your uniforms feature red in them?" Brae asked as she inspected his grubby uniform.

"No miss." the crewman answered.

"Then this must have come from our guest." Brae said and she looked up, "And from the height it was at I'd say that she jumped down from up there at some point. Give me a hand up."

"I thought you could just jump that high." the crewman commented looking up for himself at the three metre tall container.

"Maybe with a run up." Brae replied, not wanting to admit that her control over the Force also left a considerable amount to be desired.

The crewman promptly crouched down and cupped his hands for Brae to put her foot in and gave her a boost up high enough for her to be able to grasp the top of the container and pull herself up before taking a look around.

"See anything?" the crewman asked.

"Yes, yes I do." Brae replied, "Tell, me how thoroughly are these containers inspected during the voyage?"

"Customs at each end runs a full scan of each one. We just check to make sure that none of them shift or develop leaks if they have hazardous contents."

"How do you check that? Visually?" Brae then asked.

"No miss. That would take too long. We use hand held scanners to monitor the air quality for containments." "So you wouldn't notice a hole cut in the top of one if its contents weren't toxic then?" Brae said, "Because that's what I'm looking at right now." and she crouched down beside the half metre wide circular hole that had been cut in the top of the cargo container. On close inspection of the edge of the hole it became clear that a compact saw had been used to create it and this meant that it was possible to see that the edge was bent upwards, indicating that the hole had been made from the inside. Had a cutting torch been used then the melted metal would have run downwards regardless of which side it had been made from and Brae smiled in the belief that the Force was with her in this instance. Taking her lightsaber from her belt Brae activated the weapon with the usual 'snap-hiss' and then lowered it down through the hole before sticking her head through as well.

What she saw inside made it obvious that this was no ordinary cargo container, instead it had been extensively modified to function as a hermetically sealed habitation unit right up until the point that the woman inside had cut her way out. From her vantage point Brae could see ration packs, a water tank, an air reprocessing system and a compact chemical refresher unit. There was also a datapad along with several hard copy printed magazines stacked beside a camp bed that appeared to have been included to allow the woman to stave off boredom while she was sealed inside. Reaching out with her free hand, Brae attempted to use the Force to summon the datapad to her grasp but although it quivered slightly it failed to respond to her summons. Frowning, she took a deep breath and closed her eyes, attempting to focus her mind on nothing but the datapad before making another attempt but she was interrupted before she could try. "Are you okay up there?" the crewman still waiting below called out and Brae's eyes opened suddenly. "Not now!" she snapped and all of a sudden the datapad launched itself from on top of the stack of magazines and flew up out of the hole, only narrowly missing Brae's lightsaber blade before it bounced off another container and dropped to the deck with a smashing sound, "Oh no." Brae said to herself, "I've got a bad feeling about this." and she shut off her lightsaber and hurried to the edge of the container to peer over the side.

"Is this yours?" the crewman asked as he circled the container and bent down to pick up the largest fragment of the datapad. From the top of the container Brae could see that the datapad's front face was smashed, meaning that the display and touch screen interface were now useless. But other than that the device was largely in one piece, with just bits of the casing having been broken off.

"It was inside this thing." Brae replied, "It's kitted out as some sort of life support capsule."

"But the scanners at the starports are supposed to pick up living beings inside shipping containers to prevent illegal migration." the crewman said, confused.

"Yes, but they're passive systems that pick up body heat and waste gases." Brae pointed out, "This looks like it was air sealed until the occupant cut her way out and I bet that the plating is designed to disperse thermal energy evenly so that no hotspots show up."

"Err." the crewman commented and he looked around."

"What's wrong?" Brae asked.

"Well, are you sure that there was only one person in that thing?"

"Pretty sure." Brae replied as she jumped down to the floor, "There was just one bed in there. Plus a refresher that didn't have any sort of privacy screen around it. If there was more than one person in there then they'd have to have been real friendly until they cut their way out."

"But what was she doing here?" the crewman asked and Brae reached out and took the broken datapad from him.

"I'm hoping that this thing will still be able to tell me that." she said, "Or at least tell someone. Now go get the rest of your team and search this container fully. I'm going back to my ship to get some specialist help."

Aboard the *Swift Exit*, Brae sat down in the lounge and placed the remains of the datapad on the table in front of her.

"Having trouble with your datapad?" Cal asked as he appeared in front of her.

"I kind of dropped it." she replied and Cal glared at her.

"I don't need to be a genuine jedi knight to recognise that lie." he said.

"Okay I admit it I was annoyed when the crewman I was working with broke my concentration and all of a sudden the datapad came flying at me like I'd been trying to do. Only I wasn't ready."

"That anger of yours could easily be your undoing." Cal warned her.

"I know. Uncle Jayk narrowly stopped me killing someone. I'd already cut off her hands and was ready to do the same with her head."

"But you managed to stop yourself. Remember that. It means that there is hope for you yet. There were times when I was worried that my sister would succumb to the Dark Side but she avoided it. Or at least she did as far as I know. So anyway, what are you back here for?"

"You can interface with other devices wirelessly." Brae said, "You did it with the *Swift Exit*'s communications."

"Yes, providing that the device in question has a compatible wireless port of its own."

"Well I think this does, or it did." Brae said, picking up the datapad, "Can you connect to what's left of it and tell me what was stored on it?"

"You'll have to turn it on first." Cal told her and Brae examined the datapad, locating the power switch and activating it.

"How's that?" she asked. The datapad itself showed no signs of life but she was hoping this was purely down to the destroyed display.

"The core processor is running." Cal answered, "I'm running a memory check now."

"How long will it-" Brae began.

"Done." Cal interrupted, "I have access to the full file system. Fortunately your mishandling of the device didn't do any damage to the processor or memory."

"So what's on it?" Brae said.

"A lot of it seems to be personal stuff. Memos and communications along with a significant amount of recreational material. Mainly texts. But there are some technical documents as well. They appear to relate to starship systems. Specifically the types installed aboard the freighter we're in."

"Thanks Cal." Brae said excitedly and she grabbed hold of the datapad and rushed out of the lounge and down the access ramp.

"Brae you can't-" Cal began before he just sighed and quietly added, "Access the files without me."

But then Brae rushed back aboard the *Swift Exit*.

"I'll need you to access the files won't I?" she asked and Cal smiled.

"You think?" he replied and then as Brae scooped up the holocron as well the image of Cal vanished.

With Cal's holocron in one hand and the datapad in the other, Brae hurried through the corridors of the *Glory of Vel* to its bridge where she was met with some surprised looks by the crew.

"Can I help you?" one of the officers asked.

"I'm looking for my uncle – ah, my master and Captain Kurrast." Brae answered, "I thought they might be here."

"No miss." the officer answered, "They and Captain Kean took the prisoner to be questioned. You'll have come right past them. Go back out, head straight for the cargo hold and it's the second hatch on your right."

"Thanks." Brae replied before turning around and exiting the bridge. Following the officer's instructions she came to a hatchway that she had indeed come right past on her way from the hold and she was annoyed with herself when she sensed the strong presence of Jayk in the Force through it, having failed to notice it the first time.

"Master?" she called out before reaching out to open the door.

"Yes Brae?" Jayk replied as the door slid open and she stepped into the improvised interrogation cell, "Have you found something?"

"Her presence aboard this ship was well planned." Brae told him, looking at the prisoner, "I found a cargo container that was set up as a sealed life support capsule."

Fear.

Jayk smiled when he sensed this and he leant on the table and stared at the woman.

"So my apprentice's discovery makes you scared does it?" he asked and she turned to look away from him,

"Go on Brae." he added, still staring at the woman.

"Inside I found this datapad." Brae went on and she held up the datapad.

"Looks pretty beaten up." Tylo commented, "Almost as if someone was trying to destroy evidence."

"Sure." Brae said, "But I checked with Cal and he said that he can still connect with it. All the damage is to the interface. The processor and memory are perfectly intact."

"Sloppy." Tylo said as he too stared at the woman and smiled.

"Hang on." Wedge said, frowning, "Who's Cal?"

"An ancestor of mine." Jayk told him and he glanced at Brae, noticing that she had also brought the holocron with her, "Perhaps you could introduce yourself." he said and Cal's image flickered into being.

"Good day Captain Kean." Cal said, "Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Cal Udra, jedi knight. Or at least a perfect simulation of him created by the original to act as the guardian of his holocron."

"I thought holocrons were just data storage." Wedge said.

"The mundane version, yes." Cal replied, "But jedi are able to take full advantage of the crystalline memory structure to recreate their personalities within them."

"He's also able to access the datapad wirelessly." Brae added, "He's run a check on all of the files."

"Yes, fortunately Brae's mishandling of the device didn't cause any system damage." Cal added and both Jayk and Tylo turned towards Brae.

"That's not important right now." she said, "Cal, tell them what you told me about the technical files."

"The datapad includes technical readouts relating to this vessel's systems." Cal said, "Specifically the hyperdrive, shields and communications."

"Ah so now we get to the details." Jayk said, looking back at the prisoner, "You force the ship out of hyperspace and disable its shields and communications so it can't call for help and can't keep boarders out."

"Then your friends come aboard and kill everyone except you." Tylo added, "A neat plan except for one detail."

"What's that?" Wedge asked and Tylo smiled.

"Them." he said, looking at the two Jedi.

"Well thank the gods you found this information." Wedge said to Brae, "Now we can undo whatever damage she's done and deliver our cargo safely."

"Actually captain I don't think that is a suitable course of action." Jayk said.

Surprise.

"Not a suitable course of action? Then what is?" Wedge asked in disbelief.

"Our mission goes beyond making sure that your cargo reaches its destination." Jayk explained, "We need to recover the missiles stolen aboard the *Malluk's Pride* and for that we need her associates to lead us to them. That means we need them to be able to steal the trigger circuits."

"Hang on a minute." Tylo said, "The crew of the *Malluk's Pride* were slaughtered."

"I am aware of that." Jayk replied, "However, I have a plan that should prevent that from happening here."

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

5.

The *Glory of Vel's* exit from hyperspace was far rockier than usual owing to the unconventional nature by which it was achieved.

"Multiple contacts to stern captain!" the comscan operator reported.

"Hyperdrive?" Wedge asked.

"Resetting now. Estimate three minutes until we can jump again." the helmsman informed him.

"What about our shields?"

"Functioning but down."

"Excellent." Wedge said with a smile, "Then everything is as the jedi said it would be. Open cargo bay doors and disengage the magnetic field."

Obedying the command, the bridge crew opened the cargo bay doors and deactivated the magnetic field that held the atmosphere inside. Now that it was exposed to the vacuum of space the air inside the cargo hold rushed out through the open doors and carried along with it all of the cargo containers, sending them tumbling through space and crashing into one another.

"Cargo hold fully decompressed." one of the bridge crew reported, "All cargo ejected."

"Good." Wedge replied, "Now raise shields and take us away from those pirates. Maximum thrust. Then get us back into hyperspace as soon as you can. It's up to the jedi now."

"There they go." Tylo said as he saw the drive flare from the *Glory of Vel's* ion drives. The *Swift Exit* had dropped out of hyperspace within half a second of the larger freighter and immediately gone on silent running. Now they were monitoring not only the fleeing freighter but also the force of raiding ships that were now heading towards the cargo canisters that it had ejected.

"And just as expected the pirates are ignoring the freighter and going for the cargo." Jayk added.

"Do you think they know their plan has been uncovered?" Brae asked, peering between Jayk and Tylo.

"By this stage it is likely." Jayk replied, "But they'll probably believe that the crew of the *Glory of Vel* only discovered the sabotage to their ship at the last moment. Otherwise they wouldn't have made the last jump into hyperspace."

The pirate vessels slowed down as they approached the drifting cargo containers as they began to scan them. Then one of the containers was pulled into one of the larger vessels before they turned away and started to accelerate.

"They only took one container." Brae said, "They took the entire cargo from the *Malluk's Pride*."

"They were able to seize the entire ship in that case." Jayk point out, "They may not have the time available to them to be able to load every container out there so they have just taken the one that has the missile triggers inside."

"Here we go." Tylo said and he reached for the controls that would bring the *Swift Exit's* systems back on line but did not activate it just yet.

Then there was a flash of light in the distance followed by more as the pirate fleet jumped into hyperspace and Jayk looked down at the sensor readouts. Though the *Swift Exit* had been limited to using only passive sensors the energy released by the pirate ships as they jumped into hyperspace was easily detectable and the *Swift Exit's* sensors had monitored the jump process.

"We have their exit vector." the jedi said as Tylo powered up the *Swift Exit's* systems, "I'm entering the course into the nav computer now. There are only three systems that could be the destination before they would pass within range of an inhabited system's sensors."

"Three is a small enough number for us to check out on our own." Tylo said, "Can you set the nav computer to bring us out of hyperspace just outside the first system?"

"Ten light hours ought to be sufficient to hide us from their sensors." Jayk replied, "I'm programming the co-ordinates now."

With the co-ordinates programmed into its navigation computer, the *Swift Exit* jumped into hyperspace and followed the same heading as the pirates. The journey lasted for several hours before the ship returned to realspace on the outskirts of an empty system. After scanning this Jayk entered the co-ordinates of the next system that the pirates could have travelled to and the *Swift Exit* jumped back into hyperspace. Once again the journey through hyperspace was several hours long before the ship returned to realspace. Only this time the *Swift Exit's* sensors registered a large number of ships present in what was supposed to be an uninhabited star system.

"What's going on?" Brae asked as she looked over Jayk's shoulder at the sensor display and saw the multiple sensor returns.

"There are a large number of vessels either orbiting or approaching the fourth planet of the system." Jayk

replied.

"Looks habitable." Tylo added, "Not exactly welcoming but tolerable."

"One of the ships orbiting the planet is the Malluk's Pride." Jayk said, "I have a confirmation on its transponder signal."

"So we're in the right place then." Brae responded.

"My guess is that we've stumbled across a shadow port." Tylo said, "All these ships are here to trade contraband."

"That should make things easier." Jayk replied.

"Why?" Brae asked.

"Because it means we can just fly right to the surface and land without worrying about anyone noticing us."

Tylo told her, "None of these ships will be filing flight plans or requesting permission to land so who'd notice one more among them?"

"Especially one as ordinary as the *Swift Exit*." Jayk added and Tylo scowled.

Annoyance.

"Hey this ship may not look like much but she's got it where it counts." he said, "I've added some special modifications myself."

"Very well, I apologise for insulting your vessel." Jayk said, "Now if you wouldn't mind, take us in."

6.

The surface of the planet on which the shadow port was located was barren and only just capable of supporting human life. Not all of the vessels coming here landed in the same place, with impromptu settlements springing up almost anywhere that someone chose to land. There were several reasons for this it seemed and they became apparent as the *Swift Exit* closed in on the planet whereupon it was assailed by a mass of communications from other vessels as well as from the surface as other crews tried to find out what they had to trade or to advertise their own wares. In addition to this encouragement to do business there were numerous warnings to avoid other parties with claims of how they would offer poor deals or engage in outright swindling. Clearly there was little sense of camaraderie here.

"Ignore them." Jayk said, "We just need to locate the missiles."

"How do we do that master?" Brae asked.

"Easy." Tylo replied before Jayk could, "We use the *Malluk's Pride*. It's hold reads as empty but see how it's missing it's core section? Well that's the bit that's designed to land on the surface of a planet. Obviously the people we're after took it down to the surface of this one along with everything they stole. We find that and we find the Trade Federation's precious missiles."

It took just a single orbit around the planet to locate the outlaws who had stolen the missiles from the Trade Federation, the massive spherical core ship was impossible to hide without the sort of extensive docking facilities that did not exist here. Sure enough there was an assortment of other vessels clustered around it that matched the profiles of the ships that had arrived to ambush the *Glory of Vel* as well as row after row of cargo containers. Only slightly further away more ships had landed and it was among these that Tylo set the *Swift Exit* down.

"Okay so now what?" Tylo asked, looking at Jayk.

"Shouldn't we be calling for the Trade Defence Force to launch a raid?" Brae suggested.

"No, that would be too dangerous." Jayk replied.

"Why?" Brae said.

"Because it only takes one of these nerf herders outside to pick up the signal and realise what it is and all of this will be gone before the first patrol frigate can jump in. Let alone a full assault force." Tylo explained, "So that means your master here better have a good plan because there's no way that we can fight them all."

"I am hoping that we won't need to fight anyone." Jayk replied, "Come with me both of you. But Tylo, leave the *Swift Exit's* transponder active."

Tylo and Brae followed Jayk to the *Swift Exit's* lounge where he opened an equipment case that he had brought aboard from the *Glory of Vel*. Inside were three identical circuit boards.

"I had captain Kean's engineers modify these for our use." he said as he gave one each to Tylo and Brae while retaining the third for himself.

"What are they?" Brae asked.

"They're trigger circuits for those missiles aren't they?" Tylo added and Jayk nodded.

"Yes, I took them from the shipment aboard the *Glory of Vel*. Their engineers have replaced the usual detonator system with wireless receivers designed to pick up the transponder signal from the *Swift Exit*. As long as they are still receiving this signal they are safe. But as soon as the signal is cut off they will detonate the warhead."

"Nice. I'm impressed." Tylo said, grinning as he studied the circuit board he held, "Makes sure that we get clear before the missiles go 'boom' as well as giving us an automatic fail safe."

"A fail safe?" Brae commented.

"It means that if anything goes wrong then our mission will still be accomplished." Tylo replied.

"Yes, I know that. I mean what's the fail safe?" Brae said.

"If the *Swift Exit* is destroyed or the rigged missiles taken out of the system ahead of us then the detonation sequence will be triggered automatically." Jayk explained and Brae stared at the circuit in her hand, considering the destruction of the *Swift Exit*.

"Oh." she said simply.

Tylo flinched as he walked down the *Swift Exit's* access ramp and the wind blew dust into his face. Following him out of the ship both Jayk and Brae raised the hoods of their cloaks to protect them from the elements.

"We should split up." Jayk said, "If any us locate the missiles we should attempt to insert our trigger circuit into one. Then signal the others to withdraw."

"What about guards?" Tylo asked, squinting as he pulled a set of goggles over his eyes, "It may not be possible to get near the missiles without being spotted."

"In that case call for back up." Jayk replied, "Then we'll work together to get one of the triggers into a missile."

Everyone got it?"

"Yes master." Brae said.

"Loud and clear." Tylo added.

"In that case good luck and may the Force be with us." Jayk said.

The trio made their way through the other landed starships until they reached the first of the cargo containers taken from the Malluk's Pride. These were laid out in a series of concentric circles with the core ship at the centre and the other pirate vessels surrounding them. As Tylo had suggested the containers looked to be well guarded with armed pirates standing on top of many of them and cradling rifles while they observed what was happening below. As Jayk had instructed they split up at this point, walking between the containers and reading what the pirates had written on the side of each one. All the containers were labelled with a serial number and machine readable label that would tell anyone with a suitable scanner or copy of the cargo manifest what was inside them but given that no-one here was likely to possess anything like this the pirates had instead written the contents of each container on the outside.

Here and there one of the containers would be open as a potential buyer negotiated to purchase what was inside but there was no sign of the missiles until Tylo reached the innermost circle of containers and found that they were not in containers at all. The pirates had unpacked the missiles and laid them out in racks around the core ship with sheets laid over them to protect them from the elements while still allowing buyers to see what was available. Cautiously Tylo walked towards the missiles, taking note of the armed guards that stood in between the covered racks.

"Interested?" a voice said suddenly and Tylo turned around to see a being of indeterminate species now standing right in front of him. The individual's face was completely covered by a scarf wrapped around his face and a set of darkened goggles that not only protected his face from the particles in the air but also made identification impossible.

"That depends." Tylo replied.

"Depends on what?" the man asked.

"Well for starters do they even work? I've seen plenty of surplus missiles that were nothing but shells."

"Oh these work. They came direct from the Trade Defence Force and they include the triggering circuits."

"They're already live?" Tylo said.

"Of course not. But plug in the trigger and you're good to go. Each one of these can take out a Judicial Department frigate or local bulk cruiser."

"How many do you have?" Tylo asked, wondering whether any of the missiles had already made it off world.

"Fifty thousand." the masked man answered, "Yours for ten thousand credits each."

"Pricey." Tylo commented.

"You want premium quality, you pay premium prices. Just you try getting these on the open market."

"My employer would expect a discount for a bulk order." Tylo said, "Say twenty percent." and the masked man snorted.

"Get out of here you pirate." he said, "Just because we stole these from the Trade Federation doesn't mean we'll let you steal them from us."

"Okay." Tylo said, holding up his hands in front of him, "How about I bring my employer here and you can negotiate a price with him."

"Go ahead." the man said and he watched as Tylo took out his comlink.

"Mister Udra are you there?" he signalled.

"Right here." Jayk's voice replied after a few moments, "Do you have anything interesting for me?"

"I've found someone offering the artillery we're after. Fifty thousand units."

"Excellent, where?"

"You see the core ship? I'm right by that. The seller is willing to negotiate a price within reason."

"I'm on my way." Jayk told him and then the channel went dead.

"He'll be right here." Tylo then told the masked man.

Elsewhere among the cargo containers Jayk reached out through the Force to locate Brae and quickly made his way to meet up with her.

"Tylo's found what we're after." he told her.

"Where?" Brae asked.

"At the core ship. He's there with one of the pirates posing as a buyer. He's identified me as his superior and I'm to go and negotiate a price. While we keep the pirates busy you need to install our rigged triggers in the missiles. Here, take mine as well." and he handed her his trigger circuit.

The two jedi then hurried through the circled cargo containers until they reached the innermost ring and peered around the corner of one at the missiles.

"That's a lot of missiles." Brae said.

"And I'm relying on you to make sure that none of them is every used to take an innocent life Brae." Jayk told her.

"Are you sure that's a good idea master?" she replied, "My control-"

"You must have faith in your abilities Brae. Just relax and let the Force be your guide." Jayk said and then he spotted Tylo, "There's Tylo now. I must go. Remember, listen to what the Force tells you. It will be your guide." and then he set off towards Tylo.

Brae watched him leave and then took the time to study the cargo containers around the missiles. About a quarter of these had an armed pirate stood on top of them which meant that approaching the missiles unobserved was going to be difficult.

She circled around the innermost ring of cargo containers, repeatedly peering between them so that she could evaluate the distance that she would have to cross to reach the nearest rack of missiles. However, there looked to be little variation in this and so Brae instead chose a direction of approach that would put her as far from her uncle and Tylo as well as the pirate they were pretending to negotiate with about buying the weapons. Then when it looked as if none of the guards on top of the containers were looking in her direction she sprinted out into the open, using the Force to boost her speed before she dived and rolled beneath the sheet covering the rack of missiles she had chosen.

Rather than wait to see whether she had been observed, Brae quickly crawled along the length of one of the missiles until she reached an open access point where there was a vacant mounting for a circuit board.

Taking one of the triggering circuits from beneath her cloak Brae slid this into the mounting until she felt it lock into place and she smiled. She was about to withdraw when she decided to err on the side of caution and she took the second trigger circuit she was carrying from under her cloak and then wriggled under the rack of missiles so that she could reach one of the ones that would not be as easily visible if the covering sheet was pulled back. The mountings for the trigger circuits were harder to reach from this angle and Brae struggled to get her arm around the body of her second chosen missile to reach the access port. She tried to visualise the port in her mind, remembering whereabouts within it for the mounting for the circuit was located but as she did so she inadvertently released a minor telekinetic shove through the Force that shifted the missile in its rack. In turn this sudden movement knocked the missile into the one beside it to produce not only a dull 'Clump!' but also push it free from its position in the rack and that entire side collapsed as missiles rolled across the ground.

"Stang!" Brae hissed right as she felt the trigger circuit push and lock into place.

"What the kriff?" the pirate that Jayk was talking to exclaimed as one of the racks of missiles gave way and he reached for his blaster as he saw Brae emerge from beneath it, "She's after the missiles! Shoot her!" however, before he could aim his own blaster at Brae there was a sudden 'snap-hiss' from behind him and Jayk impaled him through the chest with his lightsaber.

"Brae!" Jayk yelled, "Back to the ship!" and then he swung his lightsaber again to deflect an incoming blaster bolt from one of the other pirates. At the same time Tylo drew his own blaster and promptly shot a pirate that was taking aim towards them as well.

All three ran as fast as they could back towards the *Swift Exit*, weaving their way through the cargo containers. Along the way several pirates attempted to stop them, easily identifying them from the lightsabers wielded by the two jedi. But the dense arrangement of the cargo containers gave the jedi a distinct advantage. By the time the pirates saw the jedi they were already within striking distance and a jedi's reflexes were much faster than those of any ordinary pirate. Some of the guards positioned on top of the containers attempted to fire down at them, but the jedi moved too rapidly across the fields of fire that they had between them and Jayk was quick to use his lightsaber to block any shots that would have struck Tylo while the smuggler used his blaster to pick off anyone unfortunate enough to get in their way.

"Brae over here!" Jayk yelled as he and Tylo emerged from the cargo containers and saw his niece emerging not far away and he waved her towards them.

"Coming master!" she replied, running towards them and she ground to a halt when she reached them, "The triggers are in place." she said, "Both of them."

"Nice work kid." Tylo commented as he fired several rapid shots towards a group of pirates that looked like it was trying to organise itself to attack the jedi en masse.

"hey, it's me." Brae replied with a smile.

"Don't get cocky." Tylo told her.

"Indeed." Jayk said, "Now we should get moving before they can bring a large force to bear on us. Brae, you and I will act as a shield to block blaster fire while Tylo engages any targets that present themselves. Understood?"

"Yes master." Brae replied.

"Good. Now go!"

The trio broke into a run once more, the two jedi positioning themselves either side of Tylo so that they could in theory at least parry any blaster shots that came towards them. Jayk was far more successful in this respect while Brae was able to block only a few. Fortunately the pirates accuracy against running and evading targets was poor and the trio made it to the *Swift Exit* unharmed.

Tylo used his comlink to open the access ramp remotely before they ran up into the ship.

"Get us into the air." Jayk said, "I'll take the cannon." and while Tylo turned towards the cockpit he headed for

the ship's sole turret.

When Tylo sat in the pilot's seat Brae sat beside him and watched as he prepared the *Swift Exit* for take off as quickly as he could manage.

"Is there anything I can do?" Brae asked.

"Yeah kid, sit still and shut up." Tylo replied before a blaster bolt bounced off the cockpit canopy and Brae flinched. But before any further shots could strike the ship it rose up off the ground and Tylo angled it upwards before accelerating into the sky.

Outside the cockpit the sky rapidly darkened but there was a sudden chirping from the control panel.

"What does that mean?" Brae said, looking over the readouts.

"It means we've got company. We're not out of the woods yet." Tylo replied and he reached for the intercom,

"Okay Jayk, look alive. We've got incoming. I need five minutes to set the controls for the jump to hyperspace." then he looked at Brae, "Can you fly?" he asked her.

"I've got several hours on a trainer." she told him.

"That'll do. There's not much to crash into up here. Take the controls while I make the calculations for the jump to hyperspace." and nervously Brae took hold of the control column in front of her as Tylo set to work plotting their escape route.

Meanwhile Jayk had brought the turret on line and swung it around to where a pair of starfighters were closing rapidly on their location. Before either of them could lock their weapons onto the *Swift Exit*, Jayk fired a stream of laser blasts. Continuing to swing the turret around these swept into the path of the two starfighters and both pilots rolled their craft to try and avoid. But for one of them the manoeuvre came too late and his ship was hit centrally and blown apart.

"One down." Jayk reported, "How are we doing?"

"Got it!" Tylo exclaimed as he slammed his hand down on the hyperdrive and the *Swift Exit* vanished into hyperspace.

On the surface of the planet below pirates worked furiously to inspect the missiles.

"Quickly!" their leader yelled as he strode out of the core ship, "I want to know what that jedi bitch was doing to my missiles."

"Over here!" a voice yelled, "There's a trigger circuit in this missile. It looks like she armed it."

"Then get it out." the pirate leader ordered, "Get it out before-" but at that moment the signal from the *Swift Exit's* transponder was cut off as the freighter departed the system.

The two armed concussion missiles detonated immediately and the blast tore through the circled cargo containers as well as ripping open the hull of the core ship at their centre. But in addition to this the energy released was enough to detonate the rest of the missiles even without their triggering circuits in place and the crust of the planet for thousands of metres all around was shattered by the combined force of fifty thousand concussion missiles exploded simultaneously. The devastation even extended up into space as matter was hurled out of the burning atmosphere and into orbit where the most ponderous ships, particularly the ring section of the *Malluk's Pride* were shredded by the impacts.

When the force of the explosion finally died down and its destructive force was spent there was nothing left of the shadow port but a crater while a ring of debris was left orbiting the planet.